



Rhoda's Garden

by Heather Atkinson

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ONE



RHODA ENTERED OUR LIVES through a small gap in the rhododendrons that remarkable summer so long ago, a summer that would spark in the months that followed unforeseeable and momentous events.

I did not see Rhoda at first for I had been entranced by the violet blooms shivering in the early morning breeze. But Rhoda must have seen me for I recall hearing a small sound, a kind of soft sighing that seemed to want my attention. I had turned my head to follow the sound, and it was only then that I saw her. There she was, resting upon her little grey haunches amid the rhododendrons, her magnificent grey eyes luminous as pearls. She appeared to be studying me. I noticed at once that she wore on her wee head a rhododendron twig covered in blooms that she had somehow wound into a coronet. Her two grey ears rose up from it, one on each side, clinging to it the way the claws of a ring clutch a gem. I kept very still, not wanting to frighten her. How had she managed to attach this adornment so securely? I bent my head slightly to get a better view and saw that she held it in place with milk thistle burrs.

It was then that I knew Rhoda was not an ordinary rabbit.

I also saw she was wearing little grey mittens that blended so well with her fur only the most perceptive among us might have spotted them. In truth, they almost escaped my notice for one does not expect to see mittens on a hot day. Her eyelashes I envied too, long and dainty and fluttering, the sort I once had when I was young. She had evidently taken great care to groom herself for her soft grey fur was unruffled. As I took all of this in, she sat perfectly still regarding me placidly, fearless yet remarkably alert. I decided then I must name her Rhoda (after the rhododendrons of course) though what she called herself I would never know.

That was the summer I thought I might have to watch my lovely garden disintegrate into chaos on account of my own clumsiness. I'd lost my balance and had fallen off my bike on

the pebbly path to Tranquility, the wee village not far from my home where my dear friend Fanny lives. I'd been off to have a lively chat with Fanny and get cream from Letty, her cow, but instead broke my right leg clean through in the fall. And so it was that my leg was locked into a heavy white cast I had to drag about like the chains of Marley's ghost. My own leg a traitor forcing me into idleness that Mr. MacGregor, my neighbor these 20 years, tells me does not suit my busy mind. He's right of course for it drove me nearly mad sitting like a lump on the iron settee drinking endless cups of chamomile tea while Nefurr snored beside me. I did puzzles to pass the time, though I never finished a single one, while watching Hoover take his bath and Jack eating nettles. What else could I do? I was barely able to hobble into my messy garden to hunt for carrots for my salad! Of course all of that took a turn for the better after Rhoda arrived.

Hoover is, I must tell you, the small speckled owl who lives on my property. When I first noticed Rhoda the little fellow had been taking his morning bath in the stone basin. Behind Hoover was his best friend, Jack, a hare who spends most days lounging in the nettle patch looking up at the sky and daydreaming whatever it is that hares dream. Next door, Peter and Mr. MacGregor were exercising together as they had every morning for some years. Peter, a small caramel-coloured rabbit, popped out of the forest each morning to join Mr. MacGregor for their daily routine. *Exercise* Mr. MacGregor called it though I called it *craziness* on account of the way Peter zigzagged round and round the garden lickety-split pretending to be chased. Mr. MacGregor close behind would shout encouragement: "Faster! faster, my boy, we must get our heart rates higher!" Mr. MacGregor always carried a large metal rake, raising it and lowering it, he explained, to improve the strength of his muscles. The gap between the pair opened and closed so that it was hard to tell whether the man was after the rabbit or the other way round.

Here I must explain that unlike the rabbit named Peter in that *other* story, the Peter in *this* story did not wear a little blue

jacket with brass buttons. That would have been ridiculous for how could a rabbit be expected to manage such things? No, our Peter wore a simple cape that perfectly matched his caramel-coloured fur and was easily fastened with one small burr.



The morning that Rhoda introduced herself to us Nefurrtiti was curled beside me on the iron settee waiting, as usual, to lick up the creamy tea I always left for her enjoyment in the bottom of my cup. Nefurr was a rather large marmalade cat who adopted

me many years ago when she was quite young.

Rhoda must have understood that I would not harm her though she seemed cautious of Nefurr whose twitching tail seemed to bewitch Rhoda. The little rabbit's pearl eyes moved back and forth keeping time with the fluffy orange tail.

Nefurr in turn watched Rhoda with great interest though the cat dined on the finest tinned scallops and wild salmon and therefore had no desire to catch a rabbit for her supper. Rhoda with her pearl eyes still fastened on Nefurr made several small bounces toward us and sat again. She continued to hold herself quite still, a little sentinel, her large watchful eyes looking up at me. They seemed to me to be trying to communicate something I could only imagine. She turned away suddenly and hopped with what seemed great purpose into my large garden. I shared the garden with Mr. MacGregor and gave him a good part of whatever I grew. Sadly, the garden that summer, before Rhoda arrived, was a ramshackle space where veggies were bullied by dandelion, plantain, thistle and burdock, creeping charley and dog vine and nettle.

I was ashamed to admit that I, Helen Love, could do nothing at all to keep up my own garden for my treacherous leg

confined me to the iron settee. I had to let the plants scatter their own seeds and hope for a good crop. I could not thin the carrots and had to let the lettuces have their way, bolting to early seed. My beans would have hardened on the vine, grown too fat to eat and spilled open to cast themselves out for another crop had it not been for Rhoda. I had no choice but to watch cosmos and black-eyed susan and poppy and goldenrod do as they pleased, like young children without a parent nearby. By the time Rhoda arrived, the veggies were lost treasures buried beneath these wayward plants. Rhoda must have seen all of this and regretted it for she took off her little mittens and made her way straightaway to the garden.

From that day, the garden became Rhoda's garden for it was Rhoda who would put everything right.

TWO



HELEN LOVE AND SEAMUS MACGREGOR had lived side by side for over 20 years on properties that were joined by a garden. The summer Rhoda arrived the garden was a mess, full of startling combinations of plants that had no business growing together. This was all on account of Helen falling off her bike and breaking her leg, which made it impossible for her to work in her beloved garden. Vegetables that humans and rabbits adored grew beside wildflowers and the misbehaving plants we call weeds. Helen and Seamus lived not far from the tiny hamlet named Tranquility that consisted of 30 people, 10 animals, 3 goldfish, one small store and a dump. Tranquility was connected to Seamus's and Helen's properties by a narrow stony lane bordered by goldenrod, daisy and purple flowered vetch. The lane curved beside the Tranquility River, a river so small that no one bothered to put it on a map. Helen had planted a few rhododendrons some years before that had grown into a large family of purple blooms that now decorated the little hill that led from Helen's property to the grassy bank of the Tranquility River. The little river, hardly

more than a stream, took its time meandering past Seamus's property and Helen's to the village.

Helen and Seamus enjoyed all the advantages of a long relationship between a human man and a woman without any of the complications that come when two people live squished together in the same house for many years. Helen's little white house trimmed in daffodil yellow had room enough for herself, a guest or two and Nefurrtiti, a monstrously large marmalade cat who suffered from an addiction to tinned scallops and wild salmon. Though Helen's house was small, Helen's heart was enormous for she counted as friends any creature who shared her property. Visitors from the village often wandered up to join her on the iron settee for chamomile tea when the weather was fine. But the real reason they came was to hear Helen's stories about the creatures whose lives she had so finely imagined.

Seamus lived on the other side of the garden in a falling down old barn, part of which he had made into a small apartment just big enough for himself and no one else. Icarus occupied the rest of the barn. Icarus was Seamus's flying machine. It consisted of two gigantic sails the colour of ripe cherries that Seamus made into wings. He had attached the wings to a contraption he made out of odds and ends from an old sailboat he found in the village dump. When he wasn't with Helen, Seamus like to put on his Icarus wings, which he attached to himself with a leather harness, along with the leather flight helmet and goggles Seamus's great-great-great grandfather wore back when he flew planes with four wings. Seamus would trot around his property flapping his great red wings to warm up and then he would go inside his barn and climb the rickety stairs to the top floor. There he would hook Icarus to a zip line trolley that ran along 500 feet of heavy cable. (He had found the cable and the trolley in the dump.) The cable stretched from Seamus's barn to a platform he built at the top of the ancient oak on the far side of his property. Seamus spent a large portion of every day in this way pretending he was a bird though he told Helen he was

practicing for the around the world flight he and Icarus would take one day.

Seamus did not much like visitors but he did like to sit with Helen (when he wasn't working on Icarus). There was so much to see and discuss on her side of the garden. For example, there was Jack, a tall plumpish hare with long ears tipped in black who made his home in a large complicated warren under Helen's garden. Jack had designed and built the warren for himself many years ago when he was a young and nimble hare. The complexity of Jack's warren interested Seamus very much for he enjoyed anything related to engineering, construction and other such matters. Seamus had explored the warren one afternoon when Jack was out and found himself admiring how the hare had excavated the various chambers so far down and in such a tricky way that few creatures would know it was there. This was exactly what Jack intended for he had a great fear of foxes, in particular the vixen who lived nearby but who rarely allowed herself to be seen. She did, however, leave behind small clues in the form of tufts of her auburn fur that the blackberry brambles snared.

Hoover, a small speckled owl with long yellow legs, lived with Jack. The little owl had wandered into Jack's warren one day in a previous summer feeling desperately confused and wanting a sympathetic ear he told Jack how his own mother had told him after breakfast that morning she was leaving him, a wee owl, to fend for himself. She was going off, she explained, to seek her true love though that she had taken the precaution of leaving her young owlet a small legacy of 15 dead mice, along with the instruction to eat one mouse every third day until there were none left.

After that, she told him, he must catch his own: "My darling son, you can never be truly free if you depend on others to support you."

Of course, when Jack heard this sad tale, he invited Hoover to live with him for as long as he liked.



Perhaps it was this early abandonment by his mother that left Hoover with several otherwise unexplainable fears, including a fear of great heights that made it impossible for him to fly and a peculiar fear of getting his feet dirty. For this reason, Hoover asked Jack if he would be willing to cart Hoover around on the top of Jack's head. Jack obliged though he knew very well that he must look ridiculous with an owl on his head pushing

down on his long ears so they stuck out like two arrows pointing in different directions.

When Rhoda arrived, Hoover happened to be standing on the platform in the middle of the stone basin of the birdbath. He had just finished his morning bath and was performing a little dance to shake his feathers dry and to entertain any onlookers while he contemplated what he and Jack might do to pass such a glorious summer day. His sharp eyes had first noted that the rhododendrons had begun swaying, and so he figured that a breeze had caught them. Moments later he saw the little grey rabbit.

He stared.

Having known only Jack and Peter, Hoover was naturally quite shocked to discover the existence of a third rabbit. He swiveled his neck to face backward, a trick only owls can do.

He wanted to see what Jack thought of the new rabbit. Jack, however, had been too busy nibbling nettle at that moment to notice. Hoover let out a small but urgent screech: "A new rabbit, look."

Hoover swiveled again to face Rhoda.

Jack followed the direction of Hoover's gaze. He quickly gulped down the nettle he had been chewing for now he saw Rhoda. His eyes widened and his heart stuttered for in that first instant he knew her to be the most beautiful rabbit he would ever see. He especially noted how well dressed she was, with her handsome grey cape and the dainty mittens, so precisely the colour of her fur, and the coronet of rhododendron blooms perched perfectly atop her small grey head. "Oh, yes," sighed Jack. He felt himself falling into deep and true love yet again. "Indeed, I see her now." He had a sudden urge to perform cartwheels and other tricks intending to capture the heart of the pretty little rabbit. However, due to a sudden cramp in his right leg, he got up from the nettles and simply bowed to her instead. She rewarded him with her pretty little rabbit smile.

On that morning, Helen had been stretched out as usual with her leg resting on the old iron settee beside the stone birdbath sipping one of her perpetual cups of chamomile tea. She was smiling at Hoover who was flicking water onto his feathers and screeching softly, a sign that he was enjoying his bath. Nefurr, a massive marmalade cat, lay comfortably curled against Helen's soft hip. The cat was moaning in her sleep, dreaming of mice. Nefurr (as she was called by all who knew her well) caught mice for Hoover though never for herself for she detested the bitter flavor of the tiny creatures and found their crunchiness unappealing. She did, however, enjoy watching them scamper, a pleasure shared by cats in general.

Nefurr's emerald eyes snapped open and an alertness came upon her when she smelled the delicious aroma a rabbit gives off on a hot day. Nefurr was accustomed to rabbits, for she

liked Jack and Peter quite well enough. The cat was therefore not at all surprised by Rhoda nor did she desire the rabbit beyond friendship. She certainly did not want to eat Rhoda for Nefurr gorged on tinned scallop and wild salmon that Helen provided and therefore never grew hungry though she seemed to grow larger.

And so it was that Jack and Hoover, Nefurr and Helen watched Rhoda make her way from the rhododendrons toward the iron settee. The little grey rabbit stopped briefly to make herself known to Helen in particular before setting to work.

Rhoda started right away in what had originally been intended as the first row of the garden. Now with the plants running amuck, Rhoda took some time to discover where the carrot seed had ended up. She eventually found a wiggly line of timid little carrots now overcome by large and bossy burdock and thistle and smothered with creeping charley and dog vine. Rhoda began at once to root out anything that wasn't a carrot, scratching the earth away with her busy little paws (she had removed her mittens to keep them clean) until the unwanted plant toppled onto the rhubarb leaf Rhoda had snipped from Helen's patch. Rhoda had nibbled the leaf neatly off the stem and would make the leaf into a satchel by gathering up the edges with her teeth. Into the satchel she placed the snippings and the rotten bits that lay on the ground and then carried them off to Helen's compost pile, a snug home for all sorts of helpful bugs.

When she was done with the carrots, the little grey rabbit moved onto the turnips and then the spinach and the beets. She snipped off the tops from the lettuces to stop them from turning too quickly to seed, and these snippings too she placed onto the rhubarb leaf she would cart off to the compost.

Hoover had been studying Rhoda's activities with great curiosity while the sun slowly crept to the top of the sky.

Rhoda was now distributing small round pellets of special rabbit fertilizer throughout Helen's garden.

The little owl swiveled to face Jack. "What is that rabbit doing?"

Jack did not reply for though he was fascinated by Rhoda he had no idea what she was doing or why she was doing it. It appeared that the little rabbit had come to bring order to the unruly garden though exactly how this came about or why was anyone's guess.

THREE



LONG BEFORE RHODA ARRIVED, Mr. MacGregor had got into the habit of bringing over his morning coffee when he and Peter finished exercising for the day. He would plop himself down beside me with a great sigh while I sipped my chamomile tea. I provided him with a large orange pillow to increase his comfort as he complained that the iron settee bothered his bottom, which was quite a bit bonier than my own.

After exercising, Peter usually went back to wherever it was he came from, but on the morning that Rhoda entered the garden, Peter, sensing perhaps that something new and interesting might be about to happen and wanting to find out what that might be hopped after Mr. MacGregor instead of going home. My tall neighbour was quite out of breath, the effects of the excellent exercise, and was walking very slowly toward me looking down at his cup to avoid spilling his coffee. He therefore took no notice of the little grey rabbit in the garden.

But Peter did. The small caramel-coloured rabbit stopped abruptly among the young butternut squash vines by the broken-down wooden swing to stare. He must have been taken in as I was by how pretty she was and how energetic for she had worked her way by this time all the way through the carrots and the rutabagas and the bush beans and had just begun tidying up the peas.

Rhoda turned when she spied Peter and smiled her little rabbit smile. *How white and even were her teeth*, I thought. Peter responded by performing for her enjoyment four perfect cart wheels for that is the way of little boy rabbits who find themselves falling in love with little girl rabbits.

I saw that Mr. MacGregor had also been admiring Peter's cartwheels. I giggled. "That rabbit is in love."

"Nonsense, woman," said Mr. MacGregor. "What do rabbits know of love?"

His comment startled me. "What do *you* know of love?" I said softly, for Mr. MacGregor was now gazing at me, and I felt the tug of my own heart. Mr. MacGregor's dark eyes, as appealing as warm chocolate, always had that effect on my heart. For I knew a great deal about love, the specialkind that one keeps secret like a treasure and only shares with one special person and only when the moment is just right.

In any case, the following morning it became clear that rabbits are quite like humans when it comes to love for Peter seemed to have fallen deeply and irreversibly in love. It was Rhoda Peter waited for from that morning on, not Mr. MacGregor, and it was Rhoda he hopped after up and down the rows, carting the rhubarb satchel to and from the compost and filling satchels with the carrot and spinach and other vegetable thinnings Rhoda meant to share. (Thinning is what good gardeners do, yanking out every second or third vegetable to leave space for the others to grow stronger.) Rhoda placed the thinnings on rhubarb leaves, one she would present to me, one to Mr. MacGregor and one she took away herself.

Jack must have seen Peter's love for Rhoda and felt his own heart stir and his own body urging him to declare love that was surely as strong as Peter's for Jack himself proceeded to execute a perfect set of cartwheels, higher and more elaborate than Peter's. Jack followed the cartwheels with several astonishing leaps. But Peter would not be outdone. He began another round of cartwheels and then another,

spinning and spinning faster and faster whirling as a child's toy top whirls when it is wound up. At last, the blood rushed from his head, and Peter was obliged to end his performance with a heavy sigh and a small bow.

Rhoda had been thinning peas when the performances began. She stopped and immediately sat upon her soft grey haunches for she must have understood that it would be impolite to ignore the spectacle of such a fine rabbit and such a fine hare declaring their love for her. She nodded and



smiled at both performers and gleefully clapped her small grey paws to show her appreciation. When her two suitors had quite worn themselves out each stood quietly waiting to see which of them had won her heart. However, Rhoda clearly could not

decide. She was too kind to turn one away and keep the other for she must have loved Peter's gentleness and his obliging nature but likewise loved Jack for how could she not see in the way Jack's long black-tipped ears hung down like pendants from the weight of his little owl friend that he was kindhearted and capable of selfless love, which is the truest kind and therefore the kind of love I imagined Rhoda held dear.

Rhoda sat for some time no doubt thinking of her choice. One could not have two lovers. She must choose one. However, she could not and so she treated each with the kindness and generosity of a true friend.

"I am losing Peter to that little girl rabbit of yours, woman," said Mr. MacGregor who had been closely observing the spectacle.

"Sir, she is hardly *my* rabbit," I said. "Any more than *I* am *her* human. She belongs to herself and no one else as you and I belong to none other."

Mr. MacGregor frowned. He often told me that he disapproved of women who were excessively independent.

He changed the subject. "What on earth brings that hare and that owl together? They are a most peculiar couple! The hare and the rabbit make a more sensible pair."

"Indeed," said I, "though I have no idea what attracted them I do know that Jack is like a parent to Hoover."

"Hrmmmmph," muttered Mr. MacGregor. "Well, that hare is spoiling that owl. I've never seen the little fellow on his feet or in the air. And what does he eat? I never see him catch anything."

I had been wondering likewise. "Perhaps, sir, he has a great fear of heights," I suggested. "Perhaps he does not like to catch his own food. Perhaps another is catching his supper for him." I suspected this to be true for many times I had caught Nefurr dropping a plump mouse she had caught beside the birdbath. I presumed the mice were intended for Hoover.

Mr. MacGregor raised an eyebrow. "You come up with the most ridiculous explanations, woman. I wonder that your brain can do any real thinking at all!"

I did not take offense at what he said for that was simply how Mr. MacGregor was. We had our small ways fashioned after decades of quiet contented relations as close neighbours.

I called him "sir", which I know he appreciated, and he called me "woman", which I reluctantly came to accept over time.

Meanwhile, I continued to wonder about the creatures who shared my garden. I could only imagine that their lives were as interesting as Mr. MacGregor's and mine.

FOUR



HELEN WAS CORRECT. Hoover was indeed afraid of heights so of course he never flew plus he refused to get his feet dirty and therefore refused to chase the quick mice that passed through Helen's garden on foot. Nefurr had been catching them for Hoover but had lately been discussing the matter of Hoover's fear of heights with Jack and the harmful effect such a fear was having on Hoover's quality of life and his future contentment.

"Hoover needs to fly so he can catch his own mice," Nefurr purred to Jack one day in late June. She was too hot sitting in the sun, and the heat was making her grumpy. "My bones are too creaky. The mice hear me coming. The little rascals are so annoying and their flesh is so smelly. I do not understand how any creature can eat them."

At that moment, Jack had been preoccupied with love, specifically his love for Rhoda. He had obviously noticed that Peter loved her too, and so Jack was in the process of deciding whether to continue his courtship or sacrifice his own love for Rhoda to support Peter's. He understood that the pretty little rabbit could not choose between them. Jack therefore decided with regret to back out of the contest and let Peter win Rhoda's heart. Part of Jack was contented with this decision for although he loved Rhoda with high passion he also loved to lounge in the nettles looking up at the clouds drifting overhead and dreaming. Giving up Rhoda also meant he would no longer feel the need to perform cartwheels and leaps, which he found exhausting.

"I agree," said Jack at last. "Hoover is no longer a helpless orphan. He's quite grown up now and therefore capable of walking, flying and catching mice. It's time for him to stop hitching a ride on my head. It's time for him to stand on his

own two feet. It's time for him to use the wings his mother gave him."

Hoover had been enjoying his bath when Nefurr made the startling announcement the following day. The air was hot, and the sun, having climbed as high as it meant to, had warmed the stone basin. Hoover having nothing else planned for the day was in no hurry to leave the water. Nefurr was sitting beside Helen on the iron settee. The cat appeared unusually unsettled. Helen had just poured herself a fourth cup of chamomile tea, mindful to use only half the usual amount of honey and cream for Seamus had recently begun making remarks about her round figure that left her wary of too much fat or sweet. Helen had noticed that Nefurr seemed nervous and bent to rub the fur under Nefurr's orange chin meaning to calm her. For Helen's sake, Nefurr wanted to purr but could not for on this day she was far too anxious about Hoover's reaction to what she, Nefurr, meant to tell him.

Jack was sprawled on the creeping thyme beneath the settee keeping well out of the sun to avoid scorching his fur. He was as worried as the cat about making an announcement that would likely hurt Hoover's feelings. For this reason, Nefurr and Jack had been staring at Hoover for some time, each pondering how to communicate their common message in a way that would upset their little friend as little as possible. At last, Nefurr cleared her throat and for courage took in a big breath. She began: "Jack and I have come to a decision, Hoover."

Startled by the cat's serious tone, the small owl swiveled to face her. He waited for Nefurr to continue. "It is for your own good." Here the vast marmalade cat hesitated, wondering for a long moment if what she and Jack had decided indeed was for Hoover's own good. She went on. "Jack has decided he cannot carry you around on the top of his head anymore. From this day, you must get around on your own."

Here she stopped for she wanted to gauge Hoover's reaction. However, Hoover only stared at her. The cat continued: "And

I have decided I cannot continue to catch your mice." She said this hesitantly as if she meant to change her mind.

She turned away not wanting to face Hoover's alarm and looked down at Jack. Jack nodded encouragingly then took in a deep breath. "Hoover, for your own sake, you must learn to manage your own life. I can't carry you around on the top of my head anymore. You're getting too big. You must find your own way. You must learn to feed yourself. You're an owl. You must learn to fly!"

Shocked into silence, Hoover felt the water in the basin suddenly turn cold. He started to shiver. A thought came to him. He fixed his huge golden eyes on Nefurr and then turned to Jack. "Why should I do any of that as long as you are here to do it for me?"

Jack sat up slowly, sending up a whiff of thyme and feeling in that quiet moment all the great feelings of a father for a son. "Because you must learn to care for yourself, dear Hoover, because...because..."

Nefurr continued: "Because dear boy, Jack and I may not always be here to care for you."

"Where are you going?" demanded Hoover, suddenly panicked. "When were you going to tell me you were leaving?"

"We're not leaving you, Hoover. At least, not at this moment," purred Nefurr. "But we are older than you. Much older. A whole lifetime older. Therefore, a time will surely come when we must leave."

Nefurr was relieved that Hoover did not ask any more questions. Instead, his whimpering turned to defiance. "But Nefurr, I need you to feed me. Helen is always there to feed you. She fills your bowl with food every day. I don't see you out catching mice for yourself."

The cat yawned. "But the point is I can catch my own mice if need be. I practice catching them every day, for you. I agree

I have an instinct for stalking them that I cannot overcome but truthfully, I find mice quite disgusting yet despite that I have been catching them. For you.” The cat let the owl ponder her argument before continuing. “I would be quite capable of feeding myself if Helen should ever be unable to do it for me. You must learn to be equally capable of feeding yourself.”

Hoover took a moment to gather his thoughts and then screeched triumphantly, “Catching mice comes naturally to you. I have no similar instinct for flying. My mom gave me 15 dead mice but not a single flying lesson!”

The hare, the owl and the cat suddenly found themselves distracted by honking overhead. The three looked up in unison. A vast flock of grey geese had organized itself into a letter V that was moving slowly across the sky heading south. “Of course, you have an instinct for flying,” purred Nefurr watching the flock grow smaller until it disappeared behind the large stand of white pine and wondering all the while if the V might stand for Victory, a sign foretelling Hoover’s victory over his fears. “You simply haven’t tried to fly. Your mother may not have given you flying lessons but she gave you wings. They belong to you. Learn to use them. Move them up and down. See how that feels.”

Hoover huffed. “I need to watch other birds do it, but there aren’t any, and we all know why.” He looked pointedly at Nefurr. It was true that Nefurr herself was the main reason few birds visited Helen’s property.

“You can hardly blame me for frightening them off. I’ve never hurt a bird in my life!”

“What about watching hummingbirds,” suggested Jack. “Plenty of those around.” Helen put out containers of sugar water for the hummingbirds who returned faithfully each spring to refuel themselves after the long flight from Mexico. The tiny birds were cocky and therefore not the least bit fearful of Nefurr.

Hoover was not satisfied. "Their wings move so fast all I see is a blur. I have no idea how they stay in the air going backwards and forwards and dodging at each other the way they do."

Jack nodded. He saw Hoover's point. "Okay, you could begin on my head. I could give you a running start. I could leap up into the air to launch you."

Hoover shook his head. "No. I'm not brave enough."

"Of course you are," purred Nefurr.

"Teach yourself in stages," suggested Jack. "Start with a short flight. Fly yourself down from where you're standing now. Practice landing."

Hoover peered at the ground. The ground seemed frighteningly far away. He sat down on the raised part of the stone basin, which was now dry as a desert since all the water had fled in the noon heat.

He shut his eyes.

He felt himself slowly coming to a decision.

No cajoling would convince him to fly. Hoover therefore intended to remain in the birdbath for the rest of his life.

FIVE



ONE CAN NEVER BE SURE what others are thinking, and such was the case the following morning when I awoke to find Hoover asleep in the birdbath. I was alarmed to see he had passed an entire night by himself outside the warren without Jack to defend him from the vixen.

Rhoda, Peter, Jack and Nefurr were huddled under the bath waiting for Hoover to wake up or so it seemed to me. The three rabbits and the cat appeared to be conferring about something of great importance. I presumed they were as worried about Hoover as I was.

A short while later Mr. MacGregor wandered over. He had become quite used to joining me on my settee to drink his morning coffee and his afternoon coffee since Peter had lost interest in exercise and taken up gardening with Rhoda. Mr. MacGregor's visits extended into the evening when I invited him to share my supper, which I liked to do for I enjoyed his company and had a growing sense that over the years he had likewise grown to enjoy mine.

He sat down beside me and pointedly peered into my teacup and then at my round belly. "Too much rich cream, woman. You could do with less." Then he added, a little more gently, "You are a pretty woman so I say this for your own good."

I took his compliment and left the rest. To change the subject, I pointed at Hoover. "The poor little fellow spent the night in the birdbath. Something must be wrong since the others are paying him special attention. I don't think Nefurr is catching mice for him. And I haven't seen him riding around on Jack's head. His sitting still like that is completely out of character."

Mr. MacGregor peered at the little owl. "He looks perfectly fine. Owls are like reptiles. They can go for long periods without eating. Really, woman, you must stop imagining the worst. I say this for your own good."

As the day wore on the others left to resume their daily activities. Rhoda and Peter went back to the part of the garden nearest Mr. MacGregor's since they had tidied up the rest so nicely. Nefurr went on with her napping, and Jack in the nettle patch began again to dream under the drifting clouds.

Hoover, however, remained stubbornly attached to the stone basin for the remainder of that day and all through the next. By the middle of the third day, I feared he might die from hunger.

"Well then he needs to learn to catch his own mice," said Mr. MacGregor when I told him of my worry. "And for that he had better learn to fly!"

SIX



A HEAVY RAIN BORE DOWN all the next day. Rhoda wrapped tightly in her little cape continued to work though her floral coronet sagged under the weight of the water. Peter had no choice but to stay with her for the simple reason that he found himself to be deeply in love for the first time in his life. Jack by now had noticed Peter's particular affection for the little grey rabbit and feeling it best for Rhoda to choose Peter, Jack had obligingly stopped showing off to impress her.

Rhoda and Peter had worked their way into Seamus's side of the garden and now felt obliged to give Seamus his share of the pickings. Together they filled two rhubarb satchels with fresh veggies, which they offered in equal proportion to Helen and Seamus. The two were swinging in the handmade hammock Helen had brought back from a hot country in South America and set up on the little porch out of the rain.

"Rhoda and Peter, how kind you are!" said Helen when she opened up her rhubarb satchel to reveal the pickings. The season had progressed and now provided eggplant, tomato, celery and peppers for their dinner.

"Thank you, Peter and Rhoda," said Seamus opening up his own satchel to find his favorite vegetables laid out so perfectly. He was grateful for their effort and yet he badly missed Peter and their romps around the garden each morning.

Rhoda produced a third satchel, which she placed beneath the birdbath. "For you, Hoover. A treat." Hoover appeared to be sleeping for he kept his face buried in his feathers.

However, he opened up one golden eye when he heard the word "treat" and then quickly shut it. He felt himself too weak with hunger to take even the smallest peek at what Rhoda

had brought for he had decided that starving himself was the best way to show Nefurr and Jack that they must continue feeding him and carrying him around. He had so far gone three days without food, yet neither cat nor hare had shown signs of changing their minds.

"It's a surprise," Rhoda told him softly. "I'll open it for you." She knew from experience that any surprise won immediate attention.

Hoover gave up pretending to sleep. He stared down, puzzled by the small pale blobs glistening on the rhubarb leaf. "What are they?"

Rhoda smiled. "Garden snails. They're tearing up the lettuce so badly Peter and I thought we'd pick as many as possible to give to you. I believe birds find them very tasty."

Hoover found himself suddenly interested in the snails. They smelled delicious. "Can you pass them up to me?"

"No," replied Rhoda. "You must come down and get them yourself."

Hoover frowned. "I can't fly."

"You're one foot off the ground," said Peter. "Getting down is hardly flying. You don't need your wings. One hop should do it."

Tantalized by the aroma of fresh garden snail and starved, Hoover could not stop himself from leaping down. He gobbled the first of the succulent blobs, stopped to enjoy the astonishing flavor, and then slurped up the rest. Peter was right: Hoover had not needed to use his wings.

"Well, woman, that's the first step taken," said Seamus turning to Helen. They had been watching with great interest to see what Hoover would do.

Helen smiled. "Indeed, sir, one step taken, now on to the next."

SEVEN



HOOVER SPENT THE FOLLOWING DAYS bouncing up and down the rows of the garden. It pleased me to see the little owl so pleased with himself. Rhoda had taught him where the juiciest snails clung and where the grasshoppers hid. Sadly, the mice and the voles were too quick for him. They scampered away giggling, or so I thought, and disappeared whenever Hoover got within reach.

"Well at least the little fellow has learned to feed himself. He's eating bugs so he's no longer starving," said Mr. MacGregor.

However, I was not completely satisfied. I had seen how many times a plump mouse had escaped Hoover's talons. "He is spending a great deal of time chasing a very small number of insects. He's an owl and is meant to swoop down to surprise small creatures that provide a more complete meal. Mice, voles or shrews and the like. When he runs after them, they run away. I think they must be teasing him."

"Nonsense, woman," growled Mr. MacGregor. "Mice don't tease. But if he is meant to catch them as you say then I agree that owl must find a better way to care for himself. He cannot expect others to do the caring for him."

We watched with great interest the escape of a frantic grasshopper that Hoover had captured. Mr. MacGregor turned to me, his dark eyes glowing. "I have just now had an idea that will set matters right for the little fellow." And without another word he got up and marched off.

The following morning Mr. MacGregor appeared wearing his great-great-great grandfather's leather flight helmet with the goggles pushed up out the way. He had strapped himself into the great cherry red wings of Icarus and was slowly moving

the entire wing assembly as if he meant to take flight. Mr. MacGregor told me years ago that he meant to fly Icarus around the world but in all the time I'd known him he and Icarus had only travelled along the zip line that stretched from the loft of his barn to the ancient oak that marked the end of his property.

I waited for Mr. MacGregor to explain what he meant to do dressed up in that get-up to help Hoover.

"Woman, I have come to help the little fellow help himself," announced Mr. MacGregor. "If he needs to improve his nutrition, he must do something about it. He must learn to catch a proper supper. And for that to happen, I must teach him to fly."

A long moment of silence passed between us as I considered what Mr. MacGregor had said. "*You*, sir? How can *you* teach an owl to fly when you have never once flown yourself?" I immediately regretted my comment for of course I feel sure that Mr. MacGregor believed himself to be flying as he and Icarus skimmed along the zip line.

Mr. MacGregor frowned. "How else? By *showing* him how it's done!"

I persisted. "But you've never actually *flown* Icarus! What can *you* show him?" Here I paused to soften my tone not wanting to irritate Mr. MacGregor more than I had already. "I mean you never actually get off the ground with it. You're always attached to the trolley and the zip line."

"*Theory*, woman. First, I intend to teach him the principles of flight using my own wings to demonstrate. Bernoulli's principle, how lift is created when air moves more swiftly over the curving top edge of a wing such that the difference in relative air speed across the top versus the bottom—"

I could not stop myself from interrupting. "I haven't understood a word you've said and if I don't understand a word you say the poor little owl certainly won't! Bernoulli's principle indeed!"

Mr. MacGregor ignored me. He slowly moved the cherry red wings up and down. He did this several times all the while staring at Hoover. He took a giant step forward. He looked to me like a great red bird preparing to take flight. Hoover took a small step backward and after a little pause he took another. I could see that he was terrified. His round eyes were as large as two gold coins.

The cherry red wings continued to beat, up and down, up and down. Mr. MacGregor took several more steps. Hoover responded by stepping back several steps.

Mr. MacGregor took another step. He was now less than six feet from Hoover. The little owl had stepped back as far as he could without toppling off the birdbath. His talons gripped the outer stone rim. Hoover's golden eyes were fixed on the giant red bird.

Mr. MacGregor turned to me. "Take a wing in each of your hands, woman," he whispered. "Move them up and down in time to my rhythm. Get the propeller going, get the engine started, like they did when my great-great-great grandfather flew planes with four wings."

"I will do nothing of the sort," I said. "Imagine if a gigantic creature a hundred times your size took hold of your arms without asking you and made you move them round and round as they pleased."

Mr. MacGregor huffed. He took another step forward, holding the cherry wings straight out.

I saw that Hoover had begun to quiver. "Sir, you are terrifying him!"

Mr. MacGregor took another step forward. He stood still for some moments staring at Hoover all the while silently beating the great red wings.

I had just opened my mouth meaning to insist again that Mr. MacGregor stop terrifying Hoover when the little owl began to

beat his own wings in time to the rhythm of the great cherry wings.

Mr. MacGregor smiled. "Yes, little fellow, yes!" he shouted. He moved the cherry red wings faster, up and down, up and down, faster and faster. "Go little fellow, go, faster, faster. You can do it! The joy of flying can be yours. Yes, yes, this is how it begins my boy!"

Hoover suddenly let out what I took to be a joyful screech, leaped from the birdbath and raced around the garden beating his wings.

I clapped my hands and shouted "Hurray!" The others gathered to watch. "Oh sir, what a wonderful sight. Thanks to you, Hoover is pretending to fly!"

Mr. MacGregor frowned. "*Pretending* will not do, woman. Tomorrow, I assure you that after I give our little owl his next lesson he will be well on his way to flying rather than *pretending* to fly."

And with that, Mr. MacGregor bid me good night and turned to leave. He walked away slowly beating the great cherry red wings pretending, no doubt, that he too was flying as his great-great-great-grandfather had flown when planes had four wings.

EIGHT

BY MIDSUMMER, a few villagers were making their way up the



lane to see how Rhoda and Peter had transformed the wilderness that had once been Helen's garden into a sensible and productive and pretty space.

Fanny Arbutus gave Helen cream for her tea and Eleanor did Helen's mending and Norman saved odd scraps of metal for Seamus to use for his next invention in return for the perfect vegetables that Rhoda's and Peter's hard work had created.

"I'd love to have rabbits like those two in my garden," exclaimed Fanny. "I only have regular rabbits."

Norman appreciated the cooperative way that Rhoda and Peter managed their affairs, the novel methods they had invented to compensate for not having the great benefit of thumbs. Indeed, that simple modest instrument, the thumb, makes so much possible that humans could not otherwise accomplish.

Hoover meanwhile spent the following days keeping Rhoda and Peter company in the garden, playing with his wings and chasing mice on foot without success. The little owl loved the way his wings beat the air and foresaw a day would come, a day comfortably far in the future, when he might actually get off the ground. At present, however, he seemed tied to the earth hopping and flapping after the impish mice, which ran away squeaking.

Rhoda and Peter had decided the time had come for them to encourage Hoover to do more than hop and flap. They had come up with an argument they agreed Hoover could not ignore.

Rhoda placed the final thinnings of the morning into the rhubarb satchel she meant to present to Helen. She turned to Hoover. Rhoda and Peter had decided it made sense to get straight to the point. "My dear friend, you must learn to fly. Your life will be incomplete otherwise."

Hoover had been fully occupied preening his feathers, but now he swivelled to face Rhoda. "I can't." The little owl could think of nothing further to say. He simply couldn't fly, and that was that.

Peter cleared his throat and felt his heart beat faster for he was not used to making speeches. "You're just scared. Flying is new to you. But once you learn how, you'll wonder why it took you so long."

"We have fears," continued Rhoda. "Peter and I. We are afraid of humans. Rabbits have an unfortunate reputation for ruining human gardens. Of course, that is not true of all rabbits and so Peter and I are showing humans how helpful

we can be. We must overcome our great fear every day when we come to the garden for rabbits such as ourselves are never quite at ease in the company of humans. And yet we do it for the good of all, rabbits and humans alike. When humans see how useful we are they will not hurt us and we can all enjoy excellent food and friendly relations and live our lives as we must."

Peter bestowed upon Rhoda his most appreciative and lovelorn smile. "Then there is the matter of the vixen," he continued. "That is a fear we rabbits must face every day too. The vixen is everywhere leaving traces of herself behind and yet few have lived to say what she looks like. We fear she is a great tall beast, with sharp teeth that tramps about just out of sight looking for innocent creatures to feed her children. Each day we fear the vixen though we cannot see her, and each day we must overcome our great fear."

Rhoda wiggled her small grey nose. "We must use our noses to keep ourselves alive. We must smell the vixen before the vixen discovers us and hope to scamper away to save ourselves. Unlike you, we have no wings to fly. What happens to us if the vixen comes close? Who can save us?" Here Rhoda paused and looked pointedly at Hoover.

Peter had also been watching Hoover closely to see if the little owl had understood their message. Hoover's golden eyes had indeed grown wide, which meant he was paying attention, and yet he remained silent. Peter placed one caramel-coloured paw gently on the owl's head. "Who can save us? Only one such as yourself. You could swoop down and frighten away the vixen. You could warn us. You could carry us to safety." Here Peter paused to increase the effect. "But only if you can fly."

That night, Hoover could not sleep. Deep down in the earth, safely snuggled in his nest with Jack in the nest beside his own the little owl was troubled by nightmarish images of vixens and rabbits bound up together in horrid ways. Hoover had never actually seen the vixen. She was to him a monster

that stalked the innocent such as small speckled owls and charming little rabbits, and she was made more terrible to him because he had imagined her horridness.

Dawn came at last, and with it Hoover's decision. He would do it. He would overcome his great fear. He would learn to fly. He would fly for the day might come when he would need to face the vixen and save a dear friend.

NINE



THE NEXT MORNING, Mr. MacGregor called out from his side of the garden. "Woman, come over. Bring the owl."

I had been wondering why he had not come to join me as he usually did to drink his coffee on the iron settee. Now I was very curious to find out what he was up to.

"Why, sir, do you need the little owl?" I shouted back. At that moment, Hoover was licking up snails in the lettuce patch. "I am quite sure Hoover will not be willing to let me bring him to you," I continued. "He is snacking on snails."

Mr. MacGregor did not reply. This made me even more curious to discover what my neighbor was doing. I swallowed the last of my chamomile tea and put my cup down so Nefurr could lick the cup clean. Limping slowly on account of the weight of the cast, I took the path that led to Mr. MacGregor's side of the garden.

I didn't see him at first but when I looked up there he was, standing on the platform he had built outside the loft door at the top of his barn. He was wearing his great-great-great grandfather's leather helmet and goggles and had already strapped himself into his Icarus wings. I knew from long experience that Mr. MacGregor was preparing for one of his so-called "flights". Now he was engaged in the process of attaching himself and the great red wings to the zip line trolley that was itself attached to 500 feet of metal cable that stretched from the barn to the old oak. The whole contraption

was about 100 feet above my head. Thinking about it made me dizzy.

I watched silently until he'd got himself suspended from the cable. He bounced several times to test his weight and then turned his attention to me. "Well, woman?" he called down. "Have you brought the owl?"

"Sir, what do you expect *me* to do with Hoover?" I was afraid for the little owl for not a single thing Mr. MacGregor was doing looked safe.

"What else, woman? Put him on my head!" Mr. MacGregor sounded exasperated.

I turned my attention to the cable to which he meant to attach himself. I saw 500 feet of pure peril for Hoover. The poor terrified little owl would have no choice but to sink his talons into Mr. MacGregor's leather helmet to keep himself from tumbling to the ground.

"I will not put him on your head!" I shouted back. "Not even if he let me! You are too high. The journey you mean to take is too long and far too dangerous for Hoover. He has never flown a day in his life. Yet you mean to start him off at such a height! Whatever are you thinking, sir?"

I turned away intending to return to my side of the garden, but when I looked down I saw that Hoover had followed me. The little owl was close behind, staring up, his golden eyes wide, at Mr. MacGregor. Behind Hoover, Nefurr, Jack, Peter and Rhoda had formed a little line and were likewise looking up at Mr. MacGregor with keen interest.

"He'll cooperate if you carry him up here. He trusts you," returned Mr. MacGregor. "Walk toward him, woman, slowly. Pat his head, then gently cover his eyes with one hand and pick him up with the other. I promise you he will stay quite still."

"Good grief, sir. That seems so cruel I could not do it!"

Mr. MacGregor harrumphed. "Covering his eyes will keep him calm, woman. Falconers do it."

I knew nothing about falconers but as it turned out, Mr. MacGregor was correct. With my hand covering his eyes, Hoover remained completely calm. I carried him carefully up the steep stairs inside the barn and met Mr. MacGregor at the door of the loft. He was now in the process of warming up, moving the cherry red wings up and down slowly at first and then faster and faster.

"Now, woman," Mr. MacGregor said in a low voice. "Slowly and gently place the little fellow on the top of my head. His talons will automatically grip tightly and hold him in place."

I released the hand I had placed over Hoover's eyes and with the other did as Mr. MacGregor instructed.

Hoover remained absolutely calm as I settled him on top of Mr. MacGregor's head. He instinctively attached himself firmly to the leather helmet as Mr. MacGregor had predicted.

Mr. MacGregor stepped forward onto the platform beyond the loft door. One step more was all he would need to launch himself and the owl on their shared journey to the distant oak. I ran downstairs to join the others gathered below to watch with rapt attention Hoover's maiden flight. Would the little owl do it? Would he complete the flight or would we watch in horror as he fell like a stone to the earth?

I tried to slow my breathing to calm myself. "You are sure, sir, that this is perfectly safe for the little fellow?"

Mr. MacGregor pulled his goggles over his eyes and looked down. He spoke so gently I could hardly make out what he was saying.

"Try to overcome *your* fear, woman. The little owl will eventually overcome *his*. You'll see."

Mr. MacGregor was right again. The pair journeyed from the barn to the oak without anything going wrong, Hoover screeching with joy and Mr. MacGregor smiling his widest

most triumphant smile. "Well, my boy, how do you like flying?" Mr. MacGregor shouted into the wind on their 19th trip. He kept his head very still fearing that Hoover might accidentally let go of the leather helmet and topple off before he was quite ready to fly on his own. "Flying cannot be topped as a source of pure pleasure for adventurous souls like ourselves!"

They passed the entire first day in such a way. Meanwhile the sun made its own journey, first creeping up one side of the sky to the very top and then sliding down the other side to finish the day beneath the tips of the tallest old pines on the far side of the river.



At last, the day's hard yellow light turned to the sort of mesmerizing mix of orange and scarlet that comes at the end of a cloudless day in high summer. "That's enough for today, my small friend," said Mr. MacGregor. He unbuckled Icarus and laid the harness and the giant red wings against the side of the barn. "We have flown 30 trips together!"

Hoover reluctantly released his talons from the leather helmet and hopped to the ground. He looked up at Mr. MacGregor and let out a happy screech. Mr. MacGregor smiled as he bent down to pat Hoover's head. "You, my boy, have made excellent progress."

"Flying is exhilarating, woman," Mr. MacGregor told me a little later when he had settled himself beside me on the iron settee to watch the first fireflies of the evening come out to play. "You must take a flight in Icarus. You'll see what I mean."

I let out a small sigh. Though I had indeed enjoyed spending the day watching the man and the owl enjoying themselves I nevertheless worried how best to remind Mr. MacGregor that he and Hoover were not actually flying. I certainly did not want to injure his feelings or interfere with the pleasure he evidently felt zipping along the cable with Hoover firmly attached to his leather helmet.

"But sir," I began gently. "Neither you nor Hoover are actually, well..." Here I paused as I searched for the absolutely right word. "You and Hoover are zip lining not flying," I said at last. "A very important sport I am sure, but you cannot confuse one experience with the other!" I thought of the words of a famous writer who once said the difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug. In the end I decided I did not need the help of a famous writer because I had already made my point well enough.

Mr. MacGregor harrumphed. "Well, woman, no matter what you say, the owl and I are enjoying ourselves. You can't know how it is for us. If you tried it once, you would know what we feel."

I held my tongue for nothing Mr. MacGregor might say could induce me to risk my safety in such a reckless manner. Besides, going back and forth between the barn and the oak did not interest me.

TEN



JULY QUICKLY TURNED TO AUGUST, which passed slowly into September during which two important things happened: Helen got her cast off and Seamus and Hoover started spending the first part of each day zip lining between the barn and the old oak.

Meanwhile in the garden far below Rhoda continued to teach Peter new skills. She showed him how to sow the fall lettuce from the seeds that she had shaken from the tops of the old summer lettuce. Peter learned to dig holes just the right size for garlic seed and how to snip the eggplant from its prickly stem without poking through the purple skin. He and Rhoda tugged the cherry tomatoes from the vines before the first of the cold evenings frosted the garden. They parceled up the last of the cucumbers and the peppers and the beans, which they carefully divided between Helen and Seamus. The rest they carted away in rhubarb satchels for themselves. They always ended their mornings together the same way, hopping throughout the vast garden dropping those special pellets of rabbit fertilizer everywhere.

"Where do you suppose Rhoda and Peter go with their vegetables when they are done gardening?" Helen wondered aloud to Seamus one golden afternoon in mid-September. She and Seamus had been watching Rhoda and Peter for the past hour. The two little rabbits had hopped back and forth from the garden to the path that led through the rhododendrons down to the little Tranquility River. They were ferrying rhubarb satchels bulging with vegetables.

"What else, woman, they are preparing for winter," said Seamus. He was in high spirits following an exhilarating morning of zip lining during which Hoover had indicated by releasing a talon or two from the leather helmet every so often that one day very soon, possibly as early as the following week, he might let go of Seamus's leather flight helmet once and for all and spread his wings to let the wind take him where he, Hoover, wanted to go. Hoover became

exhausted by his own excitement and was at that moment enjoying an afternoon nap in his nest in the warren. Seamus meanwhile savoured the second of two sandwiches Helen had made for him. (They were his favorite: freshly picked tomatoes on thick slices of Helen's homemade flaxseed bread.)

"But sir, where do they go?"

"Don't ask me, woman. I am not a rabbit!"

The following morning the question of where the two little rabbits went every day became urgent. This was because neither rabbit came to the garden.

"No Peter or Rhoda today," observed Jack. The sun had reached halfway up the morning part of its journey, and the hare, sprawled rather lazily in his favourite spot in the nettles, had been admiring the way the clouds rearranged themselves. They reminded him of puzzle pieces looking for their rightful places in the complicated jigsaws Helen always started but never finished. Jack had been watching a pair of lumpy clouds turn themselves into a large rabbit chasing a small rabbit when it occurred to him that Rhoda and Peter were not where they usually were at that time of day, namely, in the garden.

"Perhaps they have other matters to attend to," purred Nefurr.

"Like what?" Hoover wanted to know. "What could be more important than being here, with us?"

Meanwhile, Jack's nose had taken on a sudden urge to twitch. "I think..." here he stopped to reconsider what he had been about to share with the others. "I...I...I think I smell something."

Nefurr yawned. "What kind of something?"

Jack slowly removed himself from the nettle patch and hopped into the blackberry patch. He reached into the

brambles, then turned to the others. He held up a tuft of red fur. "A vixen-eny sort of something."

Hoover let out a panicky screech. "Eeeeh! Rhoda and Peter are surely in danger. They are small bunnies. We must save them!"

"We?" purred Nefurr. "We are in no position to save anything from anything else, especially from the vixen."

Jack let his left ear droop a little to show he disagreed. "Well, shouldn't we at least try to find them so we can warn them?"

Nefurr turned to the hare. "They are rabbits," she purred. "Smaller but otherwise not unlike yourself. They know as well as you what a vixen smells like and what to do about a vixen if a vixen should happen to be close by. They hardly need us to advise them."

Hoover screeched with indignation. "Nefurr, how can you not want to help?"

"Dear little owl, it's not that I don't want to help, it's that I would be of no use trying to help. How could I, a cat, stop a hungry vixen? She would either gobble me up in two bites or take me home for her children's supper. I believe I would be delicious."

Two more weeks passed without any sign of the bunnies. Helen was growing more agitated as each day went by and she was obliged to watch the garden slowly return to its former state of disarray, a daily reminder that the bunnies were no longer with them. It seemed to her like another puzzle she would never complete.

"I have searched the entire garden and find no sign of them," she told Seamus one morning in early October. "Rhoda and Peter are so small and defenseless. I am afraid something dreadful has happened."

Seamus rolled his eyes. That morning, he and Hoover had completed 100 trips on the zip line, and now he was wondering if perhaps tomorrow would turn out to be the day

that the little owl would finally let go of the leather helmet and fly. "Woman, you worry too much. I say this for your own good. You have watched Peter run in those clever little zigzags rabbits use to outwit danger and you have watched that clever little female transform that messy garden into a spectacular showcase. What harm can come to such intelligent creatures?"

Like Helen, Hoover feared the worst. He had by this time begun to think of nothing else but finding Rhoda and Peter. The little owl was coming very close, closer than he had ever come before, to letting go of the leather flight helmet. He had been imagining Rhoda and Peter cowering under a fallen branch while the monstrous vixen readied herself to pounce. The vixen Hoover imagined had puffed herself up until she was a thousand times the size of a regular vixen, whatever that might look like for Hoover had never actually seen one. Hoover also imagined a large crowd of hungry little foxlets waiting for their tasty rabbit supper.

And so it was that on the following morning as Hoover sat upon Seamus's head waiting to be launched on their first trip of the day the little owl resolved that without fail, he would release himself once and for all from the leather flight helmet that had once belonged to Seamus's great-great-great grandfather who had flown planes with four wings.

By the time he and Seamus, flapping his Icarus wings, had zipped halfway to the far oak Hoover had already overcome most of his fear. It was at that point that the little owl had looked down, and, seeing Helen and Nefurr and Jack looking up ready to cheer him on, knew the moment had come for him to put the rest of his fear aside forever. He knew that he had the power to free himself from the earth and become what he had always been, a creature of the air. He began to tremble with the purest excitement for he knew that Seamus had trained him well. He, Hoover, was ready at last to let go of the leather helmet.

"Go Hoover, go," shouted Jack. "Now let go!"

Nefurr purred something that Hoover could not quite make out though he thought it had something to do with how proud of him they were.

Helen said nothing, but clapped her hands to give Hoover confidence and calm her own jittery heart. She was worried about the bunnies and now she was also worried about Hoover. Seamus had failed to convince her that Hoover starting to fly for the first time from such a great height on his own was entirely safe.

Meanwhile, to give himself courage, Hoover let out a long and triumphant screech. "I am higher above the ground than I have ever been, as high as 50 bird baths stacked up. I am more amazing than I have ever been in my whole life!"

Now, a miracle happens somewhere every day though when that miracle comes we don't always see it for what it is, namely, a series of magnificent moments that change everything. There can be no doubt that a miracle happened to Hoover the moment he let go of the leather helmet, the moment he flapped his wings hard, the moment he sailed away from Seamus and the zip line cable and the startling moment when Hoover felt the full force of the wind caress his wings for the very first time. He imagined his own lost mother had become the wind, an unseen guardian whose job it was to keep him, amazing little Hoover, safe.

In the days following Hoover spent most of his waking hours in the air flying the day's mission, which was to find the bunnies. He roved far and wide, circling high overhead then spiraling down when something resembling a rabbit or the vixen of his imagination captured his attention. He flew low over the river to the village and back searching for clues. He left the warren while Jack slept and returned in the dark to flop onto his nest where he could dream of nothing but bunnies. During the day, he could think of nothing else but Rhoda and Peter. They must be found, and only he, Hoover, could find them.

One cool day toward the end of October after a series of strong winds had chased the last of the leaves from the trees, Hoover allowed himself one short screech of possible triumph.

His sharp golden eyes had spotted one small clue: a trail of rabbit fertilizer circling the old silver maple that was situated halfway along the path to the village. The great arching roots of the old tree rose out of the riverbank to form a sort of vestibule, the kind you might find in an old church. To Hoover it seemed a perfect home for two little rabbits. He stretched out his wings and floated down silently. He wanted to have a closer look.

ELEVEN



FOR THE NEXT THREE DAYS, Hoover followed a particular pattern. He would leave the warren early, hop quickly into the stone birdbath to flick water hastily over his feathers after which he would launch himself on the first of the day's flights. I felt sure by the systematic way he flew, circling first over the garden, then climbing higher to follow other flocks heading in the direction of the village and then returning a little while later, that he must be flying surveillance missions as pilots do when a lost child must be found. I was certain he was looking for the lost bunnies. He always returned with a mouse around midday, which he carried to the top branch of the young pine that marked the end of my property. There he would roost for a short time before taking off again for the afternoon flights. What he did with the mouse is something I prefer not to think about.

"Hoover must be searching for the bunnies," I said to Mr. MacGregor early one afternoon. I had been watching Hoover circle higher and higher into the upper dome of the sky until he was only a speck. Mr. MacGregor was sitting next to me reading cast-off issues of *Popular Mechanics* and *National Geographic* and *Scientific American*, his favorite magazines. Naturally, he'd retrieved them from the dump.

"Hmm," he said looking up briefly from the article he was reading. I glanced at the illustrations, which gave step-by-step instructions for making things out of things that people throw away. "You could be right." He said these words kindly but he said no more. He went back to his reading.

Over the past few days, Mr. MacGregor had grown very quiet and much less energetic. He lost interest in tinkering with Icarus and now spent his time sitting beside me on the iron settee reading about other peoples' inventions while the vast garden, Rhoda's garden, slowly disintegrated into the hopeless mess it was in before Rhoda discovered it. He didn't seem to know what to do with himself now that his mission to teach Hoover to fly was complete. Perhaps deep down my dear friend and neighbour had finally accepted that his dream of flying Icarus around the world would never come true.

"We need to stop moping around," I told him. "My leg is almost mended therefore starting right this minute I will bring Rhoda's garden back into some sort of order. I will yank out the weeds that are taking it over just as Rhoda would do. I will think of it as one of my puzzles making sure every part fits together just right. I will be remembering dear Rhoda and Peter as I work and hoping I will see them again."

Mr. MacGregor put down the *Popular Mechanics* he had been reading. He turned to me and smiled. "What a perfect way to honour those fine little rabbits. But first, if your leg is up to it, why don't we walk into the village together. After all, our neighbours have seen for themselves what fine work little rabbits are capable of and may have invited the bunnies to improve their gardens. Perhaps industrious Rhoda and Peter have chosen to fix other gardens as they have fixed ours."

Mr. MacGregor rose abruptly and held out his hand. He had never before done such a thing. Without a word, I took his hand and slipped my own into it. Shyness overcame me, and I felt my cheeks flush. I studied his long, gnarled fingers to keep myself from looking into those warm chocolate eyes for

his eyes always made me feel tipsy though I never drank anything but chamomile tea.

And so it was that we two walked hand-in-hand down the path that wound through the rhododendrons, the path I now thought of as "Rhoda's path". At the bottom, we turned to follow the stony path that would take us to our little village. We took our time, stopping now and then to wonder what the chattering little river was telling us and to select the right kind of wildflowers to put into the bouquet I meant to give Fanny Arbutus for some of Letty's cream.

We stopped at Fanny's first, and I noticed at once that my dear friend seemed distressed. Nevertheless, she put on a bright smile when she saw us.



"Fanny, is something wrong? We came to get cream and to ask if you have seen the little bunnies. You know, the dear ones who gave us all such lovely vegetables. You may recall that Rhoda wears little grey mittens, a little grey cape and a crown of rhododendron blooms, and Peter, her friend, wears a little caramel-coloured cape."

Fanny's bright smile turned to dismay. "Oh, Helen, of course I remember those amazing little bunnies. Don't tell me they have disappeared too? Oh dear, I cannot bear to tell you what I found this very morning."

She turned away and disappeared into her barn. She returned carrying in her left hand a little straw basket that held a small bottle of cream. She held out her right hand. A tuft of red fur lay in the palm.

"I found it stuck in the wire of the coop," she said. Her grey eyes glistened with unshed tears. "Henrietta, my favourite hen, my best layer, has been taken."

I stared at the red fur. "The vixen," I murmured.

Fanny nodded. "It's not the first time she has taken my chickens to feed her brood. She's always having children! Soon she'll be training *them* to take my best girls!"

Of course, I was horrified to think of the vixen taking chickens and rabbits for her own purposes but on the other hand I cannot entirely disapprove of a mother feeding her children.

After what Fanny had said, I had no wish to visit anyone else in the village and so after accepting the basket with our cream we wandered home again in silence. We had almost reached Rhoda's path when Mr. MacGregor cleared his throat. "I think you are being too gloomy. If they do not return, we must accept that. Nature has its own plan that may not always favour us."

He smiled and pulled me gently toward him.

"Helen, we must carry on with our own lives though we will always fondly remember our little friends, wherever they may be. You are tidying up the garden. I too have a project in mind that I will start working on tomorrow at first light. A secret project I have been thinking of for some time. Promise you will not come near the barn while I am working on it. I want to surprise you."

What he said had the effect Mr. MacGregor must have intended. His words not only distracted me from my sad thoughts but also left me excited about a secret project for I do love a good secret. It wasn't until we had climbed Rhoda's path that I realized something else had excited me.

Mr. MacGregor had called me *Helen*.

Such a simple thing that one word, *Helen*, and yet his saying it changed everything for me. In that moment, I had become *Helen* to him, a special woman, though it also occurred to me that perhaps I had always been that to him. I decided that I could never again call him *sir* nor would I think of him as Mr. MacGregor. If I was *Helen* to him, he would be *Seamus* to me.

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It was some days later that I heard Hoover swoop into the garden uttering a mysterious screech, prolonged and high-pitched, that I had never before heard. It was close to day's end, and Seamus and I were swaying gently on my porch swing, he reading and I having given up trying to complete the day's puzzle was preoccupied wondering if perhaps the clouds were turning themselves into characters in a story I might someday tell. Nefurr was not curled beside me nor was Jack lounging in any one of his favorite spots. I hadn't seen much of either the cat or the hare for days. *Perhaps they are looking for the bunnies*, I thought, for they had been leaving early in the morning and only returned late at night. This was unusual behavior for those two who liked nothing better than to laze about eating, sleeping and dreaming.

The little owl launched himself again and began flying large loopy figure eights high overhead. He followed that performance by plunging and swooping so close to our heads that I could feel the wind of his wings on my face. He went off again in the direction of the river. I watched him turn to follow the path that led to the village and then circle back to return over Rhoda's path until he was once again above us.

Seamus took off his spectacles, an old-fashioned pair with circular lenses he had retrieved from the dump. He watched Hoover for several moments and then turned to me and smiled. "I think our little owl is up to something." He went back to his reading.

Hoover continued to fly the same circuit, low over Rhoda's path, back toward the stony path that led to the village, then back again. *What are you up to, little owl*, I wondered. This was a puzzle I was determined to solve.

I stood up and held out my hand meaning for Seamus to take it. "I'm going for a walk."

But Seamus showed no inclination to join me. "It's a little late in the day for that," he said. He turned back to his reading.

He's brooding over the secret surprise, I thought. So, I set off on my own down Rhoda's path and had almost reached the old silver maple, the one Seamus had once reckoned to be as old as our country, when Hoover let out a piercing screech. The little owl circled lower and lower until at last he came to rest in a patch of dried bulrush near the old tree.

The thick roots of the tree curved out of the clay of the riverbank to form three tall archways and several smaller ones, which framed an inner vestibule. I knelt down to peer in through the largest of the arches. A trickle of golden light revealed the dim outlines of four openings that I imagined led to passageways.

"Perhaps the passageways lead to secret chambers deep beneath the tree," I murmured to myself for there was no one else to hear. I hoped Rhoda and Peter might be huddling in a nest far below me, safe from the vixen. I inched in further, pressing my shoulders against the hard roots until every part of me from my waist up was inside and everything else was outside.

"Rhoda? Peter?" I whispered. I held myself still and listened with all my attention, hoping to hear the scrabble of little paws coming up a passageway. Instead, I heard only the river chattering. Yet I felt in that part of me that knows that something is true without knowing why it is true that the bunnies must be there or at least somewhere close by. "It's me, Helen. Are you there? Please give some sign you are safe."

Of course, rabbits are mostly silent so I only hoped a soft little head might poke up. I waited, straining for the faintest sound, yet no little rabbit appeared.

I now felt the strain of maintaining such a difficult position, for I am not a young woman. I had crumpled myself up in such a way that would have challenged the bones of someone half my age. I tried to wiggle my way out. I turned each of my shoulders this way and that, pushing as hard as I could against the strong roots that formed the arch that now held

me fast. *I am like a lobster, I thought, caught in a trap easily entered but impossible to leave.*



It was then that I heard the familiar *rat-a-tat-tat* of someone clearing his throat. "Seamus?"

"Helen, you look a fine sight with your bottom poking out of a tree!" Seamus chuckled, a rare sound that I would come to cherish. "You followed the owl and I followed you. Do you see any sign of them?" Of course, he meant Rhoda and Peter.

"None," I called out though the heavy roots that held me swallowed my words. "So far," I added.

Seamus's face appeared in one of the archways. He was frowning not with his usual impatience but in a worried sort of way. "I think you are too far in, Helen," he said. "How on earth did you manage it?" Seamus was right. I was stuck. "See if you can wiggle out."

"I already tried. My shoulders went in, but now I can't seem to turn them the right way to get out." I wanted to cry, but I knew that tears would not help the situation.

I felt Seamus's hands on my ankles. He tugged gently.

"Ow," I called out. "I don't think that's helping."

"You're certainly in a tight spot, Helen, but whatever you do, try not to panic! I have an idea." I heard his footsteps hurrying away.

I found myself growing nervous for twilight had come. *Seamus will return so don't panic*, I told myself.

It wasn't long before I heard the comforting sound of his boots clomping back down Rhoda's path and crunching through the drying bulrush stalks.

"Now Helen, you must keep still," he said. "I have brought my small axe to chip away at the root that has trapped you." He dangled the axe in front of the opposite archway. It took him longer than I would have liked but eventually he chipped away enough of the root so that he could lift it out of the soil and away from the tree. His smiling face appeared in the archway. "Try again."

I wiggled backward a few inches, then a few inches more until I felt the last of the sun's warmth on the back of my arms and my neck. I lay still for a few moments, listening to the river chatter and smelling the fragrance the river gave off, of river weed, moist clay, frogs and lily pads. I whispered into the vestibule once more. "Rhoda, Peter, please come back." I waited but no response came.

Seamus helped me to my feet. Hand in hand, we slowly wandered back to my little white house with the yellow trim

as the stars poked through the dark velvet sky. "The least I can do is feed you a good supper, Seamus. After all, you've saved me from living the rest of my life in a tree house!"

Over the next few days, I kept myself busy weeding, hoeing and topping up the compost pile. Now and then I would turn to Rhoda's path, hoping to see those dear little heads popping up from the rhododendrons. The purple blooms had faded for they had come to the end of their season. Meanwhile Seamus travelled back and forth to the village dump in the ancient jalopy he'd made out of junk and powered with recycled solar panels. Norman came up from the village regularly bringing with him weirdly shaped pieces of metal and plastic and other odds and ends I had never seen before. I was certain it all had to do with the mysterious secret project. Each evening, Seamus joined me in my little house for a late supper. He seemed quite pleased with himself.

"It will be ready for us next week," he announced one chilly evening in mid-December after I'd fed him a large portion of my homemade veggie soup.

I gave him a quizzical smile. "Us?"

Seamus only chuckled and said no more.

TWELVE



HELEN BUSIED HERSELF as best she could putting the garden to bed for the winter, and yet she found herself preoccupied by the mysterious something that Seamus was working on. Was he building a new flying machine big enough for two? Helen desperately hoped that he was not because if so, he would surely expect her to join him on the round the world voyage he had talked of for every one of the 20 years they had known each other. A recurring vision of her and Seamus tumbling out of it and plunging to earth plagued Helen so much her attention was temporarily drawn away from the missing rabbits. She drank more chamomile tea than usual to

calm her frazzled nerves, and yet even drinking six cups one after another had no effect.

Meanwhile, as Seamus had predicted, Rhoda and Peter were indeed safe and sound far below the roots of the old maple in a warren Jack and Peter had built together. To save time, Jack had followed the design he used for his own warren, and industrious Peter had faithfully followed Jack's instructions. While the warren was under construction Nefurr had been prowling about in the bulrushes on highest alert, ready to pounce if the vixen dared to enter the vestibule that led to the lower chambers where the bunnies now lived. Nefurr had put aside her own fear of the vixen having suddenly recalled that in her youth she had seen a vixen pouncing on her prey. The way the vixen went about it reminded Nefurr very much of the way she herself captured mice for Hoover. Nefurr had decided that after all she and the vixen were enough alike that they might one day be friends. Until then, Nefurr had made it her business to warn the vixen should they ever meet that the bunnies must never be harmed.

The finished warren consisted of a large pantry for storing the vegetables that Rhoda and Peter had brought back from the garden. It included a mat of dried bulrush stalks to be used as the lavatory, which the bunnies kept clean and fresh with generous sprinklings of pine needles after every use, and four sleeping nests each big enough for several snuggling bunnies.

Once her new home was complete, Rhoda became anxious to show it to Nefurr who was naturally curious to see the dwelling that Jack and Peter had built.

"How perfect," purred the huge marmalade cat once Rhoda had shown her everything there was to see. "So much space, so tidy and clean and above all safe from the vixen!"

Rhoda smiled her pretty little rabbit smile. "It's perfect for Peter and me and..." Here, the little rabbit found herself suddenly shy. "Peter and I are expecting... expecting...children, little ones any day!"

Nefurr was puzzled. "Children? What sort of children?" The only children Nefurr knew of lived in the village. "Children are huge, many times larger than either of us. How will you ever fit them in and why would you want them?" The cat had no idea where baby cats came from having had no baby cats of her own and was likewise ignorant of where baby rabbits came from or baby anything else for that matter. She had therefore failed to understand the meaning of a notable swelling of the lower half of Rhoda's body. The swelling had been growing larger each day finally reaching a point where Rhoda could no longer wrap her little grey cape around her belly.

Rhoda smiled. "Nefurr, I mean ours, Peter's and mine. Baby bunnies. I am expecting them any day!"

"From where?" persisted the cat who had never in her entire life come close to expecting any sort of baby creature to suddenly appear.

They were interrupted at that moment by Hoover who had just arrived from the garden. The little owl was so tremendously excited that his voice came in sharp bursts, like a whistle. "A huge something, mysterious and odd, has suddenly appeared and has taken up the whole of the garden. It wasn't there yesterday and I don't know what it is, but Helen and Seamus are in it together!"

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Nefurr yawned for it was the middle of the afternoon and she was wanting her nap. "Can you be more specific, dear friend?"

Hoover looked puzzled. "What does specific mean?"

"It means that we are hoping for more details," explained Jack. "What exactly are Helen and Seamus doing inside this mysterious something?"

Hoover found himself frustrated by the many questions he couldn't answer. "I don't know. You must come and see for yourselves."

It was at that moment that Rhoda let out the tiniest of noises, a sort of oinking honking noise that one might expect from a small pig or a goose. "I don't think I can go anywhere. I must stay here."

Nefurr turned to the little grey rabbit and saw to her horror that Rhoda was ripping out chunks of her own fur. "What are you doing, dear little rabbit?"

Peter patted Rhoda with his caramel-coloured paw. "Rhoda's time has come. She is using her own fur to line the nest. The babies are arriving any minute. She must be by herself for the next little while. I will stay nearby in case she needs me."

Nefurr suddenly understood with crystal clarity where the new bunnies were coming from. She also understood her own role in the process. "Peter, while you are busy caring for Rhoda, I will be on guard, prowling around outside ready to pounce if the vixen should happen by."

In the end, they agreed that Hoover and Jack would go to the garden and report what they saw.

THIRTEEN



I WAS DISTURBED that our beloved marmalade cat had stopped eating the tinned salmon and scallops I put out. There wasn't even a single cat print to tell me that Nefurr had at least come near my house.

I shared my worries with Seamus at dinner the night before Christmas Eve. Dinnertime was the only time I saw him these days for he now spent almost every hour in his barn working on the secret surprise he had promised me.

I handed him a second helping of vegetable pie and another thick chunk of my fresh flax bread. "Seamus, I'm worried. Where is Nefurr? She hasn't touched the scallops and salmon for days. And Jack and Hoover have disappeared too. As far

as I can tell, they aren't even coming home to their warren to sleep. Can the vixen have taken them all?"

Seamus remained silent, chewing his bread with obvious pleasure. He did not seem the least bit disturbed by my worries. "That's unlikely, Helen," he said at last. "The cat and the fox are hunters with similar hunting styles though I'd reckon the cat is the bigger of the two and therefore might easily win any battle with the vixen by simply sitting on her. In any case, I cannot imagine that monstrously huge creature would permit herself to be attacked and consumed by a small fox."

I let the matter go, hoping Seamus was right, yet I couldn't stop worrying for it is my nature to worry.

Seamus shared dinner with me the following evening, Christmas Eve, though he insisted he must return to his project the moment he had cleaned up his plate and helped me tidy the kitchen. "I am determined to keep my promise to you, Helen, so I must leave you now and get back to work."

I kissed his cheek and sent him on his way. I then put on my Christmas jammies, the pair made of red flannelette decorated with gold bells and green fir trees, and crawled into the huge bed my grandma had given me when she no longer wanted to sleep in it herself. I stayed awake long into the night, trying not to think of the vixen and all of the beloved creatures she may have taken, instead allowing myself to be mesmerized by the white flakes floating down beyond my window. Snow is rare in our part of the world, and so entranced was I that I forgot my worries for a time. I fell asleep imagining the weird surprises Seamus might be concocting at that very moment. I felt like a little girl again waiting for Santa.

The following morning, Christmas morning, a familiar screech awakened me. Hoover! I put on my fluffy slippers and my housecoat, the one with the golden angels floating in the blackness of outer space, and I hurried down the hall. I pulled open the front door and gasped. In the night, Rhoda's garden

had been entirely taken over by a massive glass house, a greenhouse, at least twice the size of my own little house! I saw beyond the glass that a Christmas tree stood in the centre of it, so tall the top of the tree reached halfway up to the glass ceiling. And at the very top of the tree, where most would place the Christmas angel, sat Icarus. The great cherry red wings seemed set to take flight. And there was Seamus, standing beside the tree, grinning at me and beckoning, and beside him stood little Hoover. The little owl was staring up at the tree and wondering, no doubt, what Icarus, the great red creature that had helped him learn to fly, might be doing at the top of such a tree.

I couldn't resist the powerful urge that came over me to hug Seamus, and so I ran to the greenhouse, pushed open the door and squeezed him tight. "Oh, thank you, dear Seamus, I love it, and if Rhoda were here she would love it too! How on earth did you put a greenhouse together in one evening? It wasn't here yesterday!" Then I added with an impish grin, "Did Santa and his elves help?"

Seamus chuckled. "Well, if Santa stopped by, I certainly didn't see him. All the help I needed or could have wanted came from a friend. Norman helped me bring most of the material for the greenhouse back from the dump, and he helped me build all the pieces and he agreed to help me set it up. He spent a good part of Christmas Eve with me putting it all together for he knew how much I wanted you to have it in time for Christmas."

Seamus and I spent the rest of Christmas morning decorating our new tree, for he had planted the tree roots and all into the earth where it would live to a fine old age. We tied on with coloured ribbon small tomatoes, peppers, eggplant and parsnip roots made into stars and orange and white carrots suspended from silver thread.

Seamus had also made certain that Jack and Hoover could access their warren from inside the greenhouse. "See, Helen, how I placed it so that one of the openings to their warren is

right here, behind the compost pile. The hare and the owl may come and go as they like." At that moment, Jack's head popped up from the entrance to the warren. I could only imagine how pleased the hare was to have such a handy way into a year-round garden.

I hugged Seamus again. "Oh, dear man, you think of everything. Now all we need is Rhoda... wherever she might be, and of course Peter too."

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Seamus and I spent Christmas afternoon in our new greenhouse preparing the beds for planting. There were weeds to take to the compost and rows to be neatly drawn in straight lines just as Rhoda would have insisted. Seamus had bought fresh seeds for early planting, spinach, carrots, turnips and kale, and we dropped the seeds into the rows and covered them up with fine earth.

The two of us had scarcely known the passage of time for when we were done the sun had disappeared behind the pines across the river and now cast a pale rose light over all. Seamus smiled down at me, his chocolate eyes making my heart skip. I hadn't seen him so calm since Hoover had decided to fly.

The fairy lights Seamus had strung in spirals to the top of the Christmas tree sparkled, and it was only then that a slight movement and a faint scuffling beyond the greenhouse caught our attention.

I peered through the glass walls and saw that a distinctive shape had emerged from Rhoda's path. The shape was moving slowly toward us. The rose light of the setting sun had turned the familiar marmalade fur a shade of vermillion. Nefurr! I wasn't sure if what I was seeing was real or if the fairy lights were playing tricks because behind Nefurr came six little bunnies and behind them came Rhoda and behind her came Peter. "Seamus! They've had babies and now they've come home!" I could say no more for a heavy

emotion overcame me, the sort a parent might feel when a long-lost child returns.

Seamus bent to kiss my cheek. "Of course they have, Helen. Why else would two perfectly healthy and intelligent young rabbits run away together?"

I hugged him again. "You knew all along!"

Rhoda had indeed given birth to five identical little females I would call the Quints because I would never learn to tell them apart and one rascal I would name Huckleberry after an impish character in another story. Huckleberry would insist on living in Jack's warren with Hoover, who would become Huckleberry's close friend, and Jack would invite Rhoda and Peter and the Quints to move in too.

But all of that lay in the future, and was therefore unknown to us on the Christmas Day when Rhoda returned to her garden and brought her children into our lives.

Meanwhile, I tried not to worry about the vixen. She was after all only a phantom I'd never actually seen in the flesh and only suspected of murderous intentions. Indeed, the evidence against her was scanty, only an odd bit of red fur caught here and there which led to the pointing fingers and the accusations of others.

I therefore decided that the best way to deal with my worry was to make the vixen our friend. And so, I would put out two dishes of tinned scallops and wild salmon each day, one for Nefurr and one for the vixen if she should stop by. Only a hungry vixen would need to hunt a rabbit for supper, and I meant to make sure that the vixen would never go hungry.

The crimson light had turned silver under the full moon when Seamus at last followed me up the stairs into the little white house with the yellow trim that we had come to share.

As I set out our Christmas feast, I happened to look up and saw that Seamus was gazing at me with such a tender expression as I will never forget. He took from my hands the

plate of roast potatoes I was about to set down on the table and wrapped me into his arms. He bent down and whispered, "Merry Christmas, my dearest Helen."

I will not say what he said after that or what came after for that is between Seamus and me, and I've promised him that's one story I will never tell.



The End