

RED WILLOW



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Adapted from *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame

Red Willow

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By Dylan Southard

Chapter 1: A Mole in the North End	1
Chapter 2: Stoat Crick Mart	18
Chapter 3: Party at The Holt	35
Chapter 4: The Backwater Races	48
Chapter 5: A Visit To Weasel's	65
Chapter 6: Beneath Toad Hall	87
Chapter 7: The Crime Committed	108
Chapter 8: The Trial of Mr. Toad	126
Chapter 9: Badger's Defense	144
Chapter 10: Raging Waters	163
Chapter 11: Welcome to Greenleaf	182
Chapter 12: The Wide World	202
Chapter 13: The Great Escape	227
Chapter 14: Journeys Home	246
Chapter 15: An Unexpected Reunion	265
Chapter 16: The Raid	283
Chapter 17: And The River Runs On	300

Chapter 1: A Mole in the North End

“Oh jeez. Jeez! Oh...oh. Come on!”

Clatter. Bang. Shuffle.

It was a whole symphony of aggrieved and strained sounds that came bursting out from this rather unassuming hole in the ground, situated as it were at the base of a tired old oak tree, in a back corner of The Willows known as Wild Wood. It was a sun-drenched September Sunday; a day redolent of deep, restful exhalations, of animals wallowing in the last dregs of summer. As such, it was quiet out in the world and the exclamations of the animal called Mole drifted unimpeded through the air, there to be heard only by the very few out attempting to accomplish anything of value.

Mole was attempting to accomplish something, something very important in fact, and it wasn't going terribly well. This was an auspicious day for him. Rat was to visit his home for the first time, and so Mole was in a barely contained state of panic trying to prepare the burrow for her visit. All his cleaning instruments and implements had been wheeled out and the process set in motion. But his nervous energy was doing him no favors. He was desperate to impress Rat and overcome by the notion that he had neither the tools nor the talent to do so. Thus, the sounds of frustration that now rang through the air.

Mole hadn't lived in the burrow very long, about six months, and in that time he had put very little effort into interior design. The most striking feature of his home at this point was probably the frankly impressive way in which he had managed to organize his effects without the benefit of any furniture. He had the essentials, of course, but things like books and papers and articles of clothing had been left without any means of containment other than the delicate piles that Mole had made.

He was acutely aware of how this may look to someone, particularly someone of Rat's caliber and so Mole was now attempting something in the way of presentation. A carefully curated selection of the books had been placed on a tilted shelf that he'd hammered in place himself. There was a hand-woven throw rug that Mole had bought

during that time when he had journeyed away from The Willows and first seen the Wide World, one that he now displayed in the hopes that Rat would ask him about it. And there were a few pictures tacked to the walls now too — young Mole and some pals, Mole and his parents, and a Mole family reunion with dozens of them gathered in what looked like some vast underground dance hall.

The remaining piles had initially been shoved back into his bedroom until Mole realized that he wanted Rat to eventually see his bedroom too and so then the piles went into his closet except there was not even close to enough room to accommodate it all. So now Mole was engaged in deep contemplative consideration over whether or not this kind of messiness was what had attracted Rat to him in the first place. He still really had no idea why she was, and this was as good a guess as any. Perhaps she considered this messiness some kind of outward sign of a busy mind.

“Hullo, Mole. Are you down there?”

“Oh! Oh, I could have helped —”

“No, it's alright. I've got it.”

She was here, picking her way down the steep dirt hill that led from the surface, nimbly hopping down the earthen steps. Rat was a sight for sore eyes. Dressed for a day in the countryside, she'd hung a large bag from one arm and jauntily perched a sailor's cap on her head. She beamed at Mole.

“That's a bit of a drop you've got there, old boy.”

“I told them it was too steep and a danger —”

“It's okay. So then...will you show me around?”

The tour took about thirty seconds. Rat was charmed, not so much by the place but by Mole's earnest attempts to impress her with it. He told her the story of that rug and how he had bought it at a small woodland outpost, talking its seller — an imposing snake of indeterminate origins — down from the original asking price. He laughed self-consciously at the bookshelf's shoddy construction and smiled awkwardly as Rat cooed over his old photos. And he proudly pointed out the small work station he'd set up for himself — just a table and chair and a small oil lamp — but it was cozy enough and Mole allowed himself to ramble on a bit about the work he was undertaking. He would be writing the definitive history of The Willows, as told to him by the animals who lived there.

“It's a fantastic idea! I think it's wonderful, just wonderful. I couldn't be more supportive!” Rat proclaimed.

As she said this though, her glance kept cutting back to the burrow's opening and the bright light of midday that poured through. She had trouble with confined spaces like this. Mole loved them; the cocoon-like warmth of the burrow, the way its tunnels seemed to wrap around you, sheathing you in their protective embrace, ensconcing you behind their walls. Rat, on the other hand, craved nothing if not open air. Her father, a born and bred river rat, had instilled that in her. She loved the feel of the breeze on her cheeks, that freshwater smell in her nostrils, the gentle sound of the current trickling in her ears. Whenever she thought of any of those things, Rat felt an accompanying, almost unquenchable need to roam and explore and wander. It was a directionless lifestyle that had been afforded to her but which nevertheless occasionally led to trouble.

Today, Rat was bringing Mole to meet her old friend Toad, with plans on taking the long way, meandering from one side of The Willows to the other and allowing each to share with the other their take on the place they both called home. Departing from Mole's, they scrambled down a short hill — Rat laughing airily at the inconvenience of it as their feet shushed through the leaves — until they met up with a winding rutted trail that had no name. It had once been a stream but it now served as the principal roadway for this curious little neighborhood called Wild Wood that had sprung up in a southeastern pocket of The Willows and which Mole had recently become a part of.

Mole didn't know much about his neighbors. He wasn't exactly the type to go about knocking on doors and introducing himself and, frankly, this was the type of neighborhood where those doors might not necessarily be opened. It wasn't a bad neighborhood, not like some of the blocks on the South End where Mole had grown up, the blocks he would avoid — the ones he had carefully drawn maps of in his head in order to avoid. In fact, it rather had charm.

“Would you look at that?!” Rat exclaimed, grabbing at Mole's arm. “Do you see that window there? Isn't that beautiful? I wonder how they did that?”

She was pointing towards a small log cabin with the sort of rounded, picturesque windows that are described in fairy tales. Mole wasn't exactly sure what about the windows had captured Rat's attention besides maybe how round and fairy tale-ish they seemed but he smiled and nodded.

“They’re very interesting folks in there,” said Mole.

“Oh yes?”

“They look like it anyway. Sort of odd. On the fringe.”

“You haven’t met them?”

“No.”

“Well, why not?”

“I...I don’t know. I suppose I haven’t felt the urge to.”

“How very strange of you, Mole! You know, if you are to write this book, you are going to have to talk to animals.”

“I know that. But I’ve always found it much easier to talk to someone if you have something very specific to say.”

“I suppose that makes sense. You’re nothing if not sensible, Mole. We’ll have to rid you of that at some point!”

That stream, when it did exist and should it ever exist again, would eventually find its way to The River, and so that is where the path took them now. All things in The Willows eventually found their way to The River. It ran straight down through the middle of their small community, a mighty and surging force to hold it together; a guardian, whose gifts bound the animals to it and to each other. It defined their land, and would forever do so. In fact, there was an old wives’ tale that said that the blood of a Willows native flowed at the same pace as The River itself. That’s how intertwined it had always been with the plants, the animals, every living and breathing part of that land.

Out on to The River Run spilled Rat and Mole. The Run, as it was known, was the wide, dirt road that ran along The River’s west bank for miles. And if The River was the beating lifeblood of The Willows, then The Run was its central nervous system. Trodding down The Run, an animal could have any manner of interaction, adventure or revelation. They could buy a bushel of berries from an enterprising young squirrel or trade gossip with a passing barge captain or simply take a moment to stretch out underneath one of the many trees from whence The Willows took its name, watching the world go by through the delicate gossamer of its branches.

They had both walked down this road more times than they could count and yet today, shoulder-to-shoulder and amid the bountiful sunshine, it felt brand new.

“I still simply can't believe it has taken us all this time to actually, finally meet, Mole. Can you? How can that be possible?”

It was perplexing to Mole too. He did feel as if he had known Rat his whole life, while simultaneously acknowledging of course that this was not true. It was more as if his life had been marked by cameo appearances from Rat. Every year, as spring turned to summer, Rat would join the parade of vacationing animals traipsing into The Willows, hearts and minds set on a season of flitting about, of boat rides and lazy walks and evenings on the riverbanks, singing and dancing. Mole would catch a glimpse of her as she trailed her father on into the commercial docks on the odd occasion, looking to pick up some fresh fish to grill. Or he'd spot her at the grocery store, giggling with friends as they roamed through the aisles, selecting sweets for a party that evening. But every year, as summer faded and fall nosed its way in, Rat would vanish again and Mole would be left behind.

Her family had owned a house on the north side, a massive spread that still qualified as modest compared to some of the gargantuan beasts that surrounded it. In the spring, just before the weather turned, these houses would slowly be brought to life by animals like Mole's father. Those animals would trudge up The Run from their homes in the South End, headed north, just like Rat and Mole were at this very moment. They'd switch on the lights and shake out the linens and turn the taps to make sure the water still poured out. Mole's family lived in The Willows year-round, and his father cobbled together a living as a plumber, laying the pipe that pumped steaming water into the bathhouses of animals like Rat.

Up until very recently, Mole had only spoken to her once. It was several years ago, out at a particularly beautiful spot along The Run called Gloaming Glen, where everyone — the year-rounders and the summer visitors alike — would come on warm nights to have a bit of a picnic and revel in abandoning oneself to Nature. Mole had come with his friends. Rat had come with hers. And there was that moment — familiar to all species — when one group eyed the other and the other group eyed them right back and there was a shared feeling that they should all at least try to get into some trouble with one another.

Mole's pal Otter was the first to make official contact, striding up to a young chipmunk and rakishly extending a paw.

“Hey there. I couldn't help but notice you looking at me.”

“Oh, was I?”

“I could be mistaken. But I don't think so. My name is Otter.”

It was this way for Otter, an irrationally confident animal if ever there was one but one whose confidence always ended up justifying itself in the end. The groups slowly melted into one another and Mole found himself standing next to Rat, who turned and looked at him expectantly. Here was the moment Mole had dreamt of for years. Here was his chance to finally talk to the animal of his dreams.

“I...uh...it's a —...it's a wonderful night we're having, isn't it?”

“Oh! Yes.”

She had smiled winningly and paused for a moment, graciously giving Mole the chance to say something else, anything else. His mouth had flapped open, his eyes had darted to and fro. Something else! Anything else! Nope.

“Okay.”

And she was gone.

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“He's a good fellow, Toad is. Not everyone believes it but it's true. They think he's got it easy with all that wealth and that huge house of his — wait until you see it, it really is a monstrosity. But he's very lonely. He was even when his parents were still here. Now...even more so. But he's so good-natured, so affectionate. I think you'll really love him, Mole.”

They had arrived at Rat's small dinghy just as Rat launched into her description of Toad, a description that was completely unnecessary since anyone within twenty miles of The Willows was well aware of Toad and his various exploits. What was necessary, or at least what Rat felt was incumbent upon her, was a defense of her old friend. She and Toad had practically grown up together in those summer months spent sprawled across their respective estates. And these were, after all, the earliest days of Mole and Rat's relationship. As much as Mole might have been nervous to present his hovel-like burrow to the worldly Rat, she too had fretted about perception, notably her friendship with the flamboyantly wealthy, wildly unpredictable, notorious, uproarious Toad.

The dinghy was a reflection of that anxiety. It was purposefully small and modest, designed for utility though, of course, also stunningly beautiful in its construction. Even

Mole, who had never quite understood the idea of boating as anything more than a means of conveyance, certainly not a luxury pastime, could see that. Rat was never more at peace than when she was out on the water and the joy palpably radiated from her as she bounded down into the boat now and set about preparing for departure.

“He's been abroad so I haven't seen him for months, only exchanged the occasional letter, you know. We all thought it might be best for Toadie to do a bit of traveling, get away from it all, considering what had happened.”

Mole nodded and tottered in behind her, taking up a secure position at the stern of the boat. From there, he watched Rat go about her work, a grin slowly spreading over his face, despite his best efforts. He was still a bit shocked at how a humble mole like himself could now find himself sharing a boat with, of all animals, Rat.

There was a time when Mole thought he may never actually return to The Willows at all. Growing up amid the hardscrabble struggle of the South End, Mole had only a hazy notion of what life was like for animals like Rat and Toad. Sure, he had seen them and shared the land with them. But their world seemed impenetrable. Meanwhile, the world he did occupy seemed altogether untenable for someone such as himself. Mole had always been a quiet animal, content to spend his time buried in books or in quiet contemplation, pastimes that the South End rarely encouraged and, indeed, often found suspicious. The course that the neighborhood prescribed for its residents was quite a bit rougher, and so Mole had left The Willows in search of a new course, packing his bags and bidding goodbye to his crestfallen parents. They had hoped Mole would take up the family plumbing business. But it was not to be.

He had been gone for four years. He had first tried school but institutionalized academics didn't suit Mole well. Learning was a means to freedom in his mind and what he found at the college he attended was far from freedom. So Mole had tried wandering for a bit, reading dog-eared paperbacks and living out of a backpack. But he was just as poor at that. Wandering required a kind of bravado that Mole never had. For every proudly-won negotiation with a rug-selling snake of indeterminate origins, there were countless embarrassing, painful and uncomfortable episodes in which the hesitant and nervous Mole either failed to assert himself or asserted himself in all the wrong ways and so his adventures were usually truncated and, with a few exceptions, largely unsatisfying.

Mole had had to consider the possibility that, despite his occasional thirst for wayfaring, he ultimately belonged in The Willows. Of course, the moment he set foot back home, he could feel his father's peculiar brand of gratified disappointment practically radiating out of him. His predictions, after all, had come true. Mole had come crawling back, washed up, unable to cut it out there, not nearly as smart as he thought he was. At least, that's what Mole told himself as he scuffed his way down The Run on the painfully long afternoons that followed, muttering to himself in his father's voice.

In truth, it had always been quite difficult for Mole to discern exactly what his father was thinking. Like most South Enders, Mole's family had lived in The Willows for generations. These were folk as stoic and sturdy as the trees, and as consistent and dependable as the running waters of The River; the folk that had first built this community up out of nothing. They expected no more than what they earned and they knew that to earn anything meant hard work. So they put their noses down and did just that; they worked. The defining image Mole had of his father was of the animal silently hunched over some bit of plumbing, his mouth set in seriousness, just the faintest traces of weariness creeping in around the edges of his eyes, where the skin crinkled every so slightly.

Upon his return, Mole tried to tell himself that he was simply settling into his next chapter. That's what his mother had told him anyway. In the tradition of mothers everywhere, she had simply been happy to have him nearby once again. But when his father pronounced that if Mole were going to live at home, he would need to pay rent, Mole responded by saying thank you very much but no thank you. He reasoned that if he was going to have to pay rent, he might as well have a little privacy.

So he set about determining where exactly amid the rabbits and stoats and raccoons, among the red maples and the purple loosestrife and the azure delphinium, he might find his place now. This is what had brought him to Wild Wood, a developing neighborhood where a new breed of Willow artisans was making their home and establishing a class separate from the moneyed North End blue bloods and the blue-collar working animals of the South.

He also managed to find gainful employment repairing the books for Beaver down at the mill. The old codger had been running the place practically single-handedly for years and his finances had long ago slipped into utter chaos. Mole had a mind for order

and systems of organization though and he set to it determinedly, busying himself among the reams of paper, losing himself amid the spiraling columns of numbers, hoping perhaps that the answers he sought — answers to the question of what exactly he was supposed to be doing with himself — might be found there.

In the evenings, Mole sought answers elsewhere. He reconnected with Otter, who had his own fishing boat and was making a nice living for himself. It was just enough money, in fact, for him to comfortably blow it all night after night on parties at the tattered and charming retreat Otter called home. There, Mole, who might not have carried himself like a South Ender but carried within him the soul of one nonetheless, would wile away the nights, tipping back big bottles of the local spirit of choice, Red Willow Juice, and laughing at old stories from the neighborhood.

It was not uncommon then for some of the summer visitors to wander into Otter's, eyes wide and shoulders set back, still not entirely sure if they should be there or not. He was, as ever, a voluble presence on the docks, prone to inviting anyone over to his place, especially the attractive and rich female animals of the North End.

"We'll tip a few back. Listen to some tunes. Maybe we'll pop a few oysters on the barbecue. Come on!" he'd say, and just like that, his humble abode would be filled with a glorious mixture of everything The Willows had to offer, the wildest of wild hogs bumping up against the most prim of foxes, everyone dancing and drinking and howling up at the moon together. In those moments, quiet and contemplative Mole would abandon himself to the frenzy unfolding around him, a joyous and almost surprised smile spread across his face.

It was at a moment like this and precisely because of that oddly happy look on his face that Rat was first drawn to Mole. She had been dragged to the party by a friend who'd been taken in by Otter's bold entreaties and the promise of a potent Willow Juice mixture. Rat had been hesitant. Not that she didn't enjoy a good blow-out and she'd heard enough about Otter to know this would be a good one. But she too had recently felt herself drifting a bit, unsure of where to drop anchor. Nevertheless, she'd allowed herself to believe that the party might be a good distraction. And there she saw Mole, who looked as adrift as she felt and yet also appeared to be reveling in it, basking in it, enjoying it.

"What's your secret?" she practically yelled into his ear.

Later on, Mole would come to regard it as fate and a sign from the powers above that in this moment, a moment where he might expect himself to stumble and flail and rain flop sweat down upon the poor and unsuspecting Rat just as he had years before; Mole was instead seized with the inspiration of what he thought was a pretty darn smooth reply.

“I’ve never been much of a fan of secrets.” He smiled, paused for the briefest of beats, and extended a hand. “My name is Mole. What’s your name?”

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They had been out on the water for half an hour now, with Rat doing most of the talking. She was in the midst of an entertaining but rather long-winded story about her father. Mole would hear it again, many times, told in many settings, before all was said and done. Rat was the first to admit that she dwelled on the memory of her father, who had passed away a few years ago from an untimely heart attack. He had been a banker of some kind. Mole was unsure of which kind and he got the impression Rat scarcely knew herself. Her memories and evocations of him were much more childlike in their perspective, that of a gruff and towering but also loving figure, guiding her hand on the tiller of the boat, sweeping her up on to her shoulders so she could see above the crowd at the annual Lily Fair, holding her close when she had bad dreams.

This particular yarn involved her father’s participation in a local, amateur regatta. Rat’s father had been an expert boatsman and many among the gathered expected him to compete for the top prize. And indeed, he was right in the thick of it up until the final stretch, when a misguided tack and a submerged rock sank the boat in shallow water and seemingly ended the sailor’s day. But the animal, so close to the very end, was having none of it and decided to swim for the finish line. He finished far behind the pack but he did finish. Rat laughed now, remarking that her father must have known then what a fantastic ending to the story his swimming for it would make. He was like that, always keenly aware of the impression he had.

Mole had wondered about the effect of Toad’s parents’ death a year before on Rat. She had been close to them and, coupled with her own father’s death before that, this would seem to naturally impact any animal. And Mole could feel the strain in Rat’s joviality at times, even today. There was a weariness there. At that moment, she let the

natural quiet of The River envelop them and with it came a sadness that no one could avoid.

The death of Toad's parents had, of course, been sensational news. Toad's father had been much respected, possessing of a purposeful dignity and a care for the community that previous toad patriarchs were well known to have lacked. For her part, Toad's mother had spent her days wrapped up in the intricacies of social niceties, from which she took genuine satisfaction. She seemed to regard Toad however as no more than a curiosity, one worth trotting out when the occasion called for it but otherwise fairly useless.

Toad's father, forever fearful of the effect that money might have on his progeny, was more headmaster to Toad, watchful of the young Toad's academic work and moral upbringing but wholly unconcerned with any degree of intimacy or affection. He was an inveterate workaholic, one of several compulsions that he managed to keep hidden behind his office door, and this might explain how he could have missed the fact that, despite his best efforts, money had indeed had quite an effect on Toad.

This is how Toad grew up. And then, one day, on a trip to visit some of his mother's family, their train car derailed. And his parents were gone.

Just then, coming into view from around the corner, sprang Toad Hall. Mole had, of course, taken in this sight before and he was familiar with all the beats of the spectacle. There was the sudden clang of the emerald green lawn that fronted The River, the way its gaudiness made one's eyes pop, conditioned as they were to the muted, golden browns of The Willows. Your eyes searched for some purchase and eventually found it at the top of that emerald hill, where a stately row of fir trees stood sentry, dark but not altogether intimidating. They boosted the eye even further up, encouraging you to catch that glimpse of Toad Hall's uppermost points, the spire of a chimney, perhaps a rooftop deck of some kind. And of course the balcony and great glass doors of the master bedroom, where generations of toads had stood and gazed down upon the land they'd built.

From amid the fir trees and down the lawn now bounded the latest in that long line of toad progeny. He was dressed in an outrageous spoof of himself — a red satin smoking jacket over a designer, pink-and-black flower-print t-shirt, fitted sweatpants, no shoes.

“Hooray! This is splendid!”

“Toadie!”

“Ratty! My love! My darling! My one-and-only.”

The dextrous Rat tied up the dinghy and swung up on to Toad's private dock all in one motion. She and Toad hugged each other, their upper bodies swaying in sync with one another as they yelped and cheered.

“Oh, it's good to see you.”

“It's so good to see you too! How was it?”

“Fantastic. Life altering, Ratty, really. I must tell you all about it.”

“You must.”

“The adventures I've had, the way it's opened my eyes! I mean, my God!”

“That's fantastic. Truly. Now, Toad —”

“Yes.”

“I want you to meet Mole.”

“Yes! Of course! There he is! The famous Mole!”

Mole had remained in the boat, nervous to interrupt this merry reunion. He had momentarily pondered the question of whether or not he should feel threatened. Rat had assured him before that she would only ever be friends with Toad; that, in fact, Toad had never really been romantically involved with anyone. He craved friendship but seemed to have little interest in intimacy, she had said with a trace of wonder in her voice. Watching the two of them hop about happily, Mole put the question out of his mind. Their relationship was clearly that of siblings, bound together by a cosmic force. They had not found each other, had not sought each other out. They had been there for each other from the very beginning.

“Toad, stop it!”

“What?”

“I told you not to tease me like that.”

“Fine. But it's true. You sound eerily like her.”

“Ugh. God.”

“Mole, have you yet had the pleasure of meeting Rat's mum?”

“No, I haven't.”

Toad giggled. It was a laugh that would become very familiar to Mole, a little too familiar for Mole's taste actually. It was practically a weapon for Toad, a means to disarm even the most sober of animals, a musical honking so carefree that it seemed

both insolent and harmonious at the same time. Toad meant to celebrate life and he meant to invite you to join him. But that celebration would be on his terms and he would let you know it was so by sounding these discordant bells.

“Oh you'll have to let me know how that goes. And you thought I was going to be hard.”

“But you won't be, will you, you old Toadie?”

“Of course not. I can already tell I'll like Mole. He seems very amused by me.”

This was true. At this moment, Mole was very amused indeed. Trailing the other two as they walked up the manicured path that led from the dock to Toad Hall, he felt rather as if he were floating. Luridly colored and outrageously large flowers beamed down at him from all sides, their perfumed warmth filling him with airy, giddy anticipation. Mole tried to peak over the shrubbery and get his bearings but all he could see were more bushes, more flowers, more lawns. This was more than he had ever imagined and he had spent some time indeed imagining the details of Toad Hall.

“So what are we to do today?”

“Well, for one, you've got to give Mole the tour.”

“You've never been here before, Mole?”

“Hmm? No.”

“No? My goodness. Well then.”

As if on cue, they came out from the gardens and were met by the sight of Toad Hall, fully revealed now. Toad bowed and swept his arm out.

“Welcome to my home.”

Toad Hall lay neat and square and solid at the top of a small rise; a three-story, marvelously gabled mansion of red brick, built in the Tudor-style of the day, with rows and rows of windows that welcomed in the river light while, in return, offering only the slightest peek at the splendors that lay inside. It was designed in the style of a country home for lords and ladies and it had an accompanying, dignified and imposing sense of peace. It was in the way its considerable bulk rested on the land, thought Mole; the way it seemed to welcome your eyes to it and then insist you come no further.

As they drew closer though, with Rat and Toad again lost in chatter, Mole could see the renovations that Toad Hall had been subject to, additions and subtractions that, upon inspection, gave the property a kind of ramshackle, confused air. That balcony attached to the master bedroom truly had been attached, and poorly, it seemed. Whole sections of

the mansion appeared tacked on, with no consideration paid to any aesthetic integrity. Garish facades had been fastened to the windows and the property was littered with evidence of one fancy or another: an odd bit of topiary or some frightening attempt at modern sculpture. There was even some kind of strange, futuristic shed tucked into a back corner of the property that Mole would later learn was a new kind of hothouse. There, Toad had passingly experimented with an interest in botany.

It was fitting, of course, since the entire history of Toad's family in The Willows was about bending the land to their needs. They had quite literally done just that, not long after Toad's great-grandfather first stepped foot in The Willows. Everyone knew him as The Commodore, though whether or not he had ever served in the military was a matter of great dispute. But there was a swagger about that animal, one way or the other. It befit the name and so The Commodore had stuck. It was The Commodore who had first made the family's fortune as a real estate developer, using that single-minded swagger of his to convince locals to buy into the big dreams he spun — luxury developments, commercial hubs, resort living. The Willows was perhaps his finest achievement.

This part of The Willows was undeveloped scrub brush then, too far from the existing river to be of any real use to anyone. But standing amid the brush, posed like some kind of conquering hero, The Commodore saw the potential. He didn't need to get near The River. All he needed to do was bring The River to him. The Commodore, like any animal, had been struck by the magic and majesty of The River. He was enraptured by it and so he desired nothing more than to control it.

He had been behind the damming of The River, a massive project that altered its course and stretched its length, creating entirely new riverfront property. The River flowed slower now too, allowing for leisure activities like the recreational boating Rat had enjoyed as a youth. It was a smash success, at least for the newly minted North End, and Toad Hall was built soon after, establishing a benchmark for the sprawling mansions of The Willows and announcing the area as a premium vacation destination.

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Through the hall's great front doors now strode the current master of the house, followed by Rat and Mole. Toad moved them through a voluminous entryway and towards a salon off to one side. That room was dominated by its great stone fireplace

and the portrait that hung over it. It was the Commodore himself, posed as he surely had been on that first day in the scrub brush. His chin was tilted up, his eyes gleaming. A hand rested on his hip, which was thrust out jauntily, while his other arm and hand were extended, pointing off into the distance and to some faraway vision of a resplendent future. Toad saw Mole gazing up at it.

“Yeah, that’s the old lily pad himself,” he said. “The Commodore,” Toad intoned in a deep baritone, his voice dripping with mock gravitas. And like that, he was on to the next subject, imploring both Mole and Rat to inspect a surfboard he had just bought. Rat gently reminded Toad that there were no waves to be found anywhere near The Willows.

“It’s not for actual surfing, Silly. It’s a piece of art! Oh! Look! I also got this.”

He was now brandishing a long and terribly sharp-looking sword, holding it in front of his face and then wagging it back and forth.

“I won’t tell you how expensive this was. It’s authentic, an actual museum piece so it’s worth every penny. Here, let me show you where I want to put it.”

He was moving again now, the sword leading the way. They toured the whole house like this; as if Toad were some kind of ancient explorer, off to discover hitherto unknown lands buried deep within Toad Hall. His mouth moved a mile a minute as he darted between rooms and topics. One moment, he was delivering a history lesson on the engineering innovations required to hoist a grand piano through a third story window. The next, he was miles down the road of a tangent, entertaining his two guests with a ribald anecdote about the secrets hidden in the servants quarters.

“I’m told they used to call that closet to the left ‘the nursery,’ because so many illicit pregnancies were conceived back in there. There was a gardener - Ferret, I believe he was. Nanny says he knocked up half the cleaning staff during our dinner parties. Can you even imagine? Father and Mother off with their suck-up retinues in the dining room, toasting to each other with pink champagne. And down here, Ferret rogering the maid behind closed doors!”

Toad giggled again, the peals of laughter echoing off the room’s stone walls.

“I used to spend hours here. We both did, Rat, you remember? I shudder to think of the things we were witness to that we’ve now repressed. No wonder I’m such a mess!”

The house, for all the eccentricities that this family had introduced, was still truly a marvel. Its dining room came with a banquet table for thirty and a glorious coat-of-arms

hung from the wall. Bathrooms featured ivory-handled fixtures and mirrors framed in gold. In the game room, Mole stood over an ornate pool table, running his hands along its soft felt. At the top of the home's great, sweeping staircase, he let his mind wander, imagining dozens and dozens of animals standing below, smiling back up, joining him in a pink champagne toast.

Toad's tour led them eventually to the home's private theater, where he insisted they see the footage he'd recently shot while abroad. This was Toad's newest passion — documentary film. It was one in a long line of passions, and, at least judging by these efforts, this one did not come any more naturally to Toad than the rest, the film footage being mainly of the ocean and of the handheld, and nausea-inducing variety. He'd always flitted about in this way. It was a habit, or affliction, of the rich, caused from an abundance of time and resources. The sheer freedom to do anything made any one thing always seem hopelessly boring compared to the infinite excitement of everything not yet done, and so the wealthy were constantly bouncing from one hobby to another.

In the past year, following that untimely death of his parents, that tendency had taken on a new kind of urgency in Toad. As he tried to right himself amid all the sharp-toothed and steely-eyed business that surrounds death, especially the death of the wealthy, his habits and qualities — those habitual frustrations and fervent passions — were only magnified. The manic phases, one of which Mole guessed he was witnessing now, were mixed with periods of deep depression. Rat had been one of the very few allowed entry into Toad's most private suffering and it was she who first encouraged Toad's travels. She had reported to Mole earlier that day that she was cautiously optimistic about its results. But even Mole could catch a glimpse of something still pained behind Toad's eyes. Later, they passed the master bedroom, and it was here — and only here — that Toad had nothing to say. As they walked briskly past, Mole couldn't help but notice how untouched the room was.

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After an exhaustive tour, the trio eventually found themselves back out in the garden. A spread of food had seemingly appeared out of nowhere, alighting in front of them on an ornate, wrought-iron table in the shade of the fir trees. Toad pushed his food around with the same haphazard, manic air with which he had conducted his tour. It

was as if everything in the world was simultaneously too fascinating to ignore and yet woefully incapable of holding Toad's attention.

The latest subject to have momentarily grabbed ahold of that attention was Mole, specifically Mole's background. Rat had told Toad about Mole, describing, in as much detail as she could, Mole's upbringing in the South End. For both Rat and Toad, the South End retained a certain dangerous mystery. While Mole was floating by Toad Hall and dreaming of what lay behind the fir trees, Rat and Toad were dancing along the South End's perimeter, occasionally dipping their toes into its murky waters to try to learn how the other half lived. Rat knew enough to feel some shame about this. Toad, who had perhaps never known shame in his life, certainly didn't feel it then and there.

"You can see the kind of conditions I live in, Moley. It's no good. Believe me, I wouldn't live here if it hadn't been thrust upon me. I've got to get out. Breathe some real air, right? So what's the situation? What can you get us into?"

Mole shyly cut his glance towards Rat, who lifted her eyebrows ever so slightly. Later, Mole would realize his desire to impress and befriend Toad at that moment. It was one of many motives that would eventually swirl together with cyclonic force and run roughshod over events to come. He'd say it was because of Toad's frenzied loneliness and Mole's immediate concern for the poor animal. But it was also because of that house and those gardens and the way it all seemed to wrap itself around Toad and protect him. It was a bit like Mole's very own burrow, except of course so much grander.

And so that is how Mole ended up back at Otter's for another party, accompanied this time not just by his new girlfriend from the other side of the tracks but also Toad, scion to the most well-known and often notorious family in The Willows. And that was how Toad met Weasel.

Chapter 2: Stoat Crick Mart

Mole's inspiration for writing the complete history of The Willows had crept up upon him over time. He had never really considered himself a writer, though the idea that he might try to be had certainly popped into his mind before. He had dreamt of it, he couldn't deny that. But he hadn't allowed the dream to linger. It seemed presumptuous of him, as if the title, even in one's imaginings, could only be conferred by someone else. Nevertheless, a part of him — a creeping, nagging, insistent part of him — kept telling Mole that he was made for it. That part told him time and again that he had the necessary parts: a keen observational eye, a love and dexterity with words and, of course, an anxious disposition. That part told Mole that it was his destiny.

Then Mole went away and, while he was away, confronting the complicated reality of a wider world, he thought back frequently to his home. Not just to his mother and father and the friends he'd left behind. He'd think of the land itself too, how absolutely idyllic it all was. He'd wax poetic in his own head, crafting delicate odes to the whispers that swept through the rushes on The River's banks, to the music of the water and to the lifetimes buried in the ground underneath his feet, the lifetimes he could practically feel when he pressed his paw into the soft soil. Now granted, all young animals think that way of their childhood homes, especially when they're away for the first time, and The Willows — as Mole knew all too well — was far from idyllic. But it didn't matter. It was idyllic enough for him.

And yet still both Mole's destiny and this idea of his sat waiting for him, waiting for him to screw up the courage, that magical moment when the match is struck and the fire is set and the writer simply has no choice but to pour out everything that had been welling up inside him.

It was Beaver, of all animals, who struck that match. Or rather, it was the scatterbrained habits of the old codger and his equally eccentric wife. It happened back in the dustiest corner of the mill's offices. There, Mole had set up a kind of headquarters

for his job reorganizing Beaver's books. He'd found a rickety old table that soon proved quite incapable of supporting the massive reams of paper that Mole was sifting through and so the whole operation had been forced on to the floor, where it commenced to spread. In order to make room for this explosive growth, Mole was forced to clean and reorganize even more of Beaver's junk, junk that had nothing to do with accounting or finances or any of his ostensible reasons for being there in the first place. Which Mole didn't really mind because of course he was getting paid either way and there was something relaxing about quietly losing oneself in the minutiae of another person's life.

One day, Mole was clearing out a newly discovered crawl space. He had plans on storing boxes containing a decade's worth of Beaver's tax returns there when he came upon the newspapers. Bound and yellowed and stacked high enough to almost definitely pose a serious fire hazard, they dated back to long before Mole's birth. Curious, Mole untied a bundle and delicately paged through the topmost issue, his paws ever so gently grazing the brittle newsprint. It took a moment for Mole to realize he was holding his breath, as if the very act of breathing might cause it all to disintegrate and blow away.

Beaver, sawdust drifting off him in lazy clouds, shuffling through with a stack of lumber under one arm and his usual steaming cup of coffee in hand, glanced now at Mole.

"What have you got there?"

"It looks like a stack of old newspapers. *The Willows Gazette*?"

"Oh yeah. That was the old paper. It shut down years ago, before your time. The wife holds on to some of them. She's a real collector. I'd call her a packrat but then she'd get real angry with me."

Beaver chuckled, his whole body rolling softly. He'd held his position here at the mill for many many years and seen it and *The Willows* itself through all kinds of ups and all kinds of downs. These days, there wasn't much use for a small and independent business like this one and yet Beaver made it work. He even offered tours of the mill in the summer, his shuffling gait matched by the small crowd of gawkers that would follow behind him. He'd airily wave his hand at this machine or that, tersely describing its function and offering up his own appraisal of its relative level of destructive power on the average animal's body. The tourists would gasp in surprise and grin.

He tottered off now, calling back as he went. "Put that stuff back where you found it, will ya."

Mole did not. Instead, he pored over the recordings of his homeland's local history. It was, admittedly, mainly a folksy kind of history that the *Gazette* provided, small town events and small town lore. But there was drama to be found, as long as you looked close. A feud over a trampled flower patch that turned to fisticuffs sixty years ago. A parade float rivalry from forty years ago that didn't seem as friendly as one might expect. An unexplained spat of vandalism in a River Bank neighborhood from thirty years ago, a neighborhood now barely recognizable as its former self. Reading through it all, Mole could sense something begin to move around inside of his head; the first few atoms of an idea bumping up against one another.

Mole found himself gazing around with a welcome and surprising sense of wonder as he walked home from the mill that evening. What he'd read that day had rung a kind of bell in his head and the whole world had a resounding clarity to it now. He was suddenly aware of the many stories that had passed through these trees, this immense history spilling down the thruways and byways in pursuit of love or glory or danger. Moreover, he was both comforted and excited by the idea that he was connected to each and every one of those stories, no matter the animal who lived it, because they shared this home with him.

That night, back at his humble Wild Wood burrow, he paced the rooms, mumbling, now waving his hands, plotting. He would write a history, one with a wide scope and a big heart, built upon the stories he'd find in the *Gazette*. And there would be first-person accounts too, from interviews Mole could conduct, adding intimacy and depth to that chronicle. The combination could create a work of epic journalism, and from that a kind of poetic narrative would form. Or, rather, he would be able to find the poetic narrative within the epic journalism. Which he would then have to weave back in, in an artful way of course. It was still taking shape.

And indeed, Mole's first efforts were clumsy, even by his own estimation, filled a bit too full with wonder and romance and the wide-eyed excitement of that initial inspiration. Slow down, he told himself. These things take time.

He decided that he would take a step back, take that time to re-acquaint himself with the established history of the land. This, he reasoned, could provide him with a kind of foundation of information from which the questions and specific areas he would focus

on would then come from. Of course, he already knew the basics, the sort of history that's taught in primary school. He'd sat there in the schoolhouse, like all the other good little animals, listening to the story that The Willows had chosen to tell itself, a story that was just as golden-hued as the light passing through the trees at dusk and just as reassuring.

For most of recorded time, The Willows was a largely agrarian piece of the animal world. Various species settled land near The River and used its natural resources to fulfill their various needs. Over time and as more and more gathered, a symbiosis between the species became apparent. First, communication, and then a kind of community, was established. Animals learned from one another, they evolved in relation to one another. Civilization emerged.

One of the earliest hallmarks of that civilization was the establishment of The Willows' central market, built on a tributary of The River that would come to be known as Stoa Crick. Here, not only was the animal's burgeoning community given a physical meeting place, trade and commerce were codified there as well. Mole's teachers loved to talk about Stoa Crick Mart; how you could trace the entire emergence of The Willows' economic and social structure through the Mart's various epochs.

An offshoot of The River at its most powerful point, the Crick ran down through a gully before opening on to a wide, flat clearing and a mass of Quaking Aspen trees whose great arching branches and deep green leaves provided a most elegant canopy. The Crick was framed by The River to the west and, opposite that, by the hill ridge that marked the town's eastern border. It was as if all the business of The Willows was meant to flow through there and so the stoats, who had been living among the Crick's fallen branches long before there was business to conduct, had graciously thought to dig out a small public gathering place for animals to rest and chat and bask in the verdant shadows.

One day, a particularly clever rabbit passed through the Crick with a bushel of carrots he'd gathered. He had more than he needed and so he traded a couple dozen for a rather odd-looking tool called a plough built by, as it happened, an ancestor of Beaver's. The rabbit took the so-called plough back to his fields and used it to sow his new crop, with stunning results. Other rabbits followed his example, adding to this innovation the knowledge and tools that they too had acquired, oftentimes at the Mart.

And from their fields grew a veritable empire, one that now afforded them their own North End spread, complete with its own private road.

If a teacher were delivering this lesson while on one of the many field trips the young Mole had taken to Stroat Crick, they would make sure to time it so the lesson's end came just as you arrived at the rabbits' brick and mortar location at the Mart; their flagship store in the now worldwide Rabbit Brand Carrots Company. Their carrot products were available in specialty stores everywhere and the brand was one of The Willows' proudest exports. Mole himself had a long-standing love of their carrot-apple cake and would often take the opportunity this lesson afforded him to pop in and get a slice.

Despite its proud past and notwithstanding those few bright spots, most thought of The Mart nowadays as a tourist trap, specializing mainly in useless vacation tchotchkes like snow-globes and decorative pieces of wood. Besides the field trips, Mole had slouched around there on occasion as a teenager, once even successfully shoplifting a pack of cards from one of the countless, low-grade souvenir shops that had sprouted up along the outer bank. But he certainly didn't spend much time there now and, like most locals, tended to regard it with resigned disdain.

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A slightly more penetrative look into local history would reveal that, for many years, it was the weasels who had run Stroat Crick Mart, having taken control not long after their cousins the stoats had formally established it. Weasels were never as industrious as the stoats, nor very strong, or quick, or even very intelligent, at least not in the practical sense. But they were a crafty species, uniquely suited to sussing out opportunities and edges and to convincing others to do things not in their best interest, things they might not otherwise do. This last trait, in fact, explains how it is that the stoats came to give up control to them in the first place.

Early on, the stoats had instituted a small tax on the Mart's buyers and sellers in order to make their living and maintain the location. No one begrudged them that. And the stoats had always controlled the layout of the Mart, organizing it according to category of goods and awarding prime real estate in a responsible and fair manner, based on seniority. It was the weasels, having convinced their cousins that they could

and should take over day-to-day affairs while the stoats finally enjoyed the fruits of their labor, who then began accepting the odd bribe here and there to move an enterprising farmer to a more central spot. And perhaps, the weasels thought, there might be a place to sell some of the area's more controversial products, notably the famed Red Willow Juice, the powerful concoction that the local raccoons had been mixing up in tree hollows for ages.

Some in the South End would sing the praises of those early years under the control of the weasels. Not many animals were left who were even alive then but that era in the Mart's history had taken on an almost mythological tone. There was a nostalgic sense of hedonism done well and a sentiment that, at least then, animals knew the rules. It was later, after the damming, that the hedonism grew sticky with sugar water and slippery like greased palms. The weasels' greed grew menacing and the products that the Mart increasingly offered drew a different sort of crowd. But even then, the old timers argue, it was better than what had come later, when the Commodore swept through and changed everything.

Mole knew all this before he set out to write his book. After the droning, whitewashed monologues of his grade school teachers, there had also been the long and winding lessons delivered around the family table, not to mention the various stories told along the pitted paths and aging docks of his neighborhood. That day at Beaver's mill, one of the first articles Mole had sunk into was on one of the South End's favorite topics of conversation. It was written more than fifty years prior and it announced the redevelopment of Stoa Crick Mart and hence the end of the weasels' control.

"It was a scene filled with both promise and tension Tuesday night at Gloaming Glen where local animals gathered to hear noted North End resident Commodore Toad speak on his plans to revitalize The Willows' famed Stoa Crick Mart," the article began. "Joined on stage by Mayor Turtle, the bombastic Commodore extolled the virtues of his redevelopment plan, revealing detailed drawings and blueprints for a newly designed central market and introducing local merchants who had signaled a willingness to return to the location.

'Today, after a period of unfortunate decay, we begin a new era for one of The Willows' proudest historic and commercial centers!'," The Commodore exuberantly exclaimed from the pulpit.

The news was met mainly with full-throated enthusiasm from the assembled crowd, though representatives of the current Stroat Crick Mart Administrative Council expressed outrage, maintaining that the Commodore's takeover is not only unfair, but illegal as well. Though the meeting ended peacefully, there were reports of a tense confrontation between The Commodore and Council members later that evening. Both sides have declined to comment."

Mole examined the image that appeared in his mind. He envisioned Gloaming Glen, a small crowd of animals gathered around a stage there, and the Commodore, decked out in his waistcoat and blindingly white pants and that ridiculous cane he used, now grasping at one of those old-timey microphones and spinning another of his yarns about the bright, bright future The Willows had to look forward to. And Mayor Turtle and all the other local dignitaries were there, smiling and nodding obsequiously, and all the townspeople gazed up, just a few years removed from the damming that was already starting to irrevocably change their community and yet still in thrall to another of the Commodore's visions.

The very construct of The Willows had always depended on each species filling a role and offering a contribution. And the takeover of Stroat Crick Mart had undoubtedly deprived the weasels of the foundation of their livelihood and thus their role, creating a destabilization felt throughout The Willows. The role of the weasels had admittedly been a shifty and repugnant one because that was their nature, to be sure, but it was one that offered a contribution nonetheless. It was undeniable that the businesses of the Mart had grown under their stewardship. After all, the Rabbit Brand Carrots Company hadn't been built through bartering and ploughing alone. No doubt, some clever rabbit had sought out a private meeting with the weasel in charge, ensuring through whatever means necessary that their products remained front and center as they shifted from an agricultural to a commercial model. And so they had, and no one was complaining about that now, least of all Mole when he sunk into a warm slice of carrot-apple cake.

But unlike the weasels, the rabbits were allowed in on the Commodore's plans. They were there that day at Gloaming Glen. A rabbit had been quoted in fact, boasting of his decision to sign on to the development plan and expressing confidence that it truly would mark the turnaround that the Commodore had promised. And it had, at least for them. The weasels, on the other hand, were not afforded the room to fit themselves in.

Instead, they were consigned to the same underclass that they'd once presided over. And this had an effect.

Mole's first memory of the weasel he knew was when he was just a pup, maybe nine or ten years old. Mole had been standing at the edge of the family's burrow, situated on a relatively picturesque hill overlooking the South End. It was getting towards sundown and the young Mole was almost certainly due back inside. He had scuttled up to the burrow's threshold, anticipating his mother's call, ready to surprise her with his prompt attention to safety and responsibility.

It was practically cinematic in Mole's mind, the way Weasel had come up over the rise at that moment, that particular sneer of his painted across his face, the lips curled back and the eyes narrowed and the chin lifted. Weasel was trailed that day by three of his cronies. They seemed to ride in his wake, like water skiers pulled by a powerboat. And he walked with the easy grace of an animal used to pulling others behind him, who'd long ago ingrained that power into his bones.

Weasel was only a few years older than Mole. On that day, he could not have been more than thirteen. He and the cronies were engaged in their usual brand of mischief, stealing the odd bit of produce or scaring a smaller animal out of their pocket money, nothing particularly dangerous or consequential. But to Mole, this animal seemed to stand ten feet tall.

Mole had never quite gotten over this, the way one's perception changes the very nature of things so radically. Someone who had seemed so intimidating and so confident in his own power to the young Mole might very well have been regarded as simply a delinquent youth by the adults around them. But all Mole knew at the time was what he felt and what he felt was an unwavering desire to stay as far off Weasel's radar as he could. As adolescence commenced, Mole committed himself to doing just that. He adopted a kind of witless persona, his head perpetually in the clouds, thoroughly unworthy of an animal like Weasel's time because one like Mole simply could not appreciate the magnitude of Weasel's attention. This, ironically enough, had earned Mole the begrudging respect of Weasel, a kind of bemused amazement at Mole's unwittingness. It wasn't much but it kept Mole from ever becoming one of his victims.

Mole hadn't given much thought to Weasel in his time away from The Willows but, upon his return, he immediately began to hear of the animal's growing reputation. He'd apparently opened an auto body shop in some far-flung corner of the South End, though

Mole got the impression that this wasn't all that Weasel was up to. There were rumors that he'd become a kind of enforcer in the South End too, offering up protection to those who'd pay and doling out violence and intimidation to those who did not.

Of course, Mole was sure that a lot of this was only rumor and nothing more, part of the fabric of gossip and anecdote and mythology that ran through the South End just as swiftly and powerfully as The River itself. It seemed Weasel had already woven himself into that fabric and into the history of his species, a history filled with anger and resentment. Mole had heard that same anger spit out of the mouths of Weasel and the cronies on more than one occasion. And now, reading that article from so long ago, he heard it echoed back again.

"They've stolen it from us!" exclaimed one weasel in the *Gazette* article. "They can't just come in here and take it, can they?"

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In the weeks and months leading up to his first fateful meeting of Toad, Mole would explore all sorts of pathways and tributaries running through the history of The Willows. But he kept coming back to this particular vein, increasingly convinced he could follow its reverberations all the way to the present day. It was, after all, part of the story told across his dinner table and down the South End's pitted paths and even in the classrooms of his youth, the story of land, physical land, the very dirt that Mole had sunk his paws into. Who owns it? Could you own it?

These were questions that had first appeared the minute the Commodore set down in the scrub brush that would eventually become the North End. He had been a city animal before, brushing up against the Wide World's great centers of industry and commerce, and carrying their ideas with him to The Willows, for better or worse. After claiming his patch of scrub brush, he convinced the town that damming and redirecting The River could be a boon for all of them, a way to increase the value of their land and its products. It was The Commodore who'd essentially introduced the concept of property rights to The Willows and he'd profited quite well from it. It was his land whose value would increase most of all and he quickly parceled it off to others of his ilk, leaving himself just enough room for Toad Hall to sprawl out.

It would be more than a decade later before The Commodore would set out to take control of Stoa Crick Mart as well. Before the announcement at Gloaming Glen, Mole found nothing in the *Gazette* that suggested any kind of deal to take over the Mart had been in the works. Admittedly, Beaver's wife's collection was spotty in places. The issues stretched back almost seventy years, which was very early by the standards of The Willows, but there were large gaps there too. Mole imagined a confused Beaver using handfuls of these archives as kindling for the home fire.

What Mole did find was definite, evident concern over the prevalence of Red Willow Juice in The Willows at that time, as well as not so subtle indications that most thought the weasels were to blame. Enough stories of Red Willow-fueled mayhem had been passed around by the various animal families that the consumption of it had long raised eyebrows. But that didn't mean there weren't interested parties and the weasels had been happy to seize the opportunity, partnering with the raccoons to bring Red Willow Juice to the Mart. The rise of establishments offering boozy vacationers the juice in all its attendant forms — mixed with mint and honey into a refreshing cocktail, say, or blended together with local black- and boysenberries, creating a specialty smoothie offered at a veritable emporium of booziness called Wart's Watering Hole — had been a boon to the Mart's overall revenue.

Mole read of the opposition to these sorts of establishments and of the prolonged battle that was waged to regulate the potation. In one issue, Mole spotted a notice for a community meeting that sought to “organize common thinking and develop a productive response to the changes we have seen at Stoa Crick.” This was soon followed by an editorial written by one C.P. Munk that warned against the effects that widespread, rampant debauchery might have on their fast-growing community and listed the Mart's overseers, the weasels, as the chief enablers of such.

The expected, attendant mayhem did seem present. There were a few mentions of violence in the paper, though in keeping with its distinctly provincial tone, the reporting was somewhat oblique and euphemistic. There was, for instance, one report of a “brief kerfuffle” down at a spot then called Oyster Rock. For the life of him, Mole couldn't figure out where this might actually be but it was apparently near enough to Stoa Crick that a few especially daring animals thought they might draft off of the Mart's popularity, setting up shop there without paying the weasels for that privilege. According to the article, there were reports of a confrontation that left several animals

“to recuperate beneath the thick folds of their bedding and by the glowing embers of their hearth.”

A year later, a fire at the Mart caused extensive damage, all but obliterating a stall that traded and sold rare stones as well another that handled textiles. The accompanying article in the *Gazette* went so far as to openly speculate that it was the weasels themselves and their “well-known history of backroom shenanigans” who were the cause of the fire.

Despite all this, the weasels and their newly formed administrative council appeared to have maintained firm and uncontested control of Stoa Crick Mart. Mole had to conclude this, given the evidence he could find of them in the papers. By and large, the weasels of the era exuded an aura of influence and satisfaction. Mole even spotted one photograph of a weasel standing with a group of young ones of all kinds, everyone in matching hats and t-shirts, grinning. They were the South End's Little League team, a team proudly sponsored by the weasel's Administrative Council. In that issue, the weasel was also quoted, proclaiming his kind's dedication to the “continued well-being of this fair neighborhood.” Seven months later, the Commodore made his announcement.

Mole searched through the newspapers for more information on The Commodore's Stoa Crick Revitalization Project, as it would come to be known. But he could find only updates — albeit breathless ones — on the status of construction; the footbridge to connect the creek's two sides, the fountain built right into one of its natural pools, the newly-minted central square for public events. What Mole could not find was an explanation of how all of this had come together.

Mole began to sniff around for other sources of information then. He asked his mother what she could recollect from that period but she snapped at him for even suggesting she was old enough to remember such a time. His father offered up a cracked leather journal kept by Mole's grandmother which he said Mole could have but which Mole found to be filled mainly with poems about leaves. His new neighbor, the aging and eccentric Mrs. Mouse, was even less helpful, insisting that she show Mole an old photo album that would be sure to answer all his questions but was instead decidedly too personal — way way too personal, if you asked Mole — in its content to be of any use.

Mole even chanced to ask Beaver about it. By then, the old rodent had begun to suspect that he wasn't getting his money's worth out of Mole and Mole knew it. But he also knew that Beaver got a loose tongue towards the end of the day, when perhaps a bit of Red Willow Juice made it into his coffee mug and he'd kick his legs up on to his desk and tell a story or two if so prompted.

"Well, I was just a young one then. I can't hardly remember that bit of trouble." Beaver said, his brows furrowing, his legs kicked up onto his desk as the sun dipped below the horizon through the window behind him. "Is this what you're so interested in?"

"Just curious. So there was trouble then?"

"Oh yes, yes..." Beaver lapsed into silence for a moment. "Stoat Crick was very different then, young pup. It was very dangerous. You didn't go by there after dark. Heck, my mother didn't much care for us going by there in the day! Then ol' Commodore decided he needed to clean it up and when he set his mind on something, well, that's that...'Course, I don't know if it's any better now. Nothing but junk in those places. Overpriced, that's for sure!"

"But how could he just do it? It can't have been as simple as putting your mind to it."

"No, of course not."

"I just mean — well, it's like you said. There was opposition. There was trouble. From the weasels maybe?"

"Nothing The Commodore couldn't handle. He had the weight of the respectable community behind him. The foxes, the rabbits, the Mayor."

"Mayor Turtle?"

"Well sure, he was the one who brought that community to him in the first place!" said Beaver, taking a long and satisfied sip from his mug.

"What do you mean?"

"That was his whole job. Look, things were simpler then. There weren't so many gosh darned rules and regulations to everything. If you wanted something done, all you needed was a consensus. And that's what Turtle got ya. Heck, it's how they built this town!"

Mayor Turtle was a figure of much importance in town lore. He had been its first official mayor and had held the position for more than twenty-five years, a time of

explosive growth for The Willows. Many, particularly the upper class who had benefited most from that growth, regarded him as the community's founder. They'd even named their park after him. Nestled deep within the North End, Turtle Pond Park was a stunning jewel that included manicured lawns, a track to run on encircling the eponymous pond and, of course, a very watchful private security team. It also featured a statue of Turtle, looking august and proud as ever, gazing off placidly in the direction of his old mansion just down the road and just up the way from Toad's.

The prominence and power of the mayoral position had been in steady decline ever since Turtle had retired, with each successive animal beginning their term filled with optimism and hope only to find themselves swallowed up by the shadow of that great legislator and the office he'd created. It was Turtle who had imbued the town's upper class with the power they currently wielded. He and the Commodore had practically created that class and so from then on, the mayor was simply an instrument of their leaders. Such was the case with the current office-holder, the vacuous Mink.

After a time, Mole decided he'd like to devote himself more to potential primary sources. He had always been a shy animal, he knew that to be true. He liked to think he'd made it work in his favor in the past but he also knew it had held him back at times. And so had come to regard these casual interviews he'd conducted — with Mrs. Mouse or Beaver or the many others to come — as a kind of personal growth opportunity as well, a chance for Mole to get out there and really engage with other animals. Granted, Mole started off easy and he really hadn't been at it very long but he was exhausted nonetheless. A little bit of archival research would be just the break he needed.

So, on a crisp and cool Wednesday, with Beaver having knocked off early to do a bit of fishing, Mole happily took a long and solitary stroll to the easternmost edge of The Willows' downtown district. There, carved out of the side of a hill and marked on the outside only by a small wooden sign and a humble door, the beating heart of The Willows' municipal government lay. The sign read "Town Office".

When Mole arrived, he found this lone entrance unmanned and bereft of any instructions. He rang the bell and then knocked politely, scuffing his shoes along the hard, knotted roots that covered the forest floor here and trying to seem inconspicuous as he waited. There was no answer. He rang again, scuffed about again. Mole huffed now and shook his head. He glanced about.

"I suppose you'll just have to go on in then," grumbled Mole to himself. "Nothing to it."

Heaving a great big sigh, as if to use the exhalation to propel himself forward, Mole pushed open the door and entered.

Down a dark and dank hallway he shuffled, aiming for a small bit of light he saw far up ahead. This turned out to be a reception area. Its lone occupant was a morose-looking wild pig who seemed to be some kind of clerk and who, previous to Mole's sudden appearance, had been totally immersed in a crossword puzzle.

"Good afternoon. I'm wondering if you might point me towards anything you have on Stoa Crick Mart?"

"What?" replied the pig, the word oozing out of him as the pupils of his eyes and the corners of his mouth sagged down, as if pressed upon by the oppressive boredom of this conversation.

"I'm taking a look into its history. Around the time of the revitalization project, about fifty years ago," said Mole.

"Have fun with that. Everything from that far back is a total mess."

"Yes, well, be that as it may..."

The pig seemed amused by this last response. "If there were anything from that era, it'd be down aisle Q." He nodded vaguely down one of a half dozen corridors branching off from this central hub. "Go ahead then."

Mole spent a good half hour wandering about in search of aisle Q, though this suited him just fine. He was at home here, underground and alone and nestled in among books and records, pleasantly stuffy and dusty and warm. When he did finally come upon Q, he found there a row of file cabinets whose tops scrapped up against the room's dirt ceiling, each of which was crammed full of scraps of paper, photographs, drawings, jars filled with dirt or pebbles, knickknacks, keepsakes; selections from the long ago history of The Willows.

As much as one could say there was a unifying theme to Aisle Q, it seemed to be the detritus particular to Willows cultural institutions. Mole found there a drawer dedicated to the Stoa Crick Mart, where he unearthed a stack of posters promoting various animal music acts that once performed on Sunday afternoons right along the crick's waters. He examined an oversized, novelty coin given out to commemorate the Mart's reopening, engraved with the words, "Stoa Crick Mart — A New Era!", and rifled

through a whole box of ribbons and buttons from The Lily Fair, which, for years, had been held at the Mart until it grew too large and was forced to relocate to Gloaming Glen. Mole smiled at the faded, dusty colors; blue for first, red for second, white for third.

He was struck then by a feeling he was growing accustomed to, one that'd already struck before as he had begun to dig through this past. It was a kind of melancholy, Mole supposed, as if the happiness he'd felt when he'd first come upon all this history had now begun to dry up, as if he were watching it exquisitely fade away, fleeting as time itself. He ran his paws over the ribbons just like he had with the newspapers back at the mill. Perhaps he might absorb all the meaning these objects once carried with them through touch alone, maybe extract any happiness that still lingered. Which was ridiculous of course but this irrationality is what happens to an animal in the midst of a reverie, especially when it concerns the great and growing abyss of history.

When Mole finally returned to the lobby area almost an hour later, the sad, wild pig gazed at him with a thin streak of surprise now cutting through the boredom.

"I forgot about you! You were back there awhile, weren't you?" he asked Mole.

"You've got quite a collection back there in Q. Where did it all come from, if you don't mind my asking?"

"What's that?" The pig's brows furrowed. He had forgotten their earlier conversation.

"It just seems like there was a lot of organization happening at some point."

"I suppose. They wanted to build a museum. Of course, no one was interested in that sort of thing."

"Of course not," said Mole pleasantly. He began to head back towards the entryway.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" yelled the pig towards the receding figure of Mole.

"No," replied Mole.

Later, as Mole walked back in the direction of Wild Wood, he removed the commemorative coin as well as a small stack of papers he'd also found in Aisle Q. The papers were plumbing diagrams that had been drawn up for the new Stoat Crick Mart, cracking sheets of carbon paper with lines and shapes drawn in fading pencil. Mole had recognized the name of the draftsman listed in the corner. It was the name of his grandfather.

Mole came from a long line of plumbers. His family had, for generations, provided all such services in The Willows, and indeed, it had been expected of Mole himself to carry on in that tradition, until of course he had disabused his family of that notion. In his own time, Mole's grandfather had been one of many South End animals to have worked away on the revitalization of Stoat Crick, as well as the numerous redevelopment projects the Commodore and his ilk had initiated. So when Mole, awash in his melancholy, had found those drawings in that overstuffed drawer, in a dusty outpost on the fringes of Willows history, he'd resolved that this history would not stay hidden, left to fade away; that he would instead bring it to the light. That's what his book was for.

He had no such noble explanation for why he had taken the coin but he thought of something his father had said to him just after Mole announced his intention to go away to college. His father had gotten so he was standing right in front of Mole. He looked Mole square in the eyes and held that gaze.

"Just remember, pup. This is your home. No matter how far away you travel, that will always be true. You're a South Ender, for life." Mole's father had smiled then. But Mole could never figure out if they had been meant as words of support, a warning of what was to come, or a reminder of his responsibility.

It wasn't long after Mole's visit to the Town Office that he casually but deliberately began to seek out Weasel. Not in any proactive way, for that would give rise to the animal's suspicions and the last thing Mole wanted was Weasel suspicious of him. But more in a coincidental way. So when Otter mentioned that they might see Weasel make an appearance at his upcoming party, it stuck in Mole's brain. And when his new friend Toad got to asking about where Mole might take him to show him a different side of The Willows, it was this party that came to mind.

Thinking back on it later, Mole would marvel at how foolish and reckless he had been. Mole couldn't have known the extent of Weasel's business, nor his greater plans, nor, for that matter, the lengths he was willing to go to see those plans succeed. But he still had had plenty of reasons even then to be wary, if not outright fearful, of Weasel. Just look at the delicate way he'd gone about trying to arrange a meeting with Weasel — coincidental encounters and such. Meanwhile, he'd led Toad, of all animals, right to him and happily so!

Mole would heave a great sigh over the matter, and not for the last time. For it wasn't that Mole had acted like a fool. He had, but it was more than that. Mole couldn't shake the feeling that perhaps he had known all along what was going to happen, that it wasn't a mistake at all, that he knew full well of the combustible chaos and all the accompanying fear and hurt and fury that would come from Toad and Weasel's meeting. More so than just knowing it, Mole wondered again if perhaps he had wanted it to happen.

Chapter 3: Party at The Holt

“This is simply grand, isn't it, Toad?”

“Oh yes, yes. Simply grand.”

They were approaching the party at Otter's. Dubbed “The Holt,” and hidden away in a forgotten corner of the South End just past the docks, Otter's home was actually more a collection of cubby-like spaces, each connected to the others by handmade, ramshackle passageways, and all of which encircled a small, river-fed lagoon which Otter had fashioned into a kind of poolside party spot. The sanitary and safety levels of the entire operation were questionable and The Holt frequently emitted a mood and atmosphere of rotting decay. Nevertheless, or perhaps not surprisingly, it had become a popular locale for the young animals of The Willows to gather.

This night already felt like it was going to be an especially wild affair. One could feel it in the air and, as they approached, Mole could hear the crackling sounds of revelry drifting towards them. A couple of young hedgehogs came skipping past, practically tripping over themselves and giggling as they disappeared through the bramble entryway of The Holt up ahead.

“I mean, not *grand*, of course. But you'll see, it's this very extensive thing he's built for himself in there. It's really quite impressive and of course it's this whole scene.”

Rat had been to Otter's before. This was, after all, where she and Mole had met and so she walked now with a sense of jubilant confidence, secure in the knowledge that she would know exactly how to have a good time once they arrived at their destination. Toad, despite this being his first time at The Holt, walked with no less a sense of surety.

Or perhaps it was obliviousness. Mole was never quite sure. In any case, he bounced alongside Rat, his eyes wide and his mouth agape. He might as well pull out a disposable camera and start taking snapshots, thought Mole.

Despite the drinks they'd had at Toad's earlier that evening, Mole was still tense. Toad's presence tonight would almost certainly be noticed and perhaps could even cause a scene, and Mole worried that he had underestimated what the reaction of the assembled would be. He had been hoping for a more subdued Toad that night, not knowing the animal well at the time and so assuming that the foreign circumstances might force him to retreat inward a bit. But if the walk from Rat's mooring to Otter's were any indication, that was not to be. Both Toad and Rat were as lively as ever and Mole had begun to regret extending the invite in the first place, grimly envisioning the raised eyebrows and the snickers and the whispered grievances.

Under the arching, twisting vines of The Holt's entrance, and down they went, down into the inky darkness of the woods. Tiki torches lined the path that led the way in, casting jagged, dancing rays of light and deep flickering shadows from their perches. Above them, the trees reached for each other, their branches met and entwined, and a tunnel was formed, a tunnel transporting visitors through the darkness and to the laughter and the carousing and the music that they could hear just up ahead. There was something great and mysterious and life-altering out there, something maybe dangerous too.

A mighty energy seemed to pull at the three animals, pulling them through the tunnel, faster and faster, like fish on the line, until suddenly they were spit out into The Holt's central courtyard and instantly in among the throngs of revelers, a sea of animals bobbing to the now thunderous music. And standing proudly above it all, behind a DJ station set atop a rickety tower, was the twirling, bobbing, ever-rocking and ever-rolling master of ceremonies, Otter.

Mole gazed up at his old friend with affection and no small amount of wonder. He and Otter had grown up together, scampering through the underbrush on the hillside where both families made their home, sharing in the formative experiences of those years. As they grew up though, they found their personalities, interests and outlooks naturally diverging. Otter had become an increasingly popular animal. Though his family still carried a bit of a black mark on their reputation for their role in helping to build the Commodore's dam, Otter's friendliness and ability to shape himself to fit

comfortably within any kind of social scene overrode that. He knew everyone, reached out to everyone, had some piece of common ground with every single animal that he came across. For a shy animal like Mole, it had been difficult to watch Otter ascend into this higher strata of social standing. At the same time, it was a kind of lifeline for Mole to be able to call someone like Otter a friend.

When Mole had first returned to The Willows, he'd almost immediately gone in search of his old friend. Otter always seemed to have some kind of odd and exciting job, or odd and exciting girlfriend and they were always pulling him into some kind of fascinating adventure that left him with fabulous stories to tell. Now, Mole was eager to tell him some fabulous stories of his own. Plus, if one were looking to quickly learn what was what in the neighborhood after an extended period away, Otter had become a very good animal to start with.

Mole had found his way over to The Holt one sun-drenched afternoon only a few days after he'd set foot back in The Willows, stepping down carefully through the tunnel and finding Otter at the other end of it, still hungover from the night before and yet excitedly making preparations for the night to come. He was bent over a large wooden tub, into which he was pouring some kind of purplish-looking liquid. Mole had thought then that whatever it was that was going into the tub, its particular hue of purple — practically glowing — could not have been good for any animal.

“Hello, Otter!”

“Who's that?” Otter's head shot up, his mouth already spreading into that trademark grin of his before he even knew who it was who'd entered. He squinted and peered forward. “Is that Mole? Mole! Mole, old boy, how are you?”

Otter liked to talk that way with Mole, like some kind of faux blue-blood North Ender. He'd done it ever since Mole's penchant for books and writing had become apparent back in their adolescence. Mole would have normally found it annoying and deeply embarrassing and yet Otter managed, as ever, to get away with it. He ambled over, wrapping up Mole in his arms.

“What a smashing delight!”

“How are you?”

“I'm fucking fantastic, Mole! How are you? I heard you were back in town. How was the Wide World? Tell me all about it!”

And so Mole commenced to do just that, beginning with his time away at Highcountry College, a drab and joyless affair that Mole nevertheless managed to jazz up a bit for Otter's sake. He'd found Highcountry in a guidebook his counselor had given him in high school. Mole's good grades afforded him some choice which his socioeconomic status then promptly limited again. In the end, HCC was affordable and vaguely reputable and far enough away that it did genuinely necessitate him leaving home.

Highcountry was also Mole's first time around humans, as the school was proudly integrated. Mole didn't mind the humans so much. They were a greedy, selfish, heedless lot, to be sure, and they did evince a complete lack of understanding or respect for animal culture. This was especially galling to many as there was ample evidence that a human community once resided in The Willows and, likewise, equal evidence that animals once roamed the land now paved over to make human cities. They shared so much. But like all good parents of The Willows, Mole's had prepared him for the humans' ways and so nothing that he saw was much of a surprise. He was much more disappointed in the quality of education he received, or rather the specific directions he found his professors to be pointing him in.

This, he laid out for Otter in romantic terms. Mole was the young intellectual, perpetually frustrated by the short-sightedness of his elders.

"I'm afraid it's not all it's cracked up to be," he said to Otter, airily gazing off into the trees.

"I could have told you that. Matter of fact, I did tell you that. Told you that the day we finished up with the school down the road."

"What did you tell me?"

"That anything beyond that was going to be a waste of your time. Hell, I'm not even sure that Willows High was worth it. What'd they teach me I'm using today? Hmm?"

"It doesn't always have to be that practical, Otter."

"Well, I'm a practical guy."

"Anyway, it got better after that, after I left Highcountry and headed west."

Mole was getting to his good material now. Not just the story about the snake and the rug but also the time when, intending to visit a particular inn he'd been told was especially friendly towards artist types and was thus cheap and also filled with animals to observe and experiences to have, Mole instead found himself in some kind of bar. It

was called The Red Lion and it was populated exclusively with humans. But not just any humans. These ones all seemed to favor the kind of two-wheeled motorized vehicle called a motorcycle. They all had elaborate facial hair and wore leather vests and stared at poor Mole with the kind of fixed intensity that predators usually reserved for their prey.

It turned out that Mole had taken a wrong turn when descending down to the valley floor, moving in one direction when he should have been heading in the exact opposite. Humans and animals lived in relative peace and could even coexist at institutions like Highcountry. So there was no overt danger to Mole's error. Nevertheless, animals lived with animals in their communities, The Willows included. And humans lived with humans in theirs. And that was the way it was and always had been and always would be, as far as most saw it.

"But!" And now Mole stopped dramatically in his narration. "They turned out to be really great folk. You would have thought when I walked through the door that they were going to kill me. But I just pushed through it, you know. I kept my chin up and I walked through as if I didn't have a care in the world. South End style, you know. And I think they saw that I wasn't going to be intimidated and they came to respect me. By the end of the night, we were drinking together and singing. They have phenomenally odd music, Otter, and not the things the college students would listen to. My God. No, this music was odd, yes, but it also had soul. It was really beautiful!"

That night at the bar for humans, Mole had slept it off in a cot in the storeroom out back. The next morning, the proprietor, a burly but kind-hearted fellow named Guy, and his girlfriend Doris took Mole to their favorite swimming hole where they drank more and listened to more of that strange, delightfully twangy music and swam in the cold clear water and Mole even struck up a decidedly charged conversation with a human female which is something that definitely would have raised some eyebrows among the more conservative circles in The Willows. Somehow though, at that moment, it seemed just fine.

Mole didn't make it back to the temporary burrow he was calling home then until several days later and when he did, it was with a tremendous smile on his face and a sense of relief in his heart. It would be one of the few times Mole would have exactly the type of adventure he had set out to have.

All of this he described to Otter as Otter shuffled about The Holt, picking up odds bits of trash, dusting off the grill, darting into his lagoon and emerging a moment later with fish clutched in his teeth, all the while nodding his head and encouraging Mole with guffaws and chortles of surprise at all the right moments. Mole had only been back a short time then and could already feel himself starting to slide into a kind of well of inertia and depression so deep that it would eventually take the combined pull of both his book project and Rat to pull him back out. But for a moment, there in The Holt with Otter, Mole had felt happy.

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On that night of the party with Toad and Rat months later however, Mole was only periodically approaching happiness. Happiness only managed to peek its way through the thick fog of Mole's anxiety, not to mention the haze of whatever it was that Otter's less inspired friends had chosen to smoke out by the lagoon.

Once they'd made their entrance, Toad disappeared almost immediately. Like some kind of cartoon, The Holt's sweet, thick air had wafted through the crowd, crooked a finger enticingly at the gawking Toad and dragged him away by the nostrils. Mole, realizing this, grasped at Rat's paw and demanded she tell him where Toad had run off to, but Rat only laughed lightly, her eyes gazing around in wonderment. Undeterred, he set out into the crowd, hoping to head Toad off before he said something irrevocably insensitive to the wrong animal. But it was hopeless. It was indeed a wild affair. The Holt was practically choked with animals and the combination of the haze, Otter's cheap strobe lights and a cloudy and especially moonless and darkened night above made the very act of seeing a challenge. Mole could make out only flashes as he waded through the crowd, moving this way and that, without any real direction. He realized then that he was moving in circles and lost.

After a frantic moment or two, Mole finally washed back up to where he thought he had left Rat, only to find that she too had now disappeared. The whole night had quickly begun to spin into disarray and just as Mole thought he might need to hold on to something tight, he was instead corralled into a conversation with an old schoolmate named Spiny Lizard. Mole hadn't seen Spiny in years, indeed hadn't thought of him either. To call them friends would have been an exaggeration, and Mole didn't initially

recognize the animal who grabbed him by the shoulder, spun him around and bellowed triumphantly, beaming to the world as if he'd just discovered gold.

"It is you! Ha! I knew it!"

This animal was quite a bit more bloated and bloodshot than Mole remembered Spiny to have ever been and it was at first quite alarming that his physical devolution might have already begun. Then again, Spiny was always one for excess. He was also now just as silly and mysterious in his inebriation as Mole remembered and it wasn't long before Mole had allowed himself to slip back into the rhythms of talking with such an animal; the scenic route Spiny'd boozily take to get to his idea's conclusion and yet the fervent passion he'd maintain along the way.

Their conversation that night had chosen quite the circuitous path indeed. Spiny was far too excited to see Mole and had insisted that Mole tell him everything, just everything and so Mole, at this point still nervously eyeing the crowd out of the corner of his eye, in search of commotion, had gamely went ahead and started in with his usual slate of stories.

"Stop. Stop. Stop." Spiny said after just a few moments, waving his hands around his face vaguely. "You don't have anything to drink."

"Oh, we just got here."

"We? Whoa whoa whoa. What's this 'we' business?"

"I came with a few friends."

"No, no. I'm your friend. I'm your friend, Mole, right?"

"Of course."

"Good then. Then you'll listen to me now and have a drink."

Spiny dragged Mole down through a side tunnel and into one of The Holt's smaller rooms, where a private reserve of spirits had been set aside. Mole wondered if Spiny was indeed as close with Otter as he was suddenly claiming but he did seem to know his way around The Holt. He navigated its twisting pathways and hidden nooks with an easy dexterity despite his otherwise wobbly state. And all the while, he kept up a running narration, boasting that he had helped Otter to build a lot of these tunnels and so had earned himself a place among the VIPs.

"Course, who knows how long he'll be able to hold on to it. It'll be any day now that some goddamned vulture swoops in and tells us that we can't live here. Enjoy it while it lasts, right?" Spiny said, with an air of both wistfulness and despondency.

This was a common refrain among South Enders, a decades-long anxiety about the state of their neighborhood and the ever looming possibility that it could all be snatched away from them at any second. This feeling of course stretched all the way back to the damming. Amidst all his promises and plans, The Commodore had failed to mention that the rise in the value of some Willows property brought with it a toll. The changes in The River's path and flow shut farms down and forced their desperate inhabitants to relocate. In their place, estates were built, and those displaced farmers found themselves working service jobs for the new inhabitants. Mole wondered again how the animals of The Willows could have been fooled by The Commodore and his ilk.

For a time, Stoa Crick Mart appeared to serve as a kind of dividing line or, if one were trying to be generous, a neutral ground for the varying classes of animals of The Willows to come together. Centrally located, Stoa Crick provided a neat and profitable barrier for the North Enders, separating their neighborhoods from those of the poorer animals now residing mainly in the South. As The Willows' reputation as a vacation destination grew, that line hadn't held though. In time, redevelopment had slipped past the Mart and into pockets south of the Crick.

South Enders saw this and their anxiety only deepened. Places like The Holt, which Otter found and built for himself with his own paws and with true passion, were believed to be vulnerable, with authorities historically displaying both an impressive arsenal of means to seizing property and little hesitation to do so if they believed it benefited the greater good of The Willows. Spiny, for his part, seemed to now be seesawing between a bleary acceptance of the situation and more righteous indignation.

"It's criminal, is what it is," he slurred, squinting at Mole as they tucked into their drinks. While Mole usually liked to stick to straight Red Willow Juice, he had been persuaded into a more exotic concoction at Toad's earlier, something with coconut milk that Mole had to admit was tasty. The Holt's private reserve was also mixed with something, though it certainly wasn't as velvety and smooth going down. Mole couldn't quite place it now. At least these drinks didn't have the neon violet coloring of whatever Mole had seen Otter mixing up earlier. This had more of a tangerine tint to the red. Mole swallowed hard, watching as Spiny's good eye wobbled a bit now, as if it were itself losing balance.

"They think they've got all of us right where they want us but they don't. See, we know it's just a war of...of..." Spiny buried his head into his chest as he searched about for the right word.

"Of attrition?"

"You've got that right! We have to create resources so that we can dig into the trenches. That's what Weasel and them have been on about."

"Hmm? Weasel?"

"Yeah, you remember ol' Weez."

"Sure, sure. I mean, you know, how could I forget."

It was, of course, exciting to hear Weasel's name mentioned but also surprising. Spiny referenced Weasel like they had been talking to each other, chatting it up regularly. At the very least, he seemed to have been an audience to Weasel. Mole certainly couldn't remember any association between the two animals in the past. Then again, Mole hadn't been aware of any real friendship between Spiny and Otter either. He was suddenly cognizant of how much time had passed since he had first left The Willows, how much he had missed while he was away and how disconnected he still felt, months after having returned.

"It's about creating an infrastructure and a support system that can oppose the redevelopment and reinforce the community that already exists here, that has motherfucking existed here for generations."

Struggling to fight off the effects of the Juice and now a bit shaken by this sudden outpouring of canned coherency from Spiny, Mole could only nod. The lizard slurped at the dregs of his drink. This last gasp from him also seemed to mark the final departure of Spiny's senses. He slumped down, tried to speak, failed and then got distracted by something just past Mole's right shoulder. Mole, sensing the moment, mumbled some excuse that Spiny wasn't even listening for and stumbled back out into the tunnels.

He wanted to be back in among the music and the lights and the crowds. Only minutes ago, he had felt lost in the chaos of animals and flashes and beats and flares and thumps. Now he craved it. As he headed back towards the center of the party, Mole began to pick up speed. He careened into the side of the wall, skirted past a shadowy pair of animals headed in the opposite direction, then laughed out loud. He was still lost but he'd found that edge now, the edge that any young animal seeks when they come to a party like this, that edge between fear and joy, between chaos and exaltation.

Mole had been taught by his father that a male should only dance at his wedding and the wedding of his offspring. But this was not a lesson that Mole had ever taken to heart. As he came back out into The Holt's courtyard, he was dancing, or at least moving in rhythm to the music. It was almost unconscious.

He spun and he spun, did Mole, as he often did. Those who knew him were often taken aback when they first saw this side of him. They were surprised to see him this willing and able to let go, to let the music take him away so completely and fully. He was a quiet and reserved animal, that much was true, and he held tightly to his conception of self. He held to it so tightly, in fact, that every now and again he had no choice but to let it go for a few moments. Mole believed that was healthy. One couldn't let that kind of pressure build up. And on this night, as he felt that conception of self squirm and strain beneath his grasp, unsure of how it should behave in a rapidly-shifting environment, Mole decided to let it go.

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Mole would eventually find Rat, who had found her way to Otter and now watched him with a stunned expression on her face. Otter was in the midst of one of his trademark rambling roiling rants; comedic harangues directed at any one of his world's numerous minor grievances and usually delivered to an audience of whatever animals were close enough and willing enough to listen. Rat turned and stared at Mole.

"Is he always like this?"

"Well, he typically starts out the night a little more jubilant. He's sheets to the wind now." Mole said as Otter stood up on a table and pointed down with gleeful accusation at one of those tittering hedgehogs they'd seen outside earlier.

"It's your fault and yours and yours!" he bellowed, now indicating various animals with exaggerated indignation and a manic smile.

Mole was feeling much better, having danced away the wooziness of the drinks, leaving only the bright sheen behind. But he had also seen firsthand the effect Otter could have on female animals. He felt a pang of anxiety shoot through him and he took Rat's paw now and pulled her away.

"Come on. Let's take a look around."

Mole and Rat retreated up to a kind of deck that Otter had built into a tree overlooking the courtyard. There, they kissed for a bit and Mole even dared to get a bit handsy, though all the alcohol in him made it a clumsy and awkward attempt at best. There were other animals up there too, yelling and singing to each other and stumbling about, and so Rat and Mole eventually settled for just cuddling with one another. They whispered and laughed as they watched the shenanigans play out around them.

And then it hit Mole like a bracing splash of ice cold river water to the face. Toad! Good God, what kind of trouble could that animal have found in all this time.

“Oh, he’ll be fine, babe! You shouldn’t worry so much!” cried Rat, tottering slowly behind Mole as he scrambled down from the deck. In their current state, this descent was a dicey proposition but the anxiety was propelling Mole forward now. “And please be careful!”

Mole almost lost his footing on the bottom rung of the stairs but then performed a surprisingly nimble hop and spin, landing with arms stretched out on either side. A group of nearby animals snickered but Mole was already moving past them. He had no idea where he was going, lost and careening again, adrenalin causing the Red Willow Juice to surge forward in his bloodstream.

Of course, it’s often at moments like these, when you have no idea where to look, that you then find the very thing you were searching for. At that moment, Mole spotted Toad. It did indeed appear as if the North Ender’s presence that night had caught the attention of the gathered animals, at least judging by the number of them currently glancing at Toad from the sides of their eyes. He was engaged in what looked to be lively conversation, and it took Mole a moment to recognize who he was speaking to, and then another to realize that all those animals might not have been looking at Toad at all, because Toad was talking to Weasel.

Perhaps it all that Red Willow Juice altering Mole’s perceptions, but Weasel looked different. There was that air of menace and power to the way he seemed to lean over the predictably oblivious Toad, so familiar to Mole from his childhood. But added to that was something more sturdy now, a rigid authority and control that frankly stopped Mole in his tracks. He suddenly remembered what Spiny Lizard had said. In the moment, he had been so surprised just to hear Spiny quote their former neighborhood menace that he’d simply ignored the content of the quotation itself. Had Weasel really been going on about infrastructure and a support system? It sounded ridiculous but, looking at that

animal now, Mole could believe it. Moreover, he knew then with certainty that the rumors of Weasel's evolution must be true. And this, in turn, provoked a surprising surge of excitement in him. He remembered then why he had wanted to come to this party in the first place.

"Who's that Toad is talking to?" asked Rat, who had sidled up next to Mole.

"That's an old friend of mine," Mole heard himself say. This was an exaggeration, if not an outright lie, but he did not care. Next thing he knew, he was leading Rat towards Toad and Weasel.

"There they are!" cried Toad. "I've been looking everywhere for you two. You're right, Ratty. This place is simply fantastic. It's all homemade, you know, and it goes up and down. There's levels, see. I'm afraid it all might be a little dangerous but that's the point, isn't it! That's why they're all here. It's real, you know! And then I struck up a conversation with this fabulous animal."

He gestured now towards Weasel, who had been listening to Toad's account with a bemused, almost beneficent smile on his face.

"What is your kind again, sir?"

"Weasel."

"This is Weasel. Weasel, these are my friends Ratty and Mole."

"It's very nice to meet you," exclaimed Rat, thrusting her hand at Weasel. He smiled down at her.

"It's nice to meet you too." Taking her hand, his gaze now turned to Mole. "Hello, Mole."

Mole couldn't describe exactly how it felt to hear his name come out of Weasel's mouth, the words unfurling out like lava, underscored with a faint hissing sound, the sound of something burning.

"It's good to see you, Weasel."

"Do you two know each other?" asked Toad, his eyes filling with excitement at the prospect.

"Mole and I come from the same neighborhood." Weasel smiled and Mole could feel his heart skip a bit.

"That's around here then?" asked Toad, a grin spreading out across his face. His and Rat's palpable pride in their association with Mole was practically seeping out of their skin at that moment and Mole had no choice but to bath himself in it.

“Oh yes,” said Mole pleasantly. “Very close. So how're things, Weasel?”

“Fantastic.”

“Such wonderful, interesting animals one meets,” interrupted Toad. “Speaking of danger, Weasel was just telling me about his interest in automobiles. You see, I had been telling him about the surfers I met while abroad and how they went on and on about their sport as some kind of ultimate rush. And Weasel here said he got a similar rush from racing cars. It's fascinating, really. These very extreme measures animals will take to challenge death.”

“Yes, I'm not quite sure I see the appeal of it,” Rat said with a polite smile.

She reached down and grabbed Mole's hand, and Mole felt a wave of pride wash over him. He was here. With Rat. They were here together. Weasel must have sensed the satisfaction bubbling up out of Mole, because he flashed him a quick, sly, secretive grin. Like he and Mole were in on something. And now Mole was awash in even more pride.

“You know what?!” Toad now suddenly yelped. “I should think about maybe filming it. Of course, with your permission, Weasel. But if I did have your blessing, I could film some of the races or whatever you call them. Maybe there is something there.”

“You think there might be?” asked Weasel, his eyebrows rising ever so gently in surprise.

“There just might! I can imagine how exciting it must be. The sounds of the engines revving.” Toad let out a tremendous sound then. “Poop poop!” he yelled — his version, Mole assumed, of what an engine sounded like — and then collapsed into that laugh of his. Rat laughed and then Weasel did too.

“Yes, yes, I can see it now.”

Chapter 4: The Backwater Races

In the weeks following that party, Mole didn't hear much from Toad nor Weasel nor did he seek either of them out. He was in the midst of one of the more entrancing and delirious periods any animal can hope to experience, which is to say that he was in the throes of early love, and so could not be bothered with much else. After all, there is very little in the world that can command as much of a young animal's attention as the object of their affections. Winter was settling in and during that time, if Mole was not slogging through his days at the mill, he was whiling away the hours happily snuggled up tight with Rat.

Rat was living with her mother then, in a condo in River Bank, a neighborhood which served as a kind of downmarket version of the adjacent North End. It was the site of the few hotels built to accommodate the tourists and so the area was clean and bright but plasticine and economical too. Her mother's current abode was a prototypical example of the neighborhood's design. It wore its luxury like a uniform, with a steely, resigned attitude.

Rat's childhood home in the North End, on the other hand, was a gleaming and proud colonial that, to visitors like a young Toad, had always managed to nevertheless convey an incongruous sense of inviting and homey warmth. Rat knew better though, knew that warmth to be merely a product of good interior design; she having bore witness to the scathing fights between her parents that regularly played out there. In a certain sense then, it had been a relief to Rat when they divorced. She had been 12 at the time, and she had begun to internalize the discord around her, to let it seep under her skin and enter into her bloodstream and color her vision. If it had gone any longer that way, there would certainly have been the risk of permanent damage.

As it was, things got quieter, though, of course, there remained a permanent aura of sadness that hung over all three, father, mother and daughter. Rat's mother promptly moved into her present condo, a choice that Rat only later fully understood when she discovered that her mother had been having an affair with a local boatbuilder and

wanted to stay in The Willows full time. The gleaming colonial was sold and Rat would go to live primarily with her father, out in the Wide World. He was a loving animal but not so loving that he was willing to sacrifice much in the way of his work for young Rat. And so she grew up in the lonely comfort of affluence, punctuated by bouts of guilt-ridden affection from her father and the occasional visit with her boozy and consequently addled mother.

Rat's own ambitions in life were a little hard to puzzle out for Mole initially. She, like Toad, had no actual reason for ambition. It paled in comparison to Toad's but her own inheritance was substantial and so her survival did not depend on her striving and succeeding in any capacity. Without that kind of urgency, an animal's priorities are reconfigured in often strange ways. Toad's own priorities, particularly following the death of his parents, were centered on seeking out a great magnitude and variety of adventure, whenever and wherever he could. Rat's interests were different, but only slightly so. She too sought experiences that could come to define her life, or at least further define her tragedies. But she did not seek out those experiences on life's edges, out where she could be hurt again. Rat instead sought the happiness and purpose to be found within tranquility.

The Willows was perfectly suited for such pursuits and so Rat had chosen to stay there year-round, at least for the time being. These days, she spent her time planning an endless succession of outings for her and Mole: boat trips, picnics, hikes, or excursions to some orchard or faraway waterfall. Even when she and Mole stayed in, Rat always had a detailed plan in place for how exactly they would achieve the quiet night they allegedly sought. She was a planner, to be sure, and Mole, still swept up in the rosy, dawning light of love, was more than happy to tamper down his own organizational instincts and let her plan away, enthusiastically joining in whatever activity she'd arranged for them.

Of course, all these activities came gilded in luxury of a type that continued to delight Mole. He couldn't deny that. But it was more than that too. There was a confidence to the way Rat carried herself. Mole had to admit he ascribed this partly to wealth, but also, Rat was naturally intelligent and charismatic. That confidence was earned. The world seemed to bend to her, to reshape itself for her, even after her tragedies. It was certainly not something Mole himself could hope to attain. Except,

perhaps he had touched upon it on that night she'd first met him. Perhaps that is what she had seen in him.

In any case, nobody's joy shone through with so much electricity as hers and Mole found himself willing to do whatever it took to make sure it continued that way. And so, every evening after Mole finished up at the mill, he'd walk across The Willows to Rat's mother's home or back to Wild Wood and his burrow to await Rat there. And Rat would arrive with some dinner planned or some book she'd like for them to read together, some bit of music to listen to and marvel over or some game to play. And so they'd play the game until their eyelids grew heavy and they started to lean into each other. This was the sign that it was time for bed, at which point they'd crawl under the covers and a whole new kind of game would commence. And on the weekends, it was out onto The River or up the hill that overlooked everything and there, they'd have food and drinks and more games and more music and more joy.

Mole lost himself during that time and he was not at all ashamed to admit it. There was nothing to be ashamed of. He had fully bought into the life that Rat was offering him. And in this life, his job was a formality and his book — the one that just weeks ago, at its inception, had already threatened to swallow him whole — now felt like a wasted exercise.

Perhaps a historical survey of this size was not the tale Mole was meant to tell. It all felt suddenly quite dry. Who were we meant to care about, after all? Perhaps instead he might try writing a love story of some kind — a romantic adventure. He might even try writing it in verse. Mole would noodle on that for a while, inevitably arriving at the realization that he was better off out experiencing love than he was sitting by himself speculating upon it. And then he'd go and see what Rat was up to.

Meanwhile, Rat hadn't heard much from Toad either. This was unusual. Rat and Toad's friendship stretched back to their early adolescence and even when they were miles apart, the two always stayed in contact. There were phone calls and letters and lines extended out to ensure that, no matter what, they had each other. It was Rat who usually did that extending and so it was that she had eventually pulled herself away from the pleasures of Mole's company and reached out to Toad.

"It sounds as if he's struck up quite a friendship with Weasel," she reported to Mole later, a tinge of concern in her voice. "He went over to where Weasel keeps his automobiles and they had a grand old time together."

The curious Toad had first gone there a few days after Otter's party, traipsing down through the lower bowels of the South End neighborhood with a pleased look on his face and notebook in his hand, just to jot down some first impressions for this new project of his.

"He says he's over there practically every day now," she continued, before pausing and looking at Mole, who was sitting next to her in her mother's living room, a room designed with a reach towards opulence that could never be grasped. "Of course, Toad has a way of misreading situations, you know."

"Does he?" Mole replied, with an attempt at innocence.

"Now don't pretend to be oblivious. It's not a good look on you." Rat was intuitive in that way, masterfully so in fact. Mole could never get over it. He found it to be a devastatingly attractive quality.

"You know he can get overexcited," she went on, "and I just wouldn't want anyone to get too frustrated with him."

If his description to Rat were any indication, the visit to Weasel's garage had indeed lit quite a charge in Toad. What he found there was a cacophonous and chaotic space. Tools and bits of machinery were strewn about haphazardly. Sparks flew, and screeches and booms and clangs filled the air. A half dozen animals moved around the space, circling the cars, then attacking this spot or that. Despite all this, Toad found something warm and inviting about the place too; the way a few stray bits of furniture had been used to cobble together a kind of employee's lounge in a back corner, or how voices cut through all the other sounds in that garage, voices that were harsh and commanding but playful too, teasing. Like family.

Nobody seemed to mind Toad. They didn't exactly embrace him but Weasel's approval meant there was nothing for any of them to question. He had given Toad a grand tour on that first visit, leading him across the main floor and introducing him with easy confidence to the other animals.

"You guys know Toad?" he'd asked a couple of shrews bent over a rusted-out and hulking engine. They'd turned with expectant grins upon hearing Weasel, but when they saw Toad standing behind him, notebook out and ready, their grins faded and their countenances grew tight. Nevertheless, they had nodded at Toad and smiled with a hint of excitement when Weasel broadly introduced the idea of some kind of documentary.

“This guy makes movies. He's thinking of making one about our races,” Weasel had said.

Toad laughed that laugh of his then and clapped Weasel on the back, airily adding that he was just toying with some ideas for now. The shrews' eyes widened a bit at the sight of this exchange and then they shrank back down into the work, practically disappearing inside the engine's cylinders.

But of course Toad was more than just toying with ideas.

“I'm telling you, Ratty, it's the same sense of determination that I saw with those surfers but with so much more grit, you know. I've half a mind to toss aside that footage completely and focus exclusively on these racers. I'll start with this life in the garage, this ecosystem that Weasel is in charge of. But then of course we'll move into race footage. Oh, you've got to have them take you out for a spin, Ratty! It's simply incredible, this life-altering sense of speed you have. It's utter freedom.”

Rat was a veteran of Toad's fancies and knew it was only a few short steps from this to the predictable point at which her dear friend went and purchased an automobile for himself. And he did not disappoint, investing in a classic and, one should note, extremely expensive piece of machinery just a few days later. It was truly a marvel; an open cab with plush leather seating and a lacquered wood dash set off by the gleam coming from the glass on the dials and the polished chrome of the gearshift, wide and thick wheels to account for the varied Willows terrain and a powerful and powerfully loud engine, the kind whose strength would ripple through the air around it and whose roar sends the sapsuckers and warblers skittering off into the skies in fright.

The Willows had somewhat uneven feelings about automobiles in general. Much of the land was not accessible by car, Mole's neighborhood included. The Run technically was, though the idea of permitting cars to use that road had been met with consternation the moment automobiles first appeared in The Willows (courtesy of that venerable old Willows resident, Rabbit). The noise and the smell, not to mention the danger, threatened to immediately change the complexion of The Run. Thankfully, The Willows was an old-fashioned kind of town. The local animals still largely chose to transport themselves and their effects via the time-worm process of ambling or, if one must, by boat or bicycle, and so the machines had never fully caught on beyond showy North Enders like Toad and the committed gearheads like Weasel.

Weasel's own automobiles were less impressive aesthetically than Toad's though they certainly had their unique strengths and charms. He had two of them, both of which he had built himself and which he kept in a reserved section of the garage to be tinkered with only by himself and the most trusted members of the team. He tinkered endlessly, leaning down deep into the bowels of his car, an exploded sea of parts — of valves and pipes and pistons and screws — all around him, that easy grin of his having transformed into something serious and focused. And Weasel would polish and clean all of it, inspect it all for defects, replace one part with some super-charged version of the same, and then put it all back together, over and over again.

The satisfaction and pride in this past time came from the tinkering, from the reconstituting of parts into a whole again, from the understanding of the machine at that most basic and essential level that this work implied. As a part of this, there was a natural offense taken to figures like Toad, animals who couldn't possibly appreciate the true craftsmanship and history and the evolutionary path taken, who had no interest in the essential machine. What those animals wanted was something flashy and fast. Toad wanted something flashy and fast and so he simply bought it. This was the kind of thing that, to many, seemed hopelessly and cruelly unfair. At the same time, there was no denying the sheer beauty of Toad's purchase. Weasel certainly could not and, once he laid his eyes on it, he desired nothing more than to study it and imitate it and learn from it.

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It was in the days after that conversation with Rat, when she had described the burgeoning friendship between Toad and Weasel, that Mole first became aware of a new kind of anxiety growing inside him. He had been, up until then, quite proud of the image of himself he had seen reflected back in Rat's eyes. He knew she hoped for him to be something of a blue-collar poet, and he was working hard to fulfill that expectation. He may not have been writing much but he was suddenly quite happy to play the part of the writer.

Despite this, as well as encounters like the one they'd had with Weasel at The Holt, Mole knew he was further removed from South End culture than it appeared. He had always been no more than a novelty there, buried in his books and his musings, buried

within himself. He lacked the sense of danger needed to complete the picture he was convinced Rat had in her head. Worse, it was the exact kind of danger that practically seeped out of Weasel's skin that night. Toad had already clearly glommed on to it, and so too could Rat.

Alone, on those walks through The Willows or at those few times where Mole actually sat at his desk and stared down at the writing he'd previously planned for himself, the work that would cast light on the truth of this town and how it was built, that was set to dive into the complexities of history and the emotions that came with it, a shadow of doubt would pass over him. He could feel himself slipping from a position he'd only just recently found for himself, falling into something altogether different.

And there was nothing he could do about it. Indeed, when Rat mentioned that Toad was planning to film a race soon and suggested they go too, Mole had to fight to suppress the excitement he felt rising, just behind that anxiety. Because here was a chance to regain his position and insert himself back into the story.

The race would happen very late at night, on The Run itself. It had probably been happening this way for years and yet, Mole insisted to himself now that the races must be new. It must have started when he was away. That's why he had never heard of it before and why, for that matter, he had had to inquire about its exact location.

In the quarter of a mile right before it came to its conclusion in a grove of trees far down below the South End docks, The Run ran straight and true, with little around it to be disturbed. This was in the increasingly rare part of The Willows that had withstood the area's rapid expansion. It was called Backwater and it could be dank and dark back in here. The road led to nowhere, and the few animals that did live nearby were of a type more inclined to let the kids race than to call Willows Police. They usually had fairly strong reasons not to ignite the authorities' curiosity.

But like any good South Ender, they cared about their surroundings and so the path here was well-maintained, smooth and wide. The branches of the trees arced to meet each other in the middle of the road here too, as they did at the Holt. With the lamps of The Run lit, the darkness they warded off seemed to grow even deeper.

It was here that the animals gathered, and there were quite a large number that night. The crowd resembled the ones that gathered at Otter's, though there was an edge here that felt sharper. Mole also noticed a few humans mixed in among the crowd, and an edgy sort at that, though this shouldn't have surprised him. Just as an animal like Mole

might thrill to the adventure of drinking at a human biker bar, plenty of humans liked to come into The Willows seeking a similar charge.

Whatever charge that was to be had here was born on the back of real risk, both bodily risk and financial risk as well. That was, in fact, one of the first things Mole noticed when they arrived that night, as he and Rat waded through the crowds in search of their friends. There was an awful lot of money trading paws and every time Mole noticed this and looked up at the animals involved, he found that his gaze was being met and met with steely eyes and set jaws. It was an expression that told Mole he should just keep right on moving.

Mole was rather used to this sort of thing but for Rat, it was an entirely new experience. The walls of Otter's had represented a kind of safe haven for her, a sandbox in which she could play without fear of any reproach. Here though, in this more shadowy part of the South End, there were no restrictions at all, not even the kind that the walls of a sandbox could represent. She was aware of herself in a new and vulnerable way, aware of the way she looked to all those around her. She grasped at Mole's paw as they pushed further and then he could feel it too, that tingly wave that sweeps across the skin to tell you that you're being considered, sized up, judged.

They finally found both Weasel and Toad moments later. Their respective cars had been lined up next to one another. Toad's gleamed with a crisp brightness under the lamps. Weasel's, absent all the ostentatious chrome of Toad's number, had a flatter and heavier effect. It lurked next to its more showy cousin, low to the ground and growling with menace. This was appropriate too, given their owners. While Toad was skittering this way and that as Mole and Rat walked up, a camera in his hand but evidently no real plan for what to shoot, Weasel was hidden in the shadows. He was talking to the animal Opossum, whispering into her ear as his eyes cut back and forth.

Even with those shadows, or perhaps because of them, Weasel gave off an aura of security. It felt as though the moment the crowd saw Rat and Mole draw near to him and be welcomed into his orbit, they withdrew whatever veiled animosity they had cast out. Mole was feeling so reassured and relieved that he strode right up.

"Hullo, Weasel. Good evening," Mole said with just the faintest hint of jovial desperation. "You remember my girlfriend, Rat."

Rat, standing just behind Mole, waved. Behind her crouched Toad. He had now commenced to film something, though it was quite unclear what that something was.

“Hi, hi! Thanks for inviting us,” Rat said. “Oh! Hello, I’m Rat. And you are?”

Rat, feeling herself wrapped anew in that protective aura, had directed this last bit at Opossum who glowered back at her now even as a wry smile crept onto her face. For his part, Mole had been surprised to even see Opossum there, not because of her relationship to Weasel but because of her own reputation.

Hers was a family as rooted in the area as any. But their particular history had taken them out of the South End and into a kind of fragile wealth, one that was almost certainly achieved through immoral means. For years, Opossum's family had handled waste removal in The Willows, carting the area's trash out past the community limits, out to a massive dirt pit they'd painstakingly dug out themselves, and burning it there. It was a repugnant business but a profitable one. Opossum's family seemed to make quite a profit indeed and so, for years, rumors had swirled about the kinds of trash they might be willing to haul and the discretion they were willing to exercise.

The consensus opinion was that the opossums had, for many years, been paid well by North Enders to dispose of their dirty work. This was another installment in South End lore. As Mole had been reminded during his conversation with Spiny at the Holt, South Enders were forever wringing their paws over the dwindling size and diminished state of their neighborhood, treating it as a fortress constantly under siege. And along with that, South Enders were a notably paranoid and conspiratorial bunch, particularly as it applied to their North End neighbors. They were suspicious of every move the North End collectively made and constantly convinced there was a plan in action, one backed by powerful forces and a malevolent will that the South End couldn't possibly understand.

There was, for instance, a whole galaxy of theories dedicated to the central thesis that Mayor Turtle — that old, venerable architect of The Willows — hadn't died of a stroke while sitting in his den carving new pieces for his cherished chess set, as most believed, but had in fact been murdered. Another one — particularly outrageous — was that the Commodore actually was a human being, either disguised or disfigured, sent by that world's leaders to bring The Willows under their control and subject it to their vain and violent ideology. Mole had long thought that it was this sort of misplaced fanaticism and anger that distracted from the South End's more legitimate concerns and prevented them from truly being heard.

He couldn't quite remember when Opossum and Weasel had hooked up. In fact, he confessed to himself now that he'd never been entirely clear on the exact nature of their relationship. It had always been assumed that the two were together but they were rarely actually seen with one another and Opossum in general, maintained an extremely low profile.

It had actually created quite an intimidating reputation for her over the years, allowing for the stories about her to collect and build. Plus, of course, there was her family and the reputation they had and the rather unnerving way in which they carried themselves. Certainly no one would have actually thought to date her. No one, that is, except for Weasel. And yet, again, no one had ever really seen them together. Mole had wondered before if they'd all perhaps just made it up. It seemed so appropriate for the mysterious Opossum and fearsome Weasel to hook up that maybe they'd all just assumed it happened.

Now, though, Mole was staring right at the two of them standing together, leaning into one another closely but with a practiced posture that kept them at just the slightest remove, as if they saved that last bit just for themselves.

"This is Opossum. Opossum, this is Rat and this is Mole," Weasel said. He swaggered out now but Mole noticed that his eyes continued to move, never meeting his gaze, scanning.

"Hiya, kids," purred Opossum. Unlike Weasel, she stayed back in the shadows and her own gaze never wavered.

"I'm glad you both came. What do you think?" said Weasel, his attention hovering delicately somewhere in the mid-ground.

"Oh, it's quite something," said Rat. Weasel laughed, though it sounded more like a murmur coming from him. He was moving now, walking the perimeter of the small space that had been carved out for them. There were dozens of other automobiles lined up alongside Toad's and Weasel's, each its own mobile repair shop and display case. It resembled a kind of military encampment; a long line of compact but powerful metal beasts, their hoods popped and their contents spilled out for that one last round of tinkering before facing battle.

He turned back to them. "It is, isn't it?" he said. He smiled at them and the smile was like a flare, like something very bright and hot had been lit and in that moment Mole felt that sense of danger he'd agonized over before. At that moment, a nearby

driver revved his engine and Mole jumped in fright, his entire body actually leaving the ground and hanging in space for the briefest of moments.

"Good God!" he shouted.

"Is this your first time here, Mole?" asked the undisturbed Weasel. His eyebrows arched a bit in surprise.

"No, well...yes." Mole stammered. "I came by it once, see, uh, but I haven't ever been this close."

"Well, do me a favor, will you? Stand over there. I'm up." Weasel looked now at Toad, who was still enraptured with his camera's same odd angle and mysterious subject that he had been before. "That means you too, pal."

Toad's head shot up. "No, no. I really think it'll make for a better shot if I'm right there, Weez. Ground level, you know? That way the viewer will really be able to feel this intensity."

"Can't have it," said Weasel flatly. He patted Toad on the shoulder. "It's too dangerous that close."

Toad frowned for a moment but there was clearly to be no more discussion. He joined Mole and Rat at the front of the crowd that had started to form.

"I really think I ought to be a little closer," he said. He wasn't used to not getting his way and it seemed to flummox him in the moment. He fidgeted and pulled at the preposterous velour tracksuit he'd chosen to wear that night, then started to say something, thought better of it, and finally, rather glumly swung his camera back up.

The angry barks coming from the engines had become a sustained roar, joined now by the clamorous din of the crowd. Weasel inched his ride out onto The Run and the starting line. It was met there by another car, its driver barely visible underneath their helmet and crouched down low in their cab. Weasel, in contrast, sat high up in his ride and aggressively forward. He raised an arm and revved his engine now too and the crowd responded in kind, calling back to him, meeting all of his potential energy with their own and promising to ride alongside him all the way.

"Would you listen to that?" said Toad.

He turned his camera to capture the crowd of animals all around them. Mole turned too. He had never felt such energy before and it frankly rather alarmed him. It felt as if it were pouring forth from these machines and the crowd was feeding off it, sucking it

up and then belching it back out, all of it mixing together in this cloud around them. That crowd now seemed to surge and buck and tremble, just like the cars.

The anticipation was overwhelming and the wait here, at this final moment, seemed interminable. There was a conversation between Weasel and the other driver, then a rather heated one involving Weasel, the other driver and a third party. No one in the crowd seemed to have any idea what was happening and the noise of the engines discouraged speculative conversation. At long last though, all seemed set. The third animal backed away and the crowd leaned forward. Mole could sense the drivers now turning inward, looking deep into themselves at this final moment. Then a flag dropped and just like that, with a tremendous release of air and power and adrenalin, the cars flung forward and the race began.

They quickly receded down the road and into the night, their rear lights softened by the clouds of dust they had kicked up. The race was down and back and so there was an odd moment then during which the crowd was left by themselves and to their own devices. That rush of energy had subsided and an odd kind of serenity descended. It was to be short-lived, they knew, and so everyone embraced it.

Toad walked forward a few feet, his camera trained on the point at which the cars had vanished. Instinctually, Rat reached out and grabbed ahold of the collar of Toad's jacket. He turned back to her and smiled devilishly.

"Now, don't worry, dearest. I won't be flattened."

"You know I worry, Toadie." The words poured out smoothly, filled with reassurance.

"I know that you do." Toad stayed put and Rat released him. "I probably won't even use tonight's footage. This light..." He trailed off, evidently satisfied that Mole and Rat would know what that meant.

Just then, there was the slightest rumble in the ground beneath them and in the air around them. Headlights appeared at the end of that long and dark tunnel. The cars had made the turn. They were headed home, and the crowd, acutely aware of their forthcoming responsibilities, collectively stiffened and focused back in. On cue, a new cheer began to gurgle up from among them, growing now into a fierce roar to battle that of the returning engines. Mole, as locked in as anyone there, strained to distinguish the lead automobile from the one just behind. The headlights seemed to dance with one another off in the distance, weaving in and out like fireflies as they bore closer. It wasn't

until the machines were seemingly right on top of the crowd that he could see it was Weasel who was out in front.

In the final moments of the race, the other car surged forward and then receded back, then surged again, inches, it seemed, from overtaking Weasel. But Weasel's car, flatter and sleeker and angrier in motion than it could ever hope to be at rest, never wavered. His opponent was simply incapable of maintaining that straight line of muscle and might and focus that Weasel could and so it was Weasel who screamed over the finish line first. He slammed on his brakes then and eased the car into a slide, kicking up even more dust and eliciting a kind of trill of excitement within those cheers.

Within moments though, the cheers had faded. There was a distinct kind of choreography to these events and one of the principles upon which it was designed was efficiency. These were loud, dangerous, dirty races. If they had any hopes of continuing on and not aggravating the wrong animals, they'd always have to be moving quickly. So as Weasel steered his winning roadster back to its berth, a new set of racers were making their way to the starting line.

Weasel hopped out with the kind of flourish reserved exclusively for those who had just recently won something both prestigious and dangerous. His face was full and flush in a way Mole could never remember having seen before and his eyes had a sort of undeniable glint to them. More than anything, Mole thought, he looked young.

He briefly conferred with his opponent, and Mole watched the defeated animal glumly but dutifully hand Weasel a thick wad of cash

“Did you see that?” he said with amazement, now walking back to the group, a cadre of shrews from his garage scurrying past him to attend to the car. “She bucked a little coming down the last quarter. I could barely hold on to it!”

Soon after, the last race barreled to its conclusion and it appeared as if the night were coming to its close. The spectators slung their arms over each other and began to wander off down the road while drivers gathered up their tools and reattached whatever stray parts of their cars had been left disgorged. Someone tried to launch into a drunken version of some old river song and was told to shut up. There was cackling laughter and a flurry of movement as two animals began to wrestle, their tones shifting from teasing to angry and back again. It was here and now that a night splits, its various paths leading to various destinies.

“Alright then, who's ready to race me?” cried out a voice suddenly, a reedy, nasally high-pitched voice that was immediately recognizable to both Mole and Rat. They turned and, just as they expected, it was Toad.

“Oh no,” said Rat, “I was afraid this would happen. Toad!” He stood out in front of the caravan of racers, chest puffed out and eyes shining bright, a broad smile spread out across his face. “Toad, darling, I think the races are over for the night.”

“Nonsense!” cried Toad. “There's surely someone here who's interested in one last race.”

And like that, as if they'd all been waiting for Toad to say those exact words, a crush of animals began to move towards him. No one, it seemed, had ever presented as clear and definitive a picture of a sucker as Toad did at that moment and everyone wanted a piece. It was all Weasel could do to prevent them from carving Toad up and devouring him right there on the spot.

“You're surely going to lose. You know that, right?” cried Rat.

“Now, I don't know that and you don't know that. And what of it?” replied the resolute Toad.

“Okay, fine, what about if you kill yourself?” tried Rat.

“Well then it will have been a tremendously exciting way to die! Ratty, I love you and I love that you worry about me. Truly, I do. But if I'm to understand this world and do it justice. You know, really capture the truth of it? Well then, I'm going to need to experience it firsthand. That's simply all there is to it.” He smiled benignly in what appeared to be an attempt at rational calm.

As this discussion was taking place, Weasel was undertaking a negotiation process on Toad's behalf. His chosen opponent would be Raccoon. Raccoon was a well known animal in the South End, having come from the family chiefly responsible for introducing Red Willow Juice to the community. He had practically grown up at Covey's, his family's age-old tavern where he now tended bar, and from that perch he had a close look at everything the South End had to offer. He and Mole were the same age and yet Raccoon had always felt so much older, carrying himself with a weary kind of dignity.

Weasel turned towards them now and put steadying paws on the shoulders of both Toad and Rat.

“Listen, Raccoon is a friend of mine —”

“Yes, he's a good one,” interrupted Mole, who was watching all of this play out with a mixture of dread and delight.

“Yes, and he'll take it easy on you, Toad. Let you get your feet wet first, right?”

“Fine, fine,” said Toad. He'd already donned a pair of ridiculous-looking racing goggles and was pulling on a set of fingerless leather gloves now. “Let's do it.”

Simply getting Toad to the starting line was a chore. It wasn't as if he'd never driven before. Somehow he'd managed to get the car down to the race, after all. But the excitement and the crowd seemed to overwhelm Toad. The moment he'd tried to move, it had stalled. The crowd whooped and Toad smiled and waved, shameless as ever. He tried again, punching it forward and then letting it slowly roll down to where Raccoon waited, the same look of bemused resignation on his face that a parent might have when they find themselves watching their child perform at an especially boring recital.

The expression on Rat's face was quite a bit more pained while Mole, by now, could barely look up at all. There was something spoiled about what was happening in front of them, though Mole couldn't be sure where the rot was coming from, the crowd or the subject of their attention. When he finally did raise his head and peer out at the scene around him, the first thing he saw was Otter on the other side of the crowd. Across the gaggle of animals that laughed and shook their heads and nudged one another watching the merry Toad bumble up to the line, Mole tried to catch Otter's eye. He wanted to share a look, a smile, a connective point with anyone out there. But he failed to get his friend's attention and Otter was soon lost in the crowd.

The two cars now properly situated, the rules of the road were recited one last time — down and back, no deliberate contact, winner-take-all. There had been the briefest of exchanges regarding money just before they'd rolled out. Both Raccoon and Toad handed over what Mole would learn was the standard amount for a race, \$500. With that taken care of, Raccoon revved his engine playfully one last time and Toad did the same, giggling and squealing and yelling out, “Poop poop,” in delight. Then, with an almost comic level of seriousness and focus, Toad moved forward in his seat and shifted dramatically into first gear.

At the drop of the flag, Toad's car leapt forward, its inherent craftsmanship overriding whatever horror he was doing to its clutch. But Toad was unprepared for such a surge and he immediately struggled to control the fast-accelerating car. Perhaps sensing what was about to happen, Raccoon stayed just behind Toad and out of harm's

way as the two cars moved off. The remaining crowd seemed to collectively chortle and then gasp as first the lights of Toad's car dramatically careened off in one direction and then the other. And there the lights remained, motionless for a few seconds, giving Rat just enough time to freeze up entirely next to Mole. Then those same lights seemed to suddenly retreat back the way they'd come, twist and then zoom off, now in pursuit of the steadfast Raccoon.

Toad had lost control and hit a tree, not the last of the objects he would run into on his way to the turnaround and back. He bounced down that chute like he was trapped in a pinball machine while Raccoon, as placid as The River on a cool fall day, maintained his straight line and glided across the finish line without seeming to break a sweat.

When Toad followed behind several moments later, despite his having lost \$500 and what would, for most animals, be a great share of their dignity, there was still that tremendous grin spread out across his face and his giggles continued to ring out. And perhaps Mole was naive to think it but, at least for that moment, he thought he could feel that crowd come around to Toad, to smile and laugh along with him at the sheer absurdity of absolutely all of it.

After it was all finally concluded for the evening, Toad drove Rat and Mole back to Mole's, the car chugging and kicking and leaning at such an awkward angle that Mole felt as if he were practically in Toad's lap for most of the trip. The car was barely functional; a beat-down and humbled version of its former glorious self. But Toad remained positively ebullient.

"It's even better when you're the one doing the actual driving. See, I thought simply going that fast was the best part but it's the control, see! The absolute control you have — or you must have if you hope to win. And to race! Have you ever done something like that, Ratty?"

"What?"

"Competed."

"I was in the Junior Regatta every year. You remember that! I never did very well, though they always gave me a trophy anyway."

"I won a three-legged race at a picnic once. Me and a friend," ventured Mole, and Rat snickered.

"Well, when there's something truly on the line, everything becomes that much sharper."

Toad went on like that, barely making any sense at all and blind to Mole and Rat's bemusement, jabbering on about the essence of danger and how close he'd come to the edge until they finally pattered to a stop at the start of the dirt path leading into Wild Wood.

"Are you sure this thing is going to get you all the way home?" Rat asked, her smile betraying any real sense of concern.

"Oh I have no doubt! She's taken a licking but this girl is as tough as they come," Toad exclaimed. He slapped his hand down on the dash and Mole could swear he heard the sound of something small and metal falling through the engine block. But before he had the chance to alert Toad, the car was already lurching forward. It swung around and Toad leaned out, his hand extended in an odd gesture of farewell. And then he was off into the darkness of the night.

For a moment, Mole and Rat stood in that sudden hush, their paws clasped tight, eyes shining with the evening's lingering excitement. Looking back, Mole would circle this night as perhaps the last truly blissful one he'd enjoyed. Of course their visit to the races had been filled with its share of anxious and uncomfortable moments. But he and Rat had been in it together. They had moved through the experience as a couple, as a single unit.

In the months to come, he would discover how much one could miss that feeling, once they'd had it and then seen it slip away.

Chapter 5: A Visit To Weasel's

In a matter of weeks, Toad had become a well-known presence at Backwater, and one of the race's most willing and, predictably, unsuccessful participants. And while both Rat and Mole had so far politely declined Toad's offer to come see him race again, talk of his exploits had reached them nonetheless. Word had in fact spread to all ends of The Willows, and the gossip and the rumors had metastasized from there. Some wondered if Toad had developed a death wish following his parents' own demise. Others thought this was an obvious sign of some kind of drug or alcohol addiction. Even Rat's mother, who existed in a kind of bubble of North End social pariahdom, had heard the stories.

"What has that animal gotten himself into now?" she wondered, heavy-lidded but with an air of bemusement.

Whatever Toad was up to, it did seem to involve a deliberate effort to throw away all of his considerable wealth as systematically as possible. Toad had yet to win a race and so consequently had lost every one of his bets. Beyond that, he was such a terrible driver that he not only consistently lost, he was also doing significant damage to his automobile at practically every turn. And so commenced a cyclical routine. Toad would lose and smash up his car. He'd then have it towed back to Weasel's where it would be repaired, always at an expense to Toad that Weasel assured him was discounted. Thus ready to take on the world once again, Toad would head back out to the races where he would proceed to lose again and, in so doing, again smash the roadster to pieces and start the cycle back up all over.

Toad's behavior suggested a new, dangerous kind of mania, and one that had a finite limit, beyond which consequences ensued. At the very least, Mole was concerned that his new friend was being fleeced; that Weasel had correctly identified Toad as a willing mark and was now undertaking the relatively easy business of milking him for all he was worth. He felt bad about this, to be sure. Toad was pretentious and self-involved

and incapable of anything approaching humility or quiet dignity but Mole had also by now spent enough time with him to know that he meant well. That desperation of Toad's — that need to be seen and heard, to be so vividly present for everything at all times — seemed so sad to Mole, sadder the more time he spent with the animal. He did not deserve to be taken advantage of in this way.

The first traces of shame were thus worming their way through Mole then. At the same time, he was also in a barely suppressed state of panic that Rat would insist that he insert himself into the situation. After all, he was a “friend” of Weasel's. Certainly if Weasel, knowingly or not, was encouraging Toad's reckless pursuits, then it would fall to Mole to intervene; to ask, from one South Ender to another, that he knock it off. Of course, the mere thought of asking anything from Weasel made Mole's throat go dry and his knees grow weak.

He was afraid of Weasel, to be sure, and especially afraid of the moment when the façade Weasel had apparently built for himself — this effortlessly cool performance that included welcoming Toad into his garage and putting his arm around Mole — dropped away. Mole did not want to be held responsible for that nor did he want to see what lay behind that facade.

As if that weren't enough, Mole couldn't help but also feel sparks of excitement shoot through him too, as if all that shame and anxiety were transformed into an electric potential energy inside him, a motivating force that could drive him out of complacency and to something greater. While he'd decided that he hadn't actually enjoyed the particulars of the race, especially the noise and the thin layer of animosity he'd thought had been directed his and Rat's way, he did find a certain satisfaction in thinking back on it and reminding himself that he had done that, that he was seizing the day, pushing through his fear and seeking out life's adventures while getting his paws a little dirty in the process. He'd once left The Willows in search of that feeling and now he'd come back to find it. It gave him a charge; a crisp, edgy alertness that Mole sporadically caught himself enjoying.

Meanwhile, for her part, Rat had grown quite worried about Toad. It wasn't just the money. Rat knew that there was no real danger there, that Toad could try as hard as he'd like and he still might not succeed in throwing away all that wealth. What Rat wasn't so sure of was what lay behind this particular obsession and this fervency with which Toad pursued not just the thrill of risking it all but destroying it all too. She worried about

him hurting himself or worse, others too. And she did intend to enlist Mole's help in knocking some sense into him. Unlike Mole though, Rat didn't suspect Weasel of anything beyond carrying on as he usually did. And so she intended to not only enlist Mole's help in setting Toad straight, she intended to enlist Weasel's as well.

"This garage that Weasel has, you know where it is, right?" she asked Mole as they sat on the banks of The River one day, idly picking at the grass and tracing shapes in one another's skin. The weather in The Willows had surprised them with a sudden burst of warmth on that Sunday in early December, and the animals, most of whom had been busy steeling themselves for winter, now crept back out to luxuriate one last time. The cold loomed though. Mole could feel it in the air even then. The breeze moved quickly and urgently, dashing across the landscape as if it were hiding something. But it was getting on towards evening and that wonderful orange light had appeared and so they remained.

"Yes," replied Mole carefully. He did know where the garage was but he also thought he knew where this conversation was headed and he didn't like it.

"Well I think the two of us should go over there and see if we can't talk to Weasel and get him to help us. I mean, Toad clearly idolizes him and so if he says something; you know, tells him that racing maybe isn't for him, I feel like Toad may listen."

Mole felt a rush of adrenalin and a flush of warmth to his face as all those various emotions that had been swirling around in him now erupted forth, insisting upon him all at once.

"Yes, well...you may be right. It's just that...well, I wouldn't want him to get the wrong impression. Like that we were accusing him of something."

"No, no, no, I'm not," cried Rat. "Not at all!"

"I'm not saying you are. I'm saying he might think that."

"Why would he do that?"

"Because..." Mole could feel it all closing in on him now. His way out was becoming harder and harder to see.

"It's just —...well, or that you were criticizing his, you know, his past time," he stammered out. This here was a last act of desperation, teasing at whatever self-consciousness Rat felt over her privilege and the differences between Weasel's life and her own. But she was to have none of that.

“Don't be ridiculous,” she said. Her voice had tensed and tightened a bit in frustration. “That's not what I'm saying at all. Look, we'll tell him the truth, which is that Toad is a very fragile animal, particularly right now, and he has entirely too much time and money on his hands and he was never very level-headed to begin with and so we think that perhaps it's best if he find some new passion to pursue. He should go back to filmmaking!” she added. “He can't do much harm there.”

She was right. Mole was finished and just like that, they were arranging to go to Weasel's the following day.

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That night, lying alone in his bed, Mole was unable to sleep. Those emotions of his had drained away, and now a great yawning pit inside of him remained, its gravity pulling him down. Finally, he wrenched himself up out of bed, tossing aside the sheets in disdain, and, as if pulled there by unseen forces, headed for his desk.

Right after that first afternoon of authorial inspiration at the mill, Mole had gone and purchased a new journal to begin to write his book in. He'd savored those clean, bright empty pages, lying in wait, ready to receive Mole's genius, and he'd celebrated those first scrawled thoughts; a line here, an idea there, the first conceptual stakes driven into the ground. Now, the book lay closed, in the early stages of accumulating dust. Mole sighed and flipped it open, rifling through the pages idly and then stopping at what had been one of his first real efforts at a composed piece of writing. It was a description of one of his communities most beloved events, The Lily Fair.

The history of the Fair stretched back to the community's very earliest days. In fact, it had been one of the first affirmations that this community of theirs did exist. Nowadays, it was anticipated for all sorts of reasons; for the hotly-contested chili eating contest and the rides up on a hot-air balloon that, despite being tethered to the ground for safety's sake, still offered a stunning perspective on the town and its picturesque environs, and for the games on the Glen's makeshift midway, but also for the revenue the Fair could bring in, and, for those tasked with working it, the unbelievable amount of stress it could cause.

The most recent Fair had fallen just a few weeks after Mole had begun his project and just a few more before he would meet Rat. It was the typical crush of animals. All

of The Willows turned out, including Mole and his family. This was also a family tradition of theirs that went back as far as Mole could remember and it was not one he would ever be allowed to miss. Mole was the middle of three siblings and the only one who had not followed local tradition by taking up the family's trade. His younger brother, still just a pup, was already assisting his dad on the weekends while his older sister had been looking after the company's books for a few years now.

When Mole had first returned to The Willows, the idea had been bandied about that perhaps he could help out his sister around the office; not necessarily as a career choice, the family was quick to point out, but merely as a means of employment. Mole would not hear it though. Not only did he remain as disinterested in plumbing as ever before, he and his sister were also famously contentious. She was one of the few animals capable of inducing actual rage in Mole. If you asked him, the problem was that his sister was a painfully stubborn animal who refused to admit that Mole could ever be right about anything or know even a scintilla more about any subject than her but then again nobody ever asked Mole.

Thankfully, that day his sister had been tending to her own brood, Mole's little nieces and nephews. Mole was quite fond of the little buggers but had not quite figured out how to talk to pre-adolescent animals in a way that didn't seem completely demeaning and so he kept his distance. His brother had run off to meet up with friends and Mole found himself alone in trailing behind his parents as they wandered through the sprawling warren of booths and stalls and stages spread out on the broad flat grass of Gloaming Glen. There were tables overflowing with handcrafted cuckoo clocks and lanyard bracelets and oatmeal cookies, a display of sand art next to a dunk tank next to a gargantuan, competition-grade pumpkin and, somewhere off in the near distance, the sounds of a carnival barker offering three throws for just a quarter.

It was the rosiest picture of The Willows that could be painted and Mole had fallen right in. It confirmed those feelings he'd had when he'd first had the idea to write the book, that sweeping sense of place, not just among these animals but within a history that stretches on infinitely. So he'd decided that day to devote a portion of his book to the Fair and to a number of the other beloved communal gatherings that the area enjoyed.

Reading back the section now though, months later and in the dead of the night, Mole was overwhelmed by how trite and facile it read, like a travel brochure for this

perfectly handcrafted vacation destination dubbed The Willows. There was nothing with any of the weight of history in this claptrap. Mole's aim, it seemed, had been much more shallow. He had, for example, devoted a disproportionate amount of space to lengthy descriptions of the various food offerings to be found at the Fair. It seemed he was especially admiring of a vegetable stew that Cottonmouth had cooked up, the line for which stretched around the bandstand and made for an awkward meeting of hungry stew-lovers and banjo fans who had come to hear the stylings of Old Vole. He was a prodigious player after all, whose dulcet tones, Mole had written, "provided a splendid backdrop to the perfect afternoon."

Mole had also detailed that year's pageant, entitled "A River Runs Through Us." Put on annually by the local theatre troupe, The Woodland Players, the show was predictably insipid, with Squirrel taking on the role of The River itself and dispensing wisdom to a series of historical figures who had come seeking her advice at decisive moments in Willows history. Mole believed then and now that this play was the artistic equivalent of a glass of warm milk. But he had written glowingly about it anyway, using it as a springboard to an appreciation of the heritage and tradition that the Fair represented.

Mole remembered suddenly the Lily Fair ribbons he'd found in the Town Office and all the rest of that history, buried away now. He looked again at the pages in front of him and laughed dryly.

"Well, surely that isn't it, is it?" he asked himself, speaking the words out loud with genuine curiosity.

He picked up his pencil and swiped at the pages in his notebook until he'd found a blank one. Then he paused, leaning out over that page as if peering out over the edge of a cliff and down into some deep chasm. And then he began to write something new. What he wrote was a remembrance from the Fair, one that came from many years ago. Mole wasn't even conscious of having arrived at the memory or of any clear decision to set it down on to the paper. On that night, Mole managed to achieve that rare state that writers chase during which the words did seem to practically pour out of him.

Back when Mole was a teenager, he'd join the animals that would sneak off to the dam during the Fair, when parents were distracted and generally in a permissive mood. Caves had been dug out of the banks right at the base of the dam, hideaways where they could drink whatever Red Willow Juice they'd managed to steal or even smoke a

particular dried root brought in from the Wide World by someone's cousin or some such relation. They'd smoke and drink and then spin about in inebriated and youthful splendor, luxuriating decadently and ironically in the boneyard of The Willows' past.

These caves had thus been deemed definitively South End territory despite the fact that they were unequivocally situated in the North End. So an unsuspecting North Ender could generally be depended on to wander over at some point, drawn in by the alluring air of mischief that seemed to pulse out from those caves. And when they did, they were met with taunting and threats and an assertion of dominion and power that, frankly, young South Enders rarely had the chance to showcase otherwise.

Mole's remembrance was of one such instance. Except this time, the North Ender — some kind of deer that Mole didn't recognize — hadn't simply wandered in. They'd been lured in. Mole wasn't sure who had done the luring. It very well could have been Weasel. It frankly didn't matter as Mole's description was far more concerned with the sensory details of that night.

It had been very warm, Mole remembered that. The summer heat could be difficult for many animals of The Willows, moles included, and so they typically stayed indoors for even more of the day than usual. But they had ventured out for the Fair on that day of course and Mole remembered how sapped he'd been by the sun and by the great excitement of it all. It was getting on towards dusk and Mole had stretched out on a flat rock overlooking the caves. He remembered the way the drying sweat on his fur had felt and how its chill had crept over him. He remembered the view he'd had from that vantage point and how perfect it was.

The deer's eyes had widened at the moment when it first recognized trouble, the whites in those eyes glistening in the setting sun. Mole couldn't know what had clued the animal in. Perhaps it was just instinct or perhaps it was the air, which, in Mole's mind, had suddenly taken on the acrid and spicy aroma of tension. Whatever the reason, the deer had bowed its head deferentially and tried to back away from the situation quickly, as if it could ever be as easy as that. Mole remembered the mocking, sing-song voices that emerged out of the caves and then the rush of movement. Most of all though, he remembered that shocking shade of red, the shade of red one only sees when blood is shed.

He wrote about all of those things, hunched over his papers in that lone pool of light, his pen scratching away angrily. And when he was done describing what had

happened down on the riverbed, he followed his memories back home with him, back to his childhood home where he had gone that night after the Fair. Word had spread of the attack. The deer was going to live but there was already fear of lasting physical effects for the animal, not to mention the more widespread implications revolving around who had been attacked and who, based on the location of the assault, had done the attacking.

Mole's parents had stared at him from across the burrow that night, their expressions a mixture of concern and anger ready to pounce. He had denied knowing anything about the attack then. But the moment he had, it was as if a noxious gas had suddenly filled the space between them. Suddenly they were all breathing that lie of his.

Nevertheless, Mole would stick with that story through the pending inquiry, as would all the South Enders who had gathered that night. None of them apparently knew anything and since the deer's injury had rendered parts of their memory spotty too, no assailants were ever identified. The incident had quickly faded from the forefront of town affairs, one of many that had seemingly threatened the social fabric of The Willows only to offer an incremental ratcheting-up of pressure and a reminder of the explosion destined to come.

Notably, this would also be the first time (and not the last, though Mole had no way of knowing that then), that he would have occasion to formally meet with The Willows' Chief Investigator, Striped Skunk, a swaggering and, some would say, preening character known as much for his flights of flamboyance than for any crime-fighting prowess. But Mole would not get to Striped Skunk or the inquiry in his writing that night. He concluded instead in that moment with his parents, in that moment when he'd feigned ignorance, telling them that he hadn't been at the caves but had been with Otter around the square. He took a deep breath now, as if to confirm that the noxious gas of that lie of his still lingered, this many years later. Then he let it out slowly. He set his pencil down and looked down at what he had just written.

He didn't feel unburdened now because he had never felt particularly burdened by this memory. He knew to stay away from it and so he had, until tonight. Even now, he edged around the particulars; the faces of those who had set upon the deer, their names. He had known them then and he knew them now, but if Striped Skunk had somehow burst into his burrow at that very moment and demanded that he reveal those names,

Mole knew that he would not. That animal on that night had been where it did not belong and in The Willows, that was that.

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The next morning, Mole and Rat took the long trek down to Weasel's garage. Mole had only faint associations with this part of the South End. There had never been much reason to come here before. It had none of the lush and teeming activity of the more developed areas, the ones packed full of animals and their businesses and their noise, nor even the mystery of pockets like Backwater. Here, it was as if the life of The Willows had been left to slowly seep away. The warmth of the previous day had completely and quite dramatically vanished, and a bitter wind now blew across their faces as they pushed on, its sound scratching at the otherwise bleak landscape.

Most South Enders still preferred to make their homes in natural habitats; hollows and burrows and nests. Free-standing structures were mostly reserved for business interests and they remained modest, designed to maximize resources and blend into the landscape. North Enders were obviously significantly more ostentatious in their choice of domicile of course. Their castles could often be quite beautiful, but down in this corner, everything was wide and squat and grey; barn-like spaces where the town's few industrial businesses were centered.

Rat shivered a bit and then, as if in response, cast out an incandescent smile, breaking through the morning chill. It did not break through to Mole though who had not recovered from the night before. He was sleepless and so more anxious than ever, not to mention increasingly frustrated with Rat for offering up only unceasing positivity in the face of his obvious reluctance.

Weasel's garage sat at the end of a cul-de-sac. It felt modest, almost pointedly inconspicuous, its entrance tucked back from the road and down a soft slope. Shrubbery had been allowed to grow there too, though it was unkempt and overgrown now and only added to the apparent shabbiness of the establishment. She hadn't said as much but Mole knew that Rat had chosen to come this early because there was no chance they'd encounter Toad. He was a notoriously late sleeper, sometimes taking his cue to rise only when the sun began to fall. It was unclear why she expected Weasel to be there that early but there he was. They found him sitting behind a small metal desk in the corner

of the garage, sipping coffee and savoring a bit of quiet before the hullabaloo of the day began.

He was surprised to see them and it took a moment for Weasel to reorient himself. Mole got the feeling that he did not like to have his order of things disrupted and clearly Mole and Rat, in this space at this moment, were a disruption. He regained himself quickly though and was soon gazing at them with concerned eyes as Rat made her case.

"It's just that he's been through an awful lot. You know about the passing of his parents, of course. And I think that Toad's way of coping with that has been to just immerse himself in these, uh, pastimes of his. Totally and completely and, with racing, well, it becomes dangerous. You've seen him out there. It's reckless, Weasel. He doesn't have any of your skills or experience. Nor the temperament, I should add!"

At this, Weasel smiled knowingly and took a long and thoughtful sip of coffee.

"He respects you. I think it would mean a lot coming from you," she added.

"Well, I don't want to put him in any danger," said Weasel. "I know how much he loves it, that's for sure. But you're right, Rat. He's no good. Terrible, actually." He laughed. "I'll talk to him."

He set down the mug with an air of finality, as if he were a judge rapping his gavel in resolution. Then, clearly in a gesture of dismissal, he said, "That's that then," and leaned back.

"Thank you, Weasel. We really appreciate it. And sorry to barge in like this. That's my fault. I just don't think about these things, but I'm glad we caught you before the start of business for the day." Rat glanced around at the cavernous interior of the garage. "Such a marvelous space you've got for yourself here."

"We should let him get on with things, Rat," Mole interjected.

"Yeah, sorry to have to cut it short," said Weasel. He glanced at Mole and the two made eye contact, Weasel silently thanking Mole for that push in the right direction. "I've got to get started on some things."

"Of course! Yes, please, we'll get out of your way," exclaimed Rat. The end of things now clearly demarcated and crossed, they all jumped up and made for the door. As they did, Rat continued on though.

"This really is a splendid space. And in such an odd part of town. It's so far away from things, I don't know how you stand it. Though I understand the appeal of peace and quiet. I mean, that's all anyone in the North End is looking for, I can say that. They

should come down here, right? I know I know, you would not be happy with that, would you?"

Weasel looked at her now, his gaze focused. He met her tone of mock exasperation with one ever so slightly insistent and resolutely serious.

"No, I don't think that I would," he said. Awkwardness descended and, trailing behind them, Mole squirmed in agony. That pit in his stomach had been transformed, it seemed, into some kind of constrictor that now wrapped itself around Mole's insides and proceeded to squeeze the life out of him.

They reached the doorway with Mole practically gasping for air, and as they came back outside, he was surprised to see Otter hurrying down the slope. He stopped short when he saw them, his entire demeanor undergoing some kind of radical shift that happened too fast for Mole to fully appreciate it.

"Oh! Hullo, Mole. Hullo, Rat. Fancy meeting you here."

It was indeed odd. Mole could think of no reason why Otter might be there. He didn't own a car and he certainly wasn't driving one at the moment.

"Otter! What brings you to these parts?" Rat happily asked, bounding over to him for a hug.

"Oh, not much. I was just over in this area so I thought I'd pop in and say hello to Weasel here."

"Well, come on and have some breakfast with Mole and I won't you?" Rat persisted.

"No, I've got a few things I want to, uh, discuss. I wouldn't want to hold you two crazy kids back."

Otter was managing to act both evasive and chummy at the same time. More than anything, he seemed uncomfortable, and Otter never appeared to be uncomfortable to Mole. He must have picked up on his old friend's confusion because he now turned the chumminess directly towards Mole.

"You okay, pal? You don't look so hot." Otter reached a paw out and gave Mole's shoulder a little squeeze.

"I just haven't been sleeping very well, that's all."

"He needs to relax more," Otter said, directing this at Rat. "Take him out on the water or something."

"Oh, I've tried. Believe me!" Rat said with exaggerated weariness. Back in the fall, Rat had finally convinced Mole to try to learn how to sail himself and she'd gamely set

out to teach him. The lessons had not gone well. Rat was an amazingly patient instructor and Mole, at least initially, had been a willing student. But a sense of balance was really required, of which Mole was lacking, and so the endeavor ended with the both of them deposited into The River itself, drifting along helplessly next to Rat's overturned dinghy.

Otter laughed knowingly though Mole was sure he could also hear the strain of artificiality in it.

"Well anyway, I'm going to get on in there. See you guys later." And with that, Otter turned and headed towards the doors of the garage, where Weasel stood waiting for him.

•

"You were awfully quiet back there," Rat said, after they had been walking for a bit. The exuberance that Rat had displayed for Weasel and Otter had waned the further they'd gone, and Mole now had the distinct impression that a trap had just been laid and, worse, that breakfast was off the table.

If Mole had been in a foul mood before they'd gone to Weasel's, that mood was absolutely dreadful by now. Here again, a new piece of hitherto undiscovered connective tissue had emerged, this time between Otter and Weasel. It was one thing for Weasel to show up to Otter's party. Everyone did that. But this little casual get-together of theirs that Mole and Rat had inadvertently stepped over was something else entirely. It was like they were friends. He wanted nothing more than to quietly brood on it for a time, perhaps over some coffee and eggs with a bit of cheese, and yet that was apparently not to be.

"Was I?" he said dryly.

"I just get the sense that you think I'm meddling somehow. Toad is my friend, after all."

"I don't think that, Rat," he said. "And furthermore —"

"Are you embarrassed by me, is that it? You don't want to be seen down here with your mouthy North End girlfriend?"

"Now, listen. That's absolutely ridiculous, Rat!"

"Is it?"

Mole paused for the briefest of moments. She was baiting him, practically dragging him towards that trap and yet, for as obvious as its construction was, Mole couldn't help but stroll right on in.

"Yes, it is! I just think that you're turning this into far more of a situation than it needs to be."

"A situation?"

"Like an intervention."

She turned and looked at him now. "You are absolutely full of it!" she said. "I don't understand what this is about or why you're so afraid to speak up all the time. I really don't. Our friend is behaving dangerously and you're worried about offending Weasel?"

"I'm just trying not to escalate things if they don't need to be," Mole pleaded. He felt like a soldier who'd lost the high ground, who'd never had the high ground in fact and was now just waiting to be finished off from his position as sitting duck. But instead, Rat scoffed and waved her hand dismissively before walking away, leaving Mole to trudge behind her, alone.

He headed off to the mill while Rat spent the day volunteering at a river restoration project near to the commercial docks. Rat had first told him about this a few days prior and Mole had then smiled and applauded the effort. Now, the act of charity took on a condescending air. He spent the day seething, twisting himself up into angry knots. When he met up with his girlfriend again hours later, he could no longer contain himself.

He pounced the moment he saw her, both of them having arrived at Mole's at the same moment, at the end of the day, just as the sun settled resolutely into the horizon and its last blazing hues shot through the oak trees to say their final goodnights. It was a Wednesday, typically a night when the two would go get fried fish from the little stand down the hill and bring it back home, where they'd eat it while playing endless rounds of a rummy-like card game that Rat's father once claimed to have invented.

"I'd like to say a few things," he announced to her. Her eyebrows rose solemnly and her eyes widened, the whole of her stepping forward wordlessly to now receive whatever storm Mole planned on delivering. "I understand that you care about Toad. Of course you do. You're his oldest friend. I respect that. But when you go around the South End making all these suggestions —"

“What suggestions was I making?” she barked at him, unable to resist the onslaught without striking back.

“Making your jokes about how North Enders should move down there.”

“That’s what this is about?”

“You just don’t understand how sensitive South End animals can be. When you come down here and you criticize our lifestyle —”

“Oh my God!”

“— and you make jokes about North Enders moving in. I mean, you don’t see me up near your place just popping off whenever I want.”

She reared back at this last comment, her head bobbling in surprise.

“I’m not in the habit of *popping off*, Mole, whatever that means.”

“I just mean that I let you lead the way when we’re up there. And I’d appreciate it if you’d let me do the same when we’re down in my neighborhood!”

“Let you lead the way?” she said, her tone flooded with sarcasm. And then, savoring the words, exploring their rhythms and intonations as she went, she exclaimed, “Go to Hell, Mole!” And then she walked right past Mole and off down the path back to The Run. And that was that. Mole remained where he was, standing perfectly still, feeling the remainder of energy drain from him as if he’d suddenly sprung a leak, and listening to her heavy, angry footsteps as Rat moved off. He was, frankly, disappointed that the moment could have come and gone that quickly and he briefly considered yelling something at her before she was out of earshot. But instead he stayed still until the warm buzz inside him had fully subsided and night had fallen. And then he too set off down the path.

It was a good thirty minutes or so before Mole gave conscious thought to his destination. By then, he’d passed by the square and Stoa Crick Mart, quiet and partially shuttered for the offseason, and through downtown. Just up ahead was Covey’s. Mole smiled ruefully. He might not have been conscious where he was going but he had a destination in mind nonetheless.

The crowd inside had a decidedly midweek feel to it, a few locals scattered about the narrow, low-ceilinged space, nursing their drinks, not looking for anything other than what solace the bottom of the glass might provide. Mole slid in and quickly took a stool at the corner of the bar, gazing morosely at the string of Christmas lights that

snaked their way through the bottles and glasses and cast everything in soft and lurid tones of red and green.

Covey's had that charming kind of shabby, patchwork quality to it. Located down a disreputable-looking alley and hidden behind its peeling facade and a heavy, imposing door that swallowed up any light that tried to penetrate, Covey's was beloved by some and scorned by many for its air of grimy cheerfulness.

Along with the Christmas lights, the bar was decorated with movie posters and framed photos and team pennants tacked to every inch of available wall space, layers and layers of them, like the living history of drunken interior design. The place perpetually smelled of burnt peanut shells and the antiseptic sweetness of the Red Willows berry, smells that mingled with the sounds of bluegrass coming from the bar's ancient record player to create an air of resigned satisfaction. Life might not get any better but it could be a lot worse.

Spotting Mole now, Raccoon came ambling over, idly dragging a rag across the bar as he went. Mole hadn't actually seen him since that night at Backwater when he'd handily defeated Toad, the gracious recipient of the easiest prize money ever earned.

"We haven't seen you around here in awhile," he said, grinning at Mole. With a practiced flick of his wrist, he sent a cocktail napkin spinning in Mole's direction. It slid to a halt just in front of his folded hands.

"I'll have a double. With a water back. Please."

Raccoon bugged his eyes and let his jaw drop in an exaggerated gesture of surprise.

"It's been that kind of day, huh? Well, alright, double it is." Raccoon poured the drink while appraising Mole out of the corner of his eye. Red Willow Juice, when properly concentrated and aged, has a molten red cast to it and a syrupy viscosity. Boutique juice makers liked to boast of their pour, describing it as "velvety" and "soft" or equating it to the flow of The River itself. But Mole knew that the most potent kind — the only kind that Covey's poured — came out hard and fast, in big, resonant glugs.

Covey's true claim to fame was the connection it had with the earliest days of Red Willow Juice. The first incarnations of Covey's had, in fact, been a still, a tap and couple of roughhewn benches to sit on down at the cove that the raccoons long called home. This was before the weasels had taken over Stoat Crick and turned the alcohol into a legitimate commodity, and though Covey's had been formally established in the ensuing boom, it had never enjoyed the success of some of its brethren. It didn't offer

elaborate mixed drinks or deep-fried appetizers and there was no Trivia Night. Covey's was for the purists.

"This wouldn't have anything to do with that friend of yours, Toad from the North End, would it? He's not losing your money now too, is he?"

"No. I don't have any money to lose. And he's got enough," Mole said. He sipped at his drink with a look of rueful thoughtfulness on his face.

"And I ain't got no problem taking it either," Raccoon said with an empty chuckle, looking back to check on his customers and make sure no one had fallen asleep or thrown a punch. "You tell that clown to keep coming back to the races as many times as he wants. I'll take his money anytime."

"It's not about him. Take his money. I don't care." Even Mole could hear the hint of indignation in his own voice.

"Alright, take it easy, young pup. I know that tone. This sounds like a matter of the heart, yeah?" Mole said nothing but tossed back the rest of his drink. "Oh yeah, that's what it is, alright!" Raccoon laughed again, this time from his belly. "I'm going to get you another drink. On me."

It wasn't long before Mole was three drinks in and not just drinks but doubles and not just doubles but doubles poured with the heavy hand of Raccoon. It was hard to say exactly what this added up to but it was more than three. Mole could feel his lips loosening and his shoulders sagging. He jabbed his finger down at the bar itself, haranguing Raccoon, who he might have felt bad for had Raccoon not been the one who'd got him this drunk in the first place.

"She just thinks that she totally understands how the world works but she doesn't. She doesn't. None of them do. Not Rat and certainly not Toad. He's an imbecile! Is what he is!" Mole exclaimed now and Raccoon let out a yelp of laughter. "I mean, that apple must have fallen far from the tree, am I right?"

Raccoon nodded intently. "Far far from the tree, my friend," he said, throwing back his own shot of the juice. It was getting on towards closing time and the end of Raccoon's responsibilities for the night and so Mole's lips weren't the only ones loosening. Raccoon sighed now as the liquor swept down through his stomach and bathed him in its soft comfort.

"Of course, his daddy was okay," Raccoon continued, pouring them both another round. "That was a shame, what happened to him and his wife. He cared about the town. I do believe that. And then look what happens..."

"All they care about is money. That's the important thing, Raccoon!" Mole jabbed his finger straight at the bartender now. "All you can care about is the money."

Raccoon smiled in agreement and offered up the shot. He yelped again after they had swallowed them down and then turned to walk off, mumbling something about having to start to clean up and leaving Mole to his harangue. His mind now soaking in a warm, bubbling pool of alcohol, it was several moments before Mole's cognition caught up with that most recent of his proclamations and he was able to hear the animosity that had coursed through those words. He grunted and sighed and let his head hang down.

When Mole was growing up, the seasons of his life were practically defined by the comings and goings of the North End animals. Their arrival signaled the beginning of the busy season, the bright and boisterous days of summer when The Willows overflowed with the frantic energy of animals in search of maximum relaxation. And their departure a few months later meant it was time to shutter the t-shirt shops and taffy stands and retreat back into the simpler but far less exciting routine that came with winter.

Mole's childhood had not only been peppered with appearances from the young Rat but by her high society peers as well — her cousin Vole, her best friend Chipmunk — groomed and polished models of their species offering a window into an entirely different kind of life than the cramped and stifling one Mole knew back at his family's South End burrow. And Mole would drift by Toad Hall or he'd find himself at the fringe of Turtle Creek, staring out at the green hills rolling away to the north, subconsciously straining for another look through that window.

He'd been frustrated then, the frustration of youth that comes with the realization that life will never be fair, not even for the luckiest of us and certainly not for Mole. But Mole was grown now and so things were supposed to be different. Not only had he gained access to that world, he'd consciously undertaken a journey towards some wider perspective. That's what his book was supposed to be about. But all Mole's research was doing was telling him what he already knew; what his friends and family in the South End had been telling him for ages. Life was unfair. True. And then there were also those who worked to make it even more so.

And in that moment, Mole knew what he feared most from Weasel. He feared the bitter resentment heaped upon anyone who would dare to date one of them, someone like Rat, someone of that class; to side with them if it ever came to that. Weasel's resentment could be most bitter, Mole was sure and, in the eyes of most, it would be just.

"Hey! You're not passing out in here, kiddo!" Raccoon loomed over him. His voice was severe but a goofy grin was spread across his face. Mole dragged his head up.

"No, no, I'm awake." With a great heave of breath, Mole descended from his stool, landing with a thud and immediately stumbling for purchase. Raccoon cackled.

"Come on. Let's get out of here."

Mole looked around and was astonished to see that the room had cleared out. He suddenly wasn't entirely sure he hadn't just been asleep for a bit. But Raccoon was coming around the bar now and switching lights off and so Mole had no time to regain any temporal stability. His various mental and physical facilities were being called to pull themselves together and prepare for the inevitability of having to function at a reasonable level in a matter of minutes.

Out into the dead of night and cold of winter they went. The day had never managed to break through the gray chill of that morning and so had descended into a darkness tinted with the same ashy pallor. Mole, the bite of the air working to help him regain his senses, was amazed at how long this day now felt, looking back. It was only that morning that he and Rat had gone to see Weasel. Raccoon turned up the collar on his jacket.

"You still over at your family's spread?" he asked.

"No. Imma' living...uh...I got this place in Wild Wood," Mole said. That kick of adrenalin that had got him out of the bar was now subsiding. The cold may have reawakened his senses but it was also laying siege to his sense of resolve and he wobbled again as he squinted out into the night.

"Jesus! I gotta walk you all the way back to Wild Wood?" Raccoon asked. The type of drinking they'd just done was fairly customary for Raccoon who, after all, had spent the better part of his life inside of a bar. He seemed now not so much to have sobered up but to have wrestled his drunkenness into that hyperfocused state of determination exclusive to the high-functioning sot.

"You don't gotta do that."

“Yeah, I think I'd better.”

With Raccoon's hand resting gently on the back of Mole's shoulder, watchful though not suffocating in his care and with just the occasional bit of pressure applied to ensure the animal maintained a reasonable approximation of upright, they began to walk. They passed near to the mill, which occasioned a derisive snort from Mole but otherwise, he was silent, lost amid thoughts of Rat. He was in the process of weighing his anger towards her against a very definite urge for sexual relations that he'd just become acutely aware of. He wondered about the exact series of steps required for such an activity to take place tonight.

Raccoon too was quiet, working his way through the branches and tributaries of his own thought process as they trekked on, that determination of his now having turned inward. They made their way into Wild Wood and Raccoon now looked around at the dense dark of the forest canopy that surrounded them with a look of pained wonder on his face.

“You remember when this was actually just woods? Like, when hardly anyone lived out this way? Did you do, uh, what do you call it?...The Young Explorers!”

The Young Explorers was a program administered by The Willows Parks and Recreation Department, and which essentially amounted to summer camp for the disadvantaged and/or unattended fledglings of the community. In reality, it was dangerously unstructured, relying heavily on setting the campers loose in relatively undeveloped areas so that they may roam and cause mischief unfettered and without risk of any collateral damage. Presumably, they'd also learn something about themselves in the process though this had proven to be a precarious assumption at best.

Mole had participated one summer and lasted three days before he begged his parents to let him quit, successfully arguing that he was better off at home, in some corner with his books and drawings and imaginings than he was out in the middle of nowhere, thrashing away mindlessly at the underbrush, jumping from high places and looking for insects to crush with the other miscreants of his age.

“There's a dell back in there someplace where we used to run around,” Raccoon continued wistfully.

“Yeah, I know where that is. They're building something in there now. Like, mixed use, you know?”

“What is that?”

“Like, commercial and residential both. Like, stores and houses.”

Mole had seen the fences go up around the site just a few days before. The signs that hung from them were familiar, kelly green with bold white print that read Anura Developments. Everyone knew this as the toad family company.

“Stores and houses, huh?...I tell ya, Mole. You're right. You know, about the money thing? Too much money,” Raccoon said, the sound of his voice dissolving into the mists of the night.

Mole nodded vigorously. “Yes, yes! That's why I'm writing a book. Did you know that, Raccoon? That I'm writing a book? 'Cause we've got to preserve the history that we've got and we've got to know about how all this happened, you know?”

“And we're all in it now, Mole. You know? We're all in it now.”

Mole didn't know, actually. The two animals weren't as much talking to each other as they were talking at each other, off on their own separate streams of thought, riding their own rapids and the currents.

“Ask your fucking friend Otter about it, why don't cha?”

“Hmm?” That got what was left of Mole's attention.

“He's off making his own juice.”

“What, at his parties?” asked Mole with surprise.

“Yeah but that's just the start of it.”

“Pfft, that's nothing, buddy,” exclaimed Mole, with smiling, slurring derision. Plenty of animals tried their hand at juice making. It was practically a rite of passage for the adolescents of the community. But no one had ever tried to compete at the scale at which the raccoons operated.

Covey's in fact had no need to compete with the other Willows' drinking establishments, with their fried mozzarella sticks and karaoke nights, because the raccoons still largely made their living off of the wholesale manufacture and sale of Red Willow Juice. The raccoons' relationship with Stoat Crick Mart and its establishments had indeed carried on after the revitalization and, Mole had to presume, to this day.

At that moment though, he caught the look on Raccoon's face and suddenly felt the need to reverse course.

“Still, he shouldn't be doing that, of course. He should be leaving that to you. It's rotgut anyway, Raccoon. What he pours over there. Absolute poison.”

Raccoon nodded approvingly.

“No,” said Mole, rallying to the cause now. “You’re right. We can’t be competing with each other. We’ve got to create a support system.”

For a moment, Mole couldn’t remember where he’d heard that, and then it came to him. “You know who’s going on about that? Is Weasel,” he proclaimed with delight.

“Yeah. Do you know...” Raccoon hesitated, stopping to delicately grasp hold to the thought so as not to lose it. “Do you know the story of my great uncle?” He paused again, this time more for effect than anything. “Of how he died?”

Mole did know. That death was a part of town lore too, a cautionary tale about the dangers of Mother Nature and her occasional bouts of senseless cruelty; those moments when she’d extend out a hand — creased and calloused one time, smooth and soft the next — and snatch away an animal in the blink of an eye. And then they were gone. And perhaps she’d been sated but perhaps not. Perhaps tomorrow she’d come again.

Years ago, Raccoon’s great-uncle had mysteriously disappeared one evening, closing down operations at the family’s distillery and heading for home, only to wash up on the banks of The River three days later. It was determined he’d slipped on a patch of treacherous mud and fallen, presumably so exhausted by his day’s work that he hadn’t been able to recover from the wrong step. The accident had served as the foundation for all sorts of warnings to the youngsters of The Willows; about the need to remain alert and vigilant of your terrain and of the conditions around you, to remember to enjoy life and not just work your way through it, and to never ever take anything for granted.

Arrested by the sudden onrush of thoughts on death and perplexed as to how this could at all make for an interesting addition to his book, Mole could only manage a weak, “Sure. Yes. I mean, yeah, tragedy.” He was suddenly struck by the memory of his time at the humans’ bar out in the Wide World and his propensity for after-hours drinking with bar owners. Mole giggled with a rush of pride before Raccoon, who had been preparing to launch into the full story, froze him with a glare.

“Sorry,” said Mole. But it was too late. Raccoon had lost his momentum.

“He was all about the money, Mole. That’s what got him into trouble. And now we’re all in it.”

And with that, he continued on. Mole would follow after him, too drunk and tired to have felt the way his laugh had seemed to cut Raccoon down, capable by then of

thinking only of his burrow and of the deep, dark, warm abyss of his pillows and bedsheets to come. It was only later that Mole thought back to that moment and saw all that had been left for him to find.

Chapter 6: Beneath Toad Hall

Toad was arrested about three weeks later, on the other side of the holidays and just a few days into the new year. Snow had fallen the previous night, the latest in what had seemed like an interminable succession of tempests to blow through that winter. The storms had blanketed the town under layers of dry white powder, dimming its usual hum of activity and leaving its residents to encamp themselves next to whatever warm hearth they could find. There, they would wait out the season with as much good cheer as they could muster.

Mole had tried his best to use the weather as an excuse not to go into work but Beaver was, to no one's surprise, a hearty soul. He wasn't about to let a bit of cold stop him nor his employees from putting in an honest day. So Mole was forced to hunker down against the frigid air that crept through the slats of the mill's walls and blew through in wisps and whirls, nestling into the folds of his clothing and negating whatever effect the fire he kept going in an ancient pot-belly stove might have had. Mole hated it. The cold wasn't nearly as inescapable as the heat but its temerity was a constant source of bewilderment and frustration to him.

He was happy to see Rat then when she suddenly appeared at the mill's front entrance that morning. The deepest wounds from their fight after visiting Weasel had only very recently begun to scab over and the healing process, such as it was, had been painful. There had been a cooling-off period that had lasted an uncomfortable eighteen hours or so, the longest the two had gone without communicating with one another since their courtship had begun. It concluded when a suitably hungover and correspondingly morose Mole dragged himself over to Rat's mother's house on his lunch break the following day and apologized. It had not gone unnoticed by either animal though that the apology was carefully nonspecific and perhaps reflected more of a desire to return to a pre-fight state than any kind of actual regret.

As a result, the following weeks had seen the trepidatious design and construction of a new level to their relationship. This had been their first real fight and so it now held a rather esteemed position in their shared history, a kind of bellwether signaling a degree of seriousness achieved. It was the kind of seriousness and deep connection that could reasonably be expected to, on occasion, lead to fights. In that way, it was reassuring. In other ways though, it was not. The rift this particular fight revealed ran deeper than either animal cared to explore. There was now something to avoid, something to steer away from and Mole felt himself drifting back into the narcotic comforts of solitude.

On the bright side, Mole had taken this time, and used it to return to his writing. He had found himself strangely inspired, not just by his latest and decidedly more dark efforts, but also by his boozy night out at Covey's and, in particular, his conversation with Raccoon. It returned to him a perspective that he had gradually lost over the last few months, that place that Mole had once carved out for himself, away from the fray and buried instead in the same history that Raccoon seemed to draw his own frustrations from.

So he had resumed his efforts sifting through the artifacts of his community and was soon rewarded with a trove of old and valuable photographs from an estate sale for the recently departed Mrs. Porcupine. Porcupine had been one of The Willows' oldest animals and her collection of personal belongings was stunning both in its size and in the sheer variety and historical scope of the items on display. There were miniature wood carvings of august species, fantastic in detail; meticulously constructed snow globes and fine china with hand drawn illustrations of river life adorning each piece. There were elaborate and arcane music instruments that Mole had never seen before, stacks of records, a collection of pieces of vintage sports equipment and whole racks of clothing and piles of hats.

Along with her extravagant collection of gewgaws, Porcupine had been possessed of a notoriously prickly and loopy demeanor as well as reclusive tendencies. It certainly showed in the manic display of clutter she'd built up around herself. And yet Mole, much as he had in the Town Office archives before, couldn't help but find a certain kind of warm comfort that day, wandering through that assemblage of history. He was somewhat embarrassed, but in a not altogether unpleasant way, when he thought that if ever there was an animal who might appreciate his book project, it was Porcupine.

Hidden inside an impressively ornate and fastidiously maintained antique armoire at the back of Porcupine's ramshackle burrow, Mole had found a shelf of leather-bound photo albums. It hadn't been entirely clear if the contents of these albums were for sale. In fact, given that they hadn't exactly been put on display, Mole had to assume that they were not. Which had made them all the more intriguing. He had grabbed at them rather hungrily, like a petty thief going for a loaf of bread, and then, hunched in a corner, perused their pages. Beyond sleeves filled with what were clearly family photos that Mole had in fact felt vaguely uncomfortable looking at, he had discovered a hodgepodge of shots from The Willows of yesteryear.

The mixture of subjects and settings in the images made Mole think that perhaps Porcupine had purchased them from some kind of rummage sale herself. There were portraits — the old-fashioned kind you got at fairs and exhibitions back when cameras were new, featuring sepia-tinged animals staring stoically into the camera, ramrod stiff. There was also a whole miniature mountain of blank postcards depicting prosaic scenes of country life, the scenes clearly staged, and the animals just as posed as they bent over the plough or shucked corn on a front porch.

There were historical photographs too, simple recordings mainly, of homes that once existed, and buildings that once stood. Among these, Mole had found one of Stoot Crick Mart in its early days, during the reign of the weasels, that was worth a second look. The photographer had set their camera at one end of the Mart's main thoroughfare, and within that frame, all of the pungent vibrancy of the time and place had been captured, a menagerie of animals streaming through, bartering and haggling, building their community to maturity in each deal and transaction, in every bit of entrepreneurship, in each negotiation and every sale.

Mole had found three black-and-white photos too, especially glossy and rich in detail, the kind that came out of an expensive and old machine. They had been carefully preserved, wrapped up in tissue paper before being tucked behind the back page of this photo album, in a back cabinet of this armoire, here in the back of this unremarkable domicile, itself no longer a home anymore but now instead a repository for the last of a late animal's memories.

Two of the photographs featured The Commodore. In the first, he was posed with a large group of animals on the dock at Toad Hall. Among them was a rabbit, a fox and, curiously enough, a weasel. It must have been before the Mart takeover then. They had

either just finished a hunting outing or were about to set out on one and they all had that flushed and full look that comes only in the midst of a top-notch vacation. They were captains of industry, titans in their field and each and every one of them beamed that sentiment out to the world in no uncertain terms.

The second was a candid shot, also from the dock. In this, The Commodore lounged on a chaise lounge. He wore an unbuttoned guayabera, allowing for his considerable paunch to pour out over the waist of tiny shorts that were all but obscured and out of the bottoms of which The Commodore's spindly legs sprang forth, splayed out in extreme nonchalance. He was in the midst of speaking to someone off to his right and his head lolled in that direction while his mouth was twisted into what one might uncharitably call a sneer.

It was the third photograph that had really captured Mole's attention though. This one featured a different toad, a squat and muscular creature that Mole recognized as The Commodore's son, an animal known as The Bull. Mole had been alive for the very end of The Bull's run as the toad family leader. It was a tenure just as controversial as his father's, though for very different reasons. For while The Commodore had conquered The Willows with bold plans and a silver tongue, his progeny had maintained that control through brute force, the extent of which held its own place in town lore.

In the photo, The Bull stood in the middle of what looked to be a party, his bulky frame squeezed incongruously into a tuxedo. Next to him, crouched down a bit to allow him to sling an arm over the toad's shoulders, was a human. The man looked to be a rather slick sort, with hair that had been pushed into a swooping kind of crest and a tuxedo of his own, rumpled in the most appealing of ways. There was a boozy, sweaty gleam to both of them in fact, with that same cocksure posture from the hunting photograph, yet blurred somehow here.

There were other animals and humans behind them too, all dressed in their finest and in similar states of decadent devolution. Splayed out across a low-ceiled but wide room, they held angular, half-filled glasses and cigarettes in long, delicate holders, their hips jutting jauntily out, arms thrown wide and heads tipped back. The Bull looked right into the camera. He had one finger to his lips, a plea to his audience to play along, to keep the secret. Mole grinned and then he shoved the photograph into his pocket, happy to do so.

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Mole felt that same swaggering buzz of romance and adventure that morning at the mill, looking at Rat. He strolled up to her with an undeniable hop in his step, not stopping to consider why she might have shown up unannounced, particularly in the midst of weather that discouraged anything but the most essential of outings, nor to notice the tear-soaked fur under her eyes.

“Well, this is a surprise!”

“Mole, Toad's in trouble!” she proclaimed, her words vibrating from the tremors in her voice. “He's crashed his car and he's been arrested this time as well!”

“Oh no,” said Mole. His whole body seemed to drop a bit, as if, sinking into that pit of his for all this time now, it had finally hit its bottom with a sickening splat. “What happened?”

“I don't know. I've only just heard from his family lawyer. Do you know Badger?” Mole had never met the animal, though his reputation as the preeminent legal mind in The Willows preceded him. “Badger's gone and got him from the jail. I'm going to meet them over at Toad's now,” continued Rat.

By now, Rat's presence had caught the attention of Beaver. These were slow months around the mill and Beaver could often be found wandering around here or there, vaguely in search of something to grumble over. He loomed up over Mole and placed a heavy hand on his shoulder.

“Who's this now?” His tone had a curious lightness to it and the words seemed to bounce out of him. Mole was suddenly struck by the alarming realization that Beaver was being flirtatious.

“This is Rat. She's, uh —”

“I'm his girlfriend. I'm so very sorry but there's been a terrible emergency and I am really desperate. I need to take Mole away. That's okay, right? I mean, you can make do without him for a bit, can't you?”

Beaver could. By then, Mole had completed his massive clean-up operation, and the rudimentary system of organization he'd put into place to prevent this sort of mess from ever happening again was up and running. Mole's long term prospects at the mill had never been discussed but it had certainly occurred to Beaver at a certain point that the

young animal's tenure may have run its course. At the same time, he had taken a shine to Mole. He had to admit that. Mole hadn't been a particularly hard worker but he had worked intelligently and, beyond that, Beaver had come to admire Mole's curiosity and the particular way his South End pugnacity found expression.

Mole sensed he had won over Beaver and so they had lately fallen into a kind of repartee with one another; Beaver as a disapproving yet protective uncle-type figure and Mole as his rascal of a nephew. At this moment though, Beaver seemed to sense the gravity of the situation.

"Of course, hon. Go ahead and take him."

Moments later, they were scurrying out into the heavy snow. Moving through the reverential stillness of The Willows in winter, Mole felt as if, moments before they'd stepped outside, the whole world had inhaled sharply and now held its breath in anticipation of what was to come. Rat plowed through it all though with thrashing, frantic steps, yelling back over her shoulder, slicing through that reverence to relate to Mole the few scraps of information she'd managed to glean from Badger.

"He was over in the West Edge somewhere. What was he doing over there? That's what I'd like to know. And he crashed into someone's — oh God, someone's house, Mole!"

"Was anyone hurt?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. I imagine Badger would have told me if. Or maybe he wouldn't have." Rat stopped suddenly. "Would they have let him out if he had hurt someone?"

For the first time, she looked back at Mole, her eyes wide and expectant. Mole wasn't sure if she actually expected an answer from him. "I don't know, Rat. I'm sure Badger will have answers for us," he finally said. She nodded absently and then turned and was off again.

They had crossed Broad Meadow Bridge and were now cutting through the quite deserted Gloaming Glen. Looking off to his left, Mole could see the West Edge neighborhood through a clearing on the far side, the mottled brown of the area's trademark thatched tract huts providing the only break between the vast grey of the sky pouring down and the Glen's long expanse of bright white that rushed to meet it.

Indeed, what had Toad been doing over there? Had they moved the races from Backwater? That seemed unlikely, and even if they had, they certainly wouldn't have

relocated to the West Edge. The West Edge contained what was left of the area's middle class. They were business owners and educated animals there, having decamped to that far side to try to live out a humbler and benign version of Willows life. He supposed Toad could have been passing through the West Edge on his way to or from Toad Hall but that seemed geographically questionable, to say the least.

Mole, completely immersed in the line of thought now unspooling in his head, had stopped in his tracks.

“Mole!” yelled Rat. She was far away now and her voice caught the breeze and sailed past him, its sound stretching out in all directions. Mole started and then dashed off after her.

They headed north, passing by the hollows that the raccoons had long called home and then met up with the river again, walking alongside it. The homes were growing larger as they approached The Willows' most affluent district and even the plumes and piles of snow took on a regal air now. The River was frozen over and Mole could see the grooved curlicues of ice skates, archaeological tracks that traced the paths of animals literally gliding through the world. They had found a way to ride atop the elements here and they had done so with joy.

As if to underscore this notion, Mole spotted two young foxes up ahead. They were North End animals, juveniles content to spend the day chasing after each other and kicking up the snow playfully. These were the first two animals they had seen since leaving the mill and, looking at them now, rolling about in abandon, Mole couldn't remember having seen a more vivid and pure picture of innocence in all his days. Their yips and yelps seemed to burst through that hushed air of anticipation, rendering it powerless, irrelevant, moot.

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At long last and with Mole's entire being having now locked itself into a state of frigid tension, he and Rat arrived at Toad Hall. Up the hill and through its gardens they hurried, the once lush and vibrant colors of all those manicured hedges and meticulous flower beds having been erased and replaced with the uncaring, blank visage of snow. The estate's enormous, teardrop driveway lay empty and barren with no sign of any automobiles. Rat strode across it and through the front door without hesitation.

“Toad! Badger! Hello? Where are you?” she yelled.

From above, there was the sound of stirring and then the loud thumping of labored footsteps. After a moment, Badger appeared at the top of the staircase. He was a short, densely packed animal, dressed in his customary grey wool slacks and a battered white oxford button-down. Suspenders completed the look, though they were entirely for effect. As was his habit these days, the aging animal walked with the aid of a thick and gnarled stick which he leaned heavily on now and which, it was rumored, he could also still wield as a kind of cudgel if so provoked. Badger enjoyed that kind of reputation in The Willows, the kind that inspired all manner of story, some true and some false and most somewhere in between, the kind that led to both admiration and animosity.

He'd earned that reputation over a fifty-year career spent fighting in some of the most consequential legal battles in Willows history, most often on the side of the powerful and elite. Badger himself lived in the West Edge, where his kind had lived for generations, but he was a North Ender through and through, and enjoyed the friendship of that area's most powerful residents. He was now a much older animal of course and had eased into a state of retirement years ago, but he still served as an informal advisor to a select few of the more prominent families, including Toad's.

“Hello, dear. How are you?” Badger asked now, with the gruff and blunt manner reminiscent of one's grandfather. He had the mien of a perpetual dyspepsia sufferer though he maintained the patrician's stiff and proud bearing as he began his long and strained descent down the stairs.

“I'm a wreck, Badger. An absolute wreck. What more do you know?”

“Well, nobody was killed, thank goodness,” said Badger. “There were some who suffered injuries though, including Toad.”

“Oh dear God,” exclaimed Rat.

“What sort of injuries?” asked Mole, speaking now for the first time.

Badger stopped halfway down the steps and cocked an eyebrow as he made a thorough appraisal of the diminutive, snow-encrusted creature standing next to Rat. Mole could feel the weight of that gaze settle in over him but he was surprised at that moment to feel a kind of warmth in that weight, like one's favorite wool blanket.

Once introductions had been made and Badger had gripped Mole's paw with such force that Mole was sure he had let out a very slight but still probably audible gasp, Badger led them back to a private sitting room, one of the very few places in that great

castle that exuded any sense of familial intimacy. There were overstuffed couches and a big thick red rug and portraits of family members hung on the wood-paneled walls. A fire roared in a modest but intricately beautiful stone hearth and Mole wedged himself into the corner of the sofa closest to it, just now feeling the warmth return to his bones.

Rat stayed upright, pacing about as Badger, having thrown his considerable heft down into an easy chair, told them everything he knew. He described how he'd been awakened in the middle of the night and called to the local police station. There, he found Toad, a bandage covering up a nasty gash on his forehead and his arm in a sling from a sprained shoulder but otherwise physically okay. The arresting officer, the gangly and aging Timber Wolf, told Badger that they had found a dazed Toad lying in a patch of wild gardenias, several yards away from the gnarled wreckage of his automobile. It seemed that the car had skidded off the road and down the hill, ejecting Toad in the process before wrapping itself around the corner of the small clapboard farmhouse that Woodchuck and his family called home.

Mole knew exactly where this was. Woodchuck lived down near where the West Edge bordered Backwater, right where the homes went from middle class to working class. Mole grimaced at the picture in his head of this scene and even more so when Badger explained that, while the family had thankfully not been seriously hurt, there had been a few bumps and bruises on Woodchuck's youngest. It was his room that had occupied that corner of the house and the damage to it, Timber Wolf had told Badger, was quite extensive.

Woodchuck was not known to be an especially benevolent animal. Mole could vividly remember the time he had ventured into the print shop Woodchuck ran, seeking donations for a class field trip only to be met with a most intimidating scowl and the strident encouragement that he take his request elsewhere. He would not have urged anyone to risk running afoul of Woodchuck and now Toad had destroyed his home and practically killed his offspring.

"Was he drunk?" Rat asked. She was standing in the corner of the room now, fiddling with some heirloom and unable to look at Badger as she asked the question.

"There was no mention of that," said Badger and Rat breathed an audible sigh of relief. "Actually, he seemed unusually lucid to me," Badger continued. "And unusually quiet. Of course that could have been the shock of it all. The minute we arrived here, he went right off to his room. That's where he is now. Tucked away upstairs, asleep."

“Poor Toad,” said Rat. Badger harrumphed noisily.

“He’s damn lucky is what he is,” he said. “A few inches this way or that and he would have killed that pup. As it is, he’ll only face a few charges. Or so I hope.”

“What sort of charges?”

“Reckless endangerment, probably. He was apparently going quite fast. Now listen, Rat and you too,” Badger said, waving a paw vaguely in Mole’s direction. “Whatever this new infatuation Toad has with automobiles might be, it must stop at once. Let’s together insist to Toad that this be a wake-up call and that from here on out, he needs to begin to comport himself like an adult animal. You know quite well, Rat, that, for very very tragic reasons, Toad will soon have significantly more responsibilities than before. He’s got to start facing those and knocking off all this tomfoolery. Are we agreed?”

“Yes,” cried Rat, as if the three of them were getting set to storm the beach. She and Badger both turned and looked at Mole.

“Yes. Absolutely. Yes,” he responded.

“Good. It’s resolved. Now then, let’s see about getting something to eat, hmm?”

The trio spent the rest of the day puttering around Toad Hall with the ostensible intention of waiting for Toad to rise so that they may offer whatever support was needed. But Toad failed to emerge from his quarters. He did at one point ring down to his loyal housekeeper and one-time nanny, Murid, for a pot of hot tea, which seemed to Mole like a suitably contrite and restrained kind of request. There were however also sporadic sounds of clattering and crashing and also yelling, all of which suggested something a bit more traumatic and self-flagellating was taking place. When questioned, Murid replied only that “the young prince was just a bit out of sorts and that he wasn’t quite ready to receive any guests as of yet.”

Prior to today, Murid had remained almost completely out of sight to Mole, though her role in Toad’s life was a frequent topic of discussion for Rat. Murid didn’t just look after Toad — a job unto itself, to be sure. She also oversaw the rather extensive staff of Toad Hall that included gardeners, housemaids, a cook and a handyman along with specialists aplenty — trainers and designers and consultants — all of whom swarmed around that family’s wealth like honeybees round the hive. Her job had taken on a ghoulis solemnity and urgency in the wake of Toad’s parents death. There was the most obvious and pressing issue of the family’s business concerns but, beyond that,

there was also the life they'd led at Toad Hall and the question of how much of it would now need to be dismantled.

Thus far, Murid had seen to it that nothing changed, anticipating that what Toad needed at this time, more than anything, was something he could depend on, some degree of comfort through routine. For that reason, she had also continued to dole out the sharp-tongued rebukes of her young charge's most outlandish tendencies that were practically the foundation of the relationship the two shared. Built out of the great affection Murid had for Toad, those rebukes were a lifeline to him now. She would chide him and cluck her tongue and shake her head in exasperation and still Toad would know there wasn't a thing he could do to actually endanger the love she had for him.

Rat was always careful to note her great appreciation for everything Murid had done, but the two were also often at odds. Murid hadn't approved of Toad's recent travels, which were largely Rat's idea, while, for her part, Rat worried that Murid might be pampering Toad, sequestering him behind layers and layers of protection afforded to the rich but preventing him from doing any real healing in the process. Mole thought the latter quite likely and told Rat so. For a wound to truly heal, it needed oxygen, he said. It needed to breath, stinging as it might be. Nevertheless, neither of them dared to openly question Murid. She was a surprisingly intimidating animal and, for Mole at least, her presence triggered a feeling of shame. He could feel her judgment, sense her quiet but disappointed appraisal of him as an interloper here at Toad Hall, and perhaps even a bit of a fraud.

So Mole did not dare to complain when Murid dutifully delivered lunch to them that day, laying out a spread of baked chicken with roasted potatoes, green salad and fresh baked bread and promising a plum cobbler to follow. When the subject of wine came up, Mole even volunteered to go fetch a bottle himself. He had been feeling especially ineffective so far, trailing behind Rat with only hollow words of reassurance to offer her, and watching as Badger applied his own considerable wisdom and experience to actually trying to solve the problem. Not that running down to the cellar was all that helpful but it was the best Mole could do, and it did afford him a much needed moment alone.

He took his time then, slowly breathing in the damp chill air and letting his hands run along the bumpy terrain of the brick walls as he descended from the kitchen and down into Toad Hall's subterranean level. As he did, he thought of the casual manner

with which Badger (and, to a lesser extent, Rat) had opted to respond to their friend's arrest by getting slowly drunk in his house on a weekday afternoon. In that respect at least, animals on both sides of The Willows' socioeconomic divide were not all that different. He laughed and sighed and allowed himself a brief moment to savor the zing of excitement that ran through him then, the one that said he was in the middle of something thick and dramatic and draped in a kind of debauched intrigue that he had never known before.

At the bottom of the stairs, a long hallway stretched forward, at the end of which was the wine cellar. Inside, Mole found shelves taller than he was and four times as wide, practically filled with bottles whose dusty labels identified them only with inscrutable words and far gone years. Mole himself preferred Red Willow Juice but he could understand the attraction, the way these bottles promised something deep and dark and mysterious. As instructed, he selected a Cabernet Sauvignon, careful not to take any of the oldest bottles, and started to head back.

This was a mole's natural habitat though; the charcoal darkness and musty smells, the wet kind of cold and even the sounds from above; footsteps and muffled conversations and the thumps of objects on the floor, seemingly so close and yet unable to reach him here, secreted away. The zing of excitement pulsed in Mole now, compelling him to explore. And indeed this particular end of Toad Hall seemed rich for exploration.

There were, in fact, a number of rooms to poke one's head in down here, arrayed across intersecting hallways, spare when compared to the rest of the house but carpeted and painted and well attended to nonetheless. On this level it seemed, the rooms were set aside for specific activities of the kind native to the rich. Through one door, Mole found a home gym with mirrored walls and racks of barbells and a smell of disinfectant. Judging by its sterile cleanliness and by Toad's general appearance, this was not a place that saw much activity.

Through another door, Mole found the family's considerable collection of hunting gear. Bird hunting was a popular pastime in The Willows, particularly with the Northern set, and Toad's family were longtime enthusiasts. There was a closet's worth of jackets and vests, elaborately pocketed, all in murky shades of brown and green. Then there were, of course, the weapons themselves. One cabinet was locked, behind which Mole guessed there were the rifles, but there were also a considerable number of bows laid

out in the open. These looked to be thoroughly modern instruments, with an impressive levering system of some sort and an intimidating number of cables and pulleys. Mole wasn't totally sure where one even placed the arrow amid all that.

He picked one up but then almost immediately set it back down again. He knew himself well enough to know that every second that weapon was in his hand, the chances of it breaking dramatically increased. Besides, he found it unnerving to be in such close proximity to things designed to kill and so he quickly returned to the hallway.

Further down, Mole found a room more to his liking. It was a pantry, the house's second, since there was an expansive one adjacent to the kitchen upstairs as well. To most animals, this would not qualify as one of the more intriguing spaces Toad Hall offered. However, Mole had long held a fascination with food, as evidenced by his own rather portly physique, typical for a mole but perhaps a bit exaggerated by this one's love for pastries and his mother's home cooking. It wasn't just the food itself that charmed Mole though, it was the entirety of the journey that went along with any meal, from the first considerations of the menu to the meticulous preparation that it required. Mole wasn't much of a cook but he could put together a picnic basket as well as any animal, curating an afternoon's repast with as much careful thought as another might put into an art exhibit or an evening of song and dance.

Mole would walk the aisles of The Willows Food Emporium, between its long lines of bold words and bright colors and cheerful wide-eyed cartoons insisting you try what's inside their packages. The exuberance and promise of this abundance thrilled him, an abundance he now recognized in Toad Hall as well; in the sheer number of rooms and beds and books and now here, in its lowest and dankest level, another room with shelves chock full of more bottles, and boxes and tinned cans too, each with their own set of bright colors and bold words.

Up on the pantry's topmost shelf, Mole spied rows of what looked to be jelly jars. It occurred to him that if he could find something containing mango, perhaps a chutney of some kind, it might make for the perfect accompaniment to the chicken Murid had prepared. For a moment, Mole was arrested by a vision of himself sweeping back into the dining room, wine in one paw and chutney in the other, Rat and Badger bowled over by this dashing figure with his refined and worldly palate.

He found a stepladder in the room's corner and, setting the wine down, climbed to its topmost step. This still left him just a bit shy of eye-level with the jars though. Mole was sure he could get a good look at the labels if he stood on his tippy toes but then, such hubris is so rarely rewarded. As he pushed upward, straining to see, he felt his own weight tip too far back. Struggling for purchase, he grabbed at the shelf and, for a moment, it seemed as if he'd steadied himself. Only, Mole had overcompensated just enough. His weight was too far forward now. The footstool was sliding out from under him and he was falling. His paws flailed out, raking at the boxes of dry goods on the shelves below, and he crashed to the floor face first amid a deluge of cereals and pastas and packaged crackers.

For a moment, Mole lay completely still, waiting for a burst of pain to run through him and tell him where the problem lay. It was a fall of no more than three feet though and, after a moment, he determined himself unhurt. He stood and shook himself off, still a little embarrassed even if no one had seen the spill. He was no dashing figure, that was to be sure.

He was cleaning the mess, and grumbling about his own clumsiness as he did, when he suddenly froze, stopped short by a curious sight. A box of powdered soup packets was hanging out over the shelf's ledge, tipped forward at an unnatural angle and in complete defiance of the laws of gravity. For a moment, Mole thought he might have a concussion and was in the midst of a mild hallucination. But when he looked closer, he saw that the box was attached to the wall by way of a thin cable. And then he noticed that the entire wall behind the shelf seemed to have shifted, impossible as that may have been. It took him a few more moments after that to grasp the entirety of what he had done, and it was only after he had run his paw delicately across the wall and felt its edge, felt that he could now push the entire wall forward, that he realized that he had just quite inadvertently opened a hidden door.

A few moments after that, Mole walked casually back into the dining room. The bottle of wine was in one paw though there was no chutney to accompany it. If Rat and Badger had bothered to look, they might have noticed the thin layer of dust that seemed to cling to Mole or the strange expression on his face. But they were deep into some old river story and so Mole handed the wine off to Murid and sat down quietly. Inside his head though, the noise was deafening; a clamor of theories and urgings and warnings and adolescent fantasies of underground mazes and the monsters buried within.

Of course, he could have started by asking any of the assembled animals if they knew of the door behind the pantry and what lay beyond. But then he wouldn't have been able to savor the delicious possibilities of the secret that he now possessed. There was also the chance that no one knew of this door, of the soup packets and their secret purpose, and if that were the case, then Mole wanted to be the first to see what was down there.

He had opted not to go through the door right then, not when his absence might have been noticed. Looking at the oblivious Rat and Badger now though, he was filled with regret. It was all he could do not to just turn right around. He almost did, except right then, Murid appeared with the chicken and everyone's attention shifted.

It was simply a matter of the amount of time needed to properly explore what was down there unmolested. So Mole was quite supportive when, after the lunch and then a dinner featuring an absolutely extraordinary pheasant pie and of course loads more wine and fine Red Willow Juice and dessert and some more time in front of the fire to allow for the digestive process to do its work, and with the winds having audibly picked up and now throwing themselves in coarse waves against the great walls of Toad Hall, it was decided that it simply didn't make sense to expend the energy to go home. There were plenty of bedrooms and so the whole lot of them would stay the night.

Badger made his exit shortly after the massive grandfather clock just off the main foyer chimed ten o'clock. His weary but unruffled bearing had started to give way in the evening's later hours to something more exasperated, verging on cranky, and it was clearly time for him to retire. He nodded at Mole and patted Rat on the paw and shuffled off, leaving behind him the sounds of his grunts and sighs. Soon after, the two young animals made their way to a guest bedroom just down the hall from Toad's own suite. It was a small but cozy room, with a fire already lit in its hearth and sets of pajamas laid out for the both of them.

The room's windows looked out over a broad swath of lawn, then the fringe of fir trees and then the river. Beyond that, the whole of The Willows lay stretched out. Through glassy eyes, Mole could see Wild Wood and, if he leaned back as far as he could on the window seat and pressed his face up against the glass, maybe even a few of the faint lights of the South End.

Behind him, Rat had already crawled into bed. Her franticness had gradually receded over the course of the day, eased by the food and drink, the warmth of the fire

and, above all, the stern reassurances of the old barrister, Badger. But it was a tenuous state she was maintaining. She hadn't been pleased by Toad's stubborn resistance to leaving his room and had, by evening's end, even resorted to pounding on his door angrily, demanding that he face them and the things he'd done. But Toad had pleaded with her from the other side that he just needed a little more time and that he would be ready shortly. She'd sighed and thrown up her hands dismissively but this behavior of his was enforcing a level of tension in her even now. Rat would be needing him.

While she drifted off, curling her body up into a tight circle and then wedging herself against his side, he flipped through an old anthology of mystery stories he'd found in Toad Hall's library. The stories all centered around an eccentric boar named Boris who worked as a kind of freelance criminal profiler and who would inevitably solve the case in an eleventh hour bout of inspiration. Lulled by the stories' insipid plot lines, Mole too eventually dozed off.

Three hours later, he awoke with a start, both his mind and body snapping back to attention, suddenly and intuitively remembering the night's plan. Delicately extracting himself from Rat, Mole climbed down from their enormous, almost oppressively soft bed and retrieved his satchel from its place slung across the arm of an overstuffed wing chair in the room's corner. Inside was evidence of a work day that had never come to be; some cheese biscuits he'd bought on the way in that he had intended to eat for lunch, an extension cord he'd borrowed from the office and was now bringing back, and the journal which contained most of the writings for his book along with a number of pictures and drawings and scraps of paper stuffed into its pages.

It occurred to Mole that he had no idea how far the passageway he'd seen behind that door ran or how complex the layout became. He had taken just a few cautious steps in that afternoon but it was far too dark and dusty to get a proper sense of things. He might need the biscuits and he was certainly going to need a light source of some kind. Lucky for Mole, a pair of French crystal candlesticks stood on either end of the mantle. Mole grabbed the candles from both, stashing them in his bag and slinging it over his shoulder as that familiar zing of excitement rang through him again. Then he padded quietly out into the hallway, headed down to the lowest level of Toad Hall.

Moving swiftly through the dark and eerie stillness of the night, Mole considered what he would do if anyone were to see him. If it were Murid or any of the other servants, Mole supposed that it really wasn't any business of theirs. They were

employees and he was a guest. Mole had still not fully gotten used to that dynamic but it did come in handy from time to time, he had to admit. And if it were Badger or Rat, he would simply say that he could not sleep and was looking for a place to do a bit of writing.

But he encountered no one and made it to the pantry without a hitch. There, Mole carefully pulled at the box of soup mix packets, feeling the tension of the cable behind it and then the click of a lock giving way. He couldn't help but giggle at this, the pup in him again delighting at this bit of subterfuge. He pushed forward on the wall, now a door swinging on its hinges, and paused for a moment to let the dust disperse and the light of his candle penetrate. But it was just inky darkness in front of him, those last swirls of dust the only thing visible. Mole was going to have to move forward powered by courage alone.

Which was not to be a problem, he told himself, squaring his shoulders and breathing in the musty air. He was a stout animal, yes, and unafraid of the dark. And so he plunged forward, muttering the occasional admonishment to himself but steadfast nonetheless. The tunnel was well constructed, Mole could see that, with the same brickwork as above and a tidily-built arched ceiling that put his heart ever so slightly at ease. He naturally had a good sense of direction in a situation like this and he could tell by the course of the tunnel, as well as the increasingly cold air, that he was no longer directly under the house. It wasn't much longer, just as he began to wonder what exactly he was headed towards, when he turned a corner and practically ran into a set of double doors.

The doors were pine, with raised panels and brass doorknobs, and stood with a truly stately and alien air. A less courageous animal might have turned back here. They might decide that the circumstances - alone and in an unfamiliar environment in the middle of the night - dictate that they turn back and return later with a weapon and perhaps a companion and not just throw open such an odd set of doors so blindly. Mole was no such animal though. He took a few moments to compose himself, placed his paws firmly on the handles and pushed through.

As he did, the lights in the room beyond faded up automatically. The space that revealed itself to Mole was low-ceilinged but quite large, opening up in front of Mole in a way that seemed like a direct rebuke to the claustrophobic tunnels he'd just navigated. There was a formality to the room too that seemed just as out of place. It was lit from a

series of sconces on its walls, their light reaching up in long, elegant lines that invoked a mood as much as they did illuminate the space. The floor was parquet and echoed the sounds of Mole's footsteps as he tentatively entered, breathing in the stale air. Crown molding ran along its walls and towering silver amphorae matching the design of the sconces were arrayed throughout, empty now as far as Mole could tell. On one wall was a floor-length mirror framed in that same silver. Standing in front of it, staring at himself Mole felt the room stretch away from him. It was a function of the mirror, of course, but there was something about this space that truly did feel like a void, with dimensions that were unknowable and, thus, at least for the moment, infinite.

He grinned and shook his head, tossing off the eerie chill that had suddenly swept over him and forcing himself to return that giddy sense of wonder that had come with this discovery. And then a moment later, something new began to gnaw at his brain. He had seen this space before. It took him a moment before he realized where. It was the photograph from Porcupine's, the one of The Bull at the party.

Reaching into his bag and removing the journal, Mole flipped through its pages until he found where he had tucked that photo. His suspicions were confirmed. He recognized those same sconces and amphorae, the same molding on the walls. Mole couldn't help but laugh now, the sound bouncing off the walls and back at him. The fortuitousness of his discoveries and the role fate had just played in bringing him here were truly amazing.

He wasn't surprised at the photo's setting though. Mole had heard many a tale of the extravagant parties at Toad Hall. And if there had been humans in attendance, then all the cloak-and-dagger business - secret doors and such - made some sense now too. Back in those days, it wasn't nearly so acceptable for humans and animals to fraternize, and Red Willow Juice had always been outlawed in their lands, owing to concerns about animal production techniques. A certain amount of discretion would have been advisable.

Mole suddenly heard the scuffling of feet behind him. He whirled around to find Toad standing in the doorway. He was dressed in his own set of pajamas underneath a thick terrycloth robe. Judging from the state of these clothes, Toad had been in them all day. He raised one hand now in a playful gesture of surrender. The other arm remained in its sling. A long, thin red cut could be seen extending across his forehead.

“Sorry. I’m sorry, Mole. I didn’t mean to frighten you.” A wan smile spread across his face as he walked slowly towards Mole, who was busy at the moment trying to slow his heart back down.

“I couldn’t sleep, of course. And then I saw you prowling around and I wondered where you were headed. I didn’t imagine it was all the way down here.”

Before he could think of any kind of suitable lie to tell, Mole heard himself telling the truth. “I found the door in the pantry earlier today. By accident. Then I thought I’d come back tonight.”

“Quite the space, isn’t it? Yes, we don’t talk about this one much. Not even I knew about it for, oh, a long time. Have you looked around?”

“Uh, a little. There’s not much to see though, is there?”

“Ah! It only seems that way. You have to know the secrets.”

Toad walked to the mirror and then rapped on it.

“See this? Two-way glass. You could spy in here from the other side. Catch animals in the act of all sorts of things,” Toad said, chuckling. “He was a real scoundrel, The Commodore. You have no idea.” He sighed. “Anyway, we should have a party down here sometime, don’t you think?”

His tone was disconcertingly cheerful, except then Toad stood silently for a moment, still looking around the space, the smile now fading a bit. Mole could feel him looking far out and far back, the mysterious void of this space becoming something entirely new and different and intimately personal for him. Then, without another word, Toad turned and walked back out.

“Yes, we should,” said Mole to the empty room.

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Later that night, back in bed next to Rat, Mole would dream of the party from that photograph. In the dream, the guests swirled about him, their angular lines having animated to become sharp and jagged movements. A rabbit draped in silk spun in circles as a squirrel in coat and tails looked on, clapping and kicking up his legs. Skittering past now was a massive, mustached human man, an expression of manic joy having erupted on his face. He was dressed in baggy trousers and an ill-fitting vest, and a fez wobbled precariously atop his bald head as he ran by. Giving chase to the man

was a younger human woman, with thin blonde hair and sparkling eyes and long, long naked legs. And as the rabbit spun in her circle, so too did the man and the woman encircle Mole, moving faster and faster.

It was the sounds from the dream that Mole remembered most vividly though. He had been listening to a party's light and frothy mixture of idle chatter and string music and glasses clinking all his life. Every summer, it drifted down the river from its source at the garden parties of the North End until it had spread out across the whole of The Willows, settling upon the land with the menacing beauty of a spider's web. In his dream, those sounds took on the same sharp and jagged edge. He could hear it in the dark, clamorous jazz music that suddenly played from somewhere, in the scrape of shoes against that floor and in the cackling laughs, the whispered seductions and the hissing pleas that didn't drift so much as they seeped in.

Emerging from that dream and into the next morning, Mole spent a great deal of time in that half-state of wake; that place where you're awake but you can't quite recognize it. At that moment, he couldn't be sure he hadn't just dreamt the entirety of the previous night's activities and so it was as if his brain wanted to take these few extra moments now, in this liminal stage, to organize itself. He lay there with his eyes closed, perfectly still, allowing his memories and impressions to cohere and align. It was only when he felt Rat sit up next to him that he was reminded that the living world lay right behind his eyelids. He opened his eyes and was treated to the sight of Badger standing in the doorway, staring at him with a grave and slightly perplexed look on his face.

Mole felt a jolt of panic. His midnight escapade had been reported by Toad. He was to be thrown out onto the front lawn immediately for such a grave intrusion of privacy and breach of etiquette.

"What is it, Badger?" said Rat from behind Mole.

"Good morning. I'm sorry to wake you but I've had a chance to chat with the police. They'd like to see Mr. Toad back at the station."

"What for?" said Rat. Mole's entire body had relaxed upon learning he was not the target of Badger's dismay but he now felt Rat's tighten up against him.

"Apparently, it was the police that were chasing Toad when he crashed. They hadn't said anything last night because they weren't exactly sure of the case they had on him. But now, it seems, they've had time to amass their evidence."

"And what sort of case is that?"

“I’m afraid I do not know.”

Moments later, Rat stomped down the hall with a look on her face that Mole had never seen before. He had, by now, seen several shades of anger in Rat but this one had a propulsive energy to it that was entirely new. She reached Toad's door and resumed the banging she'd started the night before. Only this time, Toad appeared instantly, shoulders back and chin defiantly up. He was dressed immaculately in a three-piece, charcoal grey, worsted wool suit complete with a red silk tie and a red silk sling to match. His polished silver cufflinks gleamed in the morning light.

There was a moment's pause as everyone stared, rather dumbfounded, at the portrait Toad was presenting.

“Well Badger, old friend, shall we go? I'm sure they're expecting us down at the station,” he said. The faintest bit of a tremble could now be heard in his voice.

“Indeed,” replied Badger.

“Very well then. We're off.”

And with that, Toad marched right past them and out towards his fate.

Chapter 7: The Crime Committed

That evening, without any ostensible purpose behind it, Mole went home to visit his family. He'd parted ways with his girlfriend that morning at Toad Hall, with Rat heading to her mother's house and Mole heading home for a quick change before he was due in at the mill. Badger and Toad had left just ahead of them, bound for the police station and with Toad maintaining his uncharacteristic stoicism. Badger assured them both that he would pass along any more information as soon as he could. He cautioned them though that this information might be scarce, given, "these new circumstances," as he put it.

The revelation about potential additional crimes had positively shocked Mole. This was different from the news that Rat had delivered the day before. Toad crashing his car, while unfortunate, was also a predictable consequence of his behavior. Mole had assumed the crash was simply a result of Toad's speeding and less than stellar skills behind the wheel. There was nothing terribly surprising in that. But the possibility of further crimes changed the equation greatly. For one thing, it threw the whole idea of Toad's thrill-seeking into an entirely new light.

Mole had done his best to avoid the subject of Toad's parents, both in discussion and in contemplation. Ever since his first visit to Toad Hall with Rat back in the fall, he'd been acutely aware of the lengths those associated with the family went to manage the topic of their demise. Both Rat and Murid tended to Toad in their own ways, and the intensity of their care and concern served as a constant, ever-present reminder of the circumstances that had brought them to it. But the deaths were never directly spoken of and even an implicit reference was studiously and sometimes awkwardly avoided at all times.

The train crash that took the lives of Toad's mother and father had occurred just a few months before Mole had first returned to The Willows following his four years away. News of the event had trickled across the border, and Mole had first heard of it

during a three-day stay he made in Belle's Point, a little town perched high up and at the westernmost edge of the hill range that separated The Willows from the Wide World.

Mole was headed home by then but taking the long way, in an effort to halfway convince himself he still meant to explore. He'd stopped in to a local cafe for a cup of tea and overheard the two women behind the counter discussing it.

"Apparently, it went right off at Gulliver's Gulch," said the one whose hair had been tied into thick, knotted strands. "Killed both the toads on board."

The other wore an orange stocking cap and an iron bar through her nose. Mole had noticed this style prevalent among the Belle's Point locals. It was a variation on that of his old friends Guy and Doris at The Red Lion. Guy and Doris wore more tight leather while these two seemed to favor loose, woven clothing. But their commitment to their adornments signaled a similar tribal affiliation.

This woman clucked her tongue and shook her head ruefully. "Yep. You go off there and that'll do it."

"I can't say I'm too surprised. Those are animal tracks out there. God knows when they were built," replied the first.

"Or with what!"

Then they both caught sight of Mole and clammed up, their faces a mixture of embarrassment and pity.

Gulliver's Gulch wasn't actually too far from them, and its narrow passage and perilously steep sides were typical of the terrain there. Mole himself would eventually have to make his way east if he hoped to cross back into The Willows on foot but train tracks had been laid across the area — quite recently in fact, contrary to the human barista's insinuations. It was a nail-biting process that had nevertheless made The Willows more easily accessible to huge new chunks of the Wide World. These tracks included a rather scenic stretch that crossed over the gulch, and it was here that the toads' private train car had careened off, plummeting more than 200 feet to the valley below. When Mole finally found a newspaper article on the incident, the crash was described as "a fiery explosion that lit the night sky." The article added that initial reports were that the crash was an accident, the result of degrading track conditions.

Now, months later, it was as if everyone at Toad Hall were still waiting for someone to tell them how to proceed. Even his parents' master bedroom lay in a state of suspended animation, still dusted and aired out once a week, though now only by Murid herself. Like so much of that house, it felt like a room left waiting for a purpose. Lately, Mole had the sense that this collective hesitancy was becoming more of a pressing problem as it concerned the family's vast fortune and wide range of business interests.

Toad, of course, had inherited it all but there was genuine doubt, including from the young heir himself, as to whether or not he was ready for such responsibilities. Beyond that lay the question of whether or not Toad would in fact ever be ready for such a burden; if this sort of thing were really in the animal's character, especially with the effects that his parents' tragic and unexpected end would surely have on him going forward. Mole feared now that those effects ran even deeper than previously believed.

Mole himself thought about death on what felt like a near constant basis. He assumed this was the case for all living creatures, whether they wanted to admit it or not, though he wasn't sure that admitting it made it any better. Either way, he did not appreciate the stark reminder of his mortality and the mortality of those he loved that Toad's parent's deaths presented. And so it was that after a long day at the mill, during which he faced Beaver's questions about the smash-up that had already become the stuff of feverish whispers with nothing but protestations of ignorance through tight-lips, Mole found himself inexplicably on the way to the family burrow.

For generations, Mole's family had lived beneath the same plot of land, at the top of one of several small hills that dotted the topography of the South End. Their particular hill was called Huckleberry Hill, or Huck Hill, for the abundance of those fruit bushes on its softly rising western slopes. Mole had walked down The Run from the mill and now crossed The River again, just below the commercial docks and just north of Otter's, heading east past the fish markets to the base of the hill. From there, he climbed past a rocky outcrop within which Mole knew there were perfect spots to wedge oneself, to hide away during games with other pups or, perhaps, to avoid the radar-like vision of an angry parent in pursuit. He cut under a thicket where some ferrets once lived but which now looked abandoned save for a rusted-out and toppled-over old wagon, and met up with a path on the thicket's far side. From there, it was just a short walk up to the towering and gnarled old white oak tree that served to mark his family home's location,

its branches stripped bare by the season's cold, and then down into the stuffy warmth of the burrow's entry passage below.

The entry was marked by a sign his parents had made years ago, just after they'd inherited the burrow and as a means of marking it as their own. Written in his mother's cheerful, looping cursive hand, in bright white against the chestnut brown of the wood his father had cut and sanded and varnished himself, the sign read: Mole End.

As he moved in through the burrow's front door, he was met by the smell of his mother's cooking and the sound of her voice, off-key but bright, as she sang whatever old ditty it was that had wandered into her brain that day. Mole couldn't help but smile and yet, at the same time, he was suddenly aware of how impulsive he'd been. He was walking into this home unannounced and without having done a shred of the extensive psychological and emotional preparation that Mole found usually necessary when visiting with his family.

Surely, they would have heard by now of the arrest. His association with Toad was well known to them too and they had already found multiple occasions on which to subtly but distinctly mark their displeasure. Rat was one thing. That they could accept, if not embrace. She was a North Ender to be sure, practically an archetype of one, but she was also perfectly pleasant. More importantly, unlike Toad, she brought with her no larger history.

Mole's parents had only just met Rat recently in fact. It was at The Willows' Christmas Day parade, in the middle of the thaw after Rat and Mole's first fight. They'd all stood together awkwardly, paws around steaming cups of cocoa, watching as the floats inched by, costumed animals waving at them from tinsel-strewn platforms. After many false starts and much to Mole's relief, Rat and his mother eventually did find some common conversational ground in a discussion of ragtime piano music and the afternoon had proceeded from there without too much discomfort.

It was a ragtime number Mole's mother was humming that evening as Mole stood, unseen, in the hallway, bracing for his reveal. Whatever insanity there was burbling away in Mole came from his mother. It was her influence that led him to adventure out into the Wide World on his own in search of experiences, to wake in the middle of the night to scribble words onto increasingly high stacks of paper, to dance wildly when the music took him. There was an alternate reality in which his mother became an artist of some kind. She had a gift for composition that could have been shaped into something

profound. But she was of an older generation and had contented herself long ago with the job of wife and mother and so all that had been left of the artist was the impulsivity, the anxiety and the fits of passion that would periodically engulf her like storms and within which she would twist and turn.

“Oh!” she yelped, upon seeing him. He had surprised her, appearing in the doorway just as she turned towards it. Her paws shot up and fluttered in the air for a moment before she slammed them down again with force. “You! It’s you!”

“Hi, Mom.”

“Hi? Hi? That’s what you have to say to me?” She grabbed at his face with one paw, pulling him close to kiss him on the cheek and then pushing him away to stare at him intently. She turned and returned to a vegetable stew on the stove, turning it with an exaggerated show of nonchalance.

“How are you? How’s the home? How’s Dad? How’s business? What do you want?” said Mole, sliding into a chair and grinning at her roguishly.

“I want you to tell me how that dumb fucking — excuse my language — that dumb fucking animal could be so careless as to crash right into someone’s home. You know he almost killed their baby.”

“I know that, Ma!”

“So? What’s the story? I know you were over there.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because Mrs. Mouse saw you and Rat headed that way yesterday.”

Mole shook his head and marveled yet again at the efficiency with which information traveled in The Willows. There were bits of data constantly streaming through the invisible neurons and axons that connected animals in this precisely drawn network, the existence of which was chief among the reasons why Mole had no intention of telling her about this morning’s surprise. It was sure to spread like wildfire and only prompt more whispers and rumor-mongering.

“Well I don’t know anything. He didn’t come out of his room the whole time I was there,” Mole said, lying through his teeth.

His mother came to the table and sat down across from him, and Mole knew immediately to meet her gaze.

“Are you sure about that?” she asked now, her tone expertly hugging a line between teasing and interrogative.

“Yes. And, you know, you could bother to hide your mistrust of me just a little bit better, Mom.”

“I trust you!”

“I hope so.”

She fixed him with an exaggerated glare and then rose to her feet, returning to the stove as a breath of silence passed through the room. His mother was graciously allowing Mole to have the last word, at least on this topic. The silence insisted that he feel this now.

Finally, almost to herself, she exclaimed, “Who could possibly think it was a good idea to allow that animal behind the wheel of one of those things!”

“It was Weasel who got him into it,” Mole heard himself say.

“Weasel?! What on earth does Weasel want with a sniveling little brat like Toad?”

“What do you mean?” Mole replied.

“Have you ever known Weasel to have anything to do with a North Ender unless he was stealing from them or selling them something?”

Weasel was of course dating Opossum, technically a North Ender herself, but Mole knew not to correct his mother in such a circumstance.

“I think he’s changed, Ma. He and Toad have become friends,” he instead insisted, though he could hear the ambivalence in his own voice. His mother chortled in response.

“If you say so. I do hear he’s been trying to do some good for the South End. Investing in some of those buildings down by where his garage is. So maybe he is straightening up. I don’t know. Or at least getting in good with the rich animals. Though look where that gets you! And Lord knows where the money for that investment came from. I don’t know how many stolen gold watches he had to sell but I’m sure it was plenty.”

“Ma, I’m sure he’s not selling stolen gold watches. He’s got his business now.”

“That’s what he did, you know? For years. He’d even come around here sometimes. As if I had the money for any of that stuff, or any interest in possessing stolen merchandise!”

Mole’s ears pricked up a bit at this last bit. Despite his protestations to his mother now, it had of course already occurred to Mole that Weasel could have been wrapped up in all of this. Her mention now of that animal and his history of criminal tendencies

only reminded Mole of that likelihood. He felt a hot and disorienting wave of anxiety come over him now.

"He's probably still doing it," she continued. "I don't think that garage is making him much. I know a few animals who've brought their cars to him and, let me tell you, those shrews do a crappy job."

"Who do you know that owns a car?" Mole asked, forcing himself into another rakish grin. She grinned at him right back, eyebrows arched to the ceiling.

"I know a few," she exclaimed. And with that, she resumed her humming, joining up again with the tune playing away in her head as Mole let his grin melt away in the warmth of that room. There was just then the soft thumping sound of someone climbing down into the burrow and then the great plodding steps that could only mean his father was home.

In his advancing years, Mole's father had become an even more diminutive version of himself. His legs were bowed and his back was taking on an ever more pronounced bend, as if his entire body were slipping down closer and closer to the earth itself with every day. Entering into the kitchen, he shrugged out of his coat and set his lunchpail down. This was the same lunchpail he'd been toting in for 25 years, out of which came a series of slight variations on the same lunch he'd been eating for 25 years, always at his desk in the same two-room office on the busy but forgettable South End street, the radio tuned to soft rock, the sign in the window reading, "Closed For Lunch". That sign hung below a larger sign above, the one that had the single word, "Plumbing" painted in fading red, capital letters.

"Hello, pup," he said upon seeing Mole. "I suppose I know what brings you by."

"What's that?" asked Mole. He could already feel the muscles in his neck and shoulders tightening in anticipation of this next bit. Mole loved his father. He was sure of that. True, there was none of that instinctive understanding, that organic and primitive and biological fusion of the minds that passed between Mole and his mother. The relationship between an animal and its father was quite a bit different, Mole believed, defined less by biology and more by society. There were expectations with his father that didn't exist with his mother, expectations that sometimes created tension. And of course, Mole's father's generation celebrated a certain kind of ruggedness that didn't allow for affection. Mole was a smart and self-aware enough animal to acknowledge the impact all of this had on his relationship with his dad while also

remembering the many, many good times that they'd enjoyed over the years, and he was confident that when balanced out, those good times and that love won out.

All of that being said though, there were still simply times when his father's way of approaching certain subjects greatly aggravated Mole and, unfortunately, those subjects included anything having to do with Mole himself. His father had a terse and rigorously pragmatic manner that was commendable and even rather charming in the right circumstances but which didn't allow for much nuance. Arguing with him about any subject at all complex was an exercise in head-banging frustration.

"I've already grilled him on it and he doesn't know anything," said his mother, offering up a bit of protection for her son. This was a good sign for Mole. At least he'd have her on his side tonight.

"I hope not," said Mole's father, taking the seat across from Mole now. "If you knew anything about it, that'd be a problem. Right?"

"Not necessarily," said Mole. "Just because you know something about a thing doesn't mean you were involved in it. I mean, I do know something about it. I've been to Toad's and seen him. Rat and I stayed there last night."

"You said he stayed in his room the whole time," said his mother now, a look on her face that told Mole he should quit this particular path and instead accept the protection she was offering him.

"What, he needed you there for support?" snorted his father.

"Rat did."

"Ah. He needed Rat and Rat needed you?"

"That's right," said Mole.

His father chuckled ruefully. "I see." He stood up but remained in front of his seat and across from Mole. He loomed over the animal as he shook his head slowly. "You're falling into something now and if you're not careful it's going to get you into trouble."

"Hey!" exclaimed Mole's mother. "Rat is a very lovely young animal!"

"Of course she is! I'm not talking about her. I'm talking about our son. This tendency of yours, pup, to go chasing after other animals' lives —"

"I don't do that."

"Instead of stopping to think about what is best for you. Not now. Not in this very moment, pup, but long term. What is best for you long term."

"You don't think she's good for me?"

“Okay!” barked his mother, stepping in. “We’re not going to do this. So now I’m saying to you both, you need to stop.”

There was only the briefest of pauses before his father carried right on. This time, he spoke with a low tone and a slow pace, a very purposeful attempt at civility.

“I’m not saying anything bad about Rat, okay? I meant what I said before. I think she’s very lovely.”

He paused now, awaiting some sort of response from Mole, who offered him none.

“But that Toad nearly killed Woodchuck’s son. That’s a member of our community,” his father continued. Mole’s truculence seemed to have brought the edge back to his tone.

“It was an accident. And Toad is a member of our community too, by the way!” Mole responded. It was a snotty thing to say and not something Mole believed but it did have the intended effect.

His father seemed to reel a bit upon hearing the words. He walked away from the table and turned to look at his mother. She was looking back at Mole. There was a strange kind of disappointment etched into her face, one Mole could not remember seeing before. Mixed in were traces of sadness and anger and even a look of defeat that sent a chill running through Mole’s spine.

“It’s not the same and you know it,” she said, turning away from him and back to the stove. He’d gone too far perhaps.

“You don’t understand,” continued Mole’s father. “When this is all over, they can run back to their mansions on the hill, and they can hide out. They only have to deal with the parts of the world that they want to. You don’t get to do that, pup. You gotta come back here and live among the animals.”

“We live on a hill too,” said Mole flatly, pushing on past his own hesitations. That flush of anxiety and now this feeling of injustice — that his parents were standing there in judgment of him for something he did not do — had overwhelmed him. He was seeing red and all he wanted was to extend that frustration until it filled every inch of space in that burrow.

His father slammed his paws into the tabletop. The pots and pans that hung from the ceiling rack above them rattled and his mother yelped again and spun around, the spoon in her paw raised in defense.

“Goddamnit! Don't be smart! If you continue to associate with that kind, you'll never —”

But that was all Mole heard. He had to get out before the energy suffocated him. His parents would never understand the passions and curiosities that fueled him. Worse, they would look down upon him for it, just as everyone in the South End always had with Mole. So now, as his father unfurled this latest of his lectures, Mole stood and walked out of a burrow and he trudged back to Wild Wood, brimming with anger and alone with his thoughts.

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The following evening after work, Mole went to see Rat at her mother's River Bank condo, picking his way carefully through the willow herbs now bathed in a frosty sheen and across the icy footpaths laid over what was once the river bed. To his left loomed the massive embankment of dirt and stone that was The Willows Dam. It was an impressive sight, this stoic and implacable tribute to an animal's force of will and their power over nature. It was at this nexus point where not only had The River's course changed, the course of the town's history had changed as well. Where once water flowed, this entire neighborhood had sprung up, a neighborhood of footpaths and motor lodges and easy access to the best swimming hole on The River, a neighborhood left in near total darkness now that it was winter and so the offseason.

Rat met him at the door and embraced him with a hug at once warm and also perfunctory. Curling back up onto the sofa and grasping an earthen mug filled with apple cinnamon linden tea, she confessed that she had just then been trying her best to distract herself by starting in on a book she'd been meaning to read. The effort had proven futile though and Rat reported that she had done nothing for what had seemed like eons except stare off into the fire that roared away now in her hearth. She had managed to speak with Badger at last, earlier that day. With a grave tone, he had informed her that Toad was currently under investigation for attempting to smuggle Red Willow Juice across the border.

“What? I mean...really?!” said Mole. It seemed so ridiculous that Mole almost laughed.

"I'm afraid so," Rat said with a sort of emptiness that indicated she too was still having trouble believing it.

Mole was absolutely gobsmacked. In a bit of a haze, he went into the kitchen and poured himself a mug of the tea, drinking it quickly and forcing its scalding heat to shock him back into some degree of lucidity. He let the questions swirl around him for a moment. Smuggling Red Willow Juice? Had he really heard that right? Had this been another of Toad's pastimes gone to rot? Of all the idiotic and nonsensical things for that silly creature to have taken an interest in.

He rejoined Rat on the couch and listened intently as she described the details.

"That's why he crashed. He was running from the police. Apparently, they had been waiting for him. Some sort of stakeout or trap or what have you. I don't know. Badger still doesn't have all the details."

Mole tried to think of something insightful and reassuring to say but all he could muster up was a weak, "That's terrible."

"I mean, can you even imagine?" Rat continued on ruefully. "He just lost his parents, barely a year ago, and now this! It must just be so difficult to maintain one's sanity through it all."

She took a sip of her drink and stared out the parlor's picture window at the riverbed Mole had just traversed, the walls of the dam rising up and, beyond that, the mighty River itself. Mole looked out now too. From that distance and in the rapidly fading light of a winter evening, it was hard to discern the movement of the water. Its mass had a density and weight to it now. For a moment, he wondered if the water's progress had halted entirely.

Within days, the momentum building behind the scandal increased dramatically. Toad was placed under house arrest and the supervision of Badger. A trial date was set, a comprehensive investigation was convened, and the crime, already a matter of fervent whispering, now became the undisputed talk of the town.

There was undoubtedly a spirit of *schadenfreude* that swept over the animals in that time, particularly over those south of the Mart. The consensus was that Toad, an amusing animal though he could be, also represented the worst of the North End and the absolute nadir of The Willows community. He was a vain and shallow creature who flaunted his wealth and, worse, seemed to have no appreciation of the cost that this fortune of his had come at. The fact that the crime involved Red Willow Juice only

made matters worse. Mole need only think of his dive into the story of Stoat Crick Mart to find evidence of Red Willow Juice's divisive place in the town's history.

Of course, Red Willow Juice was illegal in human lands and always had been. Everyone knew that. But everyone also knew that the humans had developed a taste for it years ago and had found numerous ways to acquire it. The vast distance that separated the respective worlds of humans and animals was an opportune space for those individuals both enterprising and willing to defy the law, and smuggling had been a periodic problem during the course of the town's history.

That had really only changed recently. Achieving the comparatively open border they all enjoyed now had been a long and gradual process, requiring a consortium of animal leaders to demonstrate that whatever backwards and anarchistic ways humans thought the animals possessed were now a thing of the past. Toad's father had been one of those animals. That toad had gone by the honorific "Doctor" because he had been one of the first Willows animals to earn a degree from a human college. He'd spent the time since waxing poetic about the experience and advocating for future generations of animals to have the opportunity.

The more porous border had certainly increased the amount of human tourism in The Willows, much of which centered on their consumption of watered-down Red Willows Juice in gargantuan quantities. But if human leadership now had reason to feel as if an open border also promoted the illegal importation of Red Willow Juice, they could very easily retighten their control and restrict that kind of access once again. This threatened the dream shared by animals like Dr. Toad, as well as many humans. They dreamt of a future where animals and humans lived and worked together freely, without borders, benefiting from one another's passions and pursuits with a spirit of trust and equality. It was a dream that, for many, included the eventual legalization of Red Willow Juice in human land.

At the same time, there were those who welcomed a closed border and a complete separation from the human world, as it had been for so long. The greater fear, they'd say, was a more relaxed border. The humans had no interest in creating some new utopian future to share in with the animals. They were only interested in stealing what they could, Red Willow Juice included. In such a situation, the animals' way of life would eventually be destroyed.

As the days went by, these concerns only intensified. The stakes attached to this crime and its outcome seemed to grow exponentially, and that pit inside of Mole, the one that'd seemingly formed in the weeks leading up to Toad's arrest, was spewing forth fiery lava now in that arrest's aftermath, such that he was sure he was suffering from an ulcer. Mole's association with Toad was well known, especially now that the details of Toad's life were the subject of much informal investigation. So Mole himself was already assuredly a subject of speculation and perhaps even a new source of dismay for the animals of the South End. His father had been right. Toad could hide out in the deepest recesses of his mansion. But Mole was here amid the clamor and tumult of the animals. He had never needed an excuse to keep to himself and slink among the shadows but he now had a very real reason to do just that.

That said, Mole was also naturally quite curious to see what would happen to this strange creature he'd recently befriended, and, budding historian that he was, about the effects this incident may have on the town going forward. He was desperate for a chance to tap into that network of information that strung itself through the hedgerows and down The Run and even into The River itself, that information following the water's course before it was deposited on shore, there to be picked up by any animal curious enough to look. But it was all he could manage to make it to the mill and then back to his burrow each day. Even his time with Rat began to feel clandestine and taboo as well.

Rat had been to see Toad but had reported that she had been sternly instructed by Badger not to bring up anything to do with the alleged crime. When Rat nonetheless had privately cornered her old friend and demanded an explanation, searching his face for any signs of truth, she found him bouncing awkwardly between forced nonchalance and moments of barely contained despair.

"It's all just a misunderstanding, Ratty. A terrible, terrible misunderstanding," he'd said breezily.

"Well then, set them straight, Toad!"

"I wish it were as simple as that but it's not. You'll just have to trust me. Do you?"

Rat had paused and so Toad repeated the question: "Do you trust me?" Only now his voice was tight. He was looking at her with wide, searching, sad eyes, and Rat could see the bags under those eyes and the bits of food encrusted on his pajamas.

“Of course,” Rat replied, though she knew she sounded unconvincing. He nodded anyway and shuffled off down the hall. They had spent a few more hours together that day, watching, at Badger’s suggestion, a favorite movie of theirs from adolescence and then sitting by the fire as Rat gamely filled Toad in on all the latest happenings from around town. But it all eventually proved to be too much for poor Rat, these efforts at normalcy. She’d made some pitiful excuse about her mother needing her and dashed off before Murid had even had a chance to serve them dinner.

“What do you suppose the explanation really is, Mole?” she asked him one evening, about a week after the arrest as they sat across from a chess game neither had any desire to play.

This was not the first time Rat had asked him this question and, as usual, Mole was feeling deeply uncomfortable at the prospect of answering. Despite her initial hesitations, Rat had chosen to take Toad at whatever few of his words she could draw out and so now insisted that there must have been a misunderstanding and that her dear friend would surely explain it all once he had been given the chance to do so in public. Mole then was not necessarily keen to tell Rat that he thought this was all a load of nonsense.

“I honestly don’t know, Rat. I mean, I’ve heard all kinds of talk but it’s all just that — talk. And, well, you know Toad far better than I do. Whatever belief you have is, at the very least, the most probable explanation, I’m sure.”

“Well, I have heard that they didn’t actually find any Red Willow Juice with Toad. So maybe he was there and maybe he did know what was going on but I don’t think he was the one who was selling the stuff. Why would he? It’s not as if Toad needs money. Then the police appear, he gets scared and so he runs off. Obviously he shouldn’t have but, really, is that such a crime?”

Mole swallowed hard and remained silent, opting to try to let that question die on the vine. He could feel his frustration with Rat growing. He wanted to say to her, “Yes, yes! That is a crime! And so is the reckless endangerment that you always seem to elide over any time Toad comes up!” Despite Mole’s sympathies for Toad, these were the facts as he saw them. But of course Mole was no fool and so he said no such thing.

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One Sunday soon after, Mole walked down to The Holt to visit with Otter. By now, the snow from a few weeks before had melted, leaving behind only scraps of dirt-streaked ice and cold hard mud in its wake. A heavy fog hung over The Willows that day, and the animals, unmoored by this thick, grey air and the way it obscured the land's familiar landmarks, were feeling adrift. Most stayed close to home, busying themselves with easily-accomplished chores — a room to sweep up or a squeaky hinge to mend or a letter to write to some distant relation. It was a good time for Mole to take a walk, as the streets were quiet and blessedly free of the whispered gossip and rumors that he felt were otherwise inescapable.

The Holt had a shuttered and withdrawn air about it this time of the year, even more so on a day like today. The lagoon was far too cold to swim in or even lounge around and so the central courtyard had practically been abandoned, streaks of sticky red residue from spilled drinks and a few pieces of broken wicker furniture all that remained of the past season's merriment. Mole had to search about a bit before he finally found his old friend ensconced in one of the home's innermost rooms. Otter was there with Spiny Lizard, the two of them playing an old Willows card game called River Rummy while attacking a plate of sardines on toast. Otter was wrapped in a heavy robe and had leaned far back in his chair against the roughhewn logs that made up this room's flimsily constructed walls. A collection of toast points — small, oily fish draped across them — were arrayed on his belly.

“Mole, old boy! We haven't seen you around these parts in awhile!” bellowed The Holt's smiling proprietor, letting the chair fall forward with an emphatic thud.

“Hiya, Mole!” followed Spiny.

“Have a seat and tell us all the latest,” said Otter, nodding to an open and visibly listing easy chair in the corner.

“I was actually rather hoping that you'd do that for me,” ventured Mole, gingerly sitting down.

“Not much to tell,” said Otter with a sigh. “It's too cold, I'll tell you that. You'd think we'd have begun to see at least a streak of sunshine or two by now.”

“You always say that though! Every year,” said Spiny, his voice thick and drawling. Mole could tell that they'd already been into the juice that day. “I mean, it's still, like, February, right?”

“Not much to say for this time of year then, is there?” said Otter to Mole, a sly twinkle in his eye. He must have known why Mole was there. After all, it wasn't as if Mole had been around much in the past months, wrapped up as he was in the blossoming of his romance with Rat and, more recently, in the aftermath of Toad's arrest. His appearance now could not have been random or without intention.

Nevertheless, Otter was putting it on Mole to broach the subject he'd come for and Mole found himself happy to acquiesce. He was then in possession of quite a lot of nerve in fact, having come to believe he was fast approaching a breaking point when it came to the various forces acting on him just then. He felt as if he had nowhere to turn. He was an interloper in the north and a traitor in the south and so now he was spinning, aimlessly but furiously, much as he had at his parent's burrow. He would need to regain control of his own story, starting here and now.

“What have you heard about Toad's arrest?” Mole asked them, the slightest quiver of adrenalized energy in his voice.

“I heard the mayor is going to crack down on juice sales 'cause of it. Like, limit the amount a store can have in stock or something. Though I don't know what that's going to do other than piss off a whole bunch of animals,” mused Spiny.

“It's temporary. It's just to make the humans think he's got it under control,” said Otter. “What have *you* heard about it, Mole? Been by to see His Majesty since then?” he added with a twinkle in his eye.

“Toad? No, not me. Rat has. She couldn't talk to him about it though.”

“The lawyers got a muzzle on him, eh?” asked Spiny.

“That must have been quite a feat,” added Otter with a chuckle.

“I suppose,” said Mole. “Anyway, he's just locked away up in his house, not saying anything so I don't know.”

“It's a hell of a place to be locked away in,” said Spiny. “I'd just, like, hang out in the movie theater all day. He's got his own popcorn machine! When I saw that, I thought my freaking head was going to explode.”

“You've been to Toad Hall?” asked Mole, that old and oddly familiar sensation of jealousy ping-ponging his senses.

“Sure.”

“When was this?”

“Oh, back in the fall, I’d say. Right after he started coming around here. A bunch of us went up there.”

“Right after you started bringing him around here,” said Otter to Mole, raising his eyebrows with arched exaggeration.

“He’s probably got his lawyers living there now, working in shifts or something,” said Spiny.

“Yeah? What are they going to say?” asked Otter. The twinkle had suddenly hardened into something sharp and piercing. “They caught him red-handed, didn’t they?”

“They’ll find a way out for him, I’m sure. His kind always gets away with it,” murmured the lizard.

“Not this time,” said Otter.

“All the time! That’s all they do, is get away with things. Sorry, Mole,” said Spiny. “I know you’re his friend and all.”

“But I’m not, see. That’s what’s got me so worked up these days. Everyone’s got me lumped in with him and he’s off doing things like this, behaving like a fucking ass!”

Mole had very strategically planned the use of the expletive. He was not prone to such language and it caught the attention of both the animals listening. He hated to have to so vehemently toss aside an animal who had been nothing but kind to him — and with such language — but he simply had to at least try to begin distancing himself from Toad.

“Okay then! Don’t worry, Moley. No one’s got you mixed up in any of it,” said Otter, chuckling a little at the very notion. Mole momentarily found himself offended in the opposite direction. Well, why wouldn’t they have mixed him up in this? He was capable of such a thing, wasn’t he?

Otter continued, “If I were you though, I’d use it to my advantage. He’s a famous criminal, after all. Just start saying you’re part of his gang. You can impress a lot of animals that way.”

Spiny yelped out a laugh at the thought of that before interjecting. “What does he need to do that for, Otts? He’s already got Rat. I’m the one who needs the help in that department. I should start saying I was the mastermind.”

They both collapsed into peals of laughter and Mole couldn’t help but now join in. The thought of a gang made up of himself, Toad and then Spiny Lizard in the role of

mastermind was simply too ridiculous to resist. He let the sound of their laughs crescendo and then dissipate into a low, contented hum before he carried on.

“You don't think he was actually up to anything, do you? I mean, nothing more than his usual nonsense.”

“Well wouldn't that be enough, Mole?” said Otter with a bit of that edge returning to his tone. “Seriously though, you're right to stay away from him now. The whole lot of them. Really and truly.” He leaned back in his chair again and regarded his old friend with an expression that Mole found inscrutable.

“Except for that Rat though,” said Spiny. “You play your cards right, you could end up in a big ol' house just like that Toad. Right next door. Get your own movie theater.”

Chapter 8: The Trial of Mr. Toad

The trial of the famous Mr. Toad began on a bright and clear March morning. The sky that day was a resounding electric blue, a jolt of a color that blasted away the gloom of the previous months and heralded the arrival of a spring almost certainly just round the corner. The air too was brisk and biting, markedly alive though tempered by the warm rays of a sun that beamed down now through the poplar trees framing The Willows Courthouse. It seemed to Mole that the entire community had turned out on this fine morning, though for what exactly, he wasn't sure. Very few would actually get to witness events firsthand. The courtroom itself was actually quite tiny, with seating for no more than twenty or so in the viewing gallery. Rat would be attending the trial as a part of the small group allotted to Toad. Media members, along with a few selections chosen at random by lottery, would fill out the room.

Rat had wanted Mole to join her, insisting that both she and Toad would need him for moral support but it was a part Mole had little interest in playing. Though he was of course intensely curious about every last bit of what was to transpire in that courtroom, he had resolved to distance himself from the whole mess and simply spectate from afar. Sitting next to Rat, right behind the defendant's table, might only further inflame the suspicion that Mole was sure he sensed in the air; the one that said he was just another of Toad's sycophants, entranced by his wealth and willing to wave away his disastrous behavior as mere foibles.

In any case, Mole had to work, and he was happy to use that as his excuse. Nevertheless, on that first morning, he walked with Rat down to the courthouse before punching in at the mill, and he marveled at the spectacle of it all and the animals that had come to witness it. They'd spread blankets out beneath the trees and unloaded picnic baskets filled with provisions not just for a full breakfast but lunch as well; tea and coffee, scones with jam and butter, and then bulging sandwiches and potato salad and ginger beer to follow. And with everything then laid out, they commenced with a

fresh round of gossip and speculation, the pitch of which audibly changed the moment that he and Rat appeared, walking slowly across the cobblestones of the town square.

Anticipation had been feverish and widespread and The Willows was awash in attention. Mole even noticed several humans now dotting the crowd outside the courthouse, spreading out their own blankets and unpacking their own repasts as they ogled the scene with shades of both bemusement and hostility.

The most recent developments around the case were especially dramatic. A week prior, news began to circulate through the winds that a human involved in the case had turned up dead, the victim of foul play. There were ensuing reports that their authorities had moved from participating in the investigation to fully taking it over, which led predictably to the first rumblings about the apparent fairness and impartiality of such an investigation. Whispers that the humans might then insist on doling out their own punishment to Toad followed, as humankind's penchant for violent vengeance was a frequent subject of rumors both fascinating and horrifying in the animal community. And this was all compounded by the fact that Toad's defense strategy had remained a complete mystery up until now, so no one could really even say what chances he stood.

Of course, the business of Toad's lawyer Badger and Badger's associates in the days leading up to the trial had been monitored carefully, and from that, certain hypotheses had been developed. For instance, there were those who said Toad would claim that he was an innocent bystander. Some said he would insist he'd actually been there to stop the sale. Others believed he'd say he'd been framed. They'd point to unanswered questions about the deaths of Toad's parents and conclude there was a conspiracy afoot, or, at the very least, that Toad's very crafty lawyer might be able to suggest so.

It was Beaver who had become Mole's sole source for all this sort of speculation, though his boss was always very careful to first disavow all the sensationalism and sport that had become of Toad's trial just before eagerly launching into one of his own most assuredly comprehensive reports. Mole knew that Beaver would have the mill office's radio tuned to the local station on that day, where the soft and soothing tones of their daytime DJ, Tortoise, would deliver updates from the trial at 20, 40 and on the hour.

Rat and Mole's arrival at the courthouse was thankfully upstaged by the appearance of Toad a moment later, surrounded by a phalanx of animals with Badger front and

center. Members of the press swarmed towards them and the animals on their blankets sat up on their haunches and grabbed at each other's elbows, straining for a look.

For his part, Toad looked to have put himself together nicely for the occasion. He wore a blue pinstripe suit with a brown silk tie, and walked now with that familiar swagger of his. His entire body leaned far back and his chin pointed up, leaving just his spindly arms and legs to do all the work of driving his rather rotund center forward. And so the arms swung jauntily as Toad took his long and insistent strides up the courthouse steps. Rat called out to him but he could not hear amid the hubbub that all these animals had kicked up. Or maybe he had heard but had been told not to stop.

Rat started to move off towards the courthouse and now it was Mole's turn to call out.

"Rat, I'm going to leave you here. I'm sorry. You know I'd be there with you if I could."

She turned back to him and smiled, nodding slightly. Then she walked back towards him and hugged him tight.

"Bye, Moley. Think good thoughts today, okay?"

After parting ways with Rat, Mole chose to take the long way to the mill, going down all the way past his own burrow before turning west. He wanted to walk through Wild Wood and lose himself in its remaining pockets of silence and solitude. There, he savored the contradictions of the last few hours, this abrupt transition from the gross spectacle of the trial to the reassuring endurance of this landscape; the pieces of this world that had no interest in a toad and his adventures, that had weathered generations and generations of animals and their hijinks with nary a scratch to show, that just now were rising up again after another long winter, poised to spring forth in a new riot of color and smell and sound and life. What an odd and thoroughly remarkable world it was, thought Mole.

At the mill, he tried his best to distract himself with the various menial bits of upkeep that now constituted his job but such things were rarely any kind of distraction at all. When at last he heard the oddly upbeat musical cue break through the sounds of soft jazz to signal an update, Mole practically went running to the radio.

"Good morning, animals. This is Tortoise with a WILW news break. Everything you need to know, delivered to you at 20, 40 and on the hour. WILW, the sounds of The

Willows. News in from the courthouse, where the trial of Mr. Toad of the North End has commenced.”

The trial had evidently kicked off at a high-pitch. When the charges were read, there had been the expected laundry list pertaining to the recklessness Toad exhibited and the wanton destruction he caused. But the last, though not unexpected, still managed to create a stir. Mr. Toad would be charged with knowingly attempting to bring into human territory a prohibited item, in this case just slightly more than 150 gallons of Red Willow Juice. Upon this announcement, Tortoise reported that the defendant's facade had cracked and he had let out a great, heaving moan, followed by a procession of sobs and cries so loud that the judge had banged on his gavel and issued a stern reprimand.

Judge Brown was a hoary old brown bear with a chest full of greying hair and a dour demeanor that exceeded even Badger's. He was many times more intimidating too; a grand, magnificent force of nature whose presence and movement caused the air around him to rear back and then surge forth. It was a kind of fanfare that preceded him and one that, combined with his booming baritone, could send an unprepared young lawyer diving for cover, desperate to shield themselves from the barrage of disappointment and exasperation that might rain down upon them at any time and for really any reason. If anyone could keep the circus at bay during this trial, it was Judge Brown.

His personality was going to prove to be a challenge for Toad though, and Mole could already sense Badger scrambling to keep things from going sideways. Tortoise had practically snickered when describing both Badger and Toad's overly solicitous apologies to the judge following the latter's outburst.

Toad was right to panic too. This new charge was a very serious one, the one that had been privately feared the most. Upon hearing this news, Mole was stunned and perhaps even a little ashamed to feel laughter shoot up from his belly and come hiccuping out through his mouth. There was nothing joyous about it though, and nothing mean-spirited either. It was rather the kind of sound one makes when they first lay eyes on something they'd only ever imagined, some great edifice or piece of art suddenly looming there, right in front of you. It was a moment of both awe and fear.

Forty minutes later, another report told Mole that the prosecutor, Mr. Hare, had begun to lay out the town's case against Toad. Hare was a worthy adversary. Surprisingly young and exceedingly dapper, he had a particular gift for moving others

through complex subjects with grace and an attention to clarity. On that morning, he stood in front of the jury to deliver his opening remarks, one paw resting comfortably in the pants pocket of his impeccably tailored suit while the other was kept extended out, where it could point or clench or, at just the right moment, rest gently on his breast in a gesture of genteel shock.

With a reassuring smile and a soft, feathery tone, Hare described the sequence of events. Following up on a tip that had come into the police department at the human town of Castle Hill, both human and animal authorities staked out a position near to a local Willows landmark known as The Weir. The Weir was located just beyond the North End, out where The River turned and ran parallel to the hills and nearest to the town's border. There, at approximately 11:30pm, authorities observed two parties — one human and one animal in shape — approach one another. It was then that they moved in.

The animal suspect managed to make its way back to its automobile and a high speed chase ensued. While traveling south on Broom Branch Road, the animal lost control of the motor vehicle, at which point it skidded off the icy road, caroming off the southwest corner of Mr. Woodchuck's residence and ejecting its occupant, now positively identified as one Mr. Toad, from the driver's seat in the process.

"Now Mr. Toad's very esteemed counsel will soon stand up here and try to tell you a story, or should I say sell you a story, because this one is going to have to be so good that you'll pay for it," said Hare. The soft and feathery tone had sharpened and hardened and a note of derision ran through it. "He'll insist his client is an innocent victim. But nothing could be further from the truth. This is an animal with a long history of petty offenses, the kinds of crimes that — while not objectively serious — indicate a complete disregard for the animals around him and for this community of ours. Noise complaints. Drunken and disorderly behavior. Vandalism."

Hare paused now, turning to look at the defendant who was attempting a posture of resolve but who, at that moment, had turned a shade of green unnatural even for a toad.

"Now you may be saying to yourself, 'My my, smuggling is quite a step up for this animal.' True. But let's not forget which family this animal comes from. The toads have a long history with Red Willow Juice. It may not be the kind of history you read in the books because how could it be? Theirs is a history of juice smuggling, and in going to The Weir on that fateful night, this toad here was declaring his intentions to restart the

family business. By continuing to engage in illegal activities crossing the border, Mr. Toad may have been looking to prosper personally. But doing so also threatens the future prosperity of The Willow, demonstrating once again how little he actually cares.”

Mole was racing to process this information as it was delivered to him via Tortoise. Hare had really made a show of pulling back the curtain on the town’s history. Mole hadn’t known that the Commodore was actually moving Red Willow Juice out into human lands back then but it didn’t surprise him in the slightest. He shook his head in amazement, once again marveling at the impressively diabolical way that animal had gone about his business. The Commodore was making money off Red Willow Juice while simultaneously taking Stoat Crick Mart away from the weasels, based at least in part because of that kind’s involvement in the same, supposedly reprehensible product.

At lunch, he hustled back to the courthouse to see if he might find Rat during the court’s recess and get her impressions. He found her hunkered down with Murid in an alcove off the building’s main entryway, their midday meal of tomato sandwiches sitting untouched in front of them.

Rat seemed particularly withdrawn. There had been an intensity to her earlier, the result of adrenalin and anticipation. But it had been blunted by the intervening hours and so there was now a kind of weary sadness that reminded Mole of the way she talked of her father and his death. Mole wondered if she might already have said goodbye to Toad, setting him down in her past, left there to be looked back on from time to time with the kind of melancholy reserved for those loved ones who’d been lost or gone astray. At the same time though, Rat maintained her stubborn and unblinking defense of the animal.

“I don’t know what Hare thinks he’s doing. I mean, it’s just...,” she trailed off and then sighed. “It’s amazing to me that an animal can stand in a court of law and make these kinds of baseless accusations.” She stared off down the hall at a gaggle of animals standing by the courtroom door and staring right back at her.

“He’s grasping at straws, honey. They have nothing on him,” Murid said intently.

“It’s just theatrics is what it is. It should be offensive to everyone here. It’s cheap and manipulative. And for it to be Hare, of all animals! That’s betrayal. It’s betrayal,” Rat repeated. “After everything Toad’s family has done for him.”

“Their family and Mr. Toad’s have always been so close,” Murid said. “I suppose I’ll be striking them from the invite lists,” she added with a touch of sadness.

That afternoon, Badger commenced with his own opening remarks. He quickly stipulated that Toad had indeed driven carelessly in the moment and so had caused significant structural damage to Woodchuck's home and both physical and emotional trauma to his pup in the process. For that, Badger assured, Toad was prepared to suffer the consequences. On the other hand, the suggestion that Toad had been involved in any kind of large scale criminal enterprise was simply outrageous and untrue.

"My opposing counsel brought up some of Mr. Toad's past transgressions. Making a mess. Making too much noise. Petty acts. Inexcusable but petty, and largely attributable to the pain the defendant has suffered with, ever since the tragic passing of his parents less than two years ago. And now suddenly he's moving hundreds of gallons of illegal alcohol across the border? Even the prosecution stipulates that this is a giant, almost unimaginable step up."

Badger paused here and looked sadly at Toad, who stared back at him with an expression of mild bewilderment.

"No. Mr. Toad has neither the will nor the constitution for such endeavors. Now, we won't dispute the prosecution's allegations regarding his forebears and the business they conducted. But I will remind you that his family is also largely responsible for helping build the community that we now enjoy, and the stability of this community is of paramount importance to that family. If you need any proof, just look at Mr. Toad's late father, the good Doctor Toad. That animal worked tirelessly to ensure that The Willows would continue to thrive. He took steps to clean up his family business and I can assure you, as a long-time friend to the family, that Dr. Toad instilled those same values into his son. The suggestion that Mr. Toad would do anything to jeopardize that stability is simply preposterous.

Friends, Mr. Toad's reasons for visiting The Weir that night were entirely personal. It is a location with great meaning for him. As we all know, it is quite a beautiful spot and Mr. Toad visited it with his parents often. He had simply gone there that night to revisit those memories and perhaps share a moment with the spirits of his mother and father. And when this human appeared to call him over, the curious Mr. Toad obliged, only to find himself suddenly surrounded by police, yelling at him, pointing guns. It is regrettable, though understandable, that in the moment, a very confused Mr. Toad panicked and ran."

That evening over at Covey's, the animals who'd placed their bets on "innocent bystander" as the defense's chosen strategy applauded one another and then, with much cheer, proceeded to proudly buy a round of drinks for the bar.

Reading the transcript of Badger's remarks in the paper the next day, Mole was struck not just by the flimsiness of Toad's alibi but also Badger's apparent strategy. Trying to gin up sympathy for Toad by invoking not just his parents' tragic passing but his father's reputation in particular was predictable, and one supposed, understandable. It did feel a bit as if the defense were trying to take advantage of the dead however. And the suggestion that Toad had any care and consideration for The Willows at all was a risky play at best. If Badger were intending to exonerate Toad simply by appealing to the community's affection for his client, then he might as well just throw Toad into the keep himself right now and save everyone all this trouble.

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Mole's absence from the courtroom gallery lasted all of one day, his resolve drying up as quickly as a wet patch of fur against the summer sun. On that very first afternoon, he'd returned to work and deliberately let it slip that he could attend the proceedings at any time as a guest of Toad's, knowing full well what Beaver's reaction would be. And, just as he'd anticipated, the flabbergasted Beaver told Mole in no uncertain terms that if he did not go to the trial the next day and report back on everything he had seen and heard, then he would fire him without a moment's hesitation.

It's a specific agony one feels to live at a distance from something they feel so deeply wrapped up in, an agony that Mole had experienced on that day, sitting and listening to Tortoise's report on the radio or lingering at the periphery of Rat and Murid's lunchtime conversation. And then of course there is the frustration with yourself that comes with it, frustration for allowing that kind of intensity of emotion into your life, frustration that you are now wrapped up in it, at that agony's whim. The frustrated Mole knew full well the impression he'd make sitting behind Toad and at Rat's side, but he'd decided he could not care. That agony was too great.

Perhaps he had already made that decision. Despite Beaver's enthusiasm, these would be unpaid days off at the mill, and yet Mole had, by this point, begun to accept the odd bit of charity from both Rat and, on occasion, Toad and so he would be fine.

The fact was, he'd never been expected to pay for anything when he was with Rat and Toad and, in fact, they both seemed to delight in buying him things. Rat had endeavored to completely overhaul Mole's wardrobe and so it was now filled with items of her choosing, most of which Mole had to admit were quite becoming.

This didn't make him a sycophant though, and he tried to assure himself repeatedly that no one thought of him that way. Instead, he should take his cues from that last conversation with Otter and Spiny Lizard. They had still seemed rather proud and impressed with Mole, despite what his friend Toad had done. Nevertheless, walking to his seat in the courtroom that day, dressed as he was in some finely tailored gabardine trousers and an impeccably crafted white Oxford button-down, all courtesy of his girlfriend, Mole could feel the same questions settling down on to his shoulders and then their weight as they begin to press on him.

Hare's first witness would be Striped Skunk. The chief investigator of The Willows police department entered the courtroom that morning like the maitre'd of some long-established neighborhood restaurant, greeting each of the court's assorted apparatchiks with a smile, warm words whispered into ears and a paw placed on a shoulder.

Striped Skunk was known for a fashion sense both showy and also old-fashioned and he hadn't disappointed that day, settling into the witness stand in a pale grey, checked wool suit, bright red bowtie and wingtips that gleamed as he swung one leg up over the other and gave the jury a loose, wide smile.

He confirmed Hare's accounts of the prior run-ins with Toad, describing how the animal had most recently been cited for urinating on the 14th fairway at Red Ridge, an incident outrageous enough as is, not to mention the fact that he'd done it right in the middle of the country club's annual Father-Pup Charity Golf Scramble.

"The animal — young Mr. Toad, that is — was apparently seen by several of his fellow club members and expressed, shall we say, vocal disdain in response to their shock. He was quite colorful with his language. Allegedly."

This incident had occurred not long after Toad's parents' death and very shortly before he was rather forcefully sent on his long vacation by a group of friends, Rat included. Mole had only heard of this especially sad and besotted stretch of Toad's life in oblique terms but he'd certainly caught a whiff of the danger of it. He thought back to those first races at Backwater, and the way Toad seemed to savor the destructiveness of it all — how it seemed to invigorate him.

Hare had Skunk take the jury through the events leading up to Toad's arrest. He detailed how he had been contacted by an investigator from Castle Hill named Middleton, who had informed him of a tip he in turn had received from a confidential informant about a load of Red Willow Juice going over the border that night. Skunk and his deputy, Timber Wolf, staked out a position on one side of the border with human officers on the other. From there, they had observed two figures approach each other and make what appeared to be some kind of exchange. When they made their presence known, both parties fled.

Hare turned to Judge Brown now. "I'd like to introduce into evidence animal's Exhibit A: video footage of the raid, recorded by the humans' Castle Hill Police Department," he said with all the gusto and flair of an emcee announcing tonight's feature attraction.

The scraggly coyote that had long served as the court's bailiff now wheeled out a television set, and the entire gallery, Mole included, visibly canted forward in anticipation. Their role as spectators seemed to have suddenly taken on a new urgency, and the air crackled with energy.

In fact, it seemed that everyone in the room was staring at the screen intently, save for one animal, the accused. As everyone else leaned forward, Toad's body instead looked to have folded in on itself, its once buoyant form now collapsed into a crumpled and broken state.

The footage they were watching was shot at night, and through the windshield of a police car, and Mole himself was quite a ways away from the TV monitor's place in the courtroom. All of which was to say he initially had only a general idea what it was they were looking at. It appeared as if the camera was pointed at The Weir itself. Mole could make out the lines of its wide, concrete steps and, above them, Green Marsh Bridge, The River's northernmost crossing.

Mole knew the spot well. It was another popular field trip destination for young animals. Here, the lesson would be on the incredible innovations in engineering needed to control The River in the way they had. Like the established narrative for Stoat Crick Mart, The Weir's emergence was framed as one of progress — its existence as a sign of victory — though most came to question that position with time.

After a moment, a greyish blob appeared on screen, moving towards the patch of grass designated as The Weir's scenic viewpoint.

“You can see the human here, identified as Willie Williams of Castle Hill,” said Skunk. Then, as a second blob now moved into view and towards the first, Skunk continued, “And here you will see the defendant approaching.”

Indeed, if Mole squinted just so, he could convince himself that the smaller of the two blobs was Toad. He and Willie seemed to be talking and then there was suddenly a great deal of flashing light on the screen’s edges and some movement in the trees just to the right of Toad. He and Willie were moving in every direction at once as the panic overtook them. Toad dashed one way and Willie the other. Then both thought better and reversed course, crossing paths again. They might have even crashed into one another at one point. At last, both headed in opposite directions, exiting the frame.

“From here, we pursued Mr. Toad until he crashed his car on Broom Branch Road, after which point he was brought into our custody,” Skunk said with a tidy smile.

Hare now turned to the matter of the Red Willow Juice that had been discovered near the scene of the crime. Barrels of it had turned up in an unregistered truck found about a quarter of a mile from The Weir, in animal territory and off to the side of the same dirt road that Toad led police down as he tried to escape.

“What is the street value of 150 gallons of Red Willow Juice in human land, Inspector?”

“That’d be about \$10,000.”

Hare’s eyebrows shot up with a surprise that Mole felt sure was exaggerated. He then turned to Badger with a tidy smile of his own.

“Your witness.”

There was a pause now as defense counsel shuffled a bit of paperwork and cleared his throat noisily. Finally, with a bit of effort, he hauled himself up to his feet and slowly approached Skunk, who gazed back at him from the witness stand with a hint of amusement.

“Was there anything in the truck or found on or in any of the barrels that might have suggested an origin for them?”

“No, the barrels themselves were homemade, and rather crude, I should say. And as I already mentioned, the truck itself was unregistered and quite old.”

“Inspector, who are the primary producers of Red Willow Juice in The Willows?”

“The number one producers are the raccoons. But they have denied any involvement and we have turned up no evidence that this juice came from their stills. This was terrible product, if you don’t mind my saying.”

Badger nodded mildly and then turned to the judge.

“No further questions, Your Honor.”

The following morning, the residents of The Willows were formally introduced to Inspector Peter Talmadge Middleton of the Castle Hill Police Department. PT, as he was known to his friends, strode down the center aisle of The Willows Courthouse, with a dour, almost bored look on his face. He had none of the charisma of his animal counterpart and his suit, while finely tailored, was of a conservative style, seemingly designed to be forgettable.

Middleton was an older man, perhaps in his 50s, with thinning grey hair that he kept cropped neat and short, and the sort of weathered and windswept look that one's jaw and cheeks and the hollows in their eyes take on after they'd passed a certain point in life. He kept rigorously fit though. Even through the folds of his suit's fabric, his sinewy arms and narrow waist were apparent. He prided himself on having the discipline needed to maintain such a physique and he wore its raw and hardened effect well. Like Skunk before him, he seemed eminently comfortable in the witness box, crossing his legs and folding his hands across the rocky expanse of his stomach as he allowed for a hint of a polite smile to play across his face.

Standing opposite him, Hare briefly bowed his head, that same polite smile painted on his face as well. It struck Mole in the moment as a gesture of deference and emblematic of the whole animal-human dynamic. Despite any evidence to back up this belief, animals had always been considered inferior to humans; sillier, lazier, less sophisticated. This was, of course, utter nonsense and enlightened individuals on either side knew it. Nevertheless, sitting in that courtroom, Mole could feel Middleton carry that supposed intellectual superiority that had been bestowed upon him. The power in the room began to bend itself towards the human right before Mole's eyes.

Even Toad, who had initially remained the same sullen and pitiable lump that he had been for the majority of the trial, seemed to adopt a new posture the moment Middleton passed by him, though it wasn't a posture of deference. Toad rather suddenly leaned forward in his seat, staring at the human detective with furrowed brows. He seemed to be working something out in his head, turning in one direction, then the other, then

back again as if searching for someone or something that could confirm for him what was happening. After a moment, he moved to stand up but then stopped himself. Or, perhaps it was Badger who stopped him.

"Is there a problem, counselor?" growled the brown bear as Toad tried to wrench his arm free from Badger's grip.

"Not at all, Your Honor," said Badger, speaking over Toad's aggravated whispers.

"Mr. Badger, we have been over this. Now, if your client cannot control himself, I will be forced to hold him in contempt."

"Of course, Your Honor. It won't happen again, I assure you."

"Yes, well, we've said that before, haven't we?" replied the judge before turning to Hare. They had indeed. Toad's outburst during the trial's opening remarks had been merely the first salvo in a lengthy series of noisy and often disturbing breakdowns featuring swoons, lamentations and the frequent rending of garments. Today's flare-up actually seemed comparatively benign.

The prosecutor meanwhile had taken up his usual position during such moments. He stood in the corner of the room nearest to the jury box, where he regarded the chaos at the defense table with a look of great and, one could even believe, sincere pity.

"Mr. Hare, you may proceed."

"Thank you, your Honor. Detective, were you familiar with Mr. Toad prior to the events of the night in question?"

"Only by reputation. I was familiar with Mr. Toad's family history and of course their, uh, well, their wealth."

Middleton glanced at Toad for the first time then. It was just for a moment but it was still enough time for Mole to catch the glint in Middleton's eyes; a kind of flat and hard look, penetrative enough to cause Toad to straighten up, as if on cue.

Hare proceeded to then move the detective briskly back through the timeline of events and the role he played, beginning with the tip he received from his confidential informant. It was here that the court first learned that Toad had been named specifically as the animal seller.

"He said that he had been contacted by Mr. Toad and that Mr. Toad had said he had a lot of Red Willow Juice that he was looking to unload and did my guy know anyone who would buy it. So my guy said he'd ask around and then he came to talk to me."

“And are you prepared to reveal the name of your informant here in court?” said Hare.

“I am,” replied Middleton, and a collective inhalation from the gallery followed, as everyone seemed to once again recognize the gravity of the moment and their key role as witnesses to it.

“My informant was Willie Williams,” Middleton announced with more than a little pomp.

This was a surprising turn, yet any astonishment it might have engendered was immediately swallowed up by the ensuing revelation.

“And where is Mr. Williams now?”

“Willie Williams was found dead. Shot in the head and buried in a shallow grave.”

There followed an audible gasp emanating from all corners of the courtroom, of the kind that Mole had thought existed only in works of fiction. Willie apparently was the rumored casualty that The Willows had been buzzing about.

“When was this?”

“The body was discovered on January 20th by some folks out for a walk. Evidence suggests he was killed on or around the 18th. But that case is still under investigation.”

“January 20? That's four days after Mr. Toad's arrest. Though of course Toad was released to the custody of his lawyer, Mr. Badger, and so was free on the 18th.”

“Objection!” cried Badger now, jumping to his feet. “That's prejudicial, Your Honor, and the prosecution knows it.”

“Sustained. The jury is to disregard those last remarks,” said Judge Brown.

But it was too late. With a few well placed words, the prosecution had succeeded in connecting Toad to the death of Willie Williams. Hare paused again now to bow apologetically and allow the jurors to go about pretending to do as instructed while, in fact, they took the time to imagine Toad masterminding the murder of his supposed partner in crime. Then, he continued.

“Let's return to this tip from Mr. Williams then. How was it determined to be credible?”

“Well, I have — excuse me, *had* — a long history with Willie. He'd been into all kinds of small-time crimes — grifts on little old ladies, credit card scams, that sort of thing. I actually first caught him when he was trying to make up his own juice. He probably would have killed someone if he'd ever got to serve it,” Middleton added,

with a dark twinkle in his eye. “Anyway, he went to work for us after that. He’s the kind of character who always seems to know what’s going on. He wasn’t much of a criminal but he had a lot of contacts, a lot of friends.”

Middleton paused now and allowed for a different kind of smile, one with a touch of melancholy to it.

“He was actually a decent guy. It’s a shame what happened to him.”

“Yes,” agreed Hare solemnly, “but if I could move us forward.”

“Sure. Well, when Willie told me about this, I told him to make like he’d found a buyer and to try to arrange a meeting. And that’s when I got in touch with your Inspector Skunk.”

Hare now returned to the actual stakeout and arrest of Mr. Toad, an area that had already been covered extensively during Skunk’s testimony. Mole was beginning to see how stiflingly boring a trial could be. If run through in painstaking detail enough times, even something as dramatic as the incident at The Weir could be rendered bloodless and rote, and a criminal trial seemed to be all about the painstaking detail. Mole tried to remember that he was here as a writer and historian first and foremost, so it was important that he remain alert to the smallest detail, the bit of information, maybe even the whispered word, the gesture, anything that might help him tell the larger story. Nevertheless, he felt his eyelids grow heavy now and, out of the corner of his eye, he saw Rat’s head nod too.

As the animals filed out of the courtroom for lunch, Mole was busy trying to regain his focus and get his blood flowing again after the stupor that had beset him inside, and so he did not at first notice Murid grabbing frantically at Badger’s shirt sleeves. Badger was doing his best to ignore her. He kept his head low, a paw still holding firm to Toad as they made their way to the small room set aside for them. Finally, he turned back to Murid at the room’s threshold.

“Yes, what is it?” he growled at her. The trial was clearly taking its toll on Badger. At that moment, he didn’t seem wise so much as old.

“I’ve seen that man before. The detective. He’s been to the house,” she said.

“Well of course he has! He was investigating.”

“No, no. Before the troubles.”

“What?” Mole heard Toad exclaim from behind Badger.

“At one of them parties you had,” she said, turning to look at Rat and then back to Badger. “With some of your new friends.”

“Of course! That’s it!” shouted Toad. “And I’ll tell you something else —”

“Quiet!” barked Badger, though the weariness still lingered in him. He looked back at Murid with hard and flinty eyes. “What else do you remember? Who was he there with?”

“Oh, I couldn’t say. The parties this lot threw tended to be a bit loud so I went to my quarters rather quickly. I didn’t see much. But I remembered his face and them eyes.”

“There are powerful forces at play here, Badger. You need to listen to me —” beseeched Toad.

“I said quiet!” replied Badger with a fierceness that seemed to surprise even him. He took a moment to soften his stance. “Do you have any proof of this?” he now asked Murid.

“Nothing but my memory.”

“Then it’s useless to us now,” said Badger with resigned dismay. And with that, he shut the door, leaving Murid, along with Rat and Mole, standing on the other side, wondering anew if this truly was to be the end of the infamous Mr. Toad.

The prosecution rested the next day, following the testimony of Mr. Woodchuck. His appearance was an obvious play for sympathy and a somewhat risky one on Hare’s part, given Woodchuck’s chilly demeanor. He wasn’t an animal that naturally engendered such sympathy and yet, on the stand, Woodchuck played his part well.

“At the end of the day, I’m a father,” he explained, responding to Hare’s question about his general state of mind in the aftermath of the crash. Badger had attempted a feeble objection to this line of questioning on the grounds that it was irrelevant and had been quickly overruled.

“All I care about are my pups and if any one of them were to be hurt, so help me —,” Woodchuck stopped himself and glanced at Toad before continuing. “Whatever happened that night, I just want to know that justice will be served here, you know?”

“I couldn’t agree more,” said Hare solemnly.

But even accounting for the natural swell of emotion that any warm blooded animal might feel when listening to such an impassioned declaration from so clearly a loving father, the true highlight of that last day was delivered by an earlier witness, one whose

appearance came as a complete shock to most everyone in the courtroom, Mole especially. It was none other than his old friend, Spiny Lizard.

At the announcement of the name, Mole spun around in his seat to watch his old schoolmate now come walking stiffly down the aisle. Spiny's usually bright, beady eyes were narrowed and his rubbery smile had now been set in a display of grave seriousness. The scales that ran along the crest of his head had been dutifully slicked down and he had even squeezed himself into a collared shirt and tie.

Mole had never seen Spiny this way. He was clearly extremely nervous and very aware of himself in this space. He seemed terrified of making the wrong move or breaking courtroom protocol in some way. Upon entering the witness box, Spiny had sat down, then immediately hopped up again, glancing around for permission, then apologizing profusely when he received only looks of confusion.

"Mr. Lizard —"

"Spiny. Call me Spiny."

He offered up a weak smile to Hare, who nodded politely and pressed forward. There was none of the efficient conviviality that the prosecutor had exhibited towards Striped Skunk and certainly none of the deferential respect he'd paid to the human detective. Instead, there was something almost paternal about his demeanor, like a father who'd caught his son and friends in the act of something mildly illicit and was now pressing them to admit it. In a flash, Mole was reminded of his own father.

"How did you come to meet the defendant, Spiny?"

Mole felt his whole body clench and Rat, herself still reeling from the sight of the jovial drunkard she'd met once or twice now sitting on the stand, grabbed at his arm. Spiny cut a glance their way.

"Well, I don't know exactly when I first met him. He kinda just started appearing at some of the, uh, local get-togethers down in the South End. But I first really got to know him at the races in Backwater."

Again, Spiny's gaze went to Mole. They made momentary eye contact and, in that moment, Mole knew Spiny wasn't going to name him. Mole had no idea what it would have meant for him if Spiny had but he was glad he didn't need to find out.

Hare proceeded to prod Spiny into a fuller description of the races. This was the first time they'd been mentioned at the trial and it made Mole think again of Weasel. Mole wondered what that animal made of all this. Despite the efforts towards

respectability, Mole was sure Weasel still had his paws in less than legal activities. He still wasn't positive Weasel hadn't had something to do with this either. At the very least, Weasel knew things. He was probably furious to be associated with such a dundering fool as Toad and, again, Mole was acutely aware that it had been he who had introduced Toad to this world in the first place.

"Mr. Lizard, please describe for the court the conversation you had with Mr. Toad on the night of December 11."

"Yeah, okay, so we were over at his house. By then, he'd started to invite a bunch of us over — animals from the races — to, you know, hang out, have a few drinks, a few laughs. So we're over there that night, we're all playing pool and I'm sitting next to Toad and we're both drinking Red Willow Juices, right? And he starts talking about his family and about how they'd made all this money off of the juice. That it was like the family business. And then he said that he wanted to get back into it. Into the juice business."

"And what did you say?" asked Hare, who'd moved to the opposite end of the room, as if to allow Spiny's story room to fully unravel.

"Well, I said that sounded cool and, you know, good luck with that but then he said did I know anyone who could help him with that —"

Toad's shoulders had begun to heave ever so slightly over the course of the last few minutes, and he'd begun to emit a kind of chuffing noise, the puffs of air sharpening and tightening as Spiny went on, taking on a pitch and timbre until they had become peals of laughter. Toad was laughing. He jumped up.

"You scoundrel!" he yelled, pointing his finger at Spiny. Badger was on him in a flash, as was Coyote. But Toad continued, howling his accusation at the suddenly saddened and confused looking witness.

"Scoundrel!" he shouted, again and again over the desperate pleas of Badger and the weary admonishments of Coyote and the loud and insistent banging of Judge Brown's gavel.

Chapter 9: Badger's Defense

The discovery of the 150 gallons of Red Willow Juice and the question of where it had come from had long since leaked out into the greater Willows community. There were of course the raccoons to consider but while the raccoons were the first producers of the juice and still easily the largest, providing wholesale Red Willow Juice to practically every reputable establishment in The Willows, they were not the only ones. All manner of animal and allegedly human as well had tried their hand at mixing up the potent brew, and many had succeeded.

So it was no certainty that the juice found at The Weir had come from the raccoons. Yet, the sheer volume indicated that it must have come from a sophisticated operation, of which there were very few. Badger had seemed to at least be hinting at the idea that the barrels had originated with the raccoons when he'd asked Striped Skunk about it on the witness stand. But what connections he intended to establish with that line of inquiry and whether Badger meant to allege that the raccoons were that night's actual sellers or not remained hard to see.

Indeed, in the time to come and among the animals of The Willows who were prone to such analysis, there would be much speculation around Badger's performance at the trial. Many, in fact, placed blame for its outcome squarely on his shoulders, though such commentators almost always prefaced their damnation with an acknowledgement that, of course, Mr. Toad was guilty as sin too. All that Badger's failings had actually done was prevent the usual miscarriage of justice — the one that let rich boobs like Toad go free — from happening. So really, they should thank him.

Mole himself had, to put it kindly, noticed certain deficiencies in Badger's work. His inquisition of Spiny Lizard, for instance, had been brief and lacking in anything truly probing. As Mole had watched from the gallery, it had occurred to him that it was actually quite odd for Toad to be sniffing around for a Red Willow Juice connection. If Toad's family had such a long history with the stuff, then surely Toad could have found

a better way back to it than to survey whatever lowlife friends he could. Even if there was really nothing to be said beyond that, it did seem worth introducing into the minds of the jury.

Yet, Badger hadn't gone down that path. Instead, he'd rather rotely established that Spiny himself was no model citizen, with his own history of misdemeanor crimes. He also pushed the lizard on the matter of his and Toad's sobriety on the night in question. Here, Spiny showed his nervousness, stumbling over his answer and allowing Badger to introduce the idea that Toad was quite besotted indeed and that his conversation with Spiny that night could have amounted to nothing more than drunken, empty musings. It was a fair point but one that Mole didn't see making much of an impact with those jury members.

Rat had also taken the opinion that Badger was doing a poor job defending Toad, and she'd grown increasingly more vocal on the subject, culminating with a row at Toad Hall on the eve of Badger presenting the defense's case.

That night had at first followed a predictable pattern. As usual, after court let out, Toad and Badger shared an early dinner while discussing the events of that day and strategizing for the following. These were typically closed-door affairs that featured, according to Murid, many stern lectures from Badger intermingled with the occasional outburst of yelling or crying or general self-immolation from Toad. It all left Toad feeling quite vulnerable and bereft and so, as night fell, Rat would arrive to have a drink by the fire and offer up whatever good cheer she could to quell his mood.

Her presence was certainly required on this particular night. Hare had followed the crescendo of Woodchuck's testimony by immediately resting his case, letting the dramatics of that moment leave their vivid impression in the minds of the jurors. Mercifully, Judge Brown had then called for a recess for the day, and so the angry, panicked and thoroughly distraught Toad was allowed to quickly retreat back to the safety of his estate.

Outside the courthouse afterwards, Mole had made excuses, telling Rat that he needed to stop by the mill to check on some errant paperwork and that he would meet her at Toad's. But what he really needed to do was walk, to get out and go far, to move in such a way as to shake free from it all. These days, the urge Mole felt to jump out of his skin was near constant. The chatter and buzz around town might have receded a bit as the trial had proceeded into the slog of its actual business but it left behind something

hot and hard in the streets which Mole couldn't bear to stand on. Sometimes, it felt as if all that was left for him was his seat in the court's gallery and his role in a story that he no longer had the stomach for.

Mole was certainly relieved to discover he was still considered enough of a South Ender to have warranted Spiny's protection. Yet despite that animal's decision not to explicitly name Mole as the one who'd introduced Toad to the South End, Spiny's appearance up on the stand represented yet another tendril — perhaps the strongest one yet — reaching towards Mole, threatening to wrap itself around his body and hold him to that seat, trap him close to this case and these animals and whatever difficulties lay ahead.

At the same time, Mole found himself wondering whether or not the testimony Spiny had given had lost him the friendship that had grown between him and Toad. And then of course he wondered why he cared what an animal like Toad thought of him, particular now, and he hated himself because he knew the answer. As Mole trundled up the path to Toad Hall now, with the evening's full darkness descending and the sound of nightingales calling out across the rushes, he marveled that he had come that night at all.

Inside, the fight between Rat and Badger was just now coming to its boil. The two of them were seated across from one another at the gargantuan dining room table that had become a kind of base of operations for Toad's defense. The last of the evening's dessert course shared space with a veritable sea of piled papers, accordion files with glossy photographs splaying out from the inside, bundles of pens and pencils, and stacks of sticky notes.

Rat was bent forward across the dregs of her coconut cream pie, with her paws pressed down flat against the table. She was speaking in the manner of one who desperately wanted to understand the choices being made by those around her and who was still ready to extend the benefit of the doubt to her respected peers. There was the unmistakable hint of anger there too though. It was lying under the surface, yet Rat was making sure its presence was known, ready to burst forth should those choices prove incorrect, as she suspected they would.

"There's just no actual connection that exists between Toad and all that juice. That's all I'm saying. And it feels as though we're not emphasizing that nearly enough," she said.

Badger slowly removed his bifocals and massaged his temples wearily. Mole was sure he saw then a flash of regret pass across the old jurist's face; a searching in the eyes and a particular way that the mouth seemed to sag. He'd come back for one last round in the ring, stepping in to save the progeny of one of the great families of The Willows, and now he had found himself in an unfamiliar and disorienting place; in over his head.

"I mean, for example, you could have made Skunk say that they haven't found any connections between Toad and Raccoon, other than those silly street races —"

Toad had been standing in the far corner of the room, practically wedged into its corner. Now, he came striding forward, nodding his head vigorously.

"Yes, yes, I agree with Rat," he said with an authoritative tone that nonetheless rang hollow.

"But that's enough of a connection right there," Badger barked testily. "That's all that Hare would need. No, the best we can do is leave that sliver of a doubt in the minds of the jury. We carefully introduce the idea that it was the raccoons, and the raccoons alone, trying to move the juice but we don't give Hare enough of an opening to want to discredit that idea."

"The raccoons did it though," exclaimed Rat, "so Hare shouldn't be able to discredit that, now should he? They were angry when Toad's father stopped selling their juice to the humans, so they were trying to cut a deal themselves."

"I understand the theory," replied Badger, "but unfortunately, we don't have any evidence that will prove it."

Mole stood at the doorway, now very much regretting having come that night, and pondering whether or not it was too late to just turn around and return post haste to the peaceful solitude of his Wild Wood burrow.

"Would you like some pie then?" asked Murid, a note of exhaustion in her voice. She had let him into the room and now stood next to him.

"No, thank you, Murid," replied Mole, as politely as he could. He offered her a small smile but the look she gave him in return was one of grave concern. It couldn't have been easy tending to Toad these last few weeks and it was beginning to show.

Mole felt himself withering under her gaze, and he wondered if she was somehow concerned for him. Perhaps it wasn't concern. With everyone in a state of crisis and Murid scrambling to nurse them all, his presence — here for a slice of pie and nothing else — must have felt especially inane to Toad Hall's majordomo. He moved past her

hurriedly, only to run straight into a side table, rattling the vintage, silver-plated coffee set on top. Reaching to steady the stack of cups and plates, Mole then managed to knock over the sugar bowl, emptying its contents onto the floor below in a comically slow and steady stream.

By the time he was done, both Toad and Badger were staring daggers. Rat looked at him with something approaching plaintiveness instead as he finally settled into the seat next to her. She grabbed his paw and smiled mildly. A moment of silent tension had settled over the group in the wake of Mole's little performance but then, in an instant, it was gone. Rat's frustration from a moment ago swelled back up and she turned to Badger again.

"What about the detective then? The human one? Obviously, either he or the informant were lying about Toad being the one to contact them. Personally, I think it's the detective. It's awfully convenient that this informant character isn't alive to tell us his side of things. And the fact that the human then didn't tell Skunk that it was Toad who was going to be moving the juice? He just said it was going to an animal. What is that about?"

Badger had in fact asked Detective Middleton about that discrepancy during the cross-examination, though Middleton had easily deflected the question, explaining that due to Toad's family's notoriety, he'd thought it best not to reveal the animal's identity until absolutely necessary.

Badger had been as deferential to the human as Hare and he'd accepted Middleton's explanation then with nothing more than a slow, thoughtful nod, just as he had when he'd earlier questioned the detective about Williams' death.

"Unfortunately, we haven't turned up any evidence that can as of yet tell us who may have killed Willie," said Middleton. "But the investigation is ongoing."

As with Skunk, it felt as if Badger was poking around in the dark, with no clear expectation of what he may find.

"You know what I think? I think this detective is only saying that the informant told him it was Toad. Toad showed up at The Weir, and this vile human saw his chance. He wants to take Toad down because he hates rich animals and he's not going to stop until he succeeds," continued Rat.

Mole thought that to be unlikely. It was awfully convenient for Toad to have shown up and given the detective that chance, and furthermore, Mole failed to see why Toad's

wealth was of any concern for human police. Even if Middleton had resented it, that still wasn't much of a motive for him to so blatantly try to take Toad down. Toad, however, was in total agreement with his old friend.

"Absolutely!" he shouted out, triumphantly. "Now that makes sense. How do we talk about that in court?"

"It's too late," said Rat, casting a derisive eye towards Badger. "We could have tried to get it out of the human but he's gone back over the border now."

Mole had to admit that he was rather shocked by Rat's tone. He could remember the way she had seemed to cling to Badger's wisdom and advice on the day after Toad's arrest, as they'd all wandered about Toad Hall anxiously. Now though, she did nothing to hide her disappointment in him.

"Look, Rat, my dear, I understand your concern. But I really think our time is best spent thinking about the work ahead," said Badger, desperately trying to hold on to the last of his patience.

"Fine then. Shall we talk about Toad's testimony?" she asked.

"I have said before, and I maintain now: that is a bad idea."

"They absolutely must hear it from me. I'm the one on trial, Badger. Me!" Toad piped up.

"But we must stick to the plan, you idiotic creature!" exclaimed Badger. "I've told you before, the circumstances of that night are not where this case will be won or lost. If you go up there, we run a terrible risk of —!"

"Yes, yes, yes," said Toad impatiently.

"Hare is going to try to impugn your character. He's going to try to get a rise out of you and make you look like a spoiled, rich brat —"

"I'd just like to see him try!" chortled Toad.

"— which you bloody well are! So it won't be that difficult. And then no one will believe anything you have to say. So you mustn't fall for his traps. You must remain calm and focused." At this last remark, Badger stopped himself short and stared at his young charge. "This is a terrible idea, Toad," he finally said.

"Nonsense! I know just what to say. Now then, you work for me, Badger, and as the client, I say that I shall testify."

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Rat had recently taken to spending all her nights with her mother, telling Mole that she wanted to come to court every day as bright-eyed and well groomed as possible. Mole wasn't sure what to make of this decision. He was an intuitive enough animal to know this didn't bode well for them and her absence from his home and the lack of her warmth in his bed wasn't helping that psyche of his either. But he also knew that he couldn't say anything. Rat's relationship with Toad ran much deeper than his own which meant she outranked him on the scale of pain and suffering. It was therefore Mole's job to offer unblinking support to her.

Now, on most nights, he'd walk her home to River Bank, listening as she worried over Toad, or railed against a system she said was designed to destroy her friend, or, more recently, vented her frustrations over Badger. Tonight, however, she was uncharacteristically quiet, and Mole thought at first that her battle with Badger earlier had exhausted her. As they approached the ceremonial, wrought-iron gate that marked the North End's official entrance and exit though, she suddenly turned to him.

"What do you know about this Spiny Lizard?" she said in a calculated tone of pleasant curiosity. "You know him, right? From, like, the neighborhood?"

"I suppose so," replied Mole carefully. He could feel Rat edging towards something, and pulling him with her.

"I just don't understand why he would lie about something like that. You know, Toad was nothing but kind and warm and generous to those animals and now they turn on him."

"What do you mean, 'those animals'?"

This was customarily the point at which Mole was expected to offer that unblinking support of his, and instead he'd done quite the opposite. He'd just thrown open the door to a fight. Rat now looked at him with dismay.

"Oh please, Mole, let's not turn this into a North End-South End thing, okay? I've said before, Hare is the biggest traitor of them all and he's a North Enders through and through."

"He's the town's attorney. He's just doing his job."

"He could have recused himself. I mean, the sheer number of times I watched that animal make a fool of himself at the Toad family Christmas party...And by the way, Mole, Toad has been nothing but an incredibly kind and generous friend to you too."

“Yeah. To what end?” grumbled Mole.

“What does that mean?” she asked.

“Maybe he wanted some kind of way in. Maybe that's what this is all about...”

Rat stopped now and stared at Mole, her mouth agape.

“Oh, he was using you, is that it? Is that what you mean?”

Mole's mind raced ahead. All that generosity — the open door and invitation extended to him from across the invisible border that separated the town — it had bought Toad something. It had bought Rat something too, for that matter. They wore it on their faces that night at The Holt and down in Backwater for the races.

“I mean that it might be that he actually did it, Rat! Have you thought of that?” The words verily dripped with derision as they came out his mouth.

“Have I thought of that? No, no, I haven't thought of that yet, Mole. Please do enlighten me,” Rat parried.

“I just think maybe you should consider that. Just as a means to prepare yourself...for all possibilities,” said Mole. He could now hear himself trying to soften the previous statement, backpedaling, and he hated himself for it.

“You think he would do that? Endanger himself? Endanger this community?” Rat asked. It was now pain that rose up in her voice.

And again, Mole felt it surge forth and erupt out of him, uncontrolled. “Yes, I do, Rat! I think he would.”

Rat smiled, the corners of her mouth rising up as high as they could go, until the smile became a vicious sneer.

“You're just like the rest of them, Mole. I knew it. I knew it! This isn't about Toad or any Red Willow Juice. I mean, who cares? This is about some ancient vendetta.”

“What vendetta? What are you talking about?”

“However it is you feel about Toad and his life and how he is able to live, he doesn't deserve this.”

“You don't know that, Rat.”

“And what do you know? What does all this research of yours tell you about how vile and evil we all are?”

They stood, staring at each other silently for a moment, in the middle of the well-manicured and faintly perfumed path that wound its way through the North End. Then, without a word, Rat turned and continued on her way. Mole followed behind, all the

way to her mother's. There, he watched as she wordlessly climbed the stairs, finally pausing at the threshold to look back at him.

"Goodnight, Mole."

"Goodnight, Rat."

A few hours later, Rat appeared at the entrance of Mole's burrow. He, of course, had not gone to sleep, despite his exhaustion, but had instead paced his living room, his hands waving back and forth, the occasional utterance escaping from his lips.

"I mean, come on!" Mole said at one point. He followed that up soon after with a spastic, "Really? Really and truly, if that's how it is..." It was especially galling because he couldn't quite decide where he wanted to direct his anger. It felt as if both sides — the North and the South — expected his allegiance, except they all now doubted it too. The only way out was to pick a side, yet he couldn't be sure that that side would pick him back. It was unfair of everyone, and it made Mole hate them all equally.

But then Rat appeared, tearful and apologetic, and Mole was also instantly tearful and apologetic.

"I shouldn't have said those things. I know you're not like that," said Rat.

"No, no," replied Mole. "It was wrong of me to snap at you. Of course you're just trying to help your friend. And I want to help him too."

They spent the rest of the night that way: wrapped in each other's arms, whispering assurances to one another, both desperately hoping to ward off that creeping sense of resolution that was coming.

The next day, neither Rat nor Mole was as bright-eyed or well-groomed as they would have liked. Toad, for his part, had come dressed in the most humble and conservative suit his closet could offer, stepping up to the witness stand as a picture of contrition. It was a necessary effort, given all that the jury had already seen from him over the course of the trial. The effect was mitigated however by his eyes, which noticeably darted from the twelve animals staring back at him from their seats to Badger and back again. It was as clear as day; Toad's insecurities on full display as he sought some sign of approval for the performance he was about to put on.

"Now Mr. Toad," began Badger. "Could you describe to the court your actions on the night in question. Start at the very beginning please."

Toad cleared his throat and gazed down before turning to look at the jury fully.

“Yes, well, I had been to the races at Backwater that night. I had taken an interest in automobiles and racing culture, as potentially the subject of my next documentary film. Now, I admit to you all that I had grown very passionate about racing, and, as a result, I had begun to participate in those races. And I know that they’re dangerous and illegal and I am sorry,” Toad declared, bowing his head.

He was warming to this new role of his as contrite and accountable and, for a moment, it seemed almost believable to Mole. But then Toad smiled ever so slightly and he sat back and suddenly there was the air of closure to the speech too, as if he believed owning up to his part in the races were enough to excuse the rest of his behavior. Only, Mole could also see that Toad was shaking ever so slightly.

“And where did you go after leaving the races?” asked Badger.

“I had been thinking about my parents, actually. Sometimes, they just pop into my head. I don’t know why. They really loved it over by The Weir. They thought it was beautiful, you know? And we went there, a lot, as a family. So I thought I might take the long way and stop there on my way home. I parked at the access road and began walking over and that’s when I saw the human.”

“What was this human doing?”

“He was waving to me. So I walked towards him, and as I got closer, I could see him.”

“Did you recognize him?”

“No, I’d never seen him before in my life. But, as I said, he was waving at me and I suppose I was curious. So, well, I walked up to him and he smiled and said, ‘Good evening,’ and then he held out his hand. And just as I reached to shake it — well, it was as if the whole world were turning upside down. There were all these animals and humans yelling and there were lights flashing everywhere.”

“That must have been quite a frightening moment for you,” said a kindly Badger.

“Well, I suppose so,” said Toad with a humorless chuckle. “Something certainly had an effect on me, that’s for sure, and, well, I’m afraid I did lose control. It was as if everything seemed to speed up and then slow down at the same time. Like, all of the sudden, I’m on Broom Branch Road and there’s those lights right behind me. Like, it happened in the blink of an eye. And then I was crashing, and it felt like an eternity.”

Toad looked at the jury again and this time, Mole saw something different in his eyes. It wasn’t the deliberate contrition of a moment ago. At this moment, Toad truly

did look lost. Badger then paused, either to let the power of his client's emotional state fully make its impact or to buy himself some time as he shuffled through some paperwork at the defense table.

The more Mole watched Badger in action, the less he was sure what he was actually looking at. There was the temptation to say that the animal had lost a step, that he wasn't the courtroom titan he once was and awkward moments like this, as the court waited for Badger to catch up, were proof. But Mole also saw the traits that Badger shared with his adversary on the prosecution's side — the way that they both sought, and often succeeded, in charming the jury, and befriending them. Badger wasn't the smooth and assured salesman that Hare was but his weariness seemed to curry the jury's favor nevertheless. Just as he had with Mole on the night that they had first met, Badger managed to exude a kind of rough comfort. It was nothing soft or placating. Instead, it was secure and steadfast and if it did hurt a bit, that was only the resiliency poking through.

It was the same thinking that led an animal to purchase some antique piece of furniture rather than one right off the assembly line. The antique might be scuffed and worn, without that gleam of newness, but its continued existence proved its worth. It had been built to last and it had, and so the principles upon which it'd been constructed could be trusted.

"Mr. Toad, do you have any idea how the 150 gallons of Red Willow Juice came to be in that truck on the side of the road?"

"I do not."

"Did you ever intend to conspire to transport Red Willow Juice across the border and into human land?"

"I did not."

"Thank you," Badger said. He turned so that he faced both the jury and Toad too, looking from one to the other and nodding his head very slowly and with all the considerable gravitas at his disposal. He was working to bring the group all together in that moment, with a shared mission to return this animal's innocence to him, an innocence born from their belief in his story.

Of course, it was an objectively terrible alibi and Hare knew it. Standing in front of Toad as he got set to begin his cross-examination, he wore the same look that a lion has before they devour their dinner of antelope carcass. He wasted no time in pointing out

that Toad had no prior history of sentimental visits to The Weir nor had he told anyone where he was headed that night and why. According to Hare, the fact that it had allegedly been an impulsive visit on Toad's part was also very convenient for him, as it meant the jury would just have to take him at his word.

Having quickly affirmed how ridiculous Toad's story was, he then moved to probing an entirely new and somewhat surprising element to the case, at least to Mole: the defendant's financial situation.

"Your problems with money are extensive, aren't they? So well known, in fact, that your spending is closely monitored, isn't that right?"

Toad rocked back in his chair, allowing the momentum to push him down into a slouch before he pushed himself back up again. Especially watchful observers recognized this as the first sign of a pending tantrum.

"I wouldn't say 'closely,' no," said Toad through a clenched jaw.

"Well, any amount that exceeded your monthly allowance would have to be approved by your family company's board of directors. Though, they were in the habit of approving all such requests so perhaps you're right, Mr. Toad," said Hare with a soft chuckle. "For example, they approved a request in the middle of November of last year. Now, as part of that request, you had to submit a written description of what you needed the money for."

Hare strolled back to his table and quite delicately extracted a single sheet of paper from its place at the top of the pile.

"Which I happen to have." In a plummy tone, he read from the paper. "For the production of a feature-length documentary-style film detailing the underground car racing culture of The Willows; the animals, the machines, the lives. Funds will cover research and scouting; the purchase and rental of production equipment and remuneration for key talent. You requested \$120,000."

"Yes?" said Toad with impatience. "I already mentioned the film. What about it?"

"How's it coming?" Hare asked with feigned innocence.

"We've hit some delays, as you might imagine," Toad said dryly. He was now visibly fidgeting, rocking back and forth in the seat and building up his potential energy in the process. Mole could practically feel the pressure increasing, as if the whole room might pop at any moment.

“Oh well then surely the money you requested for the project remains, more or less, untouched. I mean, did you film anything at all?”

“Of course I did. Listen to me, the money that was spent was put to good effect. Every last dime went towards the film, I assure you of that.”

“So then, you have receipts? Evidence of where all those dimes went?”

Toad opened his mouth to fire back but then paused as he let out a cold and rattling sigh.

“No,” he finally said.

This moment of candor seemed to set Hare back momentarily, but he recovered quickly.

“So then where did it go, Mr. Toad?”

“It went towards research and experiences that can help me see the true theme and heart of the film. Not everything comes with a receipt, you know.”

“And the additional money you requested in December? Did those experiences come with a receipt? How about the withdrawals four days before you were arrested?”

“Now that was to buy an antique. I can show it to you if you’d like. See, I had been overseas last winter and taken a real interest in eastern-style musical instruments and then this opportunity came up to buy a kind of zither —”

Toad was rambling now, spitting out words in the vain hope that a wave of them might keep Hare at bay. But Hare was having none of that.

“Oh please, Mr. Toad, spare us another story of your extravagances. It’s an affront to the hard-working animals in this community. Not only that, it’s a lie. The money went to pay for all your gambling losses at Backwater, did it not?”

“Not all of it, no.”

“That’s what your so-called research was. That’s what the entire film was — simply an excuse for you to demonstrate yet again how callous and careless you are — not just with the money that your late father had hoped to put to such good use but with the well-being of your fellow Willows animals!”

“Objection! This is argumentative!” roared Badger and suddenly Toad was on his feet.

“How dare you?” bellowed Toad. “How dare you say something like that to me, Hare. I’m twice the animal you are and you’ve always known it.”

Hare raised his paws up with even more feigned innocence and returned to the prosecution's table without another word. And there Toad stood, sputtering angrily, looking very much the spoiled brat that Badger predicted he would.

After a short break, the defense was given their opportunity for redirect, and Badger had to choose which of the fronts to defend. He opted to address the question of Toad's money and the requests he'd made of his company's board. And it was in response to this that Toad again demonstrated his unique ability to undermine any trust his lawyer could have hoped to work up.

"Listen, I know it might be difficult to understand but this is the level at which I live. Whereas, months later, you may not remember how you'd spent some five dollar sum here or there, I can't remember where that thousand dollars or so went."

This remark occasioned a look of profound physical discomfort on the part of Badger. He had advised Toad during the recess that they should frame his documentary and the expenses associated with it as a means to celebrate and add to the rich cultural history of The Willows. Certainly, the idea hadn't been to trivialize the money. Yet here was Toad doing just that and doing so without the slightest bit of self-awareness.

In a further effort to refute Hare's accusations, Badger then called to the stand Mr. Goat, the chief financial officer of Anura Developments. Goat was not a physically imposing animal but he had his own sense of weight and authority. He had mastered the intricacies and vagaries of contracts, those impressive and maddening constructs that could bound animals together so inexorably. Here was someone who understood the actual rules and structures that both governed all animals and formed their path towards prosperity, who could explain how things really worked.

"The fact of the matter is that when Mr. Toad's father was so tragically taken from us, he left behind a company that was in a state of transition," said Goat, who was dressed in a magnificent deep blue, three-piece suit, complemented by a sparkling silver wristwatch, pearl cufflinks and a polka dot pocket square. Mole thought he had a rather collegial tone, chatting with Badger like they were two old friends sitting down over drinks.

"Toad's father had made some efforts at diversifying the business — looking into developments further south and building property intended for lower-income animals, for example. Those were envisioned as long-term investments, with the potential for some short-term losses. The losses, it turns out, were greater than anticipated. Our

shareholders had grown concerned. And then, well, we had the accident. In its aftermath, it was thought prudent that spending be limited on all fronts. That's why there were additional, temporary —," and now Goat paused and looked straight at the jury, "— temporary checks put in place by the board of directors. It had nothing to do with any recklessness on young Toad's part."

"Putting aside the matter of these new, additional 'checks,' as you call them, on Mr. Toad's spending, it is true that he lives off of a stipend, as stipulated in the will of his parents, correct?" asked Hare, once he was given his chance at Goat.

"I don't know if he 'lives off it' as you say, but he is given a stipend, the terms of which were laid out in the will of his parents, yes," replied Goat serenely.

"Why do you think they chose not to give their son more complete access to the family fortune?"

"I couldn't speculate."

"I see," said Hare smugly, but before he could continue, Goat interjected.

"If you're suggesting that they did not trust their son, I would counter that the stipend is quite large and, as you yourself pointed out, even in these lean times, the board is inclined to give Mr. Toad whatever he asks for. This too was at the insistence of his parents, who wanted Toad to both appreciate the value of money and also feel as if he could always pursue his dreams, wherever they may lead."

It was the rare moment where it did truly feel as if the prosecution was the overmatched side though it did occur to Mole that Mr. Goat's testimony reflected better on Toad's father than it did on Toad himself.

Next, Badger turned to his character witnesses, the animals tasked with portraying Mr. Toad in the most flattering light possible. It would not be an easy task and so Badger turned first to Mr. Moose. Moose was the head of security for Anura and he looked the part. He was a towering figure with long, powerful legs, a massive spread of antlers that could cow even the likes of Judge Brown and a great long snout, at the end of which were two nostrils which flared dramatically anytime Moose grew angry.

There was a loose ease to the way Moose moved too that reminded Mole of Middleton and which he was beginning to suspect betrayed a history of violence for both of them. It was as if they had lived their entire lives according to the advice given to someone when they fall down. Don't tense up. Simply let your body go limp.

“Look, I’ve worked for the toads for thirty-some years so I’ve known the kid his entire life. I’ve watched him screw up every way an animal can screw up. So I won’t deny that. But trust me: he’s a punk pup, that’s all. Always has been.”

It appeared as if Moose were talking directly to the judge, as if he thought he might skip all the courtroom procedures and cut straight to the chase with the animal in charge. He was certainly speaking with the appropriate blunt honesty, that was for sure.

“What do you mean by that?” asked Badger.

Moose turned back to him with a hint of impatience.

“I mean, what happened that night at The Weir was a criminal enterprise, requiring criminal levels of deliberation and planning. And Toad isn’t a criminal. He isn’t capable of a crime like this, even the bungled version we have here.”

Mole was reminded of Badger’s opening remarks and he wondered then at the wisdom of centering the defense around the idea that Toad was too incompetent to pull off a crime that, in fact, was not pulled off. Toad himself perhaps sensed this problem as well, or perhaps he took umbrage at Moose’s assessment of him because just as the witness was finishing his evaluation, the defendant let out a very loud, very noticeable scoff of disbelief.

The second character witness was none other than Rat. She had of course jumped at the chance the minute Badger had suggested it and had spent days in preparation. Sitting in front of a mirror so that she could check her own facial expressions, Rat would practice her own impassioned defense of Toad while Mole, as well as occasionally Rat’s mother, would offer up their critiques — “Remember to keep your chin up, dear”; “Don’t rush it too much, Rat”; “Perhaps a few more examples of Toad’s considerate nature? If there are anymore...”

The back-and-forth would occasionally grow heated during these prep sessions, particularly between Rat and her mother, who seemed to delight in picking apart her daughter’s presentation. Mole had rather enjoyed himself however. It really was the only quality time he and Rat shared together, not unless you counted those frustrating walks home from Toad Hall or the typically quiet lunches they would share in the courthouse hallway on most days. Those evenings were some of the last times he’d feel as if he and Rat were on the same side of anything.

She ended up doing quite well for herself of course. After all, she was, at least according to Mole, an incredibly thoughtful, eloquent and humorous animal, one

eminently capable of holding a room in sway with the power of her words. And unlike the others, Rat had not insulted Toad in order to save him by insisting he was too incompetent or scared to have committed the crime.

Instead, she told the court about how wonderful a friend Toad had been to her, how he'd been there for her — had practically been the only one there for her — during the most painful parts of her life — her parents' divorce and the death of her father. She described how Toad would take her out on little boat trips or to the Stoat Crick Creamery Company for fudge sundaes; how he'd even once purchased a horse-drawn caravan for the two of them to run away together in. This was soon after her father's passing when Rat had wanted nothing more than to disappear herself and so Toad had offered to disappear with her.

Mole had been astounded that during their practice sessions Rat's mother had remained unmoved by these descriptions but then again she was surely under the influence of some combination of pills by that hour of the day. And if she was unmoved, she was practically the only one. By the time Rat had finished with the caravan story, with she and Toad on the side of the road, having broken every one of their wagon's spare axles and wheels, completely stranded and yet filled with joyous appreciation for life, half the court's gallery had tears in their eyes. And this time, Mr. Toad was not scoffing at all. He was fully crying.

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During closing summations, Hare emphasized the facts. Gone was the easygoing confidence and stage presence of earlier. Now, Hare stood stock still in front of the jury, reciting what he knew, describing for them a defendant with a history of disregard for the laws of both animals and humans, one who thinks his wealth had purchased for him the right to do whatever it is that he pleases, no matter who he hurts in the process. To say whatever it is he wants, to lie to all of them there in this court of law.

He reminded them of the evidence they had seen — the tip that had come in from Willie Williams, the footage of Toad and Willie at The Weir, Toad's family's history with Red Willow Juice and Toad's own flirtations with crime, and the conversation he'd allegedly had with Spiny Lizard.

“Now, it’s not my place to tell you what is or is not meaningful to an animal who has recently lost loved ones. Mr. Toad was indeed a fragile animal in the time leading up to his arrest. On this, the defense and I are in complete agreement. He was experiencing a senseless tragedy for which there will never be any adequate rationale. Maybe The Weir was a place that meant something to him. But to expect us to believe that it was merely coincidence that brought Mr. Toad and Willie Williams together there on that night is ridiculous.

No. Mr. Toad had a very clear reason to meet with Williams that night. And whether or not you sympathize with Mr. Toad, he still made the choice, my friends, to engage in that illicit activity. He made many choices, in fact, and he needs to be held responsible. In the last year and a half, Mr. Toad bought a very expensive automobile and raced it in illegal contests. He gambled away large amounts of money and he endangered his livelihood and life in the process. He ran into trouble and in the hopes of getting himself out, he once again placed a risky bet, this time on crime. And when that crime didn’t pay off, when it, in fact, came to take its payment from Toad, then he ran away.”

The room was deathly quiet now. Badger kept one paw resting gently on Toad’s elbow, there should the need for restraint arise, while Toad kept pushing his shoulders back and his chin up, reminding himself to remain proud as Hare hammered away.

“He is a criminal,” said the prosecutor, “someone whose behavior stretches far beyond the negligence of an automobile accident. He has committed willful, unlawful acts and for that, he must be punished.”

Hare bowed ever so slightly and gracefully sat down, replaced moments later by Badger. Faced with a last chance to assert his client’s innocence, the venerable lawyer shuffled to his place in front of the jury with his chin held high but with a look that said he had done all he could. He sighed heavily and shook his head.

“The evidence presented by the prosecution is insufficient,” Badger declared with a mixture of grandeur and disappointment. He reminded Mole of a school teacher reprimanding an animal for a lack of work ethic. “It has not been proven beyond a reasonable doubt that Mr. Toad had any intention of illegally distributing Red Willow Juice on the night in question. Not at all. But let us examine that evidence. Let us really really examine it, just to make sure.”

Badger, still maintaining the mildly patronizing and yet somehow comforting tone of voice that was his true gift, now delicately walked the jury through the refutations:

The video of Toad and Willie proved nothing other than they were at the same place. There was no direct connection found between Toad and the Red Willow Juice in the truck, and indeed no indication of how Toad could have acquired the 150 gallons in the first place. And lastly, Toad was at The Weir for purely innocent reasons, reasons that any animal with even half a heart could certainly understand.

“Now, there were certainly plenty of other individuals with an interest in the Red Willow Juice trade, individuals who depended on it far more than Mr. Toad who, despite my esteemed opposing counsel’s best efforts to suggest otherwise, remains a very wealthy animal. Mr. Toad has never had to work a day in his life. There is no motive for him to have committed this crime.”

Now Badger seemed to be picking up a bit of momentum as he steamed towards the finish.

“Yet even without this motive, the combined investigative forces of both our community and that of the humans determined that surely it must have been Toad who planned to sell the juice. They were so certain that they pursued no other leads. They presumed his guilt, my friends, because they wanted him to be guilty. Because of his wealth, or his family, or the petty crimes that he once committed — while he was in a state of grieving, I will remind you. They have committed a miscarriage of justice and it is up to you, good citizens, to make it right. I ask that you find Mr. Toad not guilty. Thank you.”

And with just the slightest of nods, Badger turned and walked slowly back to his seat. The jurors all had looks that Mole thought was either pensive or stubbornly unmoved. A scant six hours later, he got an answer as to which it was when the jury returned their verdict. Mr. Toad was guilty on all counts. They had been unmoved.

Shortly thereafter, Judge Brown handed down his sentence. Ten years in prison. Mole was there that day too. He watched as they pulled the wailing Toad away and he comforted Rat as she cried on his shoulder.

Chapter 10: Raging Waters

Suddenly, everything got quiet. Disconcertingly so. There had been such a hubbub about Toad for so long now, not just among the residents of The Willows but also inside of Mole's own head, that the finality of the verdict, and the accompanying hush that swept out over the whole of The Willows, was jarring, for Mole especially. He couldn't decide if this was better or worse than the time when the streets were alive with chatter and he was sure everyone was talking about him.

It didn't help that Rat departed from The Willows immediately following the verdict, telling Mole that she simply couldn't bear to be anywhere near the site of such tragedy nor be reminded of the plight of her dear friend.

"I just need to be alone for a little while," she had said to him gently. "Don't worry, dear. I'll be back, as bright and sharp as ever before."

Of course she would, Mole told himself. Spring officially began in less than a month and Rat would need to help her mother arrange for the annual cleaning that came with this seasonal passage. But there was no indication whether or not she would stay and, in his heart, right then and there, Mole knew that she would not, that the time in her life that she had spent traipsing about this countryside, letting the river breeze push her towards this or that bit of tranquility, was quickly coming to an end. Its termination had been signaled at the sound of Judge Brown's gavel and the despondent wails that came from her old friend, Toad. Rat would not find any of her peace in The Willows.

She did come back, though when she did, Mole could see there was something clearly different about her. In one way, Rat's boundless joy in exploration and adventure — the kind he had been so entranced with early on — still seemed present. As the two of them walked back to Mole's burrow from River Bank on the afternoon of her return, she excitedly detailed the numerous programs and plans of actions she'd devised to help her manage during these times. There were a whole host of exercise routines, as well as breathing and meditation regimens, and Rat reported she was attacking her

reading list as well with a newfound fervor. But Mole could see a madness to it all now too; a kind of manic enthusiasm that reminded him of no one more than Mr. Toad himself.

"I don't know if any of it's actually doing anything. Probably not. But at least it's a distraction until I figure what I'm really going to do," she said as they came upon the path leading from The Run up into Wild Wood.

It was a relief to hear that Rat at least remained significantly more self-aware than Toad ever was, though that last remark of hers had also caught Mole's attention. Rat's ambivalence towards the future only added to Mole's suspicions that this visit of hers would be short-lived, and that she was now preparing herself in full for her next chapter.

"And my place there is comfortable. Loads more than my mother's, I can tell you that," she continued.

"Where is this exactly?"

"It's south of here. Where my father lived."

An uncomfortable silence descended. Rat had always spoke very little of her life beyond The Willows. On more than one occasion, she'd waved off a completely innocuous question from Mole on the subject, and he'd lately developed a theory as to why. It was so that she could keep him compartmentalized, safely and neatly tucked away in the part of her life that happened here, in The Willows.

Rat stopped short now and paused, as if sensing his discontent.

"Moley, would you like to do something with me tonight?" she finally asked.

This was the sort of question that could send a shiver of either fear or excitement up an animal's spine when posed to them by their romantic partner. At this moment, Mole was quite sure he felt a bit of both. Turning to her, he saw that she held a carefully constructed paper packet in one paw. Its folds had been opened and Mole could see two small, dark blue pills inside.

Rat had come back to The Willows in possession of a drug Mole had only ever heard of before, the so-called Sapphire — "Sapph," for short. For those animals that had tried Red Willow Juice as well as the various dried herbs and leaves whose smoke could be inhaled to achieve a kind of pleasant numbing effect but who still found the intoxication lacking, Sapphs offered a new level to be explored.

“My cousin gave them to me, said they were sure to give us a good time. I think we should take them.”

“I think that's an excellent idea,” said Mole without hesitation.

As The River swept south, on its way out of The Willows and with its sights already set on the Wide World beyond, it came upon a small hump of land covered in silver birch and alder. This was Pan Island. It was not a proud piece of land. There was nothing austere or intimidating in its makeup, nothing majestic or grand about its shores. But throughout the history of The Willows, the island had been the scene of all manner of occasion. Past the island's dense outer ring of forest, there was a clearing in its middle. It was here that, in the community's very early days, when animals had been decidedly more spiritual in their beliefs, various rituals were known to have been enacted.

What those rituals had entailed had long been left to be embellished and exaggerated and mythologized and so Pan Island had taken on a haunted history, with stories of grotesque sacrifices, dramatic exorcisms and violent initiations into secret societies of all sorts. Later, enterprising animals would try to capitalize on this supposed history by devising guided tours that promised giddy terror but more often delivered cheap effects and snorts of derision. The skeletal remains of some of these attractions still dotted the landscape of Pan Island, two-dimensional cardboard cutouts of ghosts and ghouls poking through the juniper bushes, their original shapes and gaudy designs eroding away, succumbing to the ravages of time and nature, and adding to the aura of degradation.

The island's checkered history recently included a number of failed real estate developments. There had been a round of entrepreneurs keen on turning Pan Island into a kind of holistic retreat center at one point, followed by another that wanted to make it a golf course. Local efforts had repelled the most grotesquely money-grubbing of the proposals while lack of funding submarined the most noble. And so Pan Island was left to teenage hooligans and intrepid would-be explorers.

Rat and Mole decided that they would take their drugs there, at dusk, and see what was to come. They used Rat's small boat, though this time, it was Mole who took the oars. Mole was a terrible boatsman, to put it mildly. But on this occasion, he felt suddenly compelled to plot the course they would take, if only for the next hour or so. And so they glided off, with Mole delicately dipping the sculls into water awash in the

orange light of a setting sun, thrusting himself backward as he pulled the oars forward and listening for that barest and most beautiful hint of a sound, the quiet rustling of their boat knifing through The River.

Mole's nautical competency that night surprised even him and it was no time at all before the boat settled onto the northern shore of Pan Island. The full pitch of night was imminent and Mole could feel a flutter of adrenalin shoot through him as he climbed down, his body and mind already anticipating the drugs and the calliope sounds and circus lights that would rise up with them.

They took the Sapphs quickly and with little ceremony, standing by the shores and sharing from Rat's bottle of water. And the moon swung up then. Tonight, it swelled with affection, and the light it cast down upon those two young animals was golden-hued. For a moment, they remembered one another. Rat took Mole by the hand and led the way in.

Mole had never really dated anyone before Rat. There had been episodes back in his adolescence that qualified as romantic, notably with Gerbil, a very sweet animal that Mole was still dimly fond of, even if she had turned out to be rather shallow for his tastes. She ran a pleasant, if not all that successful, tea shop in River Bank and would still wave to Mole from her place behind the counter whenever he passed by. Sometimes, Mole would catch himself comparing Rat to Gerbil, wondering if he would ever wave off the former as blithely as he now did the latter.

In truth, for as much as Mole had been stewing in anxiety over losing Rat, he was pushing back against that feeling as well, considering in fact if the anxiety was worth it. Rat was pulling away from him in the aftermath of the trial but Mole had to admit that he was pulling away from her too. Absent her presence these last few weeks, Mole had even occasionally caught himself wondering whether some distance might actually help him regain his footing a bit.

Maybe it really had all just been an effort to improve his own social standing. But then he remembered too the utterly marvelous times he'd had with Rat, and how contented he'd felt with her, the way she would could cut right to the core of him but gently, wisely; the way she'd grab at his arm and jostle him lightly and whisper into his ear when she'd been struck by a new idea, a new passion, or a new plan. And then his affection would surge forth again.

As they continued to walk, all of Mole's senses were now attuned to any possible changes in his body chemistry; any shifts in perception, no matter how slight; anything at all that would signal the onset of the drug trip. But as was so often the case with psychedelics, the actual beginning passed by with barely a thought on Mole's part. This time, it was the very faint sound of music. At first, all Mole thought was that it was quite pleasant to his ear. It sounded perhaps like a harp, the tones moving up and then down again, like waves flowing past them.

But then the music quite suddenly rose in volume, and both Mole and Rat stopped in their tracks and turned to each other.

"Do you hear that?" said Rat, with a slight quiver.

"You hear it too?" said Mole. That sensation particular to drug trips and anxiety attacks swept over him then. It was that sense of one's consciousness separating from the body and the subsequent desire to look back upon that corporeal form and to regard it as an alien being.

Mole looked down at himself now with some disdain. There he was, wobbling slightly in the evening breeze but otherwise motionless. Rat had faded off and all Mole could see now was the stupefied look on his own face, confounded once again as to how he'd come to find himself so alone and lost.

The music began to change. The soft trills of that far-off harp were sharpening now, the notes separating from one another, each growing in insistence. It became a beat, a violent one. Louder and louder it grew, like the strikes of a hammer, or a gavel beating down. Each hollow thwack rang through Mole's bones and lit up the sky with a pulse of color. Green, then blue, and then a bright orange that appeared in bolts of lightning. Each rent open the skies and left a jagged scar etched into the horizon.

Mole could faintly make out the sound of Judge Brown as he bellowed the word "guilty" over and over again, and the bolts of orange became prison bars and surrounded Mole now, trapping him.

A hot, hard feeling shot up from his stomach and stuck in his throat, so thick that Mole thought for a moment that he may choke. He turned to look for Rat, only to discover that they were now both lying down on a spot of grass in the middle of the island's central clearing. How much time had passed? How had they got here? Where had the music gone? Rat looked back at him.

"It's quite pretty here, isn't it?" she said.

“Yes, but where are we?” Mole heard himself respond. The orange had disappeared and now all was dark.

The question seemed to disturb Rat. She frowned and then Mole could see tears filling her eyes.

“Rat, are you afraid?”

“Afraid? Oh, never, never! And yet - and yet - oh, Mole, I am afraid.”

Mole reached for her and pulled her close to him.

“Just listen for the music,” he said.

“But I can't hear it now.”

“Yes, you can. Yes, you can.” And he continued to repeat that over and over, until they both did hear the music again, willing it back up from the depths of their psyche until it filled the clearing with sound. And lo and behold, they saw the ghosts of Pan Island that night. The animals of old rose up with the music and danced in the clearing, under the stars. And Mole and Rat danced with them. The tears were streaming down Rat's face now and Mole's too; tears of joy, tears of sadness, tears of madness.

There now came a kind of psychedelic awareness of temporality that swept over the both of them. Mole was sure this moment was instantaneous, that anything and everything to do with Rat would be over in a second, and in truth had only lasted a second. Which somehow made it all the more important. This moment right here — them dancing, the stars shining down through the window the clearing provided — was absolutely essential and so they grew frantic, their movements crescendoing in spastic bursts. Harder and faster. But then softer and slower, those bursts of energy fading with time too until Mole and Rat were only dancing in their mind. They stood motionless, save for a very slight swaying in the breeze.

Mole was overtaken by a new memory, that of his first day out in the Wide World. Only now, all he could remember was how wonderfully terrified he had been. He shook, physically shook, as he walked up and over Pine Ridge Pass, headed north and east and out. He was there now, on the ridge. He was looking back at The Willows proper, not so much below him — the ridges weren't nearly that high in this part of the world — but certainly behind him.

But he couldn't see it. He couldn't keep the image in his mind, couldn't maintain his grip on it. All he could remember was what he could feel in his toes and nose and burning now at the crown of his head; this insatiable, unquenchable fear that must

nevertheless be met head on. What a marvelous feeling that was! And how absolutely magnificent it was that he could feel it again now.

He wondered though if that really was how he had felt that day. After all, how could he really be trusted. How could anyone ever be trusted with their memories? And if that was the case, then maybe it didn't matter; this distinction between how you once felt and how you remember feeling. Maybe that difference was as natural as the river's current.

Mole's head began to spin and so he spun with it, dancing again. He found Rat and grasped at her paw and then they resumed their dance and the music played on.

They laughed, convulsive and gasping and teary-eyed, flinging themselves back down onto the grass, and letting the blades tickle the soles of their feet. Mole felt the shivers run up his spine and down to the tips of his paws and then he felt them shoot out. The ground shivered too and the ghosts of the island appeared again except now, they weren't ghosts. They were gods; great, mystical creatures who roamed these woods, ruled them.

They were towering figures with cloven feet but the broad, flat, hairless facial features of a human and though they loomed large over those two small animals — a mole and a rat curled up against one another in the high grass of Pan Island — and though there was to be no more dancing that night, Mole knew they were right where they belonged. Here was where the music had been born, here in the place they called Oblivion. Here now, even the passage of time no longer mattered because here all was one and one was all and so here, Mole closed his eyes and allowed himself to succumb.

The next thing he knew, the sun was up and it was morning. They rowed back to the mainland in silence, though with no tension or awkwardness, just the silence of resolution. And when they had parted ways at the fork in the road below Stoat Crick, they'd held each other and breathed in sync and Rat had kissed him on the cheek and let her lips linger there for just a second longer than usual.

The following afternoon, Rat officially and rather efficiently broke up with him. It was always to have been a last hurrah for them, that night on the island, a last great adventure for the two of them to share. Mole had known it. He had not wanted to admit it to himself but he knew it and he accepted it. And with that night now safely tucked away into their memory banks, back where they both could look upon it whenever they pleased and smile or shudder or both, Rat now dispensed with the formalities.

He watched her walk slowly up towards where he sat at the entrance to his burrow. It had been a glorious day out and one that Mole had almost entirely missed. He had spent it still in a state of both emotional and physical exhaustion, the effects of the Sapphs still lingering in his bloodstream and in the synapses of his brain. Prone in bed or stretched out on the scratchy sofa he'd hauled over at some point from the South End's Saturday flea market or shuffling about in one of his periodic attempts at productivity, Mole couldn't quite get out from behind the fog of Pan Island and the things he'd felt there.

But as the sun began its slow slide down the skyline, Mole felt an uncharacteristic urge to ascend to the surface and take in a few breaths of fresh air. He had only been above ground for a few minutes when he saw Rat ambling slowly up the hill towards him. Without a word, she sat down next to him, linking her arm with his and resting her head on his shoulder. She sighed, and they sat in silence for some time, watching as a bluejay darted from branch to branch above them, its crest raised proudly, its song sharp and sweet in the warm air.

"Moley, I'm afraid I'm about to do something you won't like," Rat softly said at last.

"It's okay," replied Mole, even though it wasn't.

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One consequence of never having been in a serious relationship before was that Mole had never, until this moment, felt heartbreak. It was nevertheless not an altogether unfamiliar feeling for this particular animal, one who could be credibly accused of wallowing in negative emotions from time to time. He tried to take some amount of pleasure in the sadness, forgetting any hesitancy he himself might have had about the future of the relationship and instead indulging in scathing, screed-like entries to his book that railed against North End greed and bemoaned its intoxicating allure while visiting Covey's for six straight nights, a stretch during which Mole became inexplicably close to some of the most derelict drunks The Willows could offer.

It was on that sixth night that Mole learned from one of his new friends who worked (when he could stand) at the train yard, that Rat had been seen climbing aboard a first-class carriage on its way out of town and to the Wide World. Mole set out to really and truly tie one on that night, and so he did. He awoke the next morning in a dried-out

gully some distance from his home, with dried-out vomit encrusting a designer t-shirt Rat had once bought for him and that he'd worn out as some kind of bittersweet testament to her impact on him. It was clear, even through the fog and amid the clamor inside his head, that he had been letting himself indulge recklessly and he resolved then and there that it was time to start moving on.

On a cloudy, damp day soon after that unfortunate bottoming-out, Mole took Otter's boat on to The River and found himself pushing the oars towards the North End. He wanted to look at Toad Hall from that old vantage point, the one set far back, down in the weeds and the mud and the water skeeters. He wanted to feel cast out, looked down upon, denied and so to be justified in wishing terrible things on Rat and all of her kind. Which is to say that his efforts at moving on were proving to be insufficient so far.

Mole had only got to go to one of Toad's parties during his time with Rat. It had happened back in the fall, on an unseasonably warm night during which Toad had invited some North End friends over for what he was terming "a backyard BBQ". None of the food served had been or would be barbecued and yet Toad had taken great delight in this designation and in everything that had come with it. Mole had come early with Rat and so had watched as Toad scampered about, ordering an unflappable Murid and her team around as they filled tables with lowland delicacies like okra stew and black-eyed peas with rice and set up for traditional games like Rolly Hole and Trash Can Frisbee to be played.

Mole had been quite pleased then, basking in his outsider status and the attention it afforded him. Now, all he could see were the tittering faces of the guests. None of them had truly enjoyed that food or those games or anything about the tradition they were participating in that night. They'd only enjoyed the idea of participating, and what it could say about them.

Mole remembered that now, as he sat at one end of the boat, just upriver from Toad Hall's dock, staring up at the mansion's towering chimneys and the hints of its gabled roofs that peaked out over the fir trees. Just then, he saw a figure walk out onto the dock. He quickly recognized it as Murid, who stood at the slip's edge for a moment in her familiar navy pincord housemaid's dress, hunched over against a wind that whipped across the water now and clearly subsumed in thoughts of the most personal and complex and wrenching variety.

Mole was ashamed to admit that this was the first he'd even thought of Murid since the trial. He'd never quite been able to shake her wariness of him and, for his part, Mole remained just a bit suspicious of her too. That home had secrets, literal secrets in the way of rooms behind walls but more intimate ones as well. Mole was sure of that and, as the overseer of the estate, he had to believe that Murid had been trusted to protect those secrets.

A few days later, Mole was surprised to learn that Murid had moved out of Toad Hall. There wasn't anyone left there to look after so it shouldn't have been all that shocking and yet, at the same time, there was a part of Mole that would have believed Murid would never leave, that she'd simply go on sweeping and dusting all those empty rooms, rotating provisions in the larder and dispatching the gardener to attend to the hedges. But she had clearly been deeply shaken by all of this business with the family she'd once cared for and tended. They were her charge — Toad and his parents — and now they were all either dead or in prison. Certainly, none of that was her fault, and Mole hoped that she wasn't inclined to perceive it in such dire terms. Somehow though, he knew she had.

The rumor was that the estate would soon be put up for sale. The board of directors had permanently retained the control of Anura that they'd already temporarily assumed during the difficult transition following Toad's parents' deaths. There was very little reason to hold on to Toad Hall beyond a feeling of sentimentality that the board, neither collectively nor individually, possessed.

Murid had apparently taken up residence in an unassuming burrow at the very base of The Willows. There were rumors about her too. She had taken to loudly advocating for Toad to anyone who'd listen or even those who wouldn't, insisting upon his innocence and on the existence of forces who'd preyed on his loneliness. This was not a popular position to take, no matter how Murid framed it, and it'd quickly earned her a bad reputation and a place among the topic of conversations in neighborhood gossip.

Murid had been cast out, with nowhere to go but to the very dregs of The Willows, down where the ground grew spongy and bog-like and where one occasionally caught a whiff of decay in the air. Perhaps the only notable point in the area was Pan Island, scene of Mole and Rat's psychedelic farewell. Beyond the various spiritual and sensual purposes the island served, it had also long stood as a geographic sentry to The Willows' southern approach.

Mole found himself in the area more and more, the waves of emotion pushing him back towards the site of such strange beauty and deep pain as he went about the nightly walks that now filled the space once reserved for Rat. So it was only a matter of time before he bumped into Murid.

One evening in the early part of May, Mole saw her emerge from a burrow he'd already walked by on several different occasions. She looked different somehow. She was out of the pincord and into a uniform of overalls and a handkerchief tied around her head, but there was something else too, a looseness in her physicality, a languid bounce to the way she moved. Mole was struck by the thought that she reminded him of his mother.

She turned and saw him, regarding him with a smile that at first seemed to spread reluctantly before breaking out wide.

"Well hello, Mole," she said.

"Hello, Murid. How are you?"

"Oh, I'm getting along."

Even through that smile, she regarded him now with a reticence and weariness that Mole recognized from their time together at Toad Hall.

"What brings you down this way?"

"Oh, well, my parents aren't too far from here. They're just over there up on Huck Hill."

"Yes, I know," she said. "So you've come for the post-mortem? Come to get my thoughts on the matter?" She paused, letting the smile linger. Mole hadn't consciously done so but he could allow that the winds had brought him here for that purpose nonetheless.

"Would you like to come in for some tea then?"

Her burrow was exactly as Mole would have pictured it, neatly organized and efficiently designed; its intimacy maximized so that everything was right at arm's length for Murid. She spun one way and grabbed at a jar full of tea leaves. Turning the other way, mismatched mugs — chipped and stained — hung at the ready from a homemade rack over her ancient and imposing stove. There was something joyous and resplendent about the clutter of her home. Everything there had been softened and faded and worn down at the edges with love. It seemed to be in direct rebuke to the cold austerity of Toad Hall, an insistence that one could be both ordered and messy at once.

Murid was quiet as she prepared the tea but she was clearly savoring those familiar motions and the sincere pleasure that came with serving an animal and serving them well. Mole could tell that Murid had missed this.

She set a steaming cup down in front of Mole and then settled in across from him with her own.

“You and Rat parted ways, didn't you?” she asked gently.

“How did you know?”

“Well, you've been here now for a few minutes and you've yet to mention her. That's not a good sign.”

“She's set back out for the Wide World.”

“Uh-huh. I can't say I'm terribly surprised, Mole. But not to worry. She'll be back. After she discovers that the Wide World is actually no place for her at all.”

“It's no matter. I don't think we were ever really right for each other anyway. Not if we're being realistic.”

Murid sighed and then said, “You're probably right. It's a shame but it's true. If it makes you feel any better, I'm starting to think I'd forgotten about it myself.”

“What's that?”

“That they're not like you and I.” She leaned forward and laid a paw down on the table, a symbolic bridge extended out towards him, a token of solidarity. “Toad's different from them though, Mole. I know you may have laughed at him from time to time, scorned him or cursed his name down at Covey's with the rest of them.”

“No!”

“It's alright. I understand. But the thing you don't understand — you couldn't understand unless you'd spent as much time with him as I have — is that there's no one as innocent as he is. Naive, really.” She sat back now with a sudden look of embarrassment. “I just feel as if animals should know that. And maybe that doesn't excuse anything but...well, it could explain things. He so wanted to be loved, Mole.”

“You think he was taken advantage of?”

“Of course! This whole town took advantage of him. South Enders. North Enders. All those lawyers and business types at his family's company.”

At that, Mole could feel his ears burn just a bit.

“Look, I'm no fool,” Murid continued. “I know Mr. Toad isn't perfect. He's not even decent, not in the way one would hope, and he's easily impressionable. But you saw

that home. You saw his life. You saw the way he is. They've been trying to take advantage of him from the moment he came out of his egg."

She paused for a moment, as if to collect herself, then sipped at her tea and smiled that same wary smile once again, staring at him with penetrative eyes. "Then again, it's not as if Toad's relations hadn't done the same thing years ago, right?"

"What?"

"Stole from the innocent and naive!" she insisted. "Come now, Mr. Mole. You're no fool either."

"I don't know about that."

"You found your way down into the tunnels, didn't you? That's something."

Mole couldn't hide his shock.

"Oh yes, yes, Toad told me all about that. Of course, you don't know the half of it. And neither does Toad. Then again, I don't think I do either. Whatever the purpose of that was, it was nasty and buried away a long time ago. And it's just the sort of thing that Toad had no business handling."

"So then what's been stolen from him?"

It took a moment for Murid to register this but when she had, she began to laugh, a low soft chuckle that bounced and echoed and built up steam until the peals were frantic and bitter.

"Where is he now, Mole? Hmm? What will he have left when he comes out? No one will care for him anymore. No one will care about him. They'll only care about what he's lost. Once Toad realizes that. Once it dawns on him truly what has happened, that Rat has gone back to the Wide World and the North Enders have severed their ties once and for all," she paused now, the delirious laughter of a moment before still lingering in the echoes. "I worry there'll be nothing left of him."

Having quickly finished his tea and politely thanked Murid for the hospitality and conversation, Mole bade her goodbye and set off for Wild Wood. Walking back, he found himself desperate to cast her in a tragic light, lost as she was in the funhouse mirror world that was Toad's life; the gravity of that wealth distorting ideas and attitudes and perceptions. But Mole's subconscious knew better than to leave it at that and he had to agree with Murid in one respect: everyone had tried to take advantage of Toad. That's what his wealth was. It was advantageous.

And Toad was undoubtedly naive about his position, though Murid didn't seem inclined to blame him for that. As far as Mole was concerned, it might have behooved Toad to have taken some caution or for someone in his life to have taught it to him. And yet he was so desperately lonely. He hadn't just allowed himself to be taken advantage of. He had openly courted opportunities. He'd almost seemed desperate in his search, and Mole wondered now if this was part of the same self-destructive streak that had seen Toad jump behind the wheel of a hot rod and laugh with glee as he very nearly killed himself. Mole laughed himself now, but dryly. It had only taken him a few moments of contemplation to find his way back to sympathy for that ridiculous creature.

He was suddenly struck by a picture of Toad in his mind, one in which the eyes betrayed the deepest of desperations. This was the night before Badger began his defense in court, the night he and Rat had fought on the way back from Toad Hall. At some point, Mole had gone to use the washroom and, on his return, been cornered by Toad. In that moment, on the eve of his last stand, one could feel his very eyes pleading for salvation.

"Mole old boy, listen, I have a question for you: Do you know how I can get in touch with Weasel? I can't seem to reach him."

By then, Mole was sure Toad knew of more ways to reach Weasel than he did and had quickly stammered out a no. At the time, he was more preoccupied with this admission that he was not as close to Weasel as advertised and with the realization that perhaps animals — even less than reputable ones like Weasel — were cutting ties with Toad. Now, Mole began to consider what Toad could possibly need from Weasel at that moment.

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It was close to noon, with the heat of the sun just now making its presence known on a late spring day as Mole made his way back to Weasel's garage. The air was redolent with the smells of the season, a heavy, grassy funk cut with the thin, light perfume that came from the wildflowers springing forth, born anew and expanding the landscape with the depth of their vibrant colors and smells.

The garage was humming with activity. Two cars had been raised using hydraulic lifts and a whole team of shrews scurried beneath them, handing off tools to one another and bickering about this or that in that high-pitched, chattering tone their kind used with one another. A rotund and rather aged mechanic that the rest called Pops stepped out to brusquely inform Mole that Weasel was away and wasn't expected back until some later point in the afternoon. He didn't seem particularly pleased at the idea of Mole waiting for him but pointed towards the makeshift waiting room that had been thrown together at the front of the vast space. A few folding chairs, a coffee table without even the requisite dated magazines and a water cooler comprised the design.

Mere moments later, Weasel entered with Opossum. Noticing Mole, he stopped and made a show of exaggerated surprise.

"Look at this! Give me one second, buddy," he said before moving into the garage to get an update from his shrews. It took a moment before Mole realized that Opossum had sat down across from him.

"So," she said, letting the word slide down out of her mouth and down to the floor, where it slinked its way towards him. She was dressed in all black — black t-shirt, black jeans and black boots that she'd left artfully unlaced — all of which only served to highlight her already striking features; her snow white fur and those dark, flat eyes. She grinned.

"Where ya been, Moley?"

Trying desperately to meet her gaze, Mole was suddenly and acutely aware of himself and his own body in a way he'd never been before. He barely squeaked out a reply. He hadn't really accounted for Opossum's presence here today.

"I've been laying low," he said.

"Hmm, yeah, I don't blame you. But not to worry, Moley, it's all over with now. Pretty soon, no one will even remember how we got here."

Weasel returned now and settled down next to Opossum with a sigh.

"I want to say, Mole, that I'm sorry we haven't had a chance to talk since all of this business with Toad started up. It must have been hell for ya, being so close to him. I'm sorry."

"I wasn't that close," Mole said tightly.

Weasel smiled and nodded, and then turned to Opossum.

“They were worried about him. Mole and Rat. They came to me, back in the fall, told me all about it. Turns out you were right,” he said to Mole ruefully. “So what can I do for you?”

Mole swallowed hard. He’d practiced this next part in his head once or twice but there was no accounting for the nerves that could sweep over an animal in the heat of the moment.

“Well, I’m not sure I told you, but I’ve been working on this book.”

“Right! All about The Willows, right?” Weasel exclaimed with delight. “One night at The Holt, Mole got all drunk and insisted he would interview me for it,” he said to Opossum.

“And I will!” Mole added with what he thought was cheer. “But I also thought I might include something about all this. Toad and the trial.”

“Really? What for?” said Opossum. “Some rich kid screws around and gets caught for being stupid. What’s there to really say, you know?”

“Well, it’s mainly about the Red Willow Juice,” Mole replied. He could feel the heat of Opossum’s gaze now warming his skin. “That’s played, you know, such a big part in town history. And the history of that family. I mean, why do you think he wanted to get into that business?”

“You’re asking me?” said Weasel incredulously.

“Honestly, I’d say you were closer to him than I was by the time he was arrested,” replied Mole. “The last time we talked, he was asking how he could get in touch with you.”

Mole could hear the edge in those words as they came out of his mouth. Evidently, Weasel heard it too. He leaned back in his seat and crossed his arms, sizing Mole up from a new perspective. Now, his surprise was not exaggerated. Now, it was real, but muted and controlled.

“I really don’t know why he would, Mole. It doesn’t make a lot of sense,” he finally said.

“He hated his father,” interjected Opossum. And what that, Weasel let out a sudden burst of laughter.

“She’s something, isn’t she? My better half. Listen, can I say something to you, Mole? I think you’re better off without them. Toad, Rat, all of ‘em. I mean, it was fun. It

was fun for me. I'm sure it was fun for you. But I don't know if it's going to do you any good trying to figure them out."

"What's past is past," added Opossum.

"That's right!" said Weasel. Now he leaned in close to Mole. "And I for one am way more interested in the future. This is our time now. Right?"

Five minutes later, Mole was outside the garage, left feeling uneasy and exhilarated and not entirely sure how and when the conversation had ended. He was aware of the fact that he'd just been handled by Weasel and Opossum but he'd also rather effectively lied to them. He had no intention of including these affairs in his book or, at the very least, it wasn't the reason he'd gone to Weasel. He'd gone to gauge a reaction; a reaction to Mole's idea that there was more to this story. And he'd had plenty to gauge. Opossum had grown defensive. Mole had felt that, just as he'd seen the surprise in Weasel's gaze. There was more there. Mole knew it.

Four days later, the announcement was made in The Willows Gazette: Toad Hall would go up for auction.

The event was held on a humid and overcast Saturday morning. It was unusual weather for The Willows, and yet it did not deter most of the town from coming out. For many, particularly the animals of the South End, this would be their first time stepping foot on to the grounds of Toad Hall and that alone was enough to brave the stifling, soggy heat of the day. Mole had fiercely debated attending and found himself regretting it the moment he stepped through the gates. He was profoundly aware of the uneven terrain he was on, the differences between how he saw this property and how others did. He even caught himself in a few moments of elitism, gazing at some South End animal trampling across a flower bed and thinking of how they were simply not equipped to appreciate the beauty of surroundings like these. He was disgusted with himself then.

He knew he had no grounds to feel in the slightest bit elite anyway. He cut a pathetic figure that day, he was sure of that. He may see the property differently but whatever view had once been afforded to him through his relationships to Toad and Rat was gone now. All Mole really had was a memory to grasp it.

After a short while wandering about aimlessly, Mole spotted a friendly face. It was Otter, who loped up to him and amiably said, "Now then, old boy, shall you buy the place?", in his exaggerated imitation of a North Ender.

Mole smiled. "Oh I thought you might and then I'd just use the guest house from time to time," he said, grateful for Otter's cocksure smile and the glimmer of hope it gave him that things might be normal after all.

"No but really, who do you think'll buy it?" continued Mole.

"I couldn't say," responded Otter airily.

"Someone from the north, I suppose," Mole said, musing out loud. "Probably the rabbits will snatch it up. They've got the land to the west. They could just expand. Or Squirrel."

"Listen, Mole. I'm sorry about you and Rat."

"How'd you find out about that?" asked a dismayed Mole.

"Well actually I first heard about you making a scene at Covey's. Something about you insisting on reciting poetry you'd written. I believe it was an ode to stone paths."

At some point in the past months, Mole's angry screeds had turned into angry poems which, in turn, had evolved into lovelorn poems. Mole dimly remembered that one as being about the decorative steps crossing through Rat's mother's garden and how it served as a metaphor.

"Oh, Mole. Oh boy. Anyway, that didn't sound like a good sign at all so I worked my way back from there." He sighed ruefully now and stared up at the home, squinting and frowning as his eyes scanned across the ornate cornices topping its roof.

"It's tough, I know, and she's a good time. But, you know, it may be for the best," he continued.

"That's what Murid said too."

"What? His maid? Jesus, Mole, I told you before to stay away from all of them. And now look! You didn't listen to me, just like always and here you are — a total mess."

Mole glared at Otter and yet he knew it was true.

"You've got to pull yourself together, Mole, and start taking advantage of where this has left you. This is our time now."

Mole had heard that last line before too. It took him a moment but then he remembered.

"That's what Weasel said too."

And then, coming up the path from The River as if on cue, Weasel and Opossum came into view. She was resplendent in a mint green floral summer dress that Rat

would have envied, and that seemed entirely out of character for her. Here, she was the picture of North End gentility.

Weasel was similarly scrubbed and polished in a pale blue, light summer suit with a dark, striped silk tie. He seemed to practically glide across the lawn, shaking hands and nodding at acquaintances, nodding at Mole and Otter now with an easy smile.

It was yet another of the moments that, in retrospect, seemed so glaringly, excruciatingly obvious. Of course this was how it was to be. It wasn't to be the rabbits or the squirrels. It was Weasel who would buy Toad Hall.

Chapter II: Welcome to Greenleaf

Mr. Toad would say later that the moments immediately following the reading of the verdict against him had felt like the aftermath of an explosion inside his own head. It was as if a bomb had been detonated and now his thoughts, ideas, and memories — his very conception of reality and how it was supposed to operate — were suddenly blown into smithereens, everything reduced to an ashy, confused pulp, a haze he was now left to wander through.

What had stood out clearly was the sound of metal. Toad always came back to that. There was first the sly, menacing clink of his manacles locking into place. There were then the sounds of the doors slamming shut on the back of the truck meant to take him to jail, the rattling that seemed to come from all around him on that long drive and, finally, the bars on his cell, clanging home. Through it all, he'd wailed and moaned, begging his guards for mercy, then offering them anything they could ever want, if only they'd turn him loose.

“What'll it be, hmm? Just say the word and it's yours. You know I'm good for it so come on. Come on!” Toad said, pressing his mouth to the small slot in the metal wall that separated him from the truck's driver. But the animal, a bullish wombat of some kind with a thick neck and tiny, squinting eyes, didn't so much as flinch.

When the truck finally came to a creaking, heaving halt and the doors were thrown up again, Toad got his first look at Greenleaf Animal Penitentiary. True to its name, his new home's walls were entirely covered in creeping, dark green ivy, which gave it a decidedly academic look and one not all that dissimilar from Toad Hall. For the briefest of moments, Toad's brain tricked him into thinking perhaps this was one of those white-collar establishments, with boating and arts-and-crafts and lively conversations in the common room. But any hopes such as these were quickly dashed upon entering Greenleaf. For as verdant and lush as the walls were outside, they were just as fetid and

decaying on the inside. The facilities were ancient. The conditions were inhumane. And its leadership was highly susceptible to corruption, which generally made things worse.

For Toad though, this last feature represented possible salvation. As he'd been led out of court following the verdict, Badger had slipped a rather large wad of cash into his breast pocket. And though the wombat had proven intractable, a number of different figures, both human and animal, had taken their turn dipping into this stash since then. Toad was barely cognizant of it, his brain choking on the waves of panic and confusion that threatened to drown him. He would later come to discover that this sort of reaction was very common. Just about everyone had that same glazed and yet acutely alarmed look on their face when they first walked into Greenleaf.

Not that Toad could have any understanding or appreciation for it at that moment, but Greenleaf's history was quite unique. True to its design, it had once actually been a school, built during one of the first attempts to integrate animal and human life. Greenleaf's student body had been entirely animal, and its teachers were exclusively human. The rationale, as it often would be in times to come, was that the way to create harmony between humans and animals was for the animals to learn to see the world as the humans did, to love and hate the same things, in the same way, that humans did; to fear the same things too and to allow their fear to take them all to the same place. These ideas were presented as objective facts, and the humans insisted, sometimes angrily, that their animal students not just learn it all, but memorize it all too. Those who succeeded were rewarded while those who struggled were punished severely.

Predictably, the dynamic that this created was devastatingly exploited by those in charge. The stories that one could find about Greenleaf — the abuses that young animals suffered there and the twisted philosophies used to justify it — were enough to make a mammal's blood run cold.

The very fact that it had been so easily converted into a prison was stark evidence of the school's brutality. The dormitories that the student-animals once slept in were merely partitioned to make the prisoners' cells. The washrooms and toilets were unchanged. The only thing that differed about the yard was a slight increase in the height of the fence.

Toad's money bought him expedited passage through the prisoner's entry process. What this enabled Toad to avoid was something he was too afraid to ever ask but it also got him his own cell, which was an immense relief to him. It was the first good piece of

news he had received in a very long time, and Toad tried his best to revel in it. Upon arrival, he sank immediately down into the rough straw pallet that served as a bed, willing himself to ignore how coarse and sharp the bits of straw felt against his skin, how little they served to soften the ground underneath. Soon he fell asleep, calmed, if for no other reason than by the knowledge that at least the whole affair was over with.

Of course, this serenity on the part of Toad was a result of exhaustion and so extremely temporary. The moment he awoke, still on that pallet and not, as he'd dared to dream, underneath the covers of his four-post bed on the topmost floor of Toad Hall, he commenced to panic and self-loathe.

"You stupid, stupid animal!" came the cry from Toad's cell. "This is the end! You've come to it, and you've only yourself to blame!"

There came the laughing then, that same high-pitched whoop that was so distinctive to Toad, only without that thick base of confidence that once made it so rich. It was hollow now, jangly. The laugh was followed by moaning and then intermittent quiet. At that point, you'd have to strain to hear Toad's muffled crying as he buried his face in the pallet.

Toad's own cell block was looked after by a kindly older guard whose name he never bothered to learn but who nonetheless was very good to Toad, and it was he who stood close by during these unceasing waves of hopelessness and despair that made up the convict's first days inside. Later, when Mr. Toad beat his fists against the cell's rough stone walls and then his head, not too hard mind you, but hard enough, it was this jailor who dashed in to restrain Toad and hold him until he calmed down.

Toad first assumed that the man's caring nature was a result of the bribes but this was not so. Rather, the man was a self-professed animal lover and did truly and deeply care about the prisoners in his charge, believing that their redemption was possible. There was talk, whispered in the yard during their recreational time or in line for the horrific concoctions that they called food at Greenleaf, that this love extended into inappropriate territory but Toad continued to be quite adept at willfully ignoring the darkest aspects of his new home. Besides, it was usually the furrier animals that were subject to that sort of thing so Toad need not worry.

He had enough to worry about as is. For one, there was the stifling claustrophobia. His cell was tiny, no bigger than the anteroom to his master bathroom at home, with nothing to offer but the stone walls, the straw pallet and one barred window, perched so

high that Toad could only see the blue of the sky or maybe the occasional cloud from his angle. It was just enough to remind him though of all that he was missing out there and how utterly trapped he was here, and the anxiety that came with that was something Toad had never felt before.

He was surprised to find that he was provided with very little to fill his time there. He was given a job sorting mail but Toad predictably despised work. There was also the half an hour each day that he was allowed to roam a fenced-in and asphalt covered yard along with a whole crew of reptilian sorts. Chief among them was an exotic-looking creature named Scorpion, who, rumor had it, was doing time for killing a human, and an older lizard they called Skink.

On Toad's first morning out in the yard, he thought it might be prudent to introduce himself around and perhaps try to establish some kind of alliance that might help him learn the ropes. As he looked about, his eyes fell on Skink. He was perched in one corner, far from the fences, sitting up high in the branches of a leafless old tree that had been allowed to grow, while the rest of the animals milled about below, playing at cards or dice. Even from a distance, Toad could see the dignified and imperial air of a leader.

He marched right up to Skink, reasoning that these were his peers now and that animals like these respected and rewarded pluck, and he managed to get quite close before anyone nearby noticed and scrambled to block his way.

"Hey!" yelped a scrawny and dirty-looking newt.

"Whoa there," said Scorpion in a low and gravelly voice, extending his tail so that Toad was face-to-face with its razor-sharp point. "Where do you think you're going?"

"I was just hoping to introduce myself. My name is Toad, of The Willows."

Skink jumped down suddenly and pushed his way through the gathering crowd until he stood next to Scorpion and could casually rest an elbow on that animal's armor-plated back.

"Yeah, we know who you are," he said. "Little rich pup gets caught with his hand in the cookie jar. You must be pretty damn stupid to be that rich and end up in here with the likes of us."

Skink laughed and the group behind him all joined in, elbowing one another in the ribs and pointing at the hapless Toad.

"Yes, well, so it would seem," stammered Toad.

“Tell you what, Mr. Toad of The Willows. Do yourself a favor and keep that big yap of yours closed and your eyes on the ground and maybe — just maybe — you’ll make it through this alive. You got that?”

Strangely, it was only that old jailor who Toad came to feel any sort of real connection or trust with. He eventually opted to take up writing a memoir as a safe and solitary means to pass the time and it was the jailor who served as the work’s first audience. Toad would read to him from his in-progress work, and the jailor, an effusive man, would laugh or gasp and then, once Toad was finished, inevitably praise him for the book’s continued brilliance.

Toad still had a great deal of time to himself, pacing his private cell, alone with his thoughts, and perhaps because of the memoir, he found he was thinking more and more about his parents. They had had their strife, to be sure, and Toad would agonize over that, much as he had when they were alive. But he also missed them greatly and when he did, he felt a different sort of pain, even more imposing and destructive than that of all his days in prison. And that pain then found its way into his writing.

One day, Toad had just finished reading from a section on his mother and her widely-known wish to have had a daughter instead of Toad. The jailor laughed ruefully and remarked that he actually did have a daughter and that if Toad’s mother wanted the girl, she could have her. Toad had then had to tell the jailor that his mother had passed away and how it had happened, and the look that came over the jailor’s face was one of a profound and wrenching sadness, the likes of which Toad had never seen before.

“She lost her mother as well, Mr. Toad. Not to an accident but to sickness. A long and very painful sickness.” The man paused, unable to move through the stickiness of this past sorrow without a moment’s strain. He sucked in his breath then and swallowed hard so that his mouth spread and tightened into something impenetrable. “I think I might bring her to meet you. I was only joking before. She’s a great girl. She’s the best at putting a smile on your face, I can tell you that much. And she loves to be around animals.”

Initially, Toad was not interested. He highly doubted that this girl would be able to put a smile on his face, given the circumstances, and he had no interest in pretending otherwise. He hadn’t realized it then but later he would tell friends that the thoughts of his parents had been a kind of morbid escape for him, from one kind of pain to another. So when the jailor proudly presented his daughter to Toad the following day,

introducing her as Maggie, and Toad looked at them both, standing before him in support of each other, buoyed by each other, he saw a family. Toad desperately wanted to be part of a family.

Maggie would appear not every day, but more and more as the weeks went on and her time with Toad grew more comfortable. Like her father, she was an eminently good listener. She'd lean forward, staring fixedly, dark brown hair tumbling down around her full and perpetually flushed face, elbows upon knees and emerald green eyes ablaze, offering up the perfect number of interjections, just enough to let Toad know she was still listening, not so many that it threw him off the rhythm of the story.

In addition, she brought food, great heaping baskets full of pastries, jars of jam, and fresh fruits and vegetables taken from the family garden. Over the course of his life, Toad had grown accustomed to a certain kind of diet and it was not one available to him at Greenleaf so he gorged himself on these treats, spreading them out before him on the single, thin blanket he'd been allotted and taking great delight in examining them, even criticizing them. "This honeydew isn't quite ripe," he'd say, or, "That particular flour — in the rye loaf — it was lacking." Then, Toad would devour it all anyway.

It was all in good fun though, as if Toad and Maggie were strolling through a farmer's market, bantering and carrying on as free folk do. And it was during one of their afternoons together and amid all the badinage, that Toad, rather unprompted, began to reveal certain truths to her.

He had previously avoided discussing his crimes, and Maggie, who had grown up around the prisoners that her father cared for, knew well enough not to ask. Instead, Toad had regaled her with story upon story chosen from his more high-flying days. There were the tales from his youth, the same ones he'd fed Mole during their first meetings; the adventures of a young Toad scurrying beneath tablecloths and between the legs of champagne glass-laden waiters at his parents' dinner parties. And then there were Toad's travels, the luxury meals and luxury accommodations; the first-rate education; the clothes and toys and houses and cars. He described it all with a wistful and pained tone as Maggie sat alertly nearby, nodding and offering up her perfectly timed interjections.

But then, one day, Toad turned to her after swallowing a bite of a silky, buttery croissant she'd brought in, and said, "Do you know why I'm here, Maggie dearest?"

Maggie was barely out of adolescence, no older than Toad, and though she'd led a difficult life, not only having lost her own mother very early on but also consequently having been forced into work at a young age, she still retained the raw excitement and vitality of youth. At that moment, it shone through the creases and lines that were already advancing across her face, setting those eyes of hers agleam.

"I know what I read," she said, rather coyly.

"Yes, well, you can't believe all that," Toad said. "I'd like to tell you."

"You can tell me anything you'd like, Toad. You can trust me," she replied as she leaned forward, urging him on.

"Well, first of all, I had nothing to do with any Red Willow Juice sale, I'll have you know." Toad scoffed bitterly. "The very idea that I'd be out there negotiating shipments and deliveries and border crossings and such — it's just ridiculous. I'm not an arrogant animal, Maggie. I'm the first to admit the things I have no faculty with, and those are the things."

"Of course. I believe you," Maggie said soothingly.

"No, I was the victim here. I was just trying to do some good. But I ran up against powerful forces, Maggie, more powerful than you can ever imagine."

Maggie just shook her head softly and said nothing as Toad gazed out his window at the milky white of a cloud-covered sky.

"And what did I want, hmm? I just wanted to make a name for myself. That's all I was after. Some impact, something to point to and say, 'I did that. That was me and me alone.'"

He sighed heavily then, letting his head drop and rolling his neck before lifting it again, so that now his eyes met Maggie's on the way up and it felt for a moment as if she was lifting him. Toad was perhaps not fully able to see the totality of what this statement revealed about him but he was more self-aware than he let on and certainly aware of the effect he was having on Maggie. He was, as ever when it came to friendships, a very resourceful Toad.

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“They're some kind of new elite,” said Mole to himself as he sat out by The River on a hazy June morning. He spat it out with a violent laugh, and then listened as the sound sliced through the rushes and skipped across the water before disappearing.

It'd been just a few weeks since Weasel's purchase of Toad Hall, an event which had all but flipped The Willows upside down. The sale of the estate had, in fact, replaced its former owner's troubles as the primary topic of conversation around town, with animals of all kinds rushing to take a position on the deal. It certainly wasn't the first time that someone of the nouveau riche had settled into the neighborhood, nor was it the first time a South Ender had made that climb. Opossum's family could attest to that. But Weasel was no ordinary South Ender, and Toad Hall no ordinary purchase.

It had come as a surprise to most that Weasel could even afford the estate in the first place but his business interests had lately expanded, branching out from the auto body shop and into real estate and construction. Mole himself had just that day seen a new sign hanging in front of the Wild Wood mixed-use property — the one that Toad's family's company had been developing. This sign listed Weasel and a company called Mustelid Services as the new, primary contractors. Yes, Weasel was making a name for himself in The Willows. That much was certain.

Despite that, many of the more entrenched North Enders still considered Weasel no more than a street thug from below the Crick. In their eyes, whatever money he'd made must have come from something illicit and whatever plans he had for himself would surely be a detriment to the area as a whole. The fact that he would take up residence in such a historically significant home was an offense and a grave sign of the trouble that Weasel meant.

Of course there were others, some in the North and certainly loads in the South, who cheered Weasel's big move. They'd look at Weasel's past and see the story of an animal who had pulled himself up by the bootstraps and overcome the socioeconomic obstacles put in his place. Sure, that might have required some less than savory decisions along the way but that wasn't a reflection of the animal so much as it was the environment he found himself in, one that had been weighted against him long before he had even been born.

Mole shouldn't have been surprised at the pride that Weasel seemed to inspire in his old neighborhood. A part of him wanted to swell with that pride too, and that same part loathed his suspicions of a few weeks prior. With the echo of his own words from

moments ago still ringing in his ear, Mole wondered, not for the first time, if he wasn't rather jealous of Weasel and if that hadn't perhaps colored his thinking. He shook his head now and closed his eyes. He couldn't help but still feel trapped.

Summer was arriving, at least there was that, easing in this year, little by little, a bit of heat here, a blast of newfound color there. Before the animals knew it, they'd be wading through the thick, sweet air once again, a gossamer layer of sweat clinging to them ferociously as they moved from barbecue to ballgame to evenings out there on The River and under the stars, the sweat now evaporating as the lightning bugs added their glow to the sky.

It wasn't all restful or relaxing times, for the summer meant the high-season too, the boom, the return of the tourists. For the next three months or so, the population of the town would double. The North End, deathly quiet during the winter, would awaken with the sound of riding lawn mowers on thick grass and the thwack of tennis balls against catgut racket strings.

The bed-and-breakfasts and inns of the outer River Bank were coming to life as well. Their proprietors, older animals in plaid shirts and bifocals, would appear to give their white picket fences fresh coats of paint, to prune back the creeping vines and clear out the gutters while teetering on rickety ladders, calling out to each other from across the road, shrugging their shoulders and grinning because here they were again, back for another summer in The Willows.

As was tradition, the first true horde appeared on the weekend of The Lily Fair. The event was always held on the Sunday before the solstice and served to welcome and celebrate that moment; the moment when The Willows and its denizens basked most fully in the glorious power wielded by nature, when rebirth was affirmed and an animal could feel most assured of their place in the Great Mystery. They were not always restful or relaxing, these times, but they were times to feel alive.

Mole couldn't help but feel that warmth spread through him, even in the midst of what anyone would deem to be a life's dark period. He reluctantly obliged it too, allowing it to draw him out to the fair on that sunny, bountiful day. There, he once again found himself trailing his parents, gazing around mildly at the artisans' wares, the games and the good cheer, glancing back at his sister and her brood who were lost in family dramas all their own.

For a moment, Mole thought back to Pan Island and the lessons he'd learned there about time, the way it could be stretched and compressed and looped back to meet itself again at its beginning. He thought about where he'd been one year ago, walking past these very same stalls, savoring the fair's folksy offerings and traditions. It seems he'd looped back around again. Everything was the same, only of course it was so different too.

Mole was suddenly struck by the desire to eat something sweet and fattening. He wanted something that could fly right in the face of time and the rough passage it took, and he was right in the middle of deciding between a deep-fried candy bar and an apple fritter the size of his face when he caught a whiff of French cologne on the breeze.

Turning, Mole saw Skunk standing behind him with a sly smile on his face. The detective was dressed with his usual flamboyance, this time themed for the season with an outrageously colored t-shirt and pair of shorts that, set off against the stark black-and-white of his fur, proudly asserted their neon, summertime freedom.

"Good afternoon, Mole. I see you and I had similar thoughts," he said, indicating the preposterously large caramel apple he brandished in one paw. "I wonder if we may talk?"

"Oh, uh, yes, of course. What about?"

"This and that. But not here," said Skunk before pausing to take an extravagant bite, chewing slowly and with a smile, his eyes casually scanning the crowd. He followed that with a long pull from a bottle of root beer and then continued. "Everyone here is having such a good time. We wouldn't want to ruin it with any official business. You come down to the station tomorrow, eh? In the morning. 9am."

"Really?" asked Mole, his heart suddenly thumping rather insistently against the inside of his ribcage.

"Hey," he cooed softly now, "it's nothing to worry about, dear one. It's just some follow-ups on all that nasty business with Mr. Toad."

As if Mole could find nothing to worry about in such a scenario. As if his entire day weren't immediately ruined. Gone was any hint of contentedness or relaxation that the fair and its rituals might have lent him. His parents had thankfully gone off then to have a look around the ceramics tent, and when they returned, Mole did his best to maintain a good front but it was no use. He was buried too deep inside his own anxieties and fears.

“Good gracious, Moley, if you're going to be like this then you might as well not have come,” his mother finally exclaimed.

“I'm sorry,” Mole replied, smiling gamely. “What were you saying?”

“I wasn't saying anything. I can just see you over there, lost in your own head!”

“I just saw Skunk. That's all. He wants to speak with me. Down at the station.”

“What?” his father said, leaning in close now, his jaw clenched. “About what?”

“About Mr. Toad.”

“Oh for Pete's sake, I thought we were finished with that,” he cried with an anguished tone.

“But you told us you didn't know anything about that, right Mole?” asked his mother.

“Yes! I don't know anything,” insisted Mole. “That's the truth.”

“Well then you tell them the truth and you shouldn't have anything to worry about, reasoned his mother, squeezing his arm.

“You tell them the truth, pup! Okay? Is that clear?” added his father. Mole could think of nothing smart to say in response and so he just nodded.

The next morning, after a long night spent wondering what truth he was meant to tell, he dragged himself to the station. It was promising to be a particularly hot day, with the sun already beating down upon the fields and forests and the rambling River of The Willows. The heat radiated up, bringing with it a whole galaxy of gnats and mites, flying insects whose buzz and hum were the perfect droning accompaniment to such oppressive weather. Conditions like these could practically break an animal.

Inside, it was quite pleasant though, cool and dark and quiet. Mole was able to take a moment to collect himself. It'd been a long time since he'd been inside the building and memories of the last time, years ago when he'd come to tell Skunk what he knew of the Deer incident, called out to him now from some deep recess in his brain. He noticed how the place felt far less imposing than he remembered. There was something a little beaten down about it too, with its fading and warped linoleum floors and the stale smell of dust that lingered in its corners.

Timber Wolf was at the front desk, nibbling on the end of a pencil and staring down at a stack of paperwork with furrowed brows. He looked up as Mole approached.

“Oh. Mr. Mole,” he said, “We're glad to see you.”

There was something oddly collegial about his tone, particularly since Mole could not recall ever having spoken to Timber Wolf before. The officer reached down below the desk to push a button and there was a loud buzz over the door behind him.

“Go right on through. You'll see him in there.”

Behind the door, Mole found Skunk flipping through files in the station's workroom, an open space that, true to Willows form, had shrunk in the years as the room accumulated desks and cabinets and boxes and took on the weight of the town's perpetually lengthening history.

Skunk was alone in the room, and it reminded Mole of how small the Willows Police Department really was. Skunk and Timber Wolf were the only full-time employees, which suited things just fine. Not that there wasn't crime. The tourists brought with them a fair share of shoplifting and drunken disorderly charges and the more unrulier pockets of The Willows could always be counted to raise a little fuss with the occasional fistfight or broken window. But it was hard to know if the absence of more severe crimes was because they didn't exist or because the department couldn't look deep enough to see them.

Skunk was dressed in what Mole could only guess was a casual Monday kind of ensemble. He had on a navy blue flannel sport coat with grey and red checked slacks and his high-collared white dress shirt was worn wide open. Upon seeing Mole, he set down his small, steaming cup of espresso and spread his arms out wide.

“Welcome to my little kingdom, Mole. Come, come. We'll talk in the interview room.”

He led the way back to a tiny, windowless room, furnished only with two folding chairs, and a table between them. Not much of a kingdom, thought Mole. Here, the heat and the stale smells seemed to have pooled and collected, and the two animals sat across from one another, simmering in it.

Nevertheless, Skunk was all smiles. He was holding one rather thick file in his paws which he opened now and studied. Finally, and without looking up, he spoke.

“The body of the human, Willie Williams, was found in animal territory, did you know that?” he asked.

“No,” said Mole. He couldn't remember having heard where the body was discovered, only that it had happened a few days after Toad's arrest.

“As a result, our department is part of the ongoing investigation into his death. Now —,” Skunk’s head jerked up sharply and his eyes met Mole’s. “Did you ever meet him?”

“Who? Willie Williams?...Uh, no.”

Mole thought of the backyard BBQ party Toad had thrown. This had been the only time Mole could remember seeing Toad with humans but he remembered them as being well-heeled sorts, as if they’d been transported over from a parallel North End. They wore crisply ironed clothes in pastel and had tastefully tanned skin and very expensive-looking sunglasses that they wore perched on top of their elegant manes of hair.

Mole had only ever seen the video footage and a few photos of Willie in the newspaper but it was enough to know Willie’s heels had never been well off. Nevertheless, something about the airlessness of the room and the tone in Skunk’s voice made it all seem so questionable. Mole could feel himself growing unsure, losing his grip on the difference between history and past imaginings.

“I don’t think so,” Mole added after a moment’s hesitation.

“You couldn’t be sure?”

“I’m sure.”

Skunk held his stare for just a few moments longer before looking back down again. “You attended parties at Toad Hall?” he asked.

“A few. There were humans there at one of them but not Willie.”

“Tell me, Mole, how would you describe your friendship with Mr. Toad?”

“Uh, casual, I guess. Or...yes, that’s about right. Casual. We met through Rat. She lives up in the North End as well, or she did, rather. She’s moved away.”

“Yes, I spoke with her,” Skunk said with studied nonchalance. This bit of information momentarily staggered Mole, though he couldn’t be sure why. It was perfectly reasonable for Skunk to have talked with Rat. Nevertheless, the thought that their end of things — his and Rat’s — was now up for public scrutiny made Mole’s stomach twist and turn, revealing once again that great and yawning pit at its bottom.

Skunk was looking at him now with something approaching sympathy. He smiled.

“And what do you know about all this business with the juice?” he asked, lowering his voice conspiratorially, as if they were now just gossiping.

“Oh, only what I — ,” offered Mole before Skunk cut him off.

“The central question of course is why Mr. Williams was killed and how it relates to this proposed Red Willow Juice buy. For instance, one might surmise that the murder

was motivated by anger. The juice deal had seemingly just gone belly up. Clearly, we, the police, knew it was to happen. Someone was to blame. Maybe it was Willie.”

“And so you think Toad killed him?” asked Mole with a bit more surprise and bewilderment than he should have liked.

“I do not think anything yet,” said Skunk with an arch of his eyebrows. “And of course Mr. Toad persists in his assertion that he’d never met the man prior to that night.”

Mole could feel the detective examining him now, scrutinizing every last bit of body language and poking in between every line Mole had already uttered.

“Well I didn’t kill him!” he yelped out suddenly, and Skunk burst out laughing in response.

“Oh, of course not, dear pup, you are not suspected. No, no, I’m simply asking Toad’s friends about who he was associating with at that time. Perhaps there were other parties involved in the juice sale. After all, we still do not know where Mr. Toad acquired the juice he was meant to sell. Perhaps you might have seen Mr. Toad and Willie and some other party?”

“Well, I never met or even saw the man in person so —”

“Ah. And what about this one called Moose?”

“Moose? At one of Toad’s parties? No. Never.”

Skunk smiled and nodded and then made a few quick notes.

“You don’t think Moose killed Willie, do you?” asked Mole incredulously.

“Oh, you don’t think he could?” replied Skunk with a devilish grin. “He could. I assure you. But no, as I said, I don’t think anything quite yet, Mr. Mole. I am simply doing my due diligence and talking to the animals who were known to associate with Mr. Toad.”

At that, he leaned back in his chair, and let this polite but firm tone of his hang in the air for a moment.

“Now, Miss Rat mentioned that you had taken her and Toad to a party down below the docks. And that is where Toad first became involved with the illegal car races, is that correct?”

“Yes, through Weasel.”

Mole hadn’t planned to say that animal’s name and yet there it was, spilling out of his mouth. In response, a bit of bemusement now danced in the detective’s eyes.

“Yes. Mr. Weasel. So then, one might say it was you who brought Mr. Toad and Mr. Weasel together, yes?” he asked.

“Not directly, no,” said Mole, the hint of an edge creeping into his voice despite his best efforts to contain it. He could feel that burn of guilt in his belly too and he swallowed hard against it. “There were a great many animals at that party. If I remember correctly —”

Mole was aware that perhaps he could not remember correctly given his level of drunkenness that night. How had Toad and Weasel actually met? There arose that pesky matter of memory and subjectivity again and Mole almost sank fully back down into that metaphysical hole before he was able to right the ship and push through.

“Yes, that's right. I had gone off with Rat. They met one another entirely separate from me.”

“He's quite the interesting character. Weasel, that is.” Skunk picked up the file and flipped through it idly. “With quite the assortment of interests. For instance, on the night of the incident at The Weir, Mr. Weasel was attending a meeting with the Mayor. Regarding the latest round of rezoning in Wild Wood. Evidently, it went quite late. Backroom dealings and such. You live in Wild Wood, yes?”

It was of interest to Skunk where Mole lived. He had taken the time to glean that information. Mole swallowed.

“Yes.”

“There are to be a great many changes there. And it would seem as if Weasel is interested in being a part of it, eh.”

There was a pause as Skunk sipped at the espresso. Mole wasn't sure if he had posed a question to him just then or was simply musing out loud. But before Mole had the chance to consider responding, the detective continued on:

“Is there anything else you'd like to tell me, Mole? Any conversations you overheard? Any suspicious characters you suddenly recall lurking around the edges of things, hmm?”

“No, I don't think so,” mumbled Mole.

“Well then,” Skunk continued. “I won't keep you. But if you do think of anything at all that might be of interest, you tell me, Mole. It is important that everyone in the Willows stays together now. At this moment, there are outside forces that are very

interested in our ways. We must work to ensure that the integrity of our community is maintained.”

And with that, Skunk stood up and extended his arm out, showing Mole to the exit.

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Walking out of the station and back into the oppressive heat of a Willows summer, Mole tried to run through his analysis of the encounter. He had to admit that Skunk's interest in Weasel was strangely gratifying. And though Skunk had also made the connection back to Mole (and made it via Rat at that), it was indirect. Even someone as nervous as Mole could see that Skunk clearly didn't suspect him of anything other than a proximity to the events.

Even still, Mole couldn't shake the feeling that he was somehow suddenly falling behind. He mulled that as the rippling breeze that typically flowed through The Willows around midday came now in hot, dry bursts. It swirled around him, disorienting his senses and casting him adrift. All of a sudden, he felt quite exhausted. Thankfully, most businesses remained closed on that Monday following the fair, including the mill. It was a tradition meant to honor the God-given laziness of the season and the need for a final moment of rest and reflection before business fully commenced. So Mole was able to trod through a still sleepy town and return to the comforting gloom of his burrow, whereupon he fell straight back into the bed he'd climbed out of only a few hours before.

In his dreams, the ghosts of Pan Island swirled up again, only this time, they hadn't come to dance. They loomed over Mole, staring down with menace. And Rat was in among them, and Toad too, dim and transparent images flitting in and out of visibility, stooped under the fog and darkness around them, animals soon to disappear for all time. And the sound of the gavel rang out again.

Its sharp jolt woke Mole, propelling him out of his bed and into the living room. The light sneaking in through his burrow's door told him it was dusk and the sun was once again sinking back down into The River. Overcome with pangs of hunger, the groggy animal set about preparing a supper of cold poached trout with a bit of horseradish and haricot vert.

With the benefit of sleep, cooler temperatures and a fuller stomach, Mole tried to shake himself free of the visions that had just been dancing through his head. That night, there was another party at the Holt and Mole decided he would be there. It was meant as a kind of dark and inverted response to The Lily Fair. It too celebrated the solstice, not as a symbol of rebirth though, but instead as a god unto itself. This was the god that enacted the destruction and purification preceding any new beginning.

As Mole made his entrance a few hours later, he could see that Otter had gone all out, actually decorating his water-logged kingdom with some degree of reverence for the occasion. There were streaks of blue crepe paper streamers and garlands of yellow hibiscus and silky white pinwheel flowers. The party's centerpiece was a ten-foot pole that had been erected in the middle of The Holt, rising up out of the lagoon's brackish waters.

Atop the pole stood a last remnant of the kind of religion that once ran rampant on the grounds of Pan Island, a ceramic plate called the oufa. Its face was divided into a series of expanding crescent moons, bigger and bigger and painted in deepening shades of green. And the torchlight from below illuminated the plate's face and threatened to burn the crepe paper and send danger careening up into the sky. And the hibiscus and pinwheels released their aromas into the atmosphere.

There was something slightly more respectful to this party, as compared to the usual bacchanals, something about the perfumed and warming air that kept everyone in a dazed and dreamy state. Animals moved in discrete clusters, whispering to each other with smiling faces and heavy-lidded eyes, splaying out on the clumps of grass or atop the viewing platform where Mole had once held Rat and there they giggled together and gazed off into the night. Mole could feel himself slipping back towards the ghosts stalking the edges of his consciousness at that moment, and he pushed back.

He moved across the courtyard and into the tunnels, searching for that same cubby-like room that Spiny Lizard had brought him to before. After a few minutes of awkward wandering and poking about, Mole found it. And, when he did, he found Spiny there too, once again minding the Willows Juice tap, just as Mole suspected he would. It was the first he'd seen of Spiny since the day of his testimony against Toad.

Mole was surprised to realize that in the intervening time, and even as his interests and suspicions had begun to rise, he hadn't reconsidered Spiny's role in Toad's downfall. Perhaps it was because it was still so hard to imagine such a genial creature

possessing any kind of real ill will. But Mole remembered how resentful Spiny had been of Toad's privilege and he wondered now if that was enough to constitute a motive.

"Ho, ho! It's the big Mole! He's the moliest," bellowed Spiny when he caught sight of his old chum. He grabbed at Mole, and pulled him in close, throwing one of his cold and clammy arms over Mole's shoulder protectively. Despite himself, Mole felt a smile creep across his face and a sense of relief wash over him.

"I was hoping we'd see you tonight. I hear all you've been doing is slinking around Covey's with those old sots!"

"Those are my kind of animals," replied Mole dryly.

"Bunch of patchy, dead-eyed snaggletooths!" Spiny brayed and two nearby voles yelped and then erupted into giggles. "But it don't matter now because you're back where you belong!"

The arm around Mole's shoulder tightened and he quickly felt himself bowed as Spiny applied a gleeful headlock, his giggling matching that of the voles.

"Though, who knows? Maybe we'll start partying up at Toad Hall again, right? Weez'll throw a blow-out eventually. He promised he would once he got settled in and finished with everything. Isn't that something that he's up there now? And hey! You can show us all the place's secret doors and shit."

"What secret shit?" barked a suddenly alarmed Mole. How could Spiny of all animals know about that? Or had Spiny's drunken stream of consciousness carried him here by accident? Judging by the confused look that had sprung up on the lizard's face, Mole guessed it was the latter.

"I don't know. Houses like that always have secret, like, portals. Behind the grandfather clock," he slurred. "Whatever, Moley!"

Again Spiny tightened his grip on Mole and now Mole threw his arm around Spiny too, hoping to preserve the fraternal tone of a moment ago.

"Listen," said the lizard, suddenly uncomfortably close to Mole and speaking in a low, soft tone. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you I was going to testify against Toad. I know you were tight with him but I just couldn't, okay? I didn't tell anyone. Just the police."

Mole nodded and smiled but he was thinking of something Spiny had just said.

"It's okay, pal. But hey, what do you mean, 'finished with everything'? About Weasel?"

“Hmm?” Spiny relaxed his grip. “Oh, just that he's just got all this stuff going on now. He doesn't come here like he used to.”

Mole took a moment to clear his throat and in that moment, it occurred to him that he had very specific motives for having come to this party and it had nothing to do with relaxing.

“Awhile back you were saying how Weasel was talking to animals about — I think you were saying, like ‘building infrastructure.’ You think he's busy with that?” asked Mole but Spiny’s eyes were starting to drift now. “I heard he was in a meeting with the Mayor. I couldn't believe it. Weasel! Meeting with the Mayor?” he continued.

“Oh yeah,” replied Spiny, a bit of pride and excitement showing on his face. “That’s Opossum.”

And again Mole was momentarily knocked back by information that had, up to this point, seemingly eluded him.

“Oh, right. Because...” said Mole, letting his voice trail off. He let his eyes dart quickly to Spiny with the indication of a question.

“Her family’s been tight with Mink’s for years. Once Weasel started to make his moves, she hooked him up. Now, he's got all this stuff. With North Enders. In the Wide World.”

“With humans?” Mole asked.

Mole's first thought was of those partygoers at the BBQ and all their glorious colors; that golden-brown skin, those gleaming white teeth, the soft streaks of blue that the women applied to their eyelids or the deep red they put on their lips. They were such a vain lot, at least the type that ended up at Toad Hall. Then his human friends from The Red Lion, Gus and Doris, appeared in his mind. They seemed to be of an entirely different species. Their skin had been mottled and etched with intricate illustrations; their teeth were dull and yellowing. But they were kind and genuinely open to the world in a way that felt markedly different from Toad's guests. Mole delighted momentarily in the image of Gus and Doris strolling through Toad Hall's front doors.

“Hey Spiny, when you went to Toad's that time, were there humans there?”

The lizard seemed not to have heard him, his attention had drifted completely out through the room's open doorway. There were the distant sounds of a guitar and a

chorus of voices now audible and coming from the courtyard. Spiny blinked and then looked back at Mole.

“Come on! They’ve started in on the song.”

Spiny heaved himself upright and hurried out the door. Like the party itself, the song that was just now commencing in the courtyard with its familiar fiddle strains was meant as a rather cheeky response to the town’s approved seasonal pageantry — the celebration and glorification of the natural world in all its teeming, bountiful splendor. The oufa and the party around it had come to represent the other half of that cycle, when the sun fell and the colors darkened and the air grew rich with the meaty smells of night. The dark hides mysteries that are worth fearing. But that fear was also worth celebrating.

Spiny Lizard was pushing his way towards the courtyard’s center, eager not only to sing but to lead the group in that cocksure way drunken young males are always eager to lead something. He jumped up on to a little makeshift dais next to Otter and the two of them raised their glasses to the moon and to the light it cast down upon them while Mole lingered toward the back, listening as the collective voice of the animals rose:

*So we’ve come
So we’re here
So we’ll stay
amid the dark and ever raging fires*

*We’ll drink,
we’ll play,
We’ll sing and dance
And our light will find the way*

*Ever noble, ever bold
The Great Mystery emits its siren call
We’ll carry forth with heads held high
Never ever - no never ever - shall we fall*

Chapter 12: The Wide World

On the day after the solstice party at The Holt, Mole set out for the Wide World. He was headed for Pine Ridge Pass and the border crossing on its far side, which meant he'd first have to skirt around the backside of downtown, hopping over the train tracks there to meet up with the old wagon road. This is the one that ran east, the one farming animals once used to bring their wares to the Mart. From there, he knew to split off when he first spotted the blackberry bushes, push north again and then go up the hill at a very particular spot where the exposed roots of the river birch trees formed a kind of staircase that led all the way up.

He picked his way over those roots, stopping to nod politely and allow an older pig, out foraging for mushrooms, to pass by. And just as he had on his way out of town the first time, back when he was headed for Highcountry College, Mole stopped now at the top of the pass, taking a moment to savor this position, perched on the border between two worlds and all the possibilities that they contained.

The possibilities were altogether different now though, and somehow, the view from the peak looked different too. Mole hadn't gone to bed the previous night with the intention of traveling to the Wide World the following day, but he'd awakened possessed of a rare kind of clarity, the kind he'd craved his whole life. He'd gone to The Holt to poke around, to fish for the very information that Spiny had given him. He'd been investigating, just like when he'd gone to Weasel's garage. Standing at the pass now, Mole felt the thrumming kind of fear he remembered, the kind that came with purpose, the kind that lets you know you'd arrived at that place where danger and glory meet.

But he could not afford to dawdle. Highcountry was a full day's travel if you moved quickly and kept the duration of your meal breaks to a minimum which of course Mole would be incapable of doing. The preparation of his food for this trip had taken up quite a bit of time that morning, what with all the apportioning of nuts and fruit slices and

bits of jerky into the proper containers. There was no occasion more exciting and challenging to prepare food for than travel, and Mole had relished the delicious mystery of it all. And since he had bothered to plan and prepare and savor the very idea of all this food, he would most certainly be taking the time to consume it properly too.

But Mole had no real desire to linger out near the border. As expected, new restrictions on crossing had been implemented following Toad's conviction, though, if you asked many, it was more as if the old restrictions had been reimplemented. At either end of the footbridge that spanned the border's low, shallow concrete moat stood guard booths. When Mole had crossed this bridge on his way to school five years earlier, those booths had been left empty. But now, Mole could see with dismay that they were manned again. The one nearest to him was filled with an especially meaty example of the human male. As Mole approached, the man heaved his considerable frame up and stepped out.

Mole took in a big breath, pushing away the first pangs of actual doubt that he'd felt since resolving to make this journey. He wordlessly extended his ID, identifying him as a registered resident of The Willows.

"Where ya headed?"

"Highcountry College. I was a student there. I'm just visiting a friend."

The man stared hard at Mole through beady eyes and then grunted with something approaching acceptance. He handed the card back to Mole and waved his hand idly, as if to swat away a not particularly bothersome fly. Mole wasn't sure what that meant.

"You can go," said the man, his exasperation leaving an odiferous trail as he slouched back to his position stuffed in the little box. And so Mole went.

Once on the human side, the trees quickly began to thin and the land became patchy, eventually giving way to nothing but hard-packed dirt, dead grass and a dusty road that the humans called Main Street. The road started at the human town of Castle Hill not far from there, but Mole now walked in the opposite direction, to the east. A mile out, he spotted the bench and the solitary pole from which hung a rusted sign. He sat down heavily here by the side of the road, removed a tin of honey-glazed cashews and a canteen's worth of fine iced tea, and began his wait for the bus that would take him to Highcountry.

Five years ago, he'd climbed aboard that bus to discover that the human faces staring back at him were stony. Their eyes stared, boring holes through Mole, and the

air took on a tremulous volume. It was always this way, Mole would learn, and he knew now how to prepare. So when the bus did pull up some thirty minutes later, he was standing ready, his food put neatly back into his bag and his face set into its own kind of stony expression.

They ambled from community to community, the bus easing into stations on the outskirts of the town and lingering for a few moments before rumbling off again. It was a procession of the same images; the lights of vending machines bouncing off the chrome and the hard plastic seats and even more stony glances from the humans, most of whom stood alone, smoking cigarettes and pacing small circles at a respectful distance from one another. The trees here were sparse and when they appeared, they were in the kinds of neat and orderly lines that nature never produced. And above those trees stood buildings twice their size, ten times the size. Great behemoths that reached up to puncture the sky and conquer it. Mole shook his head ever so slightly. He would never cease to be amazed at man's unquenchable desire to conquer his landscape and the ways both clumsy and divine they devised to do so.

It was evening by the time the bus arrived at the college, and so Mole knew he had to hurry. He jogged as quick as he could, clutching in his pocket another I.D., his old student I.D.. Surely it hadn't been so long that he couldn't still pass as a student.

One could never be sure with campus police officers though. They were an odd mix. A great many of them were quite old, still in need of a job and money, and content enough to sit stoically in their appointed little huts, positioned in the atria of the buildings and at major intersections among the paved paths. But there was also the aggressive type; those who had failed to cut it at more prestigious levels of law enforcement (and even not so prestigious levels like, say, manning the guard post at the animal-human border) and so had washed up here. They had something to prove — whatever that something was — and all they could find to prove it with was the very limited amount of power that their office and badge afforded them. And of course it was always easier to exert that power over the animal students.

Thankfully, Mole was able to get across the quad at the center of campus without encountering anyone. All around him were the outlines of students; silhouettes against the setting sun, perfect representations of intellectual pursuit — a bag slung over the shoulder, a stack of books cradled in the crook of an arm, a pencil tucked behind the ear and pointed towards the sky. He had to remind himself in that moment — with the

purpling horizon and the smell of the grass and the pleasant buzz of discourse and insects humming around him — that in fact he had hated this place and regretted coming. The faces of the students who walked past may have appeared more friendly than those on the bus but Mole knew better.

He was headed to practically the only place at Highcountry College that he'd ever felt truly comfortable in. When Mole did arrive at the august entrance of Nolan Memorial Library and saw its stairs practically choked with students, he realized there'd been no need to rush at all. It was Finals Week and so the library would stay open 24 hours a day, ready to accommodate the frantic crush of study that this time of year occasioned. He waded into the fray now, nodding and smiling unsteadily and cocking his eyebrows every once in a while as if to say, "Can you believe all this learning that's required of us?"

Edith MacMillan's office was nestled snugly in a corner of the building's top floor and behind a set of glass doors introducing her as the building's head archivist. Already a bit winded from the trek up the wide, wooden steps of the library's central stairway and through the soaring arches of its neo-Colonial hallways (which, privately, he had always thought to be a bit tacky), Mole was now barely able to heave the archive's door open and squeeze through before it slammed shut behind him.

Even now, in the masochistic chaos of the students' final days on campus, the room beyond was an oasis of serenity. The work in the Nolan Memorial Library archives tended to be long-term, done mainly by those with thesis papers developed over great periods of time. There wasn't the same kind of maniacal, sleep-deprived intensity that one felt walking through Nolan's central room. The students out there hunched over their books, their eyes moving furiously across pages, feet tapping and pencils twirling across their fingertips.

There were, in fact, no students at all in the archives at the moment and Mole wondered if Edith would actually be there. But then he remembered her devotion to this institution and the information it contained and the pursuits that that information might enable. She would be here, in solidarity and should she be needed. It was exactly why Mole had liked her so much in the first place.

He had met Edith a few months after arriving at Highcountry, during a period in which Mole spent a great deal of time at the library. He had been assigned to a dorm specifically designed for animals, where he roomed with a hamster who liked to be

called Boomer. Ostensibly, this sort of set-up was designed to provide the animal students with a built-in support system as they acclimated to human culture. But Mole found Boomer to be aggressively rude and perhaps deliberately disruptive to Mole. The whole of the dormitory was misconceived, built around the premise that all animals — by virtue of some shared origin far up the genetic tree — were naturally drawn to one another. But Mole had very little in common with them. Their rowdiness lacked the gritty realism of the South End and their interest in their studies were hollow at best.

So instead, Mole would spend hours wandering the library's stacks, picking books off shelves at random and plunging himself into the depths of past knowledge in a way that was quite familiar to those who knew him and his antisocial tendencies. Nevertheless, he'd actually been hesitant to enter the archives. The work inside seemed so delicate and refined that he'd felt his academic interests weren't official or advanced enough to warrant his intrusion. But after Mole's Intro to Literature class took a field trip to the archives and Edith came out to show them the proper way they handled their rarities — in this case, a collection of letters that one of the human world's most famous writers had written to various mistresses — he'd felt comfortable enough to go in on his own.

Edith's abundant enthusiasm had a way of spilling over into a kind of absent-minded energy that would seem to subsume her. Mole couldn't count the number of times he'd walked in to find her completely lost in thought, twirling the same lock of hair or picking at the same hole in the same sweater she'd been wearing for weeks. It was an immensely charming attribute, one that immediately gave the air around her a warm and safe kind of quality.

He'd come back to the archive a few weeks after his Literature class, ostensibly to inquire about the poems from another of their very celebrated scribes — an imperialist of much repute, known for his adventure tales and clever turns of phrase — and spent the better part of the afternoon at Edith's elbow, flipping through old magazines and whispering over yellowing pages with the same reverence that Mole would bring to his examination of the newspapers at Beaver's mill years later.

He now spotted Edith bent between two file cabinets, deeply absorbed in what looked to be a stack of old photographs. True to form, she looked as if she was already cozier up for the evening and was, at this moment, rooting through the refrigerator for a late night snack. She wore a Highcountry U sweatshirt (which Mole would have

guessed she'd taken from the lost-and-found) over a brightly-colored, flowing ankle-length skirt. The hair, once a frazzled dirty-blond and now silver, was pulled back into a ponytail.

At the sound of the door closing behind him, Edith's head shot up and her face alit with joy.

"Mr. Mole! I was wondering when I might see you," she said.

He had written to Edith several months earlier. Almost a year ago, in fact. My goodness, there went time again. This was in those halcyon early days of the book, when all his thoughts were filled with promise. One of his ideas had been to include a portion on the history of the relationship between The Willows and the human world. Mole knew that Edith was an expert on the topic and so he'd penned a letter to her inquiring if they might find a time to meet and talk. And Edith had replied quite graciously that he was welcome to whatever information she might provide. This reply however had come right at that moment during which Mole had fallen most headlong into love with Rat and had all but forgotten the book.

"I do apologize for not responding and for taking so long to visit," Mole said before pausing. He was trying to decide how to succinctly describe the events of the past few months. He decided quickly that it was impossible. "Life has a way of taking over, doesn't it?" he continued, aware of how preening this sounded. Mole was frequently acting out of character around Mrs. MacMillan, speaking in lofty, airy tones or making stupid, obvious jokes.

She smiled widely.

"Yes, it does. Now come on, I need a cup of coffee and then you can tell me all about this book of yours."

•

It was actually not very far away at all, at least as the crow flies, from the college to Toad's present, rather stuffy lodgings. Their respective ways of life weren't all that far away from each other either. There were the cell-like quarters, the bad food, the poor hygiene. It was intolerable, at least as far as Toad was concerned, and so, at the very moment that Mole was contentedly settling into that cup of coffee with Edith over at

Highcountry, Mr. Toad was right then making up his mind that it was well past time he left prison.

He'd also lately begun to fear for his life, which most would agree was a rather sensible position to take, given the inhabitants of the prison and its general modus operandi. Life in prison was, it seemed, a constant battle to maintain some life at all. This sentiment was not lost on Toad. But he also knew that his own troubles extended far beyond the makeshift knives and petty grudges that consumed his fellow prisoners.

Toad first learned of this a few weeks into his stay at prison. He was outside for his yard time, a stretch that he usually spent huddled against the building and only a few feet from the door, trying his best to focus on his breathing and the cool, clean, fresh air entering his lungs.

He was perhaps caught in a moment of reverie, fantasizing about the rich, ruddy smell of a good cigar or the pleasures of a hot bath, but it seemed to him as if Skink materialized from out of nowhere. Suddenly, he was just sitting next to Toad, a strangely placid look on his face.

"You know, you've managed to attract a lot of attention since you showed up," Skink murmured.

"Oh, for good — Well, I'm very excited to hear that. Thank you so much," barked Toad. Neither Toad's initial encounter with Skink nor his time at Greenleaf in general seemed to have so far robbed him of his penchant for sarcasm.

"Not the kind of attention you want. Talk is: there's a price on your head."

Skink was staring straight ahead and refused to look at Toad, even when Toad turned and gawked at him.

"What on earth does that mean?!"

"It means that it's worth an awful lot of money to someone to see you dead!" he snapped. "Lucky for you, I'm a sucker for hapless saps such as yourself. And perhaps if you were to pay me an equal sum of money, I can make sure that you're well protected."

Only then did Skink look at Toad and when he did, it was with a sickly sweet smile painted across his green, scaly face.

It was with no small amount of reservation that Toad then began paying Skink for his protection. He was filled with his usual abundance of hubris about the matter, insisting to himself that he was more than capable of self-defense if only he could

remember the gist of all those fencing lessons he had taken years ago. But this time, the bravado was tempered by real fear. It was of a kind that Toad had never felt before, a kind of chill that would sweep over him and then set in as panic, leaving him cowering in the corners of the yard or crying underneath the thin, papery covering that passed for his blanket.

At the same time, Toad realized that this arrangement with Skink was no long-term solution. His cash reserve was already at a dangerously low level, and Toad had no idea when, how, or if he would get more. He would need to leave and if his departure wasn't to be officially sanctioned, well then, he would just have to take matters into his own hands. Upon further reflection, he reasoned that his best way out was through the good graces of dear Maggie.

His pursuit of her friendship had been calculated. Even so, Toad had to admit that his conversations with her had a candor that he found both refreshing and profoundly unnerving. Whatever the case, he intended to cash in on the sympathy he'd engendered.

"Maggie, I need you to help me," Toad blurted out one evening.

She looked up from a bit of knitting she'd brought with her to help pass the time, her eyes immediately filled with care and concern.

"Yes? What is it, Toad?" Maggie asked.

"I'm in terrible danger here, and I must get out. Out of Greenleaf."

"You mean escape?" she whispered, her eyes wide as saucers.

"Yes. I can't stay here. I won't last. There are too many animals here with too many good reasons to hate me."

"Oh, Toadie," said Maggie with a playful smile, "you're really not as bad as you let on."

"I'm serious! Besides, it's not just that...I've made mistakes, Maggie. Terrible ones. I have to make things right but I can't do it from inside of this miserable place."

She paused. "You know, you aren't the first animal to ask me or my father to help them in that way," she said, her voice sliding down into a conspiratorial whisper. "It's a huge risk, Toad. I could be caught and thrown in jail myself."

"I'll make it worth your while!" Toad exclaimed with wretched piteousness.

Maggie nodded seriously. "Right then. Yes. You'll have to."

And so as she strolled out of Greenleaf Penitentiary that evening, offering up little waves and smiles to the various guards, all of whom she had known most of her life and

who considered her some combination of a surrogate daughter, sister or wife, Maggie felt a surge of pride and power. She was contemplating the notion that she may have just insured her financial security for the foreseeable future.

•

Edith and Mole had crossed back over the quad and into the student union, where the coffee was cheap and dependably stale. There, the two of them were able to carve out a bit of space for themselves amid even more splayed bodies and books. Mole began by telling her about his initial research into the history of The Willows.

“Of course I was bound to end up at the Commodore's redevelopment. The North End. The damming. Stroat Crick Mart. It's rather hard to avoid the significance of all that when you're in The Willows,” Mole admitted.

“Of course.”

“Anyway, I got to wondering about the extent of human involvement. Maybe of the kind that wouldn't show up in the history books, you know?”

“Oh. Well, if we're talking about the human presence in The Willows, then we're talking about Red Willow Juice.” Edith smiled mischievously. “Humans have always been rather interested in that.”

Mole chuckled. “Right. The Commodore was smuggling it out, wasn't he?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Do you know how?”

“Tunnels. Secret caches. That kind of thing.” Edith's smile broadened. “Not that any of that is proven fact, mind you, but I can show you some watchmen's logs from the Longacre Bridge that offer some pretty darn compelling evidence.”

“He takes the Mart away from the Weasels so he can get control of the juice?” said Mole, now musing out loud.

“Yes, but the raccoons were always the ones making the juice.”

“I guess he was cutting out the middle animal then.”

Edith nodded. “Well, taking the weasels out would have been messy,” she said. “But it's not as though there wasn't a history of that sort of thing.”

“What sort of thing is that?”

“Well, there were all sorts of questionable incidents back then, back when The Willows was first booming. I mean, let’s be honest: a town like The Willows doesn’t become what it is without some fishiness. If you ever want to see an example of institutionalized corruption, just look up your Board of Land Commissioners. That entire body was grossly illegal, at least by today’s standards.”

Mole had already come across references to the Board of Land Commissioners while reading through Beaver’s newspapers. Evidently, it had come into existence during that time of tremendous growth in the community ignited by the damming of The River and then the massive redevelopment of Stroat Crick. It was during that time that property ownership had first become a pressing concern for the residents of The Willows, a concern that would eventually grow into the most knotty of complications.

Few animals of any merit had ever thought to put down roots in the area that would come to be known as the North End, and no one had protested when The Commodore had announced his intentions to do just that. But then he had persuaded the town to bend The River, increasing the value of not just the land he’d staked for himself but the adjacent land as well. Animals from across the Wide World had suddenly begun to appear, poking around in the cattails on the fringes of town, eager for a piece of the world their old pal The Commodore was building.

Up until then, the notion that any animal could claim control over land using this abstract concept of “ownership” had simply never occurred to any of the residents of The Willows. The Commodore’s developments changed all that. Pretty soon, the locals were telling these prospective new neighbors in no uncertain terms that if they planned on taking land in Willows territory, then some sort of recompense would have to be made.

The problem was that while there might have been the occasional need to draw up boundaries between one animal’s habitat and another in the past, this business hadn’t been recorded or archived with any due diligence. There was no way to officially prove any kind of ownership or to establish with any degree of detail exactly how much land any one animal did or did not occupy.

“The Board of Land Commissioners was supposed to simply establish any property lines to the extent that they existed and fairly arbitrate any dispute,” said Edith.

“Fairly,” said Mole with derision.

“Exactly. The board’s decisions disproportionately favored the new arrivals, of course. Original ownership claims were rejected, valuations were decreased.”

Mole knew this story. Over time, the uprooted animals were pushed south, thereby stretching the boundaries of the The Willows itself. It wasn't long before they'd reached the thickets and brambles that one found down below Backwater, in the area they called Low Land. This had previously been considered uninhabitable, dangerous and unforgiving, and yet necessity now prevailed. The proud and stoic animals set to it with their ploughs and pickaxes and cleared the terrain as best they could. Low Land was settled but it would prove to be a tenacious opponent and it would force the residents into a protracted and bitter battle with the very soil they lived on.

“Or how about The Commodore’s son? I mean, jeez,” continued Edith.

“The Bull?”

“That animal was responsible for all sorts of mayhem. Terrible violence. Maybe even murder. And he was never caught. Or rather, he was never punished. That toad went in front of a jury a number of times and he always walked. Frankly, it’s a wonder they actually found this Mr. Toad guilty,” Edith mused. “And let’s not forget that the weasels were famous for playing dirty too,” she continued. “Really, for better or worse, it was the way the game was played. If the toads got the better of the weasels, they did it by playing dirtier.”

They paused, both hunched forward and nodding, their bodies faintly rocking back and forth, as though they were religious scholars, huddled over some ancient text.

“What’s this all about, Mole?” Edith finally asked.

Mole looked at her. Unsure of whether he’d be warned off or laughed at, he had initially hesitated to reveal the extent of his curiosities to Edith, to tell her that this endeavor of his was as much about the present-day as it was about the past. But now he plunged forward. “So you’ve heard of all this business with Mr. Toad?”

“Of course. It’s usually so hard to get news of animal affairs around here but this has been different. For obvious reasons. I have to say, Mole, I’m growing quite concerned that this incident might set back relations. You should hear how the politicians are talking,” she said wearily.

“I agree. They’ll lock down the border completely, and we both know that only hurts The Willows,” Mole exclaimed fervently. “Also, you see I had rather a front row

seat to the whole affair. I was involved, romantically, with a friend of his,” he then added, perhaps unnecessarily.

“Mole!” Edith exclaimed with delight.

“It ended, I’m afraid to say.”

And just as quickly as Edith had lit up with the news of Mole’s romance, she now shrunk back down, crestfallen and cooing with sympathy.

“It’s alright. I’m fine. The point is, I’m beginning to think there was a bit more to this than simply Toad’s adventures finally catching up to him. There might be something bigger at play.”

“Yes, but all this business with the Commodore was decades ago. Toad may have benefited from his family’s wealth but it would be hard to blame him for that, wouldn’t it?”

Mole looked at her ruefully, saddened by this show of naïveté. “Not in The Willows, it wouldn’t,” he said. “Now then, all of this illicit business you’re talking about, the sort that builds a town. Were humans involved in that as far as you know?”

Now it was Edith’s turn to gaze at her friend ruefully.

“What do you think, Mole? The Commodore was bringing them Red Willow Juice and who knows what else. And in turn, the humans were helping to make him rich — to make them all rich. You have to remember, Mole, that at that time there was barely any infrastructure to The Willows at all. The humans were managing and enforcing practically everything.”

•

For almost twenty years, all linen that left Greenleaf Penitentiary to be cleaned was handled by a family outfit headquartered in the nearby town of Riverdell. The members of the MacDougall family were a uniformly ruddy-faced, stout and leathery bunch, having labored for generations over their great, steaming vats, mixing the soiled garments with a large wooden paddle as the noxious clouds of industrial-grade detergent poured out, collecting under the bags of their eyes and in the creases of their hands.

Despite what could charitably be described as a challenging lifestyle, the MacDougalls were well-known for a kind of pragmatic cheeriness; a joy in life that can

only be found by those who have truly struggled. They would hum little ditties to themselves as they worked, swiveling their hips in time with the paddle cutting through water. If you were to enter their facility at just the right moment, when many MacDougalls were positioned above the vats and moving in sync, you could squint your eyes and believe you'd stumbled into some grand old stage musical all about the pleasures of the Industrial Revolution.

And then, when their day was done, the entire clan would repair to Riverdell's preeminent pub, The Cask & Crown, for pints of beer and long, contemplative games of cribbage. It was there that Maggie had made the acquaintance of the MacDougalls and, in particular, with their scion, one Terry MacDougall. As MacDougalls go, Terry was a handsome, if not especially bright, young man. He was short, just barely taller than Maggie, but he had an open and inviting face and thick black hair and the years of paddling had given him sinewy arms that Maggie liked to touch.

They were a smart-looking couple — Terry with his black hair and wide smile, Maggie with the dark green eyes and the hint of mischievousness that made a few of the boy's relatives worry. It thrilled Terry though. She'd grab his hand at the bar, pinch his side and whisper in his ear and, like that, they'd float out the door, dancing off into the woods to make love in the moonlight.

On the day that Toad asked her to help him escape, Maggie went straight from the prison to The Cask. It was just after dark by the time she arrived, meaning that the MacDougalls had already shut down operations for the day, having sent the evening's usual delivery of threadbare towels and faded jumpsuits off to Greenleaf for another pass through the prison system. Terry was sure to be there.

And indeed he was, positioned between his brother Matty and his sister Bethany at the bar, sipping at a beer and gazing blankly at sports scores on the TV. Maggie came up from behind, and wrapped herself around Terry, digging her chin into his shoulder.

"Oy!" he shouted in mock ire.

"Come outside," she breathed.

Understandably, Terry was a bit disappointed when he realized they weren't headed for the woods and that little patch of a clearing where they could lie naked together on the soft grass and see the moon through the trees. But he very shortly had a new reason to be excited.

“Mr. Toad has asked me to help him escape,” said Maggie, unable to contain her excitement.

“Has he?”

“Oh yes. And he’ll pay us handsomely. I know he will,” Maggie said. Her eyes were locked on to his and even in the dark of night, Terry could see the surety with which she held his gaze. He grinned and laughed and grabbed her tightly.

Terry immediately brought his cousin Tommy in on the fast-evolving plan. Tommy was typically in charge of the night deliveries, and of loading and processing the soiled linens he would return with and which would then be washed the following morning. They all decided that the animal would be smuggled out during the following evening’s visit.

Now, the MacDougalls were stout, but Toad’s stoutness was of a different class. It was determined that the only member of the family that Toad could hope to pass for would be their matriarch, old Dotty MacDougall. So it was that on the following morning, Tommy and Terry visited their dear grandmother Dotty for an impromptu breakfast.

While Tommy bustled about his beloved Nana, insisting that she tell him all about her latest interests — which, at the moment, consisted primarily of tai chi and fishing (Dotty was always an odd one) — Terry stole away to her bedroom closet. There, he retrieved a heavy and, by his eye, rarely worn frock as well as a wide-brimmed bonnet and a pair of thick black work boots. Striding quickly across the room, he threw open the window and peered down. Maggie stood below, pacing in small circles.

“Pssst!”

She looked up.

“Ready?” he whispered loudly, the kind of whisper that wasn’t a whisper at all.

“Yes. Hurry up.”

He wrapped the items up in a tight little ball and let them fall into Maggie’s waiting arms.

“Nice catch.”

She looked up at him and winked.

“See you soon,” she said with glee.

•

Mole spent the night at the humble but warm and inviting home of Edith and her husband, Paul — a bespectacled and balding man who worked in Highcountry’s administrative offices and who appeared to Mole to verily fade in and out of the scenery he was so reserved. Their children, William and Agnes, on the other hand, were wildly and wonderfully uninhibited. True to their parentage, both were curious and engaging conversationalists — far more so than Mole’s own nieces and nephews were, he had to admit — and yet also still young enough to amuse him with their innocence. The next morning, Mole couldn’t help but delight in Agnes’ inappropriate questions and the way William seemed desperate to touch him, as if merely his physical form was a kind of wonder.

But on that morning, Mole was a skittish animal and so, after a simple breakfast of yogurt and fruit around their kitchen table and amid the tumult of a young family attempting to prepare for the day, he bid them all a quick but fond farewell.

“Take care of yourself, Mr. Mole,” said Edith with great affection as they walked to the bus stop, the humidity of the early summer day already building around them, causing the air to shimmer as they strode through it. Mr. Mole had no such intention of doing any such thing though. Instead, he was going to Castle Hill.

He’d actually never been before, which wasn’t uncommon for the residents of The Willows. While some of the human land surrounding them could be quite beautiful, filled with the same lush and rambling features — slow and gurgling streams, soft light and the sweet, slightly rotting smell of the life cycle at work — the human city nearest was generally regarded as a dispiriting place for animals to visit at best, and dangerous at worst. Castle Hill seemed almost uniformly grey in appearance, an endless series of concrete and asphalt squares arrayed atop its eponymous hill and arranged into variously uninteresting patterns serving purely utilitarian functions.

All that grey was built to protect the somewhat grisly business that Castle Hill had seemingly been created to engage in, as if the concrete could absorb all the nasty intricacies of modern life, just so that places like Highcountry College could continue to carry on with their idyllic pursuit of abstract knowledge. That was the generous take on things. The less kind and more realistic version was that Castle Hill was a perfect representation of the human purpose. It was no necessary ugliness — no citadel against

the evils of existence — but rather a monument to efficient domination, to a victory over evil that had never come.

Mole was full of these kinds of bleak and caustic thoughts as he plodded from the city's central bus depot to its police station. This was perhaps just a result of lack of sleep. Edith's living room sofa was more lump than actual furniture. But also, Mole now couldn't find within him that wellspring of curiosity, that zest for adventure and that streak of heroism that had powered him up the hill the previous morning and brought him to this unlikely point. The world seemed so much bigger here.

His plan was to try to gain an audience with the human detective Middleton and see if there was anything more to be learned about Willie's connections to The Willows. Mole had been thinking about what he'd learned about the long history of humans and Red Willow Juice. He thought too about what Skunk had said, about those left angry when the police swooped in and ended a Red Willows juice sale that was never meant to be. And Mole couldn't help but also think about what he'd learned from Spiny, about all that business Weasel was apparently seeking to do with humans.

"He's not available for that sort of thing, young sir," said the gnarled but not unkind sergeant at the station's Information Desk. Mole had just finished unraveling the cover story he'd devised, which was really just a variation on the truth. He was a local Willows journalist writing a longform piece on the Toad saga and looking for a choice quote or two from the lead Castle Hill detective.

"Yes, but —"

"Maybe you'd be interested in the tour we offer to our visitors?" said the officer now, his voice adopting that lilting, singsong tone that indicated condescension.

"What? No! Look, I'm more than happy to wait. All I'm looking for is some information —"

"Ah, well, that's exactly what the tour can give you. You'll just need to join the line over there in the west atrium. See it? Next!"

Mole looked back to see the aggrieved and twitchy human who had been waiting behind now bear down on him, files clutched in hand, fully prepared for a bureaucratic battle. He took a step to his right, dodging the lumbering form, and, like a leaf in a river's current, he was suddenly swept off, caught in the chaos of a million phones ringing and men yelling and giant stacks of paper springing up out of nowhere, all of it surging with a momentum that tossed the animal this way and that.

He really had no choice but to seek purchase in the west atrium and the small cluster of humans whose facial expressions matched that of his own, stunned and unsure whether to be intimidated or bored by the circus around them. Mole washed up next to an entire family with identical looks of slack-jawed bewilderment. The youngest looked to be about the same age as Edith's children, but without any of their innocent charm. When this one pawed at Mole, it was as if they owned him.

"Hi, everyone. Welcome, welcome."

A reedy, pale man materialized in front of this cluster of onlookers out of nowhere, so much so that the mother of the slack-jawed youngster standing directly to Mole's left even jumped and yelped a little in surprise.

"This is the Castle Hill Police Museum Tour. I am Brandon. I will be your tour guide. Let's go right this way, folks. Photographs are very much encouraged but let's try not to touch anything, mmkay?"

With a small sweep of the hand and a curt smile, Brandon led his guests off across the atrium, their feet treading lightly over the department's seal — a gold shield with the scales of justice and the silhouette of a snarling lion pawing at it — inlaid in the center of the granite floor. Mole had been too busy and scattered and then perturbed by the human boy to register the austerity of this place — forced and performative as it may be — but as his own scuffed and humble shoes strode over that lion and that shield and those scales, a whiff of danger wafted through the air. Mole took a deep breath.

He was looking for a way to peel off from the group, to somehow make his way past all this pomp and into the actual, functional offices. Perhaps he could just stumble onto Middleton's desk that way. Brandon seemed to suss this out immediately though. The moment Mole hesitated and cut his eyes in either direction, looking for a quick escape, Brandon was there, gliding towards him, the smile pulling tighter and tighter.

"Right this way, young sir," he said, ushering Mole towards a set of glass doors and positioning himself behind, ensuring there was nowhere else for an overly inquisitive animal to go.

The room behind the doors was dimly and dramatically lit, with soft orange light emanating from recessed positions in the ceiling to form a kind of path for the visitors to follow. On either side were a series of displays, tracking a relatively banal history of Castle Hill's police department. There were a few items in glass cases, placards and

photos and a half-hearted nod towards an interactive exhibit that the child with the grubby hands of course lunged for.

Mole watched the boy maniacally push at the display's buttons. The idea was to listen to an audio recording of a witness describing a robbery suspect and then choose the correct villain from the line-up displayed. But the boy simply did not have the time for such structured activities. He mashed at the buttons, giggling as the exhibit hiccuped and sputtered, struggling to keep up. Mole couldn't help but be reminded of Toad in that moment and he suddenly forgave the tiny rascal all of his transgressions.

"Perhaps you'd be interested in our exhibit on police and animal relations," cooed Brandon. He had remained perched behind Mole, his presence just graceful enough not to be overtly intrusive or offensive.

Mole turned to him, unable to restrain his annoyance.

"I'm fine, thanks," he snapped. With a single nod and a tight smile, Brandon retreated.

Of course, Mole was very interested in that exhibit. It was located about halfway through and was dominated by a gigantic, black-and-white photograph. It covered the entirety of the wall and seemed to almost surround Mole as he drew nearer. In the foreground was a severe-looking human wearing a boxy but rather smart suit, Mole had to admit, and a fedora that he'd pushed down over one eye. He was smoking a cigarette and glancing off into the near distance in that effortful but still cool way that only humans — particularly police detectives of a particular era — seemed capable of. Mole marveled that they could have ever given up such a style.

He glanced at the date of the photo printed at the bottom and paused. September 23, 1965. That date rang a bell. He looked at the image again, except this time, his eyes stayed low. Behind the detective and partially obscured by those billowing pant legs, stood the Commodore, staring off in the same direction. Mole's eyes scanned the landscape. He knew exactly where they were. And then he remembered how he knew that date.

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On the day of his escape, Mr. Toad found himself feeling particularly bereft. Perhaps it was the way that his fellow convicts seemed to be eyeing him over breakfast,

or perhaps it was the breakfast itself, which was an especially chalky plate of powdered eggs and dried fruit. Whatever the problem, Toad could think of no recourse other than to return to his cell and flop back on to his cot with as much abandon as he could muster, committing himself to a day's worth of imaginings. He thought of food naturally, pushing aside the eggs and fruit to make room for memories of maple syrup and mushroom gravy. He danced about through fields of soft, buttery lettuce, exploded the brilliantly red tomatoes and let the juice run down his mouth. If only in his mind.

Mr. Toad willed himself to feel those feelings; to sense those sensations, to actually find it there on his tongue or in his nostrils or on the backs of his eyelids. And he could accomplish it. Sometimes. For moments. But then he was up again, pacing the cell, yelling out for the poor jailor who strangely wasn't to be found that day. It was, in its own way, exhausting and at some point, Mole drifted off into a feverish sleep.

He was awakened some time later by a tugging at his arm. Even before he opened his eyes, Mr. Toad knew it was practically nighttime. He could see the deep orange light of a dying sunset peeking through the slits of his opening eyes and feel how the air outside grew cold. He wasn't much surprised to find he'd slept the day away. One of the few things that had remained consistent for Toad through his incarceration was his incredible capacity for sleep. Back at Toad Hall, it was fairly common for Toad not to arise until well into the afternoon and then only for a few hours at that.

Though he was surprised to be awakened so rudely, he was greatly relieved to discover only Maggie by his side when he finally and fully opened his eyes. He'd half expected it to be Skink or the ghastly Scorpion, come to finally take whatever bounty had been put on to his head.

"Wake up, you silly animal!" she whispered harshly into his ear.

"I'm awake! I'm awake! What on earth is going on?"

Maggie smiled, the corners of her mouth turning up in a manner that looked almost wicked. It was not a smile he'd ever seen on her face but it was certainly one he recognized from glances in the mirror on his way out to a party or a race or even a clandestine meeting at the Weir. It was the smile of someone about to get into the right kind of trouble.

"I'm about to break you out of here, Mr. Toad," Maggie said.

The matter of who Toad was to pose as and how he was to be disguised was only one of several logistical problems that confronted Maggie, the escape's mastermind

from start to finish. Security at Greenleaf wasn't particularly stringent but it was still a prison. The truck would still be checked in upon arrival and checked out upon departure, and cursorily searched at both points. If Toad were to come out as Dotty MacDougall, then someone or something would have to come in as her.

Thus was created a lifesize Dotty mannequin. The dress they'd stolen from the actual Dotty covered a body made of a burlap sack stuffed with a combination of hay and sand. They'd hacked apart a couple of trowels from Terry's uncle JJ's woodshop for the arms and attached a pair of work gloves at the end. And beneath Dotty's bonnet rested a honeydew melon with a bit of strategically placed wax to suggest facial features.

The three of them — Terry, Tommy and the Dotty puppet — rolled up to the prison gate just a few minutes after Maggie had traipsed up on foot. Tommy drove. Terry, himself a familiar face at the prison, sat shotgun. And their makeshift Dotty sat in the truck's backseat, carefully placed with an eye towards keeping her out of the glare of the halogen lights that framed Greenleaf's guard station. Terry had spent the better part of the afternoon rigging a system that would allow him to operate one of the puppet's arms from his position in the front. Privately, he still worried that the line might snag. The whole body would lurch forward then and Dotty's honeydew head would come rolling right off.

"She's the boss, you know. Thinks she is anyway. Honestly, she's getting up in years," Tommy murmured to the gate guard, a moon-faced, genial kid named Charlie. "She wanted to check up on us. Make sure we were working up to the family standard. You know how it is."

With a casual flip of his wrist and a quick prayer to the Lord above, Terry raised Dotty's hand in greeting. Charlie smiled wanly in return. He looked down at the I.D. for Dotty that Tommy had handed him and peered back into the truck's cab, squinting. Next, he took a step towards them.

"How's your mom, anyway?" said Tommy as lightly as he could muster, not wanting to give Charlie a chance to try to talk to their puppet.

"Huh? Oh...uh, she's good, I guess. Complainin' about the heat."

"Yeah, it's been a hot one this year."

Tommy was now actively reminding himself to breathe. He reached his hand out to take back the I.D., and the hand shook ever so slightly. This was by no means the first

time the MacDougall clan had abused their position as Greenleaf contractors. Practically every employee of the family business had profited at one point or another from some manner of smuggling. It was mainly letters containing information that the prisoners didn't want officials reading, as it was long known that all mail going officially in and out was censored by the warden. Sometimes it was money, as there was always a need for that on the inside. Tommy had brought in a weapon once or twice. So had Terry. But neither had ever done an escape before.

Charlie handed the I.D. back and smiled with resignation.

"Getting hotter every year."

He looked back at his partner, who'd just finished poking through the clean linens in the back of the truck, and nodded. They both stepped back.

"Have a nice night," said Charlie, reaching back to press the button and lift the gate.

"You too, officer."

As Tommy and Terry steered to the laundry room's loading dock and fought to ease the thunderous beating of their hearts, Maggie was confronting another of their problems. She was going to need to get Toad from his cell all the way to the opposite side of the prison complex without arousing suspicion.

She removed from her dress a tightly wrapped package and handed it to Toad.

"Is this dynamite? A weapon of some kind?" asked Toad excitedly.

"It's horse manure. Rub it all over yourself."

"What?! Why?!"

"Because, Mr. Toad, you're going to need to take a bath."

Moments later, Maggie and Mr. Toad emerged from his cell, Toad now streaked in the most foul-smelling of excrement. He was disgusted, terrified and frightfully excited all at once and it was all Maggie could do to keep him from exploding with nervous energy.

"Good God! What's happened to that pitiful thing?" cried the corpulent and sweat-stained hall guard as the two drew near to him.

"Some of the other animals have been giving him a hard time, I think," said Maggie, pinching Toad hard in the back so that he let out a sharp whimper at just the right moment.

"By smearing shit on him?" sneered the guard.

“My father hasn’t been here to look after him and you know how soft this one is.” Toad flinched at this remark and she had to dig her nails hard into his back. “Pathetic thing. I thought I might take him downstairs and wash him up. You don’t mind, do you, Wally?”

Wally grinned lasciviously. “Just keep your hands to yourself, Miss Maggie. That’s an animal you’ve got there.”

“Gross!” she laughed and playfully slapped at Wally’s meaty arm. “Thanks!”

And like that, the two were moving, past Wally and down a flight of iron stairs to the vast lower-level, which housed the prison’s shower room on one side, and a loading dock on the other. The facilities were empty at this hour and once they were out of earshot of Wally and the others above, Maggie gave Toad a hard shove.

“Get into the shower with you. And quickly!” she barked.

“I don’t understand why you’ve gone to the trouble to make me so filthy only to now insist I clean myself up.”

“Now listen, we won’t have time to explain to you every last decision that’s been made. You’ll just have to trust us. Get in!”

Toad was a bit shocked at this abrupt change in Maggie’s demeanor. Gone was the warm, forgiving soul that would alight upon his miserable cell with a basket full of fresh vegetables and a shoulder for Toad to cry on. She had suddenly become some kind of mercenary, stealing into the night with ruthless efficiency.

He looked back at her once more, a bit intimidated now and unsure whether she was as much of an ally as he had thought. He was of course more than prepared to pay Maggie for her aid but he had thought perhaps he might get a deal, given how much it appeared she liked him. Now, Toad wasn’t so sure.

Indeed, Maggie was aware of the tremendous risk she was taking. It wouldn’t take a crack detective to figure out her involvement in this and once they got to her, it’d all unravel rather quickly. Consequently, Terry and Maggie were more than prepared to run away together. He had no desire to be a laundryman his whole life anyway and she certainly had no desire to be the wife of a laundryman. And Tommy, whose sleaziness even his closest relatives would admit to, would be fine living in the shadows. But Maggie did worry about her poor father. She would need a tremendous amount of money from Toad to make it right.

Toad hadn't had the pleasure of a shower that wasn't in a room full of scowling fellow prisoners since he'd arrived. But by now there was no way he could relax and savor the pleasures of the scalding hot water and steam, if even for a moment, and he wasn't given much time anyway. It seemed like only seconds before he began to hear a dull beeping sound coming from somewhere nearby. It was the sound of a truck backing up. Maggie, who had been standing just outside pacing impatiently, popped her head in.

"Come on, come on," she hissed, now glancing back at the stairs.

As soon as Toad exited the shower, wearing only the towel wrapped around his waist, she grabbed at his arm, dragging him towards a bin that had been strategically left just outside by the MacDougall's day crew. Before he knew what was happening, she had hoisted him up and practically threw him inside, where he landed on a small mountain of soiled bedding.

Toad screeched in alarm.

"Maggie! Now I'm all dirty again! This is intolerable."

Maggie came tumbling in after him and quickly began to work covering them both with the sheets.

"We're almost there. Stay down. And for God's sakes, Mr. Toad, do shut up!"

"Hey Wally! Come on down here and let us in, you tubby ball of love!" called out Tommy's teasing voice now from the far end of the hall.

Toad could hear Wally's heavy, plodding steps and his labored breathing as he descended from the prison's main floor. He seemed to walk right past them.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm coming, ya smartass."

This, like Tommy and Terry's check-in at the guard station minutes earlier, was a moment rife with the possibility of disaster. They needed Wally to open the gate that separated the facilities from the loading dock and they needed him not to grow alarmed at Maggie and Toad's mysterious absence. Maggie had hoped that he was just old and half-drunk enough to have forgotten about them completely.

"Hey," said Wally, "did you see Maggie down here just now? She woulda been with the frog."

"Maggie? Terry's Maggie? Yeah, yeah, they went back upstairs, chief," replied Tommy. The loose familiarity of the response was perhaps a bit too calculated. Maggie gritted her teeth and held her breath. She had thought she had timed it right so that

Wally would have headed out for his nightly evening cigarette just after Maggie and Toad passed him on the way to the showers. If so, it'd be easy for Wally to believe that he had then missed their return. But she couldn't be sure. There was a long pause.

"Huh," said Wally lightly, opening the gate to let Tommy in. "Must have missed them."

Maggie smiled. How could she have ever doubted Wally's lazy indifference. She had almost decided to offer him a bribe until her more savvy side prevailed, and she was quite glad it had.

Now, the sounds of Tommy and Wally's voices grew louder as they approached the bin. Tommy was talking a mile a minute, rambling on about some hunting competition he was watching on TV. Maggie could practically hear his nerves jangling. With a lurch, they began to move and Maggie knew that Tommy was moving them towards the truck, through the gate and down the ramp and out into the open. They were almost there. Moments away.

"They're talking about these little pellet guns, see, and that's not going to do it for me because I want to see those fuckers explode!" said Tommy, cackling with laughter. Wally chortled in reply. The bin came to a halt and the mens' voices began to fade as they headed back towards the building, hauling up that evening's delivery of clean linen.

Underneath what was a uniquely pungent sheet, Toad felt the bite of a cold wind and heard the faint hint of its whistle. They were outside now, he was sure of it. And not just outside but in the world of the free animals. Toad remained perfectly still and quiet. Sometime in the preceding moments, the intense gravity of the situation had fully registered to the still somewhat bewildered animal and he had felt a mighty fear and panic grip him that he had only ever felt one time before.

Through the smudged, dirty gauze of the sheet, Toad saw a man's head appear, hovering over them, topped with wooly black hair and dominated by a wide grin. He winked and the bin started to move again as he pulled the bin up the truck's ramp and into the safety of its darkness.

Once they were fully inside, Maggie quickly jumped up and out of the laundry cart. Toad, now the picture of cautiousness, followed. He was stunned to see his liberator and the boy share a quick but adrenalin-fueled kiss, and it was at this moment, perhaps spurred on by a slight bit of jealousy, that Mr. Toad rediscovered that familiar

wellspring of take-charge haughtiness that seemed to always live inside him. He vigorously cleared his throat.

“Excuse me, but shouldn’t we be —”

“Yes, of course,” said Maggie. She glanced out of the truck and then turned back.

“I’ll see you soon,” she said to the both of them and, like that, she was gone, out into the night. She would make her way down the access road and reenter the prison from the opposing side, being sure to put in an appearance with Wally, himself newly returned from his trip downstairs.

Back in the truck, the boy shoved a pile of clothing at Toad, who stared at the heavy, woolen dress and bonnet he was suddenly holding.

“Put these on, and get in the backseat. Keep your head down and your mouth shut.”

And that was how Toad left Greenleaf Penitentiary: ducked down in the backseat and wrapped in a washerwoman’s frock he’d already managed to sweat through. And then he was free again.

Chapter 13: The Great Escape

Mole had lately found himself wondering what fate thought of him. He knew what he thought of fate. He thought of it like the antagonist in some great, epic tale. This was classic South End thinking, born from generations of existence as an underclass, where fate meant hardship. It must be defied and defeated then. It drew its only meaning from that role, and Mole, in his own way, and as the hero in his own story, had tried to live it.

They'd waged quite a battle, Mole and fate. Mole had plunged ahead, making his own plans, charting his own course and trying his best to fly in the face of as much as he could along the way. He'd left The Willows for college years ago. That was a journey few were willing to undertake with any true intention. And then fate kicked him right back home, showing him all the reasons why he wasn't meant for the Wide World. Too small. Too quiet. Just another furry little thing, scurrying about.

His disappointment upon returning to The Willows was that he'd lost. He'd tried and he'd failed, and sad though that was, it was also easy to understand. But as he got older and his history grew longer, Mole was finding it harder and harder to keep it straight in his head. Had he, for instance, ended up with Rat because fate had forced him back to The Willows? Or was it because he'd had the temerity in that moment to talk to her?

It was fun sometimes too, this line of thinking, to trace the steps that brought Mole to, say, the secret subterranean levels of Toad Hall. That was one thing. It was quite another when Mole began to consider how he'd suddenly found himself in so much danger. Had he put himself there, insisting that he be cast into the maw, or had he been put there? And so should he try to get himself back out?

He'd had his meeting with Detective Middleton after all. Having completed the tour, which included a trip to the department's Hall of Heroes, where officers killed in the line of duty were memorialized; the station's old gun range in their basement; and lastly, a small and sad gift shop where Mole bought a bottle of water and avoided the

toy badges and commemorative keychains, he was headed towards the main doors, when he recognized the low, gravelly voice of the detective calling out to him.

“Mr. Mole.”

He turned and Middleton was right there, towering over him but with his hands in his pockets and an obsequious smile across his face.

“I’m Detective Middleton. The desk sergeant says you were looking for me.”

“Oh, uh, yes,” Mole stammered out. He was instantly and completely disarmed and what felt like minutes passed as he desperately tried to remember what it was he meant to say to this human.

“You okay?” asked Middleton, the smile reshaping itself into a look of concern.

“Yes. Sorry...uh...Right, well, you see I’m writing a book about the history of The Willows. I live there, incidentally —”

“You were at Mr. Toad’s trial, weren’t you? Sitting with his friend,” interjected Middleton. He was smiling again but now his arms were crossed against his chest.

“Right. I was there to write about it. I took a great interest in the case as it applies to our history actually. Particularly as it intersects with Red Willow Juice. It’s actually quite a rich history. I don’t know how familiar you are with it.”

“I just know it’s illegal over here,” the detective said flatly.

“Right. Yes. Uh, anyway, I thought I might ask about any connections Willie Williams might have had to The Willows and to the juice, uh, game.”

Middleton’s smile broadened in amusement.

“You think you’re going to figure out who killed him?”

“Oh no, of course not. Like I said, I’m just interested in the role Red Willow juice plays in our town’s history. Up to the present day. In this case, the role it plays in criminal enterprises.”

“Well, I’m afraid I can’t help you. As I shared with your Inspector Skunk, I really didn’t know of any connections Willie might have had in The Willows. I deal with human criminals.”

Before Mole had a chance to respond, Middleton was bending down close to look him in the eye. The smile had disappeared, replaced by a look of grim concern.

“I’ll tell you this though. The criminals I do deal with? The kind Willie associated with? If I were you, I’d stay away from any them. Those are dangerous individuals. They won’t hesitate to hurt an animal that gets too close, you know?”

He laid a heavy hand on Mole's shoulder and let it stay there, the weight of it pushing down on the smaller animal slowly and subtly. Middleton smiled again.

"Just be careful."

And without another word, he was gone, leaving behind a chill that stayed in Mole's bones all the way home.

Hiking back that night, Mole wondered what fate thought of this most recent act of defiance, and whether or not he'd be punished for it. He wondered too if perhaps it hadn't been defiance after all, not actual defiance but the performance of it rather. Perhaps fate was always just a step ahead.

Hard to say what use there was to this kind of speculation. His father would say not much at all, that it was no use digging for something that could never be found. Yet, Mole could feel fate's presence in the pitch-black woods around him. He could sense its eyes gazing at him, fiery red eyes peering through the underbrush, testing him, daring him to make his next move. Only Mole couldn't stop now, even if he had wanted to. The steep trail he'd climbed up the morning before was now a treacherous decline. The momentum had gotten the best of him by now, and he stumbled and began to roll down the hill.

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The following morning, a small group of gawking tourists gathered in front of the mill. Someone had once told Beaver that the building's hulking, creaking, moss-encrusted wooden water-wheel made for a good photo op, and so now visitors were directed to assemble there when they first arrived. They clustered in small groups, chatting excitedly, posing for photographs, fussing with their things.

Mole stared at them on his way into work, this mixture of out-of-town animals and a few scattered humans. He'd certainly seen tourists before. He'd seen them all his life. The group was, in fact, no different than the one he himself had been a part of the previous day at the police station, and yet this one now appeared grotesque. It was as if they were a parasite attached to the body that was his home, here to suck away something essential.

At that moment, Beaver appeared, shuffling out with a slight wave and a forced smile to meet the group, quite in character now as another of The Willows' lovable old coots. He spotted Mole standing off to the side and detoured towards him.

"You're late. Get inside and look after things while I take care of this," he grumbled.

His dark reverie broken, Mole couldn't help but now smile. He was glad to see his boss, relieved almost. He'd come to rely upon the animal's gruff affection. He'd come to rely on it all, actually. He'd used the job and the tedium of its responsibilities as a pleasant hole to bury himself in following his break-up with Rat, and so he had made himself essential to the mill, transitioning into a kind of permanent office manager and bookkeeper.

"Aye aye, Captain. Have fun."

It was a decidedly unglamorous job and Mole shuddered at the thought that it could become some kind of career for him, but he was content to hold on to it for the time being.

He walked towards the mill now, making a point not to look back at the tour group. Inside, things were up and running at full speed and the nutrias that Beaver would hire for the busy season scurried about, eyeing the sorters and saws, the turners and conveyors and debarkers that all hummed away now with throbbing intensity.

Mole nodded to a few of them as he picked his way across the mill floor and towards the staircase that led to his office. Somewhere in there, buried beneath all matter of mill business and pushed further and further aside as the months went by and Mole's life grew ever more complicated, were the newspapers that he had found last spring, the ones that had first led him to the Commodore and Stoat Crick Mart. Thinking about it now, Mole laughed dryly at the circuitous route he'd taken to get all the way back to them.

It didn't take him long to find the right issue. Mole had taken the trouble to meticulously arrange the newspapers in chronological order for just this reason and he knew the exact date he was looking for: September 23, 1965. That day's edition of *The Willows Gazette* featured the story about the Stoat Crick Mart fire. It was the same story he'd read more than a year ago, when he had first discovered the newspapers. Reading it again now, Mole remembered how convinced the writer, listed as one Groundhog, was that the weasels were ultimately to blame. He had concluded his article thusly:

“Last night’s blaze shall serve as a troubling reminder that the Stoat Crick Mart, once the crown jewel of our community, has fallen into a state, not just of disrepair, but of mismanagement as well. Whether the cause of the fire is determined to be accidental or purposeful, this reporter is sure that its ultimate cause is the shameful way in which the Mart has been run.”

Looking at issues that covered the ensuing days and months, there was no mention again of the fire. Nothing about a break in the case or even about how there’d been no breaks. Mole wasn’t surprised. He was beginning to think that there weren’t any breaks because there hadn’t been an actual investigation. The idea had been to implicate the weasels and leave it at that.

Next, he went backwards. He wasn’t looking for mentions of the Mart or the weasels anymore though. He was looking for mentions of humans. He saw the true influence they’d wielded in Willows history, and now he needed to know the invasiveness of that influence, how wide it reached and how deep it lay.

This was the painstaking work. The last time he’d gone through these articles, it had been with wide-eyed curiosity. All he’d had to do was find the things that had interested him. Now, Mole’s target was as tiny as a pin prick. Over the next few hours, he pored over the text, willing himself to stay alert, forcing himself into that zone of thought and work where all that mattered was the effort to put one proverbial foot in front of the other. Pretty soon, the sounds of industry around him died down. Mole didn’t even notice when Beaver walked by, too wearied by the performance he’d just finished giving to care much that Mole was clearly not doing mill work.

Just before lunchtime and just as his eyes threatened to glaze permanently over, Mole came across an article about the establishment of the Willows Board of Land Commissioners. Remembering what Edith had said about the corruption there, Mole read on and discovered that the charter for the board had been created with the consultation of a human, one S. Thad Remington, who was identified only as a prominent Castle Hill businessman.

Mole found other human names listed among the issues of this period. Surprisingly, it seemed that during this earlier period, when the separation between the two sides was at its most strictly-enforced, humans were most present. Except that this wasn’t a surprise to Mole anymore, no more so than the fact that any real interest in the causes of

the fire at the Mart had very quickly dissipated. A separation may have been strictly enforced but this only meant that those allowed in had that much more power.

That evening, he placed a call to the Highcountry College Library and the desk of their head archivist.

“Oh, it was so very good to see you, Mole. The kids and Paul just loved having you,” exclaimed Edith.

“It was a true pleasure. Now Edith, I’ve come across a name and I’m wondering if you’ve ever heard it before. Thad Remington. Oh! Excuse me. S. Thad Remington,” he said with a bite of derision on the S.

“Oh yes, of course! He’s quite a famous figure in Castle Hill history. Jeez, I think there’s even a street named after him somewhere. Maybe over near our dry cleaner? Anyway, that’s not important. What’d you find on him?”

“Just some mention of him advising our Board of Land Commissioners.”

“Really?” said Edith. You could hear her sitting up in her chair. “Well now, remember how we were talking about fishiness in The Willows?”

“I do.”

“I’d say there were a lot of stinky fish on that board. Actually, hold on a tick. I think I’ve got a book here somewhere. A sort of Who’s Who history of Castle Hill,” she said before dropping the phone.

Mole could hear her rummaging about, yelling out to one of the student assistants; then something fell, then more rummaging. Finally, he heard her yelp in delight.

“Ah, yes, here we are. Remington and 16th! That’s where it is. I knew it...”

“Did you find the book or just remember where you get your clothes cleaned?” asked Mole warmly when she got back on the phone.

“Both, I suppose. There’s an entry in here on Remington. Prominent businessman...Ah, well...”

“What?” said Mole

“Well, he was once a police officer. Years ago. Oh, okay, so then after he retired, he became the president of the PBA. The Policeman’s Benevolent Association. The union.”

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The truck rumbled on in silence for some time. The immediate exhilaration of the escape had died down a bit and the two men in the front had now lapsed into a kind of nervous exhaustion. The one in the passenger seat — the one with hair like sheep's wool and the propulsive grin — kept looking back through the window behind Toad's head. The driver was smoking cigarette after cigarette, the smoke from which was flung straight back, causing the animal to finally cough rather delicately but deliberately.

Toad was growing uncomfortable. Once Greenleaf had fully disappeared from his view, the exhilaration and relief of the escape itself had washed over Toad and brought with it a moment's exaltation. But the hideous smoke of the driver's cigarette had found its way into his nostrils now. Not only that, he was still dressed in the heavy, scratchy washerwoman's uniform. And furthermore, he now hadn't eaten in some time, which did truly terrible things to his temperament.

"Excuse me, gentlemen, but when might we be able to stop?" For some reason, Toad thought it best to adopt his most plummy of demeanors with these two, his saviors but perhaps not the warmest members of their species. "I'd love to get out of this ridiculous get-up and perhaps find some warm food for my belly."

The one in the passenger seat said, "We've just got to meet up with Maggie first."

Without looking back, the driver added, "And we've got to get paid."

There was a grit to the driver's voice that sent a spasm through Toad's heart. A moment later, the man suddenly veered off the road. They had been carefully winding their way through the forest that separated Greenleaf from the town of Riverdell but now the truck was bucking and bouncing violently down a dirt road and through the dark of night, and the flutter inside Toad that told him he was not quite out of danger became a pounding drumbeat.

They were swallowed by the blackness of the forest, the faint light that the moon cast on the asphalt road fading off into the distance as the trees closed in around them. Now, all they had were the truck's headlamps, and the tunnel their lights provided, and the frantic heat of Toad's growing panic.

Surely they didn't think they'd be getting all their money now. Toad and Maggie had come to an agreement on a sum and it was not one that a prisoner just had on their person. It was, in fact, going to take a rather audacious plan for Toad to get his hands on such an amount, considering that his accounts were surely frozen and that his appearance outside the walls of Greenleaf would cause quite a bit of consternation from

his family's vanguard. But surely Maggie and her motley team here could have foreseen that complication.

Toad simply was not equipped for this. There were no hidden reserve of fortitude, no hitherto undiscovered supply of courage that could be called upon. There really never had been a need up until the events of the past few months. But now, Toad was forced to face the idea that beneath all of his bluster, there was nothing more than empty space, a vacuum where an animals' will was supposed to reside.

The truck finally rumbled to a halt. Through the back windows, Toad could make out the twisted, distended shapes of automobiles in various states of disrepair. The cars all encircled a cheap and rusted-out edition of the mobile homes Toad knew humans would sometimes bring into The Willows. They'd park them alongside The River and then emerge, settling heavily into flimsy lawn chairs, murmuring to one another, occasionally swatting at a fly or spitting tobacco juice into a can.

"We ain't got no food. No change of clothes for you either. So just stay quiet," said the driver, his disdain for Toad now fully revealed.

Toad wasn't listening though. He was too distracted staring at what was either a human head or a honeydew melon lying on the floor.

"What about that?" asked Toad tremulously.

The two men glanced back and immediately began to laugh uproariously.

"You can't eat that, you savage!" said the passenger, the one that Toad had seen kiss Maggie earlier, though his guffaws. "That's our dear grandmother."

"What!" screeched Toad, who, with the sweet taste of melon alighting on his taste buds, had just begun to reach for it. He scrambled back, his arms clawing at the air, searching for purchase. But then he must have tripped over something because his feet flew forward and all of the sudden Toad was sitting on his butt, the orb lying innocently between his splayed legs.

The laughter reached an almost deafening uproar. Toad had had enough.

"Now see here, I may not have your money now but I do intend to pay you for your help. Now as I see it, that makes me your customer and, as such, I insist you show me the proper respect." Toad waved his hand at their surroundings. "I assume this is your home or some sort of hideout so I find it extremely hard to believe that you haven't a scrap of food lying around here somewhere. Please."

Toad had tacked the “please” on at the last moment, a bit of jazz improvisation that arose naturally as a response to the increasingly severe glowers on his liberators’ faces. But it came out with the tone of insolent disbelief, like the outrage of a hotel guest who’d found the fluff on their towel to be lacking.

“We ain’t got no food for you. That ain’t what you paid for. In fact, you ain’t paid us for nothing as of right now,” said the driver. He had twisted his entire body back towards the rear of the truck and was now unbuckling his seat belt.

“I just said I intended to pay you, if you were listening at all. This was all worked out with Maggie before, okay? I’m not going to waste my time trying to explain it to you now. May I go outside and stretch my legs please?” said Toad. He left the question there, dripping in sarcasm, as he headed towards the truck’s rear doors, making a show of not waiting for an answer.

Now the driver was on his feet though, and the passenger was wearily saying, “Come on, Tommy. Don’t be a freakin’ idiot!”

But Tommy’s blood was up, the nervous exhaustion of a few moments before having too easily congealed into fear and anger inside him, just as it had with Toad. The latter had just managed to get the truck’s rear door opened when Tommy’s kick landed squarely in the small of his back, sending him flying out and then down.

“Fucking animal!” he yelled.

His compatriot yelled angrily, “God damn it, Tommy! He’s not going to pay us now.”

“Oh, he’s going to pay us,” said Tommy menacingly as he hopped out the back of the truck. “We’re going to make sure of that right now.”

Toad scrambled to his feet, his left shoulder and the side of his head both now wailing, the peals of pain scrambling the signals in his brain. He waved his hands about, frantically trying to get his bearings.

“Stay back!” he screamed. He was backpedaling

“Alright, alright,” he heard Maggie’s boy say. “Just take it easy. You’re going to hurt yourself. We’re just going to wait here and —”

But whatever it was that he said after that, Toad didn’t hear it. All he heard was the high, insistent yelp of a police siren; that short and sharp sound they used when they wanted your attention. They all stopped. They were all silent.

With the nightly bed check commencing on that particular evening at just around the same time that the MacDougall Laundry Services truck crossed the penitentiary threshold and set out towards home, it really hadn't taken long for the prison authorities to realize Mr. Toad had escaped, though it should be noted that this bed check was a full two hours earlier than Maggie had anticipated, a result of some misinformation from her father.

Whether it was his fault or the fault of the fates that led Maggie's father to that sad point whereby he spent his days mopping up holding cells and trawling for friendship among criminal animals and his nights so drunk that he'd lost any conception of the passing of time was not a question to ever be answered. Maggie herself certainly couldn't be bothered about it now. She'd strolled back through Greenleaf's doors, intent on establishing her alibi with Wally and then darting off, out to a scooter she'd stashed a quarter of a mile away, and then to the rendezvous with Terry and Tommy and Toad. Now, she found the walls of her tightly fortified plan coming down around her.

For his part, Wally had initially tried to quell the alarm his colleague had initiated after coming upon Toad's empty cell. He'd waved his hands with exasperation, trying to explain that the frog had only gone off with Maggie somewhere. But then he went back down to the shower room and he remembered how Tommy had strained a bit as he'd rolled that cart down to the truck. And then he saw Maggie and the beads of sweat that appeared on her forehead as soon as he began to ask her questions. In that moment, Wally, who was not nearly as dumb as he looked (though, of course, still dumb enough to have let this whole thing happen), finally figured it out. And when Maggie insisted that she had deposited Toad back in his cell fully twenty minutes ago and asked if she could get home to her father who, of course, wasn't feeling well that evening, Wally said yes even though he knew he shouldn't. He watched her walk quickly off down the road and then, with a sigh, Wally headed back to join the search.

Six miles away and ten minutes later, Mr. Toad heard the bark of that siren and saw the distant red and blues reflect off of the canopy of tree branches and he did the only thing that a rational animal could do under the circumstances: he ran.

What followed was a chaos that seemed to unfold at an achingly slow place but also all at once. The police were only passing by at that moment, having missed Tommy's well concealed turnoff and with no clue as to how close their subject was. That didn't stop Toad or the two men from assuming otherwise and they all took off as if their very

freedom depended on it. Toad, waving his hands in front of him as if to ward off trouble, promptly crashed into the side of a wheelless Winnebago that had been placed atop cinder blocks. He was sent careening sideways and yet, with no time to consider his new bearings and potentially correct his position, Toad instead let his feet naturally follow the new course they'd been set on and so went skidding down a hill, toppling over on to his right as he did and then rolling like a log, over and over until he came to a stop. His momentum had sent him plowing right into a pile of leaves within which he was now buried, very well hidden and quite dead to the world.

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"Hello there," said Mole, trying his best to look ingratiating. He was back in the cramped and dank reception area of The Willows Town Office, once again looking up into the profoundly uninterested face of the pig clerk. The pig gazed back at him vacantly. He did not intend on returning Mole's greeting.

"I was here before. Some months back....Actually, it was about a year ago now."

The very corners of the pig's mouth twitched, feinting towards a smile before sliding back down the sides of his face.

"Wonderful. Then you know your way around," murmured the pig, his eyes already returning to the tiny television perched on the counter next to him. There was no sound coming from the box, but its light flashing across the pig's face made his normally pink skin seem sallow and grey.

"Yes. Well, I'm actually looking for something different now. I'm not sure if you're familiar with the Board of Land Commissioners."

"Property records are Aisle J." The pig's eyes again slid up, this time past Mole and to one of the hallways that branched off.

"Good luck," he said, with some finality.

Following his phone conversation with Edith, Mole had tried to find out what he could about The Board, though this proved difficult. An understanding of its exact workings had so far been very hard to find, with any such explanation having long ago dissolved into a more general and historical kind of antipathy.

So Mole had decided to venture back to The Town Office, back to the comforts of its dark tunnels and cavernous archives. As he picked his way down Aisle J, squinting

at signage scribbled on note paper and taped to the sides of shelves, he thought again of fate and self-determination and what it meant that he had come back here, back down into the bowels of his town's history.

He could just stop. He could do what Middleton had suggested, and Otter and Weasel too and just leave this all behind, write the book he'd set out to write at the beginning, and work at the mill and live in his burrow. But then what would he really have? Like, what truly would he have? There was no choice. He had already made his way here. And just like that, as if the universe itself were seeking to affirm Mole's conclusion, he found what he was looking for.

It was a rather sad little stack of boxes, pushed off to the very corner of Aisle J. On the side of each were scrawled the letters, "BOLC". Board of Land Commissioners. Mole grabbed at the topmost box's dust-caked cover to reveal a stack of cracked and aging, leather-bound journals. He picked one up and flipped it open. Inside were minutes from the meetings of the board, dozens and dozens of meetings that spanned the relatively short time that it had existed.

At the beginning of the record of each meeting, the names of the three board members appointed by then Mayor Turtle were recorded. Mole had already assumed The Commodore had been a member. He chuckled knowingly upon seeing the other two names: Messrs Rabbit and Fox, both extremely wealthy animals and both North Enders through and through. Rabbits had, of course, been the first species to make their fortune at the Mart while the foxes were longtime allies of the Commodore, having come over from the Wide World at his invitation. Mole remembered the photo he'd discovered at Porcupine's, the one that showed The Commodore and Rabbit and Fox gathered on the banks of The River, awash in their own power. There was nothing at all impartial about this board.

And the records themselves only proved it. It was actually rather surprising to Mole that it was so plain to see. During each of the meetings, the board would preside over land disputes, almost always between a local on one side and a newly-arrived Wide Worlder on the other. The local would gamely try to prove ownership of land they'd lived on for generations while the Wide Worlder offered up a slew of supporting evidence, attesting to the fact that their presence on the land would be of economic, cultural and aesthetic value to the community as a whole.

In one case from November of 1962, Mr. Pika, a longtime resident of an area just south of the Mart which was now called Merry Meadows but which then had no designation other than, “the area where the pikas lived,” (that was, in fact, exactly what the board stenographer had listed under the heading “Previous land designation”) was fighting desperately to hold on to the land. Mole had to admit that it looked like they had had quite a bit of it, almost three acres in fact, in a highly desirable location, close to the river, with sunlit fields for scrounging and a grove of craggy vine maple trees to nest in.

Mr. Pika was opposed by one Mr. Garter, who was listed in the ledger, somewhat preposterously, as a “prominent business-animal.” Garter was pitching a new retail area called South Crick Village. According to the ledger, the area would focus on commercial entertainment experiences such as mini-golf and go-karts and a swim-up movie theater. Mole had never heard of South Crick Village before. All the tourist traps were upriver on the other side of the Mart now. Merry Meadows had instead become the location of The Willows’ four-star hotel, The Dulce Domum Resort & Spa.

Garter’s plan for Merry Meadows might have been destined for failure but the Board had nevertheless ruled in his favor on that day. It was an unanimous, 3-0 vote with the Board’s chair-animal, Rabbit, noting in their judgment that Mr. Pika had provided none of the documentation the Board required.

At the bottom of one box, Mole found a copy of the board’s charter and the ridiculous list of documents it demanded of landowners: planting records, accounting logs, official correspondences dating back more than seven years. It was preposterous to ask Willows’ animals to provide records for a time in which no records were required, nor expected. This would explain how the Board was able to rule so consistently against the longtime Willows residents.

Mole realized then that he’d had his answer to the question of how they’d done this from the moment he’d first seen the list of their members. They had been empowered to make the rules and so they had given themselves and their kind every advantage they could find. He could see those advantages written right there in these yellowing, quickly forgotten pages — pages that were destined for the furnace someday, never to be gazed upon again. That is, until Mole had come bumbling along.

On the last of those pages, Mole found one last bit of information and one last reason to scoff. Credit for the charter’s creation was listed here, given to two

individuals. One was S. Thad Remington of Castle Hill. The other was Badger of the West Edge.

Mole next went to find a record of the Commodore's Stoa Crick Mart appeal. Here, the efforts to evade any suggestion of impropriety were both strenuous and completely ineffective. This was, after all, a member of the Board of Land Commissioners, appealing to the Board of Land Commissioners, and asking for permission to take over The Willows' oldest and most important commercial location. The very idea of it screamed of conflict. So, the board stenographer had carefully noted how the Commodore had been replaced, for the purposes of that hearing, by Mayor Turtle himself.

The appeal itself also seemed to have been reclassified. All the other cases Mole had read through had been categorized as matters of property rights and ownership claims. But here, the documentation noted that the hearing had been "convened in the interest of the public good." As such, a different process was mandated.

Mole read a detailed recount of the report Commissioner Fox first presented that day, laying out the objectively declining standards at the Mart. There were revenue concerns to be sure. Fox explained that while many animals were spending money there, they weren't spending enough. But more than that, it was a matter of the health of the community, and of civic pride. Here, Mole felt the unique satisfaction of a new narrative fully forming; the sense that everything had found its proper place:

"We all know of the instances of violence and destruction at the Mart — pickpockets and con animals, fires and vandalism! Will we good animals allow that sort of thing to continue? I say no!" read the stenographer's transcription. Mole noted that the animal's careful inclusion of the exclamation points pointed to both a dry sense of humor and the occasional flair for the dramatic.

The stenographer had also gone to the trouble of transcribing the entirety of the weasels' rebuttal, presented by their paterfamilias, listed in the record as one M. Weasel. It read as follows:

"Yeah, I'd like to begin by addressing my family's long and distinguished history as the — uh, what do you call it? — the stewards of Stoa Crick. We have been the Mart's administrators and overseers and stewards now for the past twenty years, during a period of, if I may say, incredible development and growth. From which the entire town, including the animals gathered here, I will add, have benefited greatly. So I get

that there are possibilities that are untapped or whatever, but I don't think you're looking close enough at the possibilities that've been tapped already. That have been flowing, you know?

Okay then, I would also like to address some of these accusations leveled at my family. Which are spurious, sirs! Now, look, I agree that the fires were intentionally set. We're in agreement on that. But it wasn't because of any kind of bad business dealings on our part. We weasels are upstanding animals. They were set to make us look bad. To discredit us! Now I'm not going to say who set them because I don't know for sure. But I want it on the record that we believe we've been set up and that a proud Willows institution is being stolen away from its rightful owners."

At the bottom of the page, the verdict was listed: 3-0 in favor of seizing the land in the interest of redevelopment. A note had been added, at the insistence of the board's voting members, that their integrity was unblemished with regards to the troubles at the Mart, that the weasel's accusations were unsubstantiated and speculative at best and, furthermore, that their decision had been motivated primarily by a need to protect the future safety, stability, and profitability of the location.

Everything that Edith had suggested and, indeed, everything that Mole had known in his heart for some time, looked to be true. The Willows had been built on the back of corruption. It was a corruption that the humans had enabled and one that had ruined the weasels, among many others. Only now, it appeared Weasel was doing business with the humans.

He was aware that he still felt jealous of Weasel at this moment, jealous of the power and esteem he'd built up for himself but even more than that. Even as he seemed to be edging closer and closer to coming to a fuller picture of the animal's criminality, Mole couldn't help but marvel at the sheer audacity of it all, as if Weasel's path had led him down a steep and dangerous ramp, a ramp that would kill most animals but upon which he had lately launched himself into the stratosphere. Perhaps one needed that kind of momentum if they ever hoped to truly escape, to truly defy fate. Mole wondered now how far Weasel might have gone to get it.

He soon discovered that it wasn't just the weasels who had been ruined. Just a few months before the hearing on Stoat Crick Mart, the otters had also come before the Board and begged to be allowed to stay on their land. A group of Wide World hedgehogs had filed a claim on some acreage south of Gloaming Glen and adjacent to

The River, an area that the otters had lived on for as long as anyone could remember. But the otters, like the pikas, had none of the supporting documentation required by the board and so the hedgehogs had walked away victorious.

That land was now Hollyhock Lane, offering up an array of exclusive yet cozy eateries arrayed along a promenade festooned with its namesake flowers. Mole had never been to any of the restaurants, though he knew plenty of animals that had bussed tables there. He found that area's strenuously fabricated picture-book facade to be especially galling, even more so than any of the schlock at Stroat Crick Mart.

Mole had only ever heard the story of the otters' land told in broad strokes. Reading about it now, he was surprised by the contradiction it highlighted. Otter's family had lost land just the same as so many South Enders. But the prevailing story told about the otters had always been that they'd benefited from the Commodore's magnanimity. They had always been the chief builders of The Willows, and had erected not just the Commodore's dam but many of the North End mansions as well.

Mole knew his childhood friend had worked hard to overcome this reputation. And now he saw that the otters had been doubly duped. They'd traded that reputation for favors, favors extended out and then cruelly pulled away.

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The following day, Mole made the short walk from the mill down to the docks, hoping to catch Otter as he brought his boat in for the midday rest. The tourists rarely made their way this far south in any appreciable number but even still it was crowded on this bright and hot summer day. But Mole saw no sign of Otter, only his much-abused but ever reliable dinghy, tied off at its usual place and looking even more weathered than normal.

After some asking around, Mole made his way to Cubby's, where he found the animal situated at the bar's outdoor patio, shucking oysters and chatting amiably with its eponymous proprietor, an aging ringtail known to be both a degenerate gambler and a consummate entertainer, happy to play the role of salty old sailor and regale his customers with trumped up tales from the sea.

"Hey, pal!" said Otter, with his usual cheer. He kicked at a seat across from him, inviting Mole to sit. "Fancy seeing you here."

“What do you mean?” asked Mole, plopping down. Evidently, Mole sounded more defensive than he’d intended because Otter’s eyebrows darted up and he leaned back.

“I just thought you’d be at work. Everything okay?”

Mole nodded and waved his hand vaguely, as if to shoo away his previous tone. He looked over at Cubby, who, at this early hour, tended to be a bit more ruminative, having not yet fully slipped into his role as the bar’s frontman or gotten to the alcohol necessary to do so.

“Hiya, Cub. Sorry.”

“Ahoy there, Mole.” Cubby tipped back the tattered straw beach hat eternally perched at the top of his head and heaved himself up with a great groan and sigh. “Get you anything?”

Mole shook his head with a small smile. He looked out across the patio. Through the trees, he could see the flagpole that marked the east entrance to the Mart, and if he craned his neck and squinted, he could also make out Dulce Domum’s rooftop bar and restaurant as well. The views were like illustrations to the history he’d just read.

“Otter,” Mole suddenly said. “When I first started hanging around with Rat and Toad and the like, what did you think?”

Otter held Mole’s gaze as a slow smile crept across his face.

“I was happy for you. Let’s face it, Moley, you were never that popular with the fairer sex.”

“Okay, but I mean, they’re North Enders.”

Otter sighed in amusement and looked over at Cubby.

“Get this animal a shot of the good stuff, will you, Cub?” Cubby had wandered back inside by now and was doing deep knee bends in the middle of the room.

“Aye,” he called out, and Otter and Mole snickered.

“Listen, this is you stressing again. I told you before that you had to move on,” Otter continued.

“That’s not what this is about.”

“Okay, fine! Yeah, they’re from the North End and you were hanging around with them and we could see how excited you were. Sure. Is that what you want to hear? But no one hates you for it. Come on! They were jealous.”

“It’s just — I’ve been doing work on my book and the more I find out about how that side screwed us all over, the more I think there are animals here who haven’t forgotten it.”

“Damn right, they haven’t,” said Otter with a snort.

“So I’ve been starting to think maybe they did something about it,” Mole declared. There was a pause as it dawned on Otter that Mole had been leading them to this point.

“Like what?”

“Like maybe they set him up,” said Mole at last.

Now Otter looked hard at Mole.

“Okay then, buddy, this is where I tell you that you need to lay off. You’re worried about animals hating you? This is how that happens,” said Otter, his tone growing harsher and his volume increased.

“I know! That’s why I’m talking to you.”

“I mean, are you telling me you believe his ridiculous story?”

“No, no, not at all!” cried Mole desperately. “It’s completely absurd. I just can’t help but feel there’s more to it than that.”

“Alright, maybe you’re right. Like you say, there’s definitely reasons why animals would hate that family, and, I mean, his father had cut off the juice supply to the humans so there’s probably someone on that side who’s pissed off too, right? And where were the toads getting their juice from?”

“Raccoon denied having anything to do with it. And besides, they wouldn’t do anything to jeopardize the borders opening up. You know they were hoping to be able to sell to the humans legally.”

“Okay,” said Otter with a dubious smile. Mole waited a moment.

“You didn’t make the juice for Toad, did you?” He finally asked, forcing a grin to demonstrate that he was only kidding.

But Mole had been thinking of what Raccoon had said to him that drunken night back at Covey’s, about how Otter had been making up his own juice. Mole had tasted it, numerous times, in fact. Mole had thought too of that morning months ago, when he and Rat had gone to talk to Weasel at the auto body shop and ran into Otter on the way out. He remembered Otter’s shifty manner, the obvious evasions, his desperate attempt at casual conversation.

Otter barked out his laugh.

“Me? What, ‘cause I’ve been making some for my parties. Mole, there was like a truckload out there, right? I couldn’t possibly make that much, even if I wanted to. Which I don’t. And you’ve had my stuff. It’s terrible. Cubby!” Otter said to the bartender as he arrived with their shots, “What’s my Red Willow Juice taste like?”

“Tastes like shit,” said Cubby with a grin.

“Well, I can’t argue with that,” said Mole, though he was remembering the testimony from the trial about the low quality of the juice found at the crime scene. He raised his glass and locked eyes with Otter. As he tipped back his drink, he had the same thought he’d had back on that morning at Weasel’s. It was the one that told him his old friend was lying.

That evening, Mole returned home to find a letter from Edith, marked for express delivery. When he opened it, he found a single piece of paper, photocopied from a book. Circled in red felt pen was a black-and-white portrait of a middle-aged man and an accompanying short biography. This was S. Thad Remington, and once again, Mole’s mind traveled back to the photos he’d found at Porcupine’s. Because Mole recognized this man immediately. This was the same human posed with The Bull at his party.

He was standing next to his mailbox, staring at this photo, his mind racing to recognize all the connections it seemed to prove, when Mole heard the sound of kindly old Mrs. Mouse approaching.

“Did you hear?” she said, leaning over the gnarled and half-raised old fence that separated their properties, a hint of breathlessness in her voice.

“Hear what?” said Mole.

“It’s that Mr. Toad,” she said. “He’s escaped from prison.”

Chapter 14: Journeys Home

The hours immediately following Toad's rather clumsy escape from the MacDougall cousins passed in the dark and cold. This was literally true, as, in a physical sense, Mr. Toad was laying in the dark of night and at the bottom of a gully, having come to rest on the banks of a narrow, shallow rivulet whose cold waters seeped up into the ground and soaked into his skin.

Biologically speaking, toads are of course eminently suited for these types of conditions. This toad in particular was not however. This was a toad who'd spent his life wrapped in velvet robes, and curled up in the folds of down comforters while the warmth of a fire in the hearth softened the air around him. Now, as he lay in the bog and the mud, his body temperature began to tumble down, and the dark and the cold crept up into his mind.

It was a semi-conscious state that Toad existed in through those next hours. He was dimly aware of where he was and the obvious danger there was in remaining there. Yet he was also overcome by an exhaustion unlike any he had ever felt before. He had been through a tremendous amount, not just in the last few hours but in the last few weeks and months as well and so, in some kind of primal way, it was as if he was happy to return back to the muddy cold, away from the concerns of all these evolved species, and so he closed his eyes against the idling shadows of the forest and those stray bits of moonlight.

Traces of the light lingered however, even after his eyes had shut and from them, a new scene emerged. The light now shone upon the face of his mother and, right beside her, his father too. Toad was looking right at them, as if they were actually right in front of him, and in that moment, he felt such joy, and such profound confidence in his decision to remain where he was, face down in the muck, if only because that meant he could be with them again.

But he wasn't in the muck anymore, not really. Somewhere deep inside his brain, Toad became aware of the fact that he was now inside a memory. Somehow, he knew they were at The Weir, and as he recognized this, as if on cue, the sounds of the place rose up; the low rumble of The River's water as it cascaded down and, behind it, the faint whistle of air moving. Suddenly, Toad felt a blast of cold glance across his cheek. He remembered this. He remembered them here.

It had so rarely been just the three of them, just the family, but here they were. They had been out to Red Ridge that night, which meant it must have been a Wednesday. They always went on Wednesdays, traditionally a family night for the members of The Willows' most prestigious golf and tennis club. Tacos were served on Wednesdays. Toad's father could get in a little casual networking, and his mother could compare notes with all the other mothers and Toad himself could be safely shuttled off to the care of the club's in-house staff and the innumerable distractions they could offer.

Something had prompted them to stop on the way home that night. Perhaps his parents had been into the Red Willow Juice Margaritas especially hard and gotten it into their head to try to have a moment; to stand there amidst the incredible natural beauty and savor the fact that they were there to see it, together, as a family. Which is what had happened. They stood there that night, listening to the rush of the water and the whistling air; realizing that only together, only as a group of three, were they large enough to be swept up in that wondrous rush.

His parents each had a hand on one of Toad's shoulders and they held him firmly, protecting him. He wasn't ready to be in The River on his own. He turned to look up at his mother and she turned and looked back down at him and, just like that, she smiled. His mother had been an exceptionally beautiful toad and that smile sparkled in the moonlight.

She crouched down to tell him something, only just then the world around them started to fade away, and so he couldn't hear her. He felt a stab of pain right in the middle of his chest and then Toad was back outside of Greenleaf, back out in the cold again, out for just enough time, in fact, to think to himself that it was actually quite a bit warmer back in those memories of his and to wonder if it wouldn't perhaps be the most prudent course of action for him to just return post haste. So he did.

Only now, his parents had disappeared, and instead Toad found himself inside of Toad Hall, perched in his favorite chair — a great, weathered piece of Windsor

craftsmanship, with high armrests that made Toad feel like a king. He was slumped back into that chair now, staring into his own lap and giggling.

There was giggling all around him — in all sorts of pitches and tones — and when he looked around, he saw animals of all kinds gathered in what had once been his father's study. It still was his father's study, in the sense that nothing had been moved. Toad would not allow it. The space was supposed to be sacred, as were the objects in it — the great oak desk and the rows of leather bound books, and also the plain glass ashtray, still with the very last remnants of ash from one of the Doctor's post-prandial cigars, and the framed photos of his wife and child and the small pillow that he'd kept in a desk drawer, just in case his back started acting up and he needed a little more support.

That chair Toad sat in was equally special. Dr. Toad had built it with his own father long ago and now his son would sit in it, alone in that office, and he'd imagine that he was there with his dad, to talk over some bit of business strategy, resolve a decision or two, then maybe just chat about the weather or the upcoming hunting season.

He was surprised to see all these other animals now gathered in the study, and a rather scruffy-looking group at that. Then Toad remembered who these animals were and he began to scan the room, looking for one in particular. He found Weasel leaned up against a bookshelf on the far side of the room, laughing along, slapping a ferret on the back and toasting with a shrew.

"You loved them, didn't you?"

"Hmm?"

Time had hopped forward. Or backward. It had hiccuped somehow, because Toad turned and was surprised to see that Weasel was now sitting right next to him, and that the rest of the room was empty.

He was remembering this night now too. It was one of their first nights at Toad Hall. Perhaps it had been the very first, though looking at Weasel sitting across from him, snifter in hand and legs stretched out, you could easily believe that this was actually his home, and that Toad was the visitor.

"Your parents," Weasel was saying. "It sounds like you loved them."

And now a slurry of words dribbled out from Toad.

"Maybe. One does. I loved them but did they love me...hmm?"

It was a particularly maudlin night then, as it tended to be when one was there to see it turn back to day again. Toad and Weasel had shared a few such nights back then, back when they had been friends.

“Oh, I’m sure they did,” said Weasel, standing up with a surprising grace, given their alcohol-soaked condition, and moving past windows where the first light of dawn was poking through the drawn shades. “They just might not have known how to show it.”

“They were busy with their other interests,” Toad corrected him.

“At least they were important interests. I mean, your daddy was basically running The Willows, right? That’s a full-time job and then some.”

Weasel had moved behind the desk. He let both paws rest on its leather and rosewood blotter and leaned forward, adopting the pose of a titan of industry, surveying his interests.

“It’s a lot of power. He did right by it though. Don’t let anyone tell you differently,” Weasel said.

Toad suddenly saw his father’s face again. Somehow, his father was back here in his study, or maybe he was there, out in the woods. Toad couldn’t place him, but he could see him. He could see that wide, ruddy face and the heavy knitted brows that cast shadows down upon his father’s eyes — the eyes everyone said Toad had inherited from him. Toad read such disappointment in those eyes. He used to think that he and his wayward ways were the source of that disappointment. Now, he saw it differently. It radiated from inside his father and then Toad felt it radiate inside of him too. It felt hot, like anger, and for a moment it blinded him.

When he could see again, Toad discovered that he was now in a different part of Toad Hall. He was in the secret room behind the pantry, the same one he’d found old Mole snooping around in, late on the night of his arrest. But Weasel was with him now. Again they were laughing, great, big booming laughs of triumph that surged up over the faint sounds of music coming from above and sliced through the room’s stale air.

“Look at this place!” exclaimed Weasel with glee, throwing his hands up in the air. “I’m telling you, buddy, you don’t appreciate what you got.”

Toad was full of swagger. He could feel the power of it in his legs and in the way he spoke.

“Ah, you’re only saying that because you’ve never been to a Toad Hall party before.”

“Aren’t we at one now?” teased Weasel.

“No, no. I mean a proper one —”

“Like the kind they used to throw here in the old days?” Weasel looked at him now with gleaming eyes. His smile had shrunk until all that was left was a smirk.

“Yeah, like those,” replied Toad.

The room seemed to stretch away from Toad now, as if it were pulling away from him, or rather that he was pulling away from it. He could get a good look at that room now, and strangely, he could see it as a point on a map, or a star amidst a constellation. There were paths that led to and from this room.

“What do you know about construction, Toad?”

“Construction of what?”

Weasel laughed again.

“Of buildings.”

A new star shone then. It shone with the promise of towering skyscrapers, sprawling estates, centers of luxury and commerce and industry, of land given purpose. All the toads who had come before him had dedicated their lives to this pursuit, so perhaps he should as well. He wanted to. He could feel in him this collision of passion and duty, an explosion almost.

The room that had stretched away from him now came rushing back, the smell of that stale air assaulting his nostrils, the sound of the distant music now throbbing inside his head. And there was another sound now, another presence.

“Dude, what is this?!”

Through the doorway now appeared the form of Spiny Lizard, grinning and goggle-eyed. Toad stared at the fool, the simp, as that grin and those eyes grew wider and wider. His face had become a hideous horrific caricature of itself. And the music was throbbing now. Toad was beginning to think that these memories of his weren’t quite so warm and comforting after all.

That idea sent him straight back to the cold, only he wasn’t outside Greenleaf in the mud. He was at The Weir again. He was standing in front of the hunched and twitchy figure of Willie Williams. Looking at him now, even through the veil of memory, he

could see how unsavory the man looked; how clear it was that he had meant trouble for Toad.

Toad had known it then too. He'd seen it that night, just as clear as he saw it now in his memory. Willie wore faded jeans and an equally worn and thin denim jacket over a plain white t-shirt. It wasn't nearly enough to protect him against the cold and he hugged himself tightly, bobbing his head and occasionally flicking away his long, stringy hair.

Seeing Toad, he raised a pale, hairless hand and offered a thin smile and in that moment, Toad felt the land stretch away from him again. It made room for his parents and for Weasel and Spiny Lizard, for Rat and even Mole too. They were all there when the lights came on and all those loud, insistent voices rang out. It had all been too much for him then, and so he'd run.

And now again, in this memory, it was too much for him. The lights from the police cars grew so intense that he could see nothing else. Everything became harsh and bright and then there was the sound of the whole world moving past Toad at an incredible rate. Everything became a blur, mixing together and then washing away so that there was nothing and then Toad felt free. It felt like the best moments behind the wheel of his automobile.

Which is where he was now, behind the wheel of that large automobile and moving through the dark of night, fleeing The Weir and Willie and the police. His head was racing, and his heart was racing, and the car was racing, careening across the road, spinning and spinning and spinning him away, back to the safety of Toad Hall.

"Listen, this isn't something I expect you to understand, Toad. You've never had to live this way. But I live this way every day. This is the way things get done. It's the way generations of toads did it too."

They had come back up from the secret basement ballroom, back up into the study, and Weasel was very close to Toad now, crouched down in front of him, his face set with a seriousness that Toad had never seen before.

"Now if I know anything about your kind, Toad, it's that they were able to see what was coming next. This is what's coming now. Like it or not, the key to the future of The Willows lies beyond its borders. Help me make that future happen!"

He had been scared then too. Toad suddenly recognized the expression on Weasel's face. It was the same expression his father had so often worn, one of disappointment

masked by hope, by the belief that, with the right combination of words and actions, Toad might be coaxed into becoming the animal they wanted him to be.

Toad had felt shame then, and he felt it again now. He watched himself kindle the fire in his own eyes, huff and puff, stare at Weasel and grasp him by the wrist, exclaiming, “Okay then! Let’s do it!”

Then he laughed, not then but now. He was laughing so hard, and it hurt so much that it woke Toad up, sent him right back to the mud, just as the new day’s sun had arrived to drive away the dark and cold. He was fully awake now, painfully so, laughing at his own foolishness, his own naïveté. Spiny Lizard hadn’t taken him down. No. He hadn’t had to. Toad had done it himself. He’d done it by allowing Weasel to talk him into such a moony-eyed plan and he’d done it when he’d listened to that creature plead with him after his arrest. He’d assured Weasel then that there was nothing to worry over. Animals like him did not go to jail.

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For Mole, the news of Toad’s escape hit like a blow to the back of the head — unexpected, disorienting, dizzying and of course, quite painful. He’d actually physically reeled a little bit when Mrs. Mouse had first told him. He thought he’d then managed to pull himself together quite admirably though, making sure to stumble down into his burrow before he began to pace and flap his arms and furiously try to get a handle on the situation.

It was a spectacularly stupid thing for Toad to have done, first and foremost, though it was easy to believe he had. Mole had no trouble, in fact, imagining that perpetually pampered creature just up and deciding that prison life was simply unconscionable and making a run for it. At the same time, Mole knew there existed the possibility of a larger story, the very same larger story that he was in pursuit of. Perhaps Toad had other reasons to escape. Perhaps he hadn’t escaped at all and that was just the cover story. Perhaps something far more sinister was at work.

Mole was almost, but not quite dazed enough by this news, to forget about the discovery he’d made in the mail moments before: it was Remington — the police officer and union bigwig — in that photo with The Bull. It was confirmation of what he had already come to suspect; what the fire at Stroat Crick had already taught him — that

a firm connection between the toads and the human police existed. And if the Commodore and his progeny were involved in juice smuggling, then it was natural to assume that the police might have had a hand in it as well. For a moment, Mole's brain flashed on an image of Detective Middleton — the sly smile, the way he danced around questions; the way he moved, and how it reminded Mole of violence.

Mole found himself suddenly, desperately hoping that Toad was guilty and that his guilt was as simple as Hare had made it seem. If that were the case, there wouldn't be anything more that Mole had to discover, and whatever festering ties still remaining to be unearthed could be left there, buried. He had to admit that, right at this moment, that sounded like a lovely way forward.

Unfortunately, Mole also knew in his heart that this wasn't to be the case. He had that feeling again like he was falling behind, that the story was unfolding at a rate faster than he could ingest it. It was a fluttering kind of nervous energy but also a manic and anxious craving to be ready, and all of that was mixed with a dread far deeper and darker than anything that had beset him in those early days, when it was just Toad's drag racing and his friendship with Weasel that had worried him. Toad's escape only meant that this whole affair was quickly coming to its climax and when that moment arrived, Mole feared he would be devastatingly ill prepared.

All this was at the forefront of Mole's mind a few days later when he set out for his family home at Mole End. He'd gone to a fair amount of trouble to make himself presentable, though he'd been careful to eschew any of the articles of clothing Rat had bought him and had instead opted for something in the more durably-inclined style of the South End: plain brown chinos and a pale blue polo shirt whose boxy cut Mole suddenly found to be most unbecoming on him. He fussed and picked at it as he strode down The Run, bathed in the orange light of a summer gloaming.

He had to admit that at this moment, he was desperate to see his family. It was his father's birthday and though that animal was predictably disparaging of any attempt at celebrating the occasion, his mother nevertheless always went to the trouble. The family would be gathering that night, and she'd be making her special caramel bundt cake. Mole did not miss an opportunity to indulge in a slice or two or three of that heavenly treat.

He held a small scroll of paper at his side as he walked, around which Mole had tied a red ribbon. It was his father's gift. Mole was actually proud of this choice, though it

had been made out of necessity. He had forgotten his father's birthday, which was typical of him, though he did feel as if recent events gave him a better excuse than usual. Scrambling around his burrow that afternoon, he'd come upon the old plumbing plans that his grandfather had drawn up for Stoat Crick Mart, the ones he'd taken from the archives the previous year.

It really was an excellent gift for his father — a bit of family history, delivered in a most unexpected and unusual form. Mole hoped that it would be well received. His relationship with his father, tenuous even in the best of times, had only grown shakier in recent months. The family had faced the same subtle but still evident signs of resentment that Mole had from South Enders, both during and even after the trial, his father most acutely. It was a whisper here, a frown there, perhaps something of an attitude from the field mouse working behind the cheese counter at the Food Emporium. Mole didn't dare to ask whether it had affected business, though he suspected it had. And all of that was sure to return now that news of Toad's escape had reached The Willows. Mole hated to think that he might be mixing his parents up in something both painful and now dangerous too.

Night had fallen by the time he reached the family home. The burrow's entry was ablaze with light and a whole labour of moles could be heard laughing and yelling good-naturedly over one another. Indeed, the party was already in full swing. Mole's sister was there, as well as her husband and their brood of young pups, all of whom swarmed around Mole instantly, grabbing at his paws and barking for his attention as they regaled him with all their latest stories. Mole could see his younger brother as well, brooding a bit, though this was customary for someone his age. And his mother was happily wading through the middle of all this madness, basking in it really as she directed cooking and table-setting operations, teased one pup, then scolded another, then grabbed a third around the neck and, unprompted, attacked him with a savage round of kisses.

"Where's Dad?" asked Mole, as he sidled up to her. She was suddenly busy laying out construction paper and crayons for some impromptu arts and crafts.

"Oh, he's disappeared off somewhere. You know how he gets on his birthday," replied his mother.

He leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek, then dipped a paw quickly into the bowl of caramel she'd set out for the cake and dashed off, laughing wickedly as she sent her good-natured rebukes after him.

He found his father in the small den adjacent to the kitchen, stretched out in the recliner that had been exclusively reserved for him ever since he had purchased it more than twenty years ago. He was bent over the book of word puzzles that was always kept at arm's reach from the chair, his eyes fixed squarely on the problem, a pencil poised in his hand, ready to strike as soon as he spotted his target.

"Hiya, Pop! Happy birthday!" said Mole with unusual cheer. Even he was surprised at how light and joyful he'd felt immediately upon entering Mole End.

Through the trial and its aftermath, Mole had largely steered clear of his family, though that was only relatively speaking. He was still expected at family dinner every Sunday, as well as any and all special occasions like tonight's. And he lived no more than a ten-minute walk away, which meant he was constantly being called upon to help out or pop over for one thing or another. The issue of lingering animosity from South Enders had largely been skirted around, and though his parents hadn't offered Mole anything beyond cursory comfort when he'd told them of his break-up with Rat, they also hadn't rubbed his face in it. They'd largely kept their opinions to themselves, which was an unusual and most welcome occurrence.

"Thank you, thank you," said his father with a stiff but appreciative smile. He set down the puzzle and turned his attention fully towards Mole. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, I suppose," Mole said. "Everything's fine at work."

"You're worried about that toad?"

There was a hint of care and concern there, which set Mole back.

"No!" he replied hastily. "I mean, he's got himself into even more trouble, lots more trouble, which I didn't think was possible at this point so there's that. But it's none of my concern."

"Right. That's good. It's good you feel that way."

There was a long pause. Neither animal seemed ready to move or speak. Mole could feel his earlier exuberance fading away now, but even if his father was hiding out from his own party and perhaps would appreciate the solitude, he knew he couldn't just up and walk back out of the room. He suddenly felt as if he had more to say and yet he couldn't determine what that something was. Instead, he thrust the roll of paper out.

“Here. I got this for you.”

“Oh, I think your mother wanted to do gifts after we ate,” said Mole’s father, but the subsequent pause hung even heavier than the ones before.

“Actually, I — yes, I’ll open it now. Thank you.”

He unrolled the paper and looked at it quizzically for a moment.

“It’s Grandpa’s. His work. I think, maybe, original diagrams for the plumbing at Stoat Crick Mart. I found it when I was doing research...For my book. You know I’ve been working on this book,” Mole explained with some embarrassment.

“Of course,” replied his father. “Your mother keeps me updated.”

“Right. Anyway, I was over at The Town Office in their archives, and I came across it. Thought you might like it.”

“They let you just have it?” asked his father now with a raised eyebrow.

Mole had been quite prepared to lie about this but his father didn’t give him a chance. He chuckled and grinned out of the corner of his mouth.

“Yeah, I bet they did,” he said wryly. He looked down at the diagrams again and ran a paw over them with great care. “Yeah, this looks like the Mart alright. Complicated job. Your grandfather was a very smart animal. Not everyone knew that. He didn’t get many chances to prove it but he was very smart.”

Mole heard his father’s voice break ever so slightly as it fought against an unexpected wave of emotion, and, much as he was pleased to see that the gift was so well received, he was now desperate to change the subject. He considered how much he wanted to tell his father about this research of his. On the one hand, the more his father learned, the more he was bound to be either confused or worried by his son’s pursuits. Probably both, and justifiably so. On the other, he might find some satisfaction in learning the full extent of the Commodore’s corruption.

“Yeah, I was looking into how the Commodore took it over. He really screwed over a lot of animals. I mean, we all knew that. But did you know how much business he was doing with the humans? And how much they were helping him screw everyone over.”

“Well, he loved the humans. I mean, the animal had a tunnel dug from Toad Hall out to the Wide World just to sneak ‘em in.”

“Really?” Mole asked. “How do you know that?”

“Because your grandfather dug it for him.”

It felt to Mole as if all the fur on his body were rippling through a breeze, as if something were passing over him. He remained perfectly still, hoping to grab hold of whatever that something was.

“Your grandfather probably told you about it,” his father continued. “Shouldn’t have but you were too young to remember. It took a lot of engineering. He was proud of it. And all so that the Commodore could have his little parties with the humans.”

“That’s not all they were doing. I mean —”

Mole stopped short, his brain having caught up. He was aware now of the implications. If the Commodore had once run Red Willow Juice out to the Wide World, then he could have been using this tunnel. And if he had done so then, perhaps Weasel could be planning the very same thing now.

“Do you know where it let out? In the Wide World?” he asked.

“Pup, don’t go trying to find it,” his father said with a weary sigh. “It’s probably half caved in by now.”

“It’s just for the book,” Mole barked in irritation.

“So write about it. You don’t need to go see it.”

“No, you don’t understand. If it’s still standing — like, if you can still use it —”

“What, you wanna use it for parties too? What is it with you and this fascination with the North End?” his father asked. “They’re no better than we are. Just because you’re rich does not make you happy.”

“I know that,” replied Mole, growing angry. “I don’t want that. You know, you’ve never understood —”

“Understood what?” cried his father.

“That I don’t want to be like them, I only want to be something more than this,” said Mole, waving his arm around the room. The waves of emotion were breaking over Mole’s shores as well. “I don’t mean, like — of course, I love this. But I can help us too, I think... I don’t know, but maybe I can.”

All of a sudden, he wanted to tell his father everything. He wanted to tell him all about the many things worrying him: about the shadowy sorts caught up in this crime — who they were and what they might be capable of; about what Toad’s escape might mean for this family, and what it might make the family think of him. He worried about what they thought of him now. He’d already put them through so much. And he worried about himself. He wanted to admit how lonely he’d been feeling.

But he wanted to boast too, to revel in the things he was discovering and the way he was discovering them; the moments when he'd surprised himself with his South Endchutzpah and bullheaded bravery. He somehow couldn't bring himself to say any of that now though. It wasn't important anyway.

Only his father was looking very seriously at Mole, staring at him with the penetrative eyes of a parents. He could read it all in his son's face.

"You don't need to do all that."

"No. I want to. I'm sorry, okay?"

"All that your mother and I have ever wanted was for you to be happy. Maybe you don't value your own happiness the way we do, I don't know —"

"No, no," cried Mole.

"But we do, okay? And you're not happy!"

He put a paw on Mole's shoulder and let it rest there and the silence returned. Finally, he gave that shoulder a squeeze and sighed again.

"You know, the Commodore screwed your grandpa over too. Paid him like crap. Cut costs. Threatened him. He was angry about it, just like everyone always is. He spent the last years of his life down at Covey's with the rest of them, being angry. We can be angry about it too or we can live the life that is in front of us. Right?"

His father stood now, grunting as he used Mole's shoulder to boost himself up.

"Thank you for the gift. Now I think we should go and have some dinner with our family."

He patted that shoulder once, then walked out of the room slowly, calling out to his grandchildren and laughing gruffly as their shrill voices called back to him in response. After a moment, Mole followed him out into the kitchen. There, he sat at the table, his sister on one side and his brother on the other, a slew of pups banging at their dishes and his mother clattering away, and heaping bowls of stew passed down. Mole's father brought out his son's gift and passed it around, and then they told stories to the younger pups of the dearly departed; not just of Mole's grandfather but of his grandmother too, and of his uncle, who'd gone off down The River one day in search of his fortune, never to return; and that reminded them of Uncle's friend, the ferret who use to push around that cart full of junk, pushed it all over the South End, singing little made-up songs and trying to get animals to buy some rusted-out old frying pan or some such thing.

It wasn't to be a late night, not with the younger animals already starting to slide down into their chairs by the time the dessert plates hit the table, whimpering in expectation of a temper. His father too was already staring longingly back in the direction of his recliner. Mole hadn't even got to his second piece of cake before his sister was grabbing for her pups' jackets and his mother was clearing plates.

"Take your time, dear, take your time," she said to Mole but Mole could already feel the warmth of earlier dissipating into memory. Even quaint family birthday parties have their tipping point, and they had now come to it.

His mother was, of course, two steps ahead of Mole, appearing with a spare tin for him to take home his dessert. As he turned to walk out minutes later, tin in one arm and a large plastic tub of leftover stew in the other, he felt a paw on his shoulder. Turning, he saw his father, framed by the soft orange light of the fire in the hearth behind him. The stoop in his back and the slump in his shoulders grew more pronounced by the day but written across the old mole's face was a bashful, crooked grin.

"You remember far up north in River Bank, where I used to take you to get our tree for Christmas?"

"In the woods back there behind where old Groundhog's was?" asked Mole, struggling to pull the memory out from the deepest storage of his brain. From the point of view of a young mole, he could dimly see his father looking down at him, his face haloed and his body silhouetted by the bright winter light. They were walking in among through the trees, crunching through the snow.

"Yeah. Well, if you keep going up, up over the crest there, that's where you'll cross over. Just keep walking straight after that, maybe a quarter of a mile. Look for a big thicket of elms," he said and then, leaning in closer, "That's where the tunnel lets out."

He nodded and then, almost as an afterthought, he said, "If you're interested."

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The official border between The Willows and The Wide World followed the jagged course of the hill range that separated the two regions. As the range turned to the south, the border line instead descended down the backside of the hill, arriving at flat land below Pine Ridge Pass. Here, the government-sanctioned border station Mole had visited just weeks before was located. There were also of course numerous

unsanctioned places where one could cross over into the Wide World, but most animals rarely had reason to take the risk these days. Crossings were still relatively routine occurrences, while the penalties for going over without registering were stiff. As long as you were willing to brave the disdainful gaze of the border crossing guard and gave off no obvious scent of suspicion, there wasn't much of a reason to chance anything illegal.

Mole very easily could have gone about things the proper way; waiting until morning, crossing over officially, just as he had during his visit to Highcountry, and then working his way over to the spot his father had described. But Mole could not wait. Instead, he stopped at the burrow just long enough to drop off the leftovers and pick up an extra sweater before heading for River Bank, and passing through the Mart along the way. There, the dying embers of the night were extinguished by the barkeeps and bussers, and the last patrons — a scraggly mixture of late-season tourists and beer-soaked locals — shuffled off to their burrows and to the inns.

Out in Gloaming Glen, a brazen moon filled the sky with foreboding. It was swollen to an outrageous size, and cast a sickly yellowish pallor over the land. Mole stopped short suddenly there, held in place by the reverberations from the many passages he'd made before. They came to life now, the moon's light illuminating the scenes before him like the stage set of a play. He was a young pup, holding his father's paw as they explored The Lily Fair that lay stretched out before them. Older now, and sneaking off to the caves with Otter. And finally he was with Rat, on their way to Toad Hall on the morning after Toad's arrest, plowing through the snow that covered this field then, with hardly an idea of what lay in front of them.

He moved on, pushing forward and ahead, right through River Bank and up the hill, passing the groundhog property and then the wide swath of firs that The Willows locals traditionally used for their Christmas trees. At the crest was a rocky outcrop whose backside dropped precipitously, practically plummeting into the border itself before leveling off. Here, Mole had to climb down on his hands and knees to cross over.

The Wide World terrain was unfamiliar to Mole and he moved slowly over a craggy granite floor, careful not to take a wrong step or, even worse, somehow draw attention to himself. Finally, the thicket of elms his father had described loomed up ahead. Their upright members were crisscrossed by fallen brethren, great arcing logs now covered with moss and lichen and grotesquely shaped fungi and vines that hung down over their sides like beaded curtains. From the moment he parted those curtains, Mole felt as if he

were entering an alien world, and it was here, after much searching about, beneath the largest of the fallen trees and hidden by a flat grey rock which he had to pry at with his claws, that Mole found the entrance to his grandfather's tunnel.

He peered down. He hadn't brought a flashlight for fear of being seen and was relying only on the slivers of moon beam that slipped through the leaves above. He couldn't see much except for a series of steps carved into the dirt leading down but he could feel the cold brushing past his face and smell the must as he leaned over the hole.

Moving down the steps and into the tunnel, Mole could see it was of a simple design but expertly engineered. This wasn't surprising. A mole always knew how best to dig. This mole however did wish his grandfather had thought to include some lighting. As soon as he'd moved away from the entrance and those last bits of moonlight, he had descended into a pitch-black darkness. Now, it was just him and his excitement. Him and that courage of his. Mole strained to feel it all, just as he reached out into the darkness, straining to feel whatever lay in front of him, trying desperately to let those animal instincts take over and lead him.

As he crept slowly forward, Mole was reminded of the previous tunnel he'd uncovered, the one leading to Toad Hall's secret basement ballroom. His grandfather must have dug that one out as well. It seems the moles had been just another species under the thumb of the Commodore, consigned to build his kingdom and then left to shuttle off to their holes in the ground. This mole would not let that happen again. He would not let another animal, no matter who it was, dictate the fate of his family. And then he saw a dim, milky light up ahead and his breath quickened. Whatever he was headed towards, he had now arrived.

He crept closer, unsure of where the tunnel led out and what may be on the other side. But as he neared the light, he could see that it was passing through a pane of glass. It was a large window, almost the size of a floor mirror. Mole realized then that it was a mirror. He was looking through the mirror in the subterranean ballroom. It made perfect sense, of course. Toad had told him it was a two-way mirror, and now Mole had found its other side.

He was feeling around for some sort of knob or release that might let him in when all of a sudden the dim light coming from the ballroom grew bright and Mole heard voices approaching. He gasped and stumbled back. Despite the fact that he had been on the other side and seen the mirror's obscuring reflection, it was still hard to believe he

couldn't be seen. Crouched low in the darkness, he watched as Weasel now came into view, followed closely by Opossum.

"They said he was meeting with Skunk. Skunk went over. They spotted him in Castle Hill," said Weasel. He appeared more distraught than Mole could ever remember seeing him. His normally impeccably groomed fur looked matted and he moved spastically through the space, first pacing off in one direction, then suddenly reversing course. He was behaving like Mole. Opossum, on the other hand, maintained her icy demeanor. She stood stock still in the center of the room and spoke in a low, even tone.

"But we don't know what was discussed, do we? So we're not going to start going crazy, are we? We're going to deal with the situation."

Weasel didn't stop the pacing but he nodded.

"They discussed Willie. That's what they discussed. Then, Middleton talked to Raccoon. And we damn well know what those two were talking about."

"Which we expected," countered Opossum. "It's okay."

"It's not okay if we can't bust him up," Weasel hissed. He seemed about to say more when there was suddenly the sound of a third voice. Though Mole could not initially see the speaker, he recognized the tone immediately.

"I told you the human police wouldn't turn on him," said a gruff and weary voice. Into view plodded none other than Badger. "They always make excuses for each other. It's their way."

"You shut up!" bellowed Weasel and both Badger and Opossum took a step back.

Behind the mirror, Mole was suddenly aware that his mouth had fallen open and he had forgotten to breathe. It was as if even his basic bodily functions had been stunned into paralysis.

"Now there's only one way to take care of the problem," Weasel continued. Then, turning to Badger again, he said, "Meanwhile, find out where the goddamn toad is."

"I'm not turning that animal over to you."

"You'll do as you're told," replied Weasel icily, "or you know exactly what will happen."

Weasel stared hard at Badger, who stared right back. But it was only for that moment that Badger seemed to rise to meet Weasel because in the next, he lowered his head.

“I would just beg you not to do anything rash quite yet. Let’s wait until Middleton actually makes a move and then we can turn to our political friends,” said Badger. And with that, he turned, and walked out without another word.

Weasel and Opossum just looked at one another for a moment and, in that moment, Mole could see the connection the two shared, the unspoken exchange of emotions passing between them. They walked towards one another and sank into an embrace.

“He’s right, you know?” said Opossum. “If Middleton does partner with Raccoon, we can use that.”

“No, it’s too late. He’ll have taken me out by then,” murmured Weasel. Then he added, “It’s going to get ugly.”

Opossum nodded and then rested her head on his chest. Her face was turned toward the mirror and she gazed into it. She smiled and then Weasel looked down at her and he smiled too and the mirror cast back its reflection of two animals in love. Mole however was not there to witness this moment. By then, he was running at top speed, blindly through the dark and back towards the tunnel entrance, his courage having finally given out.

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In the morning, the filthy and exhausted Toad left the mud behind and set out, following the narrow rivulet he’d landed near and winding his way out of the woods until eventually he came upon a great expanse of wheat fields and a wide country path running alongside it.

As he strode down the path now, the sun doing its best to warming away the previous night’s chills, Toad thought of his dreams from the previous evening; though since Toad still felt as if he’d had no sleep at all, perhaps it was more appropriate to call them visions. He looked back on those images of his parents, and of his various conversations with Weasel too. It was as if his brain were trying to point out a connection, only Toad already knew the connection existed. Of course he’d gone into business with Weasel because of his parents and the pressure he’d felt. It’s why he’d lied up on the witness stand too, he thought with impatience.

He shook his head violently. He had to remain focused on the problem at hand, which was, even he could admit, quite a large problem. If he was going to go on the

lam, he would need resources — money, clothes, some kind of new identity. It was painfully clear now how unprepared he was for this escape; or rather, how unprepared Maggie had left him. See if she ever got any of her payment from him!

And just as that thought blared out, Toad stopped short. He stood stock still, staring up at the sign that loomed over him. It cast its shadow down and obscured Toad's face, a face that was at once confused and overjoyed. The sign read: "Another exciting project from Mustelid Services."

Chapter 15: An Unexpected Reunion

The evening after his father's birthday, Mole sat on his bench at the entrance to his burrow and quietly watched the sun fall. He'd set that bench there right when he'd first moved in, pointing it in this very precise, westerly direction so that he could peer through a gap in the usually impenetrable mass of oak trees and make out The River itself. He'd been so excited by this. The sun would swing down low, its light soft and warm, diffuse through the leaves and branches, dappling his clothes and fur with spots that made him feel like he had ascended to the stars.

Some nights, Mole would remain there and let the darkness descend and the hush truly wash over him — let himself drift in those stars. On this evening though, he could only wish for such a luxury — to let go of his cares and concerns, to let Nature take a hold and carry him off into night's deepest reaches. It was not to be so tonight. The sky's light was still blazing red, and he knew what he had to do.

He was aware of the fact that he was exhausted and had barely eaten since the previous night's dinner; that his senses were dull and his emotions raw, and that this perhaps might be clouding his judgment. He'd run straight home after emerging out of the tunnel's end the night before, but he'd been far too excited, thunderstruck even, and completely incapable of sleep. For a time, he was also convinced that he'd left something of his behind in the tunnel and that Weasel or Opossum or one of their goons would find it. Any second now, they'd show up at his door and it'd all be over.

So once more he'd paced and flapped his hands through the night, occasionally pressing his ear up to the burrow's entrance, listening for any approaching intruders. When he'd finally convinced himself that his presence in the tunnel had gone undetected, or grown too weary to care, he'd then decided that he should write, that this could perhaps once again quiet his mind.

What was once Mole's book was now something quite different, and he struggled to define what that was. His earliest writings — the hackneyed odes to one local tradition

or another — sat next to his explorations of Willows history, the ones that had taken him down increasingly dark roads. And then that had given way to the active investigation of the previous months, whereby his work began to look like the scribbles of some mad detective — circles and arrows and suspicions scrawled in half-sentences. Mole knew it was a mess but he'd still come to find the act of building the book to be comforting. It was like his first job at the mill, sorting old invoices and cancelled checks for Beaver, filing everything away in its proper place. It helped Mole to make sense of it all.

Badger's alliance with Weasel did make some degree of sense. It could explain his less than stellar efforts as Toad's attorney, and Badger certainly had a history of deceitful business practices. One need only remember his role in helping to create the Board of Land Commissioners to know that. All of this Mole scribbled down, barely considering the structure or language of his writing, concerned only with its comprehensiveness. Then, upon consideration, he took what he had written and locked it in a battered old file cabinet where he kept what amounted to his valuables. Then he took the key to that cabinet and stashed it away in the furthest reaches of his sock drawer.

He'd wondered then if it might not be time to go to the authorities with what he knew. Except Mole had no idea who he could trust. Clearly, there was some kind of partnership, as well as a growing conflict, between Weasel and Middleton, and it almost certainly had to do with Red Willow Juice. Weasel had seemed most concerned about Middleton meeting with Striped Skunk but Mole couldn't be sure where that concern came from. The human detective was just as crooked as Mole had begun to suspect, and just because he was now meeting with the animal police did not mean he could suddenly be trusted.

At the same time, Mole couldn't be sure he could trust Skunk either. For all he knew, Skunk might have called him down to the station that day just to suss out what he knew and report back to whichever criminal was paying him. No, Mole would have to do this on his own. That realization finally quieted all the noise in his brain, as if it had finally arrived at its destination. He collapsed limply on to his couch, not to sleep but instead to stare off blankly at the surrounding burrow.

It occurred to Mole then, seemingly out of the blue, that it was exactly one year to the day that he had first met Toad. This fact would seem to be full of cosmic

significance and yet it occasioned only a dry, mirthless laugh from Mole. It did make him think of the many lives he'd led since then though, the very curious set of twists and turns that he'd faced over that time and how they had inevitably led him to this moment. It had been a long year.

"Yes indeed, it's been a long time," Mole said to the empty room.

Even the burrow had sedimentary layers. You could see, for instance, the effect of Rat in its interior design — a consideration of comfort and civility in the appearance of a dining room table, ramshackle as it may be, and coordination in the pillow-to-couch color scheme.

A year ago, Rat had come to the burrow for the first time. He'd been so eager then to impress and so nervous that he would fail. He'd been thinking lately of writing to Rat, to tell her about the things he was discovering, but he had to admit to himself that he had no idea how she might take it. Would she find solace in the revelation that Toad had been a pawn? Would she find hope? Or would it only sadden her more? And if so, would he lose the only chance he'd have to win her back? He missed her terribly.

"I had never been happier, actually," Mole said, again to no one but this time with the full force of a revelation.

Just as the realization that he would have to act alone had stopped Mole moments before, this revelation had the same effect, only stronger. It was so strong, in fact, that Mole had spent the better part of that following day considering its ramifications as he drifted in and out of a restless sleep. Finally, he'd ventured topside to sit on the bench for the sunset, and then he'd arrived at his conclusion.

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The quiet and still of the night hid watchful eyes and open ears, Mole was now sure of that, and so he chose to approach the lawyer's home from the north, where a patch of dense forest lay which could provide him some cover. Once again, he found himself moving covertly across a moonlit Gloaming Glen, this time sweeping down its back side, moving nimbly across its steep, grassy face before ducking into the trees that sat at the bottom of the vale there, their dark silhouettes cutting jagged shapes in the skyline.

As he moved, Mole practiced what he would say to Badger. If last night's conversation was any indication, Weasel had something on Badger, and Badger did

seem concerned for Toad. If he were in fact an unwilling participant in all this, then perhaps Mole could convince him to reveal what he knew and maybe even turn on Weasel.

Then, Mole could stop Weasel. He might also stop Toad from being unjustly imprisoned and he might win back his girlfriend and he might write something compelling but, along with all that, he'd be trying to stop Weasel, trying to deny him that which might only be obtainable in the ways Weasel had chosen. He thought again of Weasel's popularity now, and the way he occasioned so much pride and for a moment, he looked back in the direction of the South End. Only, Mole knew it was too late to turn around now, if only because he heard himself say so.

Of course, that could be the great voice of fate speaking to him. Had it once again appeared, a set of blood-red eyes peering out at Mole from behind the gooseberry bushes, controlling him? And was that in fact fate, or some other, much more nefarious force; the forces of money and power and greed, the forces that had brought The Willows to where it was today? Was that their distinct power — to make their manipulations appear to be the work of pure destiny?

Mole came up out of the sycamores then, and got his first good look at West Edge. It was a neighborhood well cultivated to provide its residents a manner of insulation from the rest of the town, so sheltered that it often felt like an alien planet. West Edgers appreciated that protection though, and the kind of ordered and controlled existence it gave them here. One could see it in the long, neat hedgerows cultivated to delineate property lines, and the thatched huts — the only type of exterior home construction permitted in West Edge.

A long, low hill ran like a spine right down the middle of the neighborhood, and the entrance to one unique home had been built into the side of that hill, though it was easy to miss if you didn't know what to be looking for. Luckily for Mole, Rat had talked of Badger's home before. She'd described with great admiration the steady, patient expansion that Badger had undertaken, the way he'd let the contours of the hillside dictate the design of his space; and how his choices reflected an appreciation for the natural environment.

"It's very understated, is the thing. Not at all like these 'palaces,'" she'd said, waving her hand with derisive airiness at the other North End estates visible from Toad Hall's dining room.

“Though it is surprisingly large,” she added.

Of course it is, thought Mole now with scorn. No one was going to take any land away from Badger.

He walked along the hillside now, peering about at his surroundings. As he did, he could feel eyes staring back at him through the curtains in the windows, their senses instinctively pricked by the arrival of this outsider. He knew it was only a matter of time before someone would appear to politely but gruffly ask him just what the heck he wanted.

But then Mole spotted what he had been looking for: a small door, painted dark green and thus barely distinguishable from the hill itself. The only thing that did distinguish it was a brass plate affixed to the door’s center, upon which was engraved: Mr. Badger.

Mole held his paw inches from the door, letting it hang there in the air. This was the point of no return. If he told Badger what he knew and how he knew it, then he was a part of it; not just an observer, not just the chronicler, but a player in the game. It’s what he wanted. He knew that now, even as the dangers of that game loomed large.

Knock, knock.

For a moment, there was just the sound of an evening breeze whistling through the hedgerows, and with it, the distant sounds of animals at peace — a bit of laughter, a clatter of dishes, a snatch of music. Then Mole heard a soft cry from the other side of the door and with a great whoosh, it was swung open and there on the other side stood Rat.

They stared at each other with the same wide, astounded eyes, the same mouths agape. Then, the corners of their mouths began to curl upward, hesitantly, fighting against themselves and then breaking through because, no matter what this unexpected reunion might portend, at that moment, both were quite glad to see the other. Rat’s rising smile was the first to collapse.

“What are you doing here, Mole?” she asked.

For a moment, Mole couldn’t remember why he had come to Badger’s. Then he did and the dizzying warmth that had momentarily filled his head drained away again, replaced now with a fast-spreading panic.

“Rat, you can’t be here. This — You don’t understand.”

Rat was just about to respond when Badger called out from behind her.

“Who is it?”

“It’s only Mole,” she called back.

Mole made a grab for Rat’s arm, trying desperately to pull her out of the house, but it was too late. Badger appeared behind, a look of concern on his face. Mole wondered then if Badger already knew, if somehow they had figured out he was there last night.

“Come in. Quickly,” said Rat and, although Badger looked none too pleased, he stood back as Rat grabbed at Mole’s arm instead and pulled him inside, shutting and locking the door behind him.

“Listen to me, Mole. I have to know if I can trust you,” Rat said, staring at him intently.

“Of course you can.”

“Good. That’s what I thought.”

Rat was about to say more, only then Mole heard the scuffling of more feet behind him and even before he turned around to get a look at the animal, Mole knew exactly who it was. And indeed, it was none other than Toad. He looked quite a bit skinnier. More than that, he looked drawn, as if some of his very essence had been siphoned out of him. It was as if Toad sensed this appraisal though, because his chest suddenly swelled up and he threw his arms out, bellowing, “Moley, my good friend.”

For just a moment, Mole felt that flush of pride and relief that had always come with Toad’s approval. Only now, it was chased by a shot of disgust and again, this time even more futilely, Mole considered turning right around and going home. But he was also looking at Rat. And all of this was happening all at once inside Mole’s head and playing out across Mole’s face as she and Toad and Badger stood around him.

“Listen,” said Rat, “I know this seems bad but Toad has assured us he’s here to set things straight.”

“And we will be going to the authorities, won’t we, Toad?” added Badger sternly.

“No! Get away from them!” Mole shouted. He could hear his heart beating violently in his chest, beating so hard all of Mole’s body shook. He turned to Toad and Rat, who were staring at him in shock. “Don’t listen to him. Don’t listen to a word he’s saying.”

“What? Why? Mole, for heaven’s sake, what’s wrong with you?” asked Rat but then Badger spoke:

“I suppose you know then?”

He seemed even older and more tired than Mole remembered, the days now beating down upon him, the old cudgel the only thing keeping him upright.

“Know what?” asked Toad.

“He’s in on it!” exclaimed Mole. “Him and Weasel and maybe the human detective. Listen to me, Toad. I don’t know what you had arranged with him, but Weasel is not on your side. He wants revenge on you for what The Commodore did to his kind.”

“Yes,” replied Toad impudently. “Yes, I know that.”

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Toad did know it, somewhat. Toad had known it for quite some time, though it really hadn’t set in his mind until he’d seen that sign on his way back from Greenleaf, the one proclaiming Mustelid Services the overseers of the massive construction site that lay beyond.

Toad stared at that Mustelid Services sign for quite some time. On it was an image of the proposed buildings that were to be built. Toad had seen that image before. In fact, he’d spent a good deal of time staring at it on the night Weasel had first come to Toad Hall, the very night he’d revisited in his dreams. On that night, he’d been convinced to help finance this project.

Now, staring at the image again, Toad laughed that whooping call of his and then shook his head in wonder. Then he lapsed into some thoughtful silence, punctuated only by the occasional snort. Finally, he started off again, only now he’d made a slight adjustment to what constituted his plan going forward. He would not be seeking out Weasel.

Instead, he had spent another couple of hours walking down dirt roads, following this directional impulse or that, lapsing into moments of reverie and reflection while growing increasingly overwhelmed by the possible paths that lay in front of him. Ultimately, he knew his only real priority was to put as much distance as he could between himself and Greenleaf Penitentiary, and so it was with relief and excitement that he recognized the unmistakable sound of a train whistle and caught sight of a faint plume of steam rising up in the distance and moving steadily across the horizon.

Scrambling up over the fence that separated the road from the fields it cut through, Toad followed the plume, huffing and puffing, desperate now for a future that he could barely see and yet one that carried with it the hope of his salvation.

Toad ran for more than a mile — an impressive distance for an animal of his stature (and health) — before he came upon the train station. He was still in his preposterous disguise from the night before, though by now it was encrusted with mud and redolent of sweat. Toad had no experience with washerwomen of any species so he had no clue as to how they acted or whether or not dirt and sweat were commonplace. Toad thought it likely given their job description but, frankly, it was irrelevant, since Toad also had no money on him and so had no way of rightfully boarding the train.

There were ways to hitch a ride though, and, like so many before him, Toad had left prison with far more of an inclination towards criminality than he had ever had before. The station itself was no more than a simple log cabin manned by a single clerk and so it was no mean feat for Toad to simply shimmy under a fence and walk down the tracks a bit until he was out of sight.

He was considering which of two boxcars might be the more comfortable — one containing sacks of sugar piled to the ceiling and another filled with sod rolls of the type that would periodically appear at the edges of Toad Hall's great lawns, ready to unfurl and coat the grounds in a new layer of emerald green — when he heard a voice call out from a few cars down.

“Hullo, mother! What's the trouble? You don't look particularly cheerful.”

It was a raspy voice, as if the words were being forced out through tiny cracks, scraping and scratching themselves on the way. But there was a hop to the words too, a skip and a jump, and though Toad knew it was inadvisable, he walked towards the car from which the voice came.

As he neared, a pair of long, spindly legs poked out from the car's interior and slung themselves down over the side, followed by a pair of equally spindly arms whose sharp elbows came to rest on top of the legs, and then lastly the weathered but smiling face of what must have been a very old human being peeked out. He had dirty grey hair jutting out in all directions from under a ragged top hat, and an equally dirty and gray beard that threatened to consume his face, in the midst of which was now appearing a mouthful of yellow, crooked teeth. The song in his voice was matched by a twinkle in the man's eye though, and Toad returned his smile.

“Looking for a ride?” said the man as Toad neared.

“Yes, well, uh, I don’t seem to have enough money for a ticket and I thought I might —”

Toad was careful to keep his head down and speak in what he could only hope was a passable impersonation of a peasant woman. He couldn’t risk being recognized as a notorious prison escapee, not even with this crowd. But now the hobo was reaching down.

“Give us your hand,” he beckoned. “I’ll pull you up.”

For the briefest of moments, Toad wondered if this was inadvisable. Perhaps he’d be better off traveling alone. However, to refuse the man’s offer would be to risk insult at this point. Moreover, after existing in some kind of a state of fear for very nearly the past 24 hours straight, Toad was also desperate for some companionship.

“I can manage myself, thank you very much,” Toad said.

He clumsily pulled himself up into the car, his rather stubby legs scrambling to find purchase as his skinny arms struggled against his own weight. The darkness of the unlit car would hopefully hide his skin’s pigment but he was aware of how silly he still must look and, indeed, once he’d managed to right himself, he found a whole train car’s worth of scruffy humans staring down at him and snickering.

“You’re a real independent woman, aren’t you?” said the man. “Well come on and have a seat, and tell us about yourself.”

There were a half dozen of them, of varying ages, though one could only tell that upon a close inspection. From a distance and in the dusky light of the car, they all had the same leathery smiles with the same cracks in the skin, tiny fissures of danger having broken through from beneath the surface. He stared at them as they stared back, and Toad was suddenly at a loss for what to say.

Just then, there was the sharp, short cry of the train’s whistle and, with a lurch, they were off and moving. It was just a moment, but it was enough time for Toad to gather himself. He was still, after all, the fabulous Mr. Toad — a seasoned host and first-rate raconteur. If he had experience with anything, it was the holding of attention.

So Toad launched into his tale, casting the MacDougall brothers as the disreputable and ungrateful sons to his washerwoman character. They’d promised to pick up their dear sweet mother after she’d gone to visit her ailing sister, herself a washerwoman. Washing was a family business but she’d be damned if her two sons would ever gain

control now, since they couldn't even be bothered to make good on their promise and pick up their own mother.

The group all groaned and shook their heads in sympathy and then they offered the poor washerwoman a pinch of tobacco and a pull off a bottle of some homemade whiskey. It almost reminded Toad of that first night at The Holt — the night he'd met Weasel — and how genuinely excited he'd been to poke his head into this strange new culture and to feel, if only for a moment, that he was welcome here.

Perhaps this was his answer, this nomadic life these humans were leading. It was certainly without material comforts but Toad could adapt. Reflecting back, he decided he'd actually done a fair job adjusting to life in prison so why couldn't he do the same now. As the train picked up speed, he felt that rush of freedom again — the wind on his skin and the world flying by — but now he was awake. He'd had his eyes opened.

Of course, he was also drinking the whiskey offered, and while the concoction didn't pack the punch of quality Red Willow Juice, it was strong enough that all the freedom and speed and excitement began to spin Toad around and lay heavily on those eyes of his. He still hadn't eaten that day, nor had he slept much the night before. One of the humans — a younger man with the same sharp, angular features as the one who'd invited Toad in and with a far-off look in his eyes - pulled out a harmonica and began to play. A few others commenced with a card game. Just as quickly as Toad had been enlivened by this new chapter in his adventure, he was now overwhelmed with exhaustion. So, feeling at last like he'd found a path he could travel on, Toad laid down for a much-needed nap.

This time, his sleep was dreamless, the kind in which time seems to bend and you awake unsure if it's been one minute or eight hours. It was certainly closer to one minute because when Toad opened his eyes, he was still on that train, only now all the humans were bent over him, staring down. And then he was being pulled up to his feet and the blood was rushing from his head.

"You thought we weren't going to figure it out," Toad heard a voice say. It was the old man who'd first invited him in, except now that twang in his voice had flattened and the creases and crags in his face had deepened and darkened.

"Wait, wait. Listen, I'm very wealthy —"

"Shut up," someone said.

“No, you don’t understand. I’m Mr. Toad. Of The Willows? Surely you’ve heard of me. I need help and I can make it worth your while,” Toad screeched desperately.

“We don’t want nothing from you, you dirty animal,” hissed the man.

Four of the humans grabbed him, one for each of his limbs, and he was lifted high, swung back once and with their laughs and curses and Toad’s own pleas still filling the air, he was flung out. There he was: a small green lump tracing a shallow arc against the blue of the sky, descending rapidly towards the high grass, bouncing once and then again, skidding for a bit and then finally coming to a rest, the train now just a dwindling blip on the horizon.

And so, just like that, Toad found himself back trudging along a wide, country path. Only this time, he was limping badly, and the whiskey had left him with only a splitting headache and the sun above was doing nothing to warm him or brighten his mood. It only cast him in an even harsher light.

What a fool he was to think he could be free out here. Those filthy humans had attacked him merely for being an animal. They hadn’t even realized that he was the notorious prison escapee, or cared that he was fabulously wealthy, if he even was anymore. He wanted to go home now. He knew that was the last place he should go but that no longer mattered. He still meant something there. So Toad took it as divine encouragement when, later that day, he caught the scent of river water in the air. A few hours later, he heard a most welcome, soft gurgling noise and then, as Toad pushed his way through some willow trees, he laid his eyes on that lifeline of a body, that passage carved through the earth that told his story, that River.

Toad was, it turned out, quite a distance from The Willows. This was a mighty river, one that spanned a great distance, sustaining life as far as it stretched and Toad’s train ride, short as it had been, had been in the complete opposite direction and so had set Toad back. There was a great distance to travel and yet, from then on, he remained solely focused on his destination. The scattered memories and flashes of dreams, the dawning realization about the truth of what happened to him, even the trauma of the incident on the train, it all dropped away.

He traveled that way for days on end, sleeping in tree hollows, scrounging for nuts and berries and the occasional bit of charity. Early on his second afternoon, he was once again mistaken for an actual washerwoman, this time by the driver of a passing barge. Toad managed to talk his way on board and get an actual meal into his belly — baked

beans and homemade cornbread suffused with a soft, pillowy sweetness that the driver — a jolly, talkative woman who called herself Marge of the Barge — proudly boasted of.

Of course, Toad was only allowed on the boat because he had promised to help with what Marge had assured him was quite a large load of dirty laundry that she and her husband and their whole entire family had amassed during their frequent voyages out on to the water. None of them could stand washing clothes as a chore and so it'd all built up and Marge was very lucky indeed to have come upon a professional such as he.

But once Toad sat down to the laundry, his incompetency was quickly revealed and then Marge's kindness turned sour. Here again, Toad was made to stare at a human face turned ugly, a mask of camaraderie and bonhomie made foul and fierce and hateful. He begged to be allowed a graceful exit but here too he was picked up by the scruff of his neck and cast out.

So it went like that, with Toad following The River's course, begging and lying and hiding, until finally he came upon a section of water that felt oddly familiar. Here, the roots of the alder trees resembled long, twisted fingers, with weathered knuckles and scaly skin. They crept down into the water, disappearing beneath the surface. Toad had been here before. With joyous relief, he realized he was close.

But Toad also knew that if he was going to make it the rest of the way, he would need help. Soon after he came upon the alder trees, he spotted the faint glow of a neon sign poking through, and so here, Toad left his friend The River and followed the lights until he found himself standing at the edge of a service station. He was still on the human side of the border, where automobiles were far more popular, and this station was absolutely filled with them. Toad gawked. He couldn't help himself. He was thinking of that wonderful feeling of the wind against your skin; the freedom that came not just with speed but also with control — to be at the wheel, charting your own path.

During those long days, scrambling to survive, Toad's plan had continued to evolve. He had been a victim of manipulations and domination and intimidation for too long. Even the necessity of following The River had eventually come to seem like an attack on his liberty. So, he would tell the truth about what had happened. It would not exonerate him but at least it was a choice that he had made, on his own, after due consideration.

At the service station there was one pay telephone, perched at the edge of the lot and with a single street light shining straight down upon it. From there, Toad called the only animal whose number he could remember and who he could be reasonably sure would accept a collect call. When the operator asked for his name, Toad used his childhood nickname, one that his lifelong friend had given, one that only she would recognize. And indeed, when she heard the operator ask if she would accept a call from someone called Hoppy, Rat knew exactly who was calling. She had expected the call ever since she'd read of his escape.

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That call had been made a little more than 24 hours ago. Now Toad stood in front of Mole, practically swimming in an old set of Badger's pajamas, with a look of peevishness masking fear.

So Mole laid out everything he knew, starting with that fateful moment on the eve of Toad's defense, when he'd asked Mole about Weasel. From there, he'd described his meeting with Skunk and subsequent detective work as well as everything he'd learned about the Commodore and his suspicions about Weasel's plan to stage a similar takeover of town affairs before finally circling back to the conversation he'd heard the previous night beneath Toad Hall.

Rat turned to Badger.

"So, what, you purposely did a bad job defending Toad?" she shouted at him accusingly.

"Oh, there was no defense. It's not as if he were actually out there visiting with the spirits of his parents, may their souls rest in peace. Were you, Toad?"

"What were you doing, Toad?" said Rat, just as accusingly.

"I was trying to help close a business deal that would have done a lot of good, if you must know. It could have opened this town up to all sorts of new opportunities," replied Toad defensively. He had now stepped back away from the group and was now staring at them all with indignation in his eyes.

"He was trying to deliver a bribe," said Badger.

Rat threw up her hands in exasperation and despair and turned away, and Mole was suddenly overcome by the desire to go and comfort her. At the same time, there was a

great deal he was learning. He had wondered what Toad had or hadn't known about Weasel's machinations, and now it sounded as though he knew very little. Or at least what he did know was a far cry from the truth.

"And where is that money, hmm? As long as we're airing all the truths here," Toad now said with his own accusatory tone.

"They stole it from you, you damn fool. It was all a set-up!" replied Badger.

"And you're a traitor!"

Now Toad was lurching towards Badger, an arm cocked back. Mole, standing between the two animals, found himself momentarily caught in the crossfire. He caught the approaching Toad in a great bearhug, and heaved him back, hard enough that he stumbled back into Rat.

Badger watched this with rueful eyes, then sighed heavily.

"You're right," he muttered softly. "I have betrayed your family, Toad."

"Why?" cried Toad with such deep and pitiable confusion that Mole felt that pain ring through his own bones.

"Your friend Weasel knows certain things about me, certain things I've done, and he threatened to reveal those things unless I helped him with those plans."

"The Board of Land Commissioners," said Mole triumphantly, having by now put a few of his own puzzle pieces into their place. "They had you rig the system to favor all the Wide World animals."

"I was young then and I thought that what I was doing was for the good of this community...It was. It was for the good of the community but it just — it hurt far too many animals along the way."

"You stole land. Land from us," said Mole

The words came out hard and fast and loud, and suddenly Mole was the one moving towards Badger with fire in his eyes. Rat grabbed at his arm though and held tight.

"Well now, it seems Weasel is taking it back," Badger said with a sardonic hint. "For whatever it's worth, I'm sorry," he said to Mole. Then, he turned back to Toad.

"And I'm ready to do right by you now. You must believe me."

"Why should I?" replied Toad.

"Because I'm telling you that Weasel is very dangerous and he means to harm you."

"I told you already I knew that."

“The human too,” added Badger. “The detective. Middleton. They’ve been working together to restart the juice trade since your father shut it down. Weasel would control production and distribution on this side of the border, and then pass it to Middleton, who moves the juice under police cover.”

“Last night it sounded as though Weasel and Middleton were at odds though,” said Mole.

“Yes, well, neither actually intends to honor this agreement. Now that Weasel has Toad Hall, he doesn’t need Middleton. He can use those tunnels underneath, and cut the humans out. Weasel’s already tried to anonymously report Middleton to the higher-ups with the human police but they’ve just waved it aside. Most likely they’ll just take the opportunity to shake down Middleton themselves.”

“And Middleton’s been talking to Raccoon about production,” said Mole, remembering more of the previous night’s conversation.

“He’s trying to cut Weasel out. I’m afraid it’s to be war between them,” Badger said glumly. “Weasel and his allies are gathered up at Toad Hall tonight hatching a new plan.”

“The human police were a part of the smuggling?” asked a dazed-looking Rat.

“That’s right. They’ve been a part of it for years. Had the same arrangement with your grandfather,” said Badger, looking at Toad but Toad had turned away. They were all still crowded in the small vestibule just inside Badger’s front door. Now, Toad walked a few paces down the low, wide hallway that led off to the rest of the home, and then turned back.

“Weasel said he was my friend. We were going to go into business together,” he said, still with a hint of wonder in his voice.

“He lied to you,” offered Badger. “Now then, we need to get you as far away from here as possible. I have some contacts in the Wide World that may be able to help us —”

But Toad continued on, his voice trembling and rising in pitch.

“And you,” he said to Badger. “You lied to me too. Everyone’s lied to me!”

“Toad, no —” said Rat, moving towards him.

“Did you lie to my parents?” demanded Toad.

“You have to know, pup, that I loved your parents and I believed in what your father was doing. But he was fighting forces that were too powerful, even for him,” Badger said softly.

Toad took a step forward now. His eyes had grown even wider, his breath had quickened and he was leaning forward, as if preparing to jump off something very high.

“What do you mean? Badger, tell me: were their deaths really an accident?”

Badger’s shoulders sagged, and he practically fell onto a low bench that had been stationed near the door, a place for animals to shed their muddy shoes and outerwear. He let his head hang down.

“I don’t know but...I have my suspicions,” he said softly.

What was left of the air in the room was now sucked out. Toad let out something that sounded like a dry chuckle, though of course that wasn’t what it actually was. It was the last of something leaving Toad’s body, a certain something he had been born having a great wealth of — too much, really — and now it had all drained away.

With that, he turned and walked right out Badger’s door and into the night’s cooling air. Down on to the lane now and he began to run. He could hear Rat and Mole calling out to him, and then Badger too, but their entreaties caught in the breeze and sailed right past him, speeding off into the night.

Toad had known in his heart that there would be no returning to his old life. He had come to accept that, out there on that road back to The Willows. But his family had deserved far better. He had concentrated on them out there. He had seen their faces — his mother and father’s — not just on that first night but on all the other nights out there too and not just in his dreams but in the current of the river and the leaves of the trees. He saw them now, through the tears that streamed down his face. He’d remembered what had driven him in the first place. He wanted to make them proud. He still did.

He was a stupid, stupid animal. That was the conclusion he should be arriving at. He’d tried to redeem himself with the very animals who’d murdered his parents. And that thought struck Toad down. Right where Mole had emerged from the vale is where Toad collapsed, his body dropping like a dead weight onto a large, soft pile of leaves. There he sat, his ragged breathing the only sound; his mind, having worked so hard for so long to keep that beautiful, delicate ego of his — his own proverbial dam holding back the pain and fear and anger — now finally giving up and letting go.

Rat and Mole caught up to him a moment later, and huddled around him, both fearful of being discovered and broken-hearted by the image of this once proud animal so felled now by sorrow that he could not even muster the spirit to cry.

“Come now, sport. It’s okay,” said Mole.

“We’re here for you, Toadie,” added Rat.

But they were sure to attract attention at any moment, and the moment Toad was spotted by someone unsympathetic to his travails, the police would be called, and then he’d be headed back to jail. Or worse. They still couldn’t be sure of the integrity of The Willows Police Department.

Mole couldn’t begin to think of some kind of alternative plan of action though. All he knew was that they had to get Toad out of the open. He reached down and pulled the dead-eyed animal up and began to drag him in the direction of Wild Wood.

“We’ve got to move now, Toad, okay? I need you to focus up,” Mole instructed. Then he turned to Rat.

“Let’s get him to my burrow and we can figure out a plan from there.”

Rat nodded, and the two shared a lingering glance. He desperately wanted just a single moment where he might talk to her, not about any of this but about the two of them. Maybe even not that. Maybe they’d just talk about the weather, or what they’d each had for dinner the night before or what they thought they might have for breakfast the next day.

They were making their way across Gloaming Glen when Toad turned to Mole suddenly.

“I’m sorry for all of this, Mole,” he said.

“It’s not your fault,” Mole replied.

“It is, though. Not all of it, but...I just — I know how you all look at me. I thought I could change that, you know? But it’s hopeless.”

Mole nodded. His mind was elsewhere, though had he stopped to consider what Toad was saying, he would have discovered a deep and perhaps even painful level of understanding.

Just then, there was a sudden flash of light in the distance, bright and garish and cutting through the dark with such a force that it stunned the three, and it was a moment before they recognized those lights for what they were: the police.

“Hide,” screeched Rat, trying to pull Toad down onto the Glen’s grassy floor which, as it was late summer, was very patchy. It was no hiding spot and, besides, the lights were still a good distance away. Mole watched as the lights tracked across his field of vision, moving away and off into the distance. But then they seemed to linger. They’d stopped at the entrance to Stoat Crick Mart.

“Wait here,” he said to Rat and then moved closer. As he approached, Mole saw that the dusty old police truck Timber Wolf rolled around in had been positioned to block the entrance to the Mart and a crowd of animals had gathered around its periphery. He spotted Cubby standing off to one side with a group of nutrias he recognized from the mill, and walked over, putting on his most innocent, curious face.

“What’s going on?” he asked Cubby. Turning to face him, Mole could see the red and blue lights reflected and refracted in the tears filling the weathered eyes of the old ringtail.

“It’s Raccoon,” he said quietly.

“What about him?”

“They found him behind Covey’s. Dead. Murdered.”

Chapter 16: The Raid

It occurred to Mole at that moment, walking away from Covey's and back across the Glen with the stiff, barely controlled energy of one who would much rather be running, that this must be what it feels like to be in a car crash. This is what Toad must have felt, plowing into Woodchuck's on that fateful night, this sensation as if he'd been hurtled through the air and then slammed into the earth. Mole was still too dizzy and disoriented to feel any of the pain at this moment though. He was just barely able to aim himself in the right direction.

"Okay then. Okay. Let's just —...Let's...Oh my."

His own voice came to him from afar, as if it'd traveled across the whole of The Willows. He could barely hear it amid the noise in his own head. He was thinking of Raccoon. He had known the animal his entire life. In fact, his entire life was, in so many ways, interchangeable from Raccoon's own. They'd both grown up here, in this same neighborhood, around the same animals, having had the same experiences. Somehow, they'd both ended up in the middle of this mess. Now, just like that, he was gone.

"Okay then," Mole said again, this time with finality. Whatever he had worried was going to happen was now happening, and nothing had changed. Except, Mole wasn't confused anymore. If anything, he suddenly felt more focused than ever. They still needed to get Toad out of sight, first and foremost.

"What's going on up there?" asked Rat. The distant, flashing lights showed Mole her faint silhouette, crouched in the grass with the silent Toad.

"Raccoon is dead. It was Weasel. He must have killed him. Middleton was trying to cut a deal with Raccoon and Weasel found out about it and now Raccoon is dead."

"Dear God," said Rat as Mole tried to steady his breathing. He reached out to take her paw and she squeezed it.

Badger had just hinted at war between Weasel and Middleton, and now it appeared as if the first shots had been fired. But Weasel needed Raccoon just the same as Middleton did. If Weasel had indeed killed Raccoon, then surely he must have another way to make the juice. And just as he arrived at this conclusion, so too did an image of his old friend Otter — bent over that homemade still of his back at The Holt — appear in Mole's mind. He frantically shook it off.

"We've got to keep moving," he said.

They would have to steer very clear of the Mart, which meant swinging down through the South End. The glint of the police lights at Stroat Crick still twinkled here but it was otherwise dark, and only the hollow, steady sound of river water slapping up against the sides of the moored boats could be heard as they passed by the docks. In one direction, Mole could see the bramble doorway that marked the entrance to the Holt and soft, orange light spilling out. In the other was the faint outline of Huck Hill, where Mole End was, where his own parents were probably just now turning down for the evening.

"Okay now, listen to me, both of you," said Rat, the minute they had entered the burrow and Mole had closed and locked the entrance above them. "I'm still catching up on exactly how we got here but I do know that I care about both of you very much. You're in a lot of danger, Toad. And you," and now she turned to Mole, "I care about you too, Mole. And you're in danger too, aren't you?"

"I honestly don't know, Rat."

"Well if you can't honestly say you're not in danger then that means you are. So the three of us are going to sit here and we're not going anywhere until we figure out a plan for how to get you out of that danger."

With that, Rat sat herself down on that old sofa of Mole's, leaning forward from the edge of the seat, and looking up at them, eyes full of life and energy, intent on playing her part and solving this problem. Toad hadn't sat down. Instead, he stood near the entrance. He had remained silent ever since Mole had delivered the news about Raccoon, but now he spoke.

"It's quite simple. I'm going in through the tunnels and I'll face Weasel myself."

"You can't possibly be serious," Rat said, jumping to her feet.

“He killed my parents, Rat! And then he played me splendidly, didn’t he?” Toad said. “The promises he made — all the things the animals would say once they discovered what we were doing.”

“What were you doing?” asked Mole, unable to contain his curiosity.

“We were going to build things. Great institutions. Complexes. Places to live. Places to do business. Shop. Weasel had all these ideas. He had the garage and, I suppose, there was the Red Willow Juice. But there was also the construction company, Mustelid What-Have-You. He said everything — the races and all the dumb things he’d done as a youth — all of that was about preparing for this, building to this moment when he could start to create things for this community and not take things away. He said we could partner with humans, open up their land for our business and not just the other way around. That was going to be the next great chapter for The Willows and we would lead it. We just needed to pay the right man the right amount of money and the contract would be ours.”

“So that’s what you thought you were doing that night at The Weir?”

“Yes. He told me all that. Came right into my house,” Toad was still speaking dazedly, as if it had all happened in a dream.

“Then why didn’t you ever turn on him?” asked Mole.

“The night after I got arrested — that same night you all stayed at Toad Hall — I talked with Weasel. He told me his competitors for the construction contract must have set us up but that I couldn’t tell anyone the truth. If anyone found out about the bribes, it’d ruin all our plans.”

“So you volunteered to go to jail?” Rat was looking at Toad with a mixture of bewilderment and great pain.

“I thought that — well, I thought I’d get away with it. I actually thought the story I came up with was quite convincing, and you remember how sorrowful I made myself during the trial? I still can’t believe they found me guilty,” Toad said balefully, as Mole tried to stifle an unconscious snort of disbelief that somehow nevertheless escaped.

“Listen, Rat,” Toad continued, “I may not have committed the crimes they accused me of, but I committed crimes nonetheless. And I’m prepared to go back to prison and face the consequences. But when I go back, I intend to take Weasel with me.”

“Toad, they will kill you first!” cried Rat, emphasizing each word carefully as if this might help drill its meaning into his head.

“My family home has been taken from me...My family has been taken from me. I have nothing except what I can reclaim tonight. Don’t you see, Ratty? This is my last chance — a chance to really do something.”

Rat turned to Mole. “Will you please talk to him? This is insanity.”

Toad was going after Weasel. It was preposterous to think it, let alone say it out loud. Mole would have laughed but he now sensed the presence of fate once again. He could see it now. Fate was not a foe to guard and rebel against. It was neither friend nor foe because it did not exist anywhere but in his head. It was no more real than the gods of Pan Island, the ones Mole had glimpsed on his night there with Rat, no more real than a memory.

“I’m going with you,” Mole said to Toad. Then he turned back to Rat.

“You should stay here,” he said, though the moment the words were uttered, he regretted them. Mole had overstepped his bounds, forgetting that his fate wasn’t necessarily hers, and her face immediately lit up in anger. He grabbed at her arm and tried to pull her towards his bedroom but she immediately shook him off.

“Get off me,” she said with force. “I’m coming too.”

She stared at him for a long moment, and he stared back. Only now was he realizing how much Rat seemed to have changed since he’d last seen her. And even more so if he looked all the way back to that first visit of hers. Or to the first time he’d ever seen her. She was beautiful then as she was beautiful now but there was an austerity to her at this moment. That youthful jubilation of hers had finally run dry, and those moments of melancholic stillness that’d grown up in the wake of her father’s death had evolved into something impressive.

The evolution had frequently been a painful one for Rat, as it often was for so many, and it had sometimes got the best of her. For instance, in the days following the verdict levied against her best friend — the animal with whom she’d shared the deepest pains and most exultant joys — Rat came to the opinion that the world was quite a painful and horrifically unfeeling place and that, having come to see this, she was now more than permitted to go sideways in response. It might even be advisable.

When she’d left The Willows after breaking things off with Mole, she’d gone far to the south, deeper into animal lands, to a community called Maple City. Here, the animals moved quickly, their heads down and their shoulders raised, their minds focused not just on the task at hand but also on their greater ambitions and

responsibilities and ideas, and also worries and frustrations and fears. Everything came spilling out of Maple City residents in a way that felt overwhelming and inspiring and dangerous.

A great many animals disdained Maple City. It felt far too much like a human city, not just because of that frantic energy but because of the tall buildings that energy had birthed, the hustle and bustle that ignored nature or, worse, reviled it. Rat loved it though. Her father had gone there following his divorce and so Rat had spent time there too, growing up in the shadows of those buildings. It was Maple City where Rat returned, establishing her base of operations in the small but luxurious pied-à-terre that her father had willed her and which she'd taken possession of upon coming of age.

Maple City was also where her cousin Rakali lived. Rakali was a few years older than Rat and had always occupied a somewhat lofty and mysterious place in her mind. He wore a leather jacket and read long, challenging books and got into the sort of trouble Rat figured adolescents were supposed to get into. When she was younger and during those times when she needed to get away from her mother, Rat would go to stay with her aunt and uncle for a few weeks, and Rakali would slip her a nip or a puff of something to ease her pain.

So she knew him to be the kind of animal who could lead her to the world she sought, one in which there were no consequences, and nothing to care about. There were the Sapphs but also dark earthy mushrooms that made her heart race and small green pills called Dandies that made her sleepy and all sorts of roots and leaves and flower buds to swallow or smoke or sniff at. It was never tawdry or disgusting or desperate. Rat was far too careful an animal to allow her hedonism to reach those kinds of levels. It was sad though, intolerably sad because none of it did much. Rat was too smart not to see that, and too perceptive to miss the new problems it'd all caused.

It became much sadder still once Rakali's problems finally caught up to him. He'd long ago moved past experiments and into something habitual, and everything that had once seemed dangerous and alluring about him was now broken. He didn't read long books and he'd lost that leather jacket. And he was stealing. Rakali's family had never been as wealthy as Rat's. His and Rat's father were brothers, but they had taken wildly divergent paths, and Rakali's family had been left to scrap and struggle. Rat was happy to fund their little adventures but Rakali was too proud. And just like Toad, he seemed to take pleasure in his own recklessness. It was all happening again.

And so it came to pass that Rakali stole from Rat to buy Dandies for the two of them. He couldn't simply ask her for the money or ask her to buy them, and of course he couldn't stop. Rat figured it all out quickly. When she'd then tried to confront him about it, he'd denied it, until suddenly he'd admitted it and then he was yelling at her, screaming at her in fact. She'd been scared.

At last, he'd stormed out; left Rat standing stock still in the middle of her apartment, hopeless, another sad, lost little pup having careened out of her life. She thought about fate then too. She'd tried to numb herself. She'd tried to run away. She'd thought she succeeded. And still she felt pain. So this was when she saw the world as it really was. She could not run away or hide from the sorrows of life. Privilege offered no solace. It offered only its own kind of sorrow. She could not avoid the storm. She could only hope to walk through it.

She saw there was defiance to that acceptance, and hope now in her purpose. And it was then that Toad called her, and then that she decided she was going to help one of those lost animals find his way. So Rat climbed down into the ditch where Toad lay, the hopelessness pouring out of him. She'd opened her arms and she'd waited until Toad had picked himself up and walked forward to her. There was nothing to be done but move forward. As long as they could do that, then they'd be okay.

Rat not only saw the world as it was. She saw Mole as he was too. She saw right through him. She could see that Mole was scared and confused, despite his best efforts at pretending otherwise, and that he was determined to act in a way that would put an end to all that fear and confusion, no matter how irrational he might become in the process. She was wise enough to know that his was not the right kind of energy with which to lead an expedition like this one, and so she said the same thing now that she'd said to Toad on the night she'd retrieved him from that ditch.

"Now then, we're going to need a plan."

•

Toad and Rat were waiting for Mole outside the burrow's entrance when he emerged less than an hour later. By now, Toad was a barely controlled bundle of raw energy. He was pacing a tight circle and ignoring Rat's periodic attempts to calm him down.

“Let’s go then,” said Toad the moment Mole had popped his head above ground.

And so again they headed out into the night, where the cool air mixed with the vanilla aroma of the primroses and the branches of the Southern Oaks cut jagged shapes in the sky, and the sound of the river was a whisper heard everywhere.

By now the heartiest of the South End animals — those who made their living out on the water — were already up and about, inspecting their nets or engines or sails or just sipping coffee and waiting for the sun to rise, ignorant of the wave of violence at that moment sweeping through The Willows. Mole smiled at these animals and lifted a paw in the air as a gesture of solidarity. He couldn’t be sure that he was actually united in any kind of pursuit with them but, at this moment, he desperately needed to believe that he was.

The police had evidently wrapped whatever work they needed to do at Raccoon’s crime scene because their lights had disappeared, leaving only an ashy darkness in their place, hanging in Stoa Crick Mart like so much smoke after a fire. They passed by it quickly, making their way to River Bank. Toad led the way now. When they had crossed over and returned to that copse of elm trees, they paused.

During their hasty preparations back at Mole’s burrow, the group had heeded Rat’s demand and begun to put together a plan. Toad informed them that the tunnel leading to the basement ballroom was only one of several secrets built into the walls of Toad Hall. Most relevant to them was a panic room installed behind one of the closets in the home’s master bedroom.

“We’ve got the whole house wired with audio and video feeding into that room. From there, we’ll be able to see and hear everything. Weasel’s up there with Opossum and the like, making plans, so we can get them on tape. If I’m going to the police, I’ll need leverage,” Toad had said with the stoic grit of a decorated field general.

“How can you be positive he’ll say what we need him to say? We can’t end up trapped in there,” Rat had asked.

“I’ll ask him,” said Mole. What a tremendously silly thing to have said, and yet he’d meant it. He wanted answers and, beyond that, he was tired of sneaking across The Willows at night to try to get them, moving from one pain to the next, wondering where they came from and what they might lead to. He was ready for Weasel’s truth, and he was desperate for this to end.

And so, at the entrance to the tunnel, Mole parted ways with his two companions. Toad grasped Mole's paw and locked eyes with him.

"Godspeed, friend," he said, and then he added, rather grandiosely, "Let's save The Willows," before he disappeared down the hole.

Rat was staring at him too but when Mole tried to look at her, it felt as if every emotion an animal could feel was all about to crash down upon him at once. Instead, he kept his eyes fixed on the ground at his feet and the bowie knife that hung from his belt.

The knife had been a gift from his father many years ago, one of that animal's periodic attempts to toughen up his progeny. Mole had impulsively snatched it up from its place at the bottom of a desk drawer just before leaving the burrow.

There was undoubtedly the risk of violence. Mole knew that, but it was only in those last moments, just before he left the safety of his home and truly committed himself to the task ahead, that he accepted the reality that would face him and, more importantly, what he may lose.

"Be careful, Rat," he said quietly. He held the knife out to her.

After a moment's hesitation, she took it, and then Mole felt her paw reach out to touch his.

"You too, Mole," she said and then she too was gone.

•

It was a long and somewhat hazardous walk back over the border and then across River Bank for Mole to reach Toad Hall. According to their plan, this should give Toad and Rat plenty of time to access the panic room and turn on the recording equipment. Mole tried to move at a rational pace but the pounding of his heart and his short and violent bursts of breath drove him forward. It seemed like mere moments before the great home loomed before him, its bright lights blinding Mole, its walls stretching up into the darkness, a citadel perched on The River's edge.

Even from the far end of the estate's long and winding driveway, he could hear noises from inside; first, a voice that sounded like a sharp jab, followed by a chorus of others, raucous and inflamed. He could not hesitate, could not think, could not consider

the potential ramifications. Another door to knock on, another point of no return. There was never any return. Never any path to go down other than the one you're on.

But just as Mole resolved to continue down this particular path, there were rustling sounds coming from the rose bushes on either side of him and then appeared a pair of beady-eyed shrews, with slick smiles peeking out from behind their long snouts. The moonlight caught the gleam of the steel in the revolvers they pointed at him.

"Freeze," one said.

"I'd like to speak to Weasel," Mole replied, with as much confidence as he could muster.

They both snickered.

"Oh, of course. Right this way," said the other, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

A moment later, Mole was led through the front doors of Toad Hall and into its grand foyer. At the top of the staircase, standing where Mole had once dreamed he himself would stand, looking down as if waiting to welcome him to his kingdom, was Weasel.

"Mole," he said with cheer, "so good of you to join us."

To say that Weasel was actually waiting for Mole wouldn't have been entirely correct though. He was mildly surprised to see his old South End compatriot march in, though not nearly as surprised as he would have been had he not discovered Toad and Rat attempting to sneak into the home's panic room not five minutes before. That unto itself was quite a surprise, and so Weasel had been primed to expect even more astonishments.

Upon moving into Toad Hall, Weasel immediately undertook a thorough examination of the entire physical property. One of Weasel's chief attributes was a thoroughness and a dedication to seeing a task through, not just from start to finish but top to bottom and from all sides as well, and though Toad Hall was of course quite sprawling and ramshackle, Weasel attacked the project with relish, poking his head into every crawl space and closet and rapping a knuckle against every wall. This investigation had naturally included the hidden ballroom with the two-way mirror; the feature Toad had once proudly revealed to him. It then hadn't taken him long to realize that a piece of decorative paneling along one of the room's other walls looked somehow different from the rest, offset somehow.

It was, however, quite a bit of head-scratching before Weasel worked out how the panel could be also opened, but when he did find the latch built into the baseboard and the wall swung open, it was as if an entirely new world opened up to him. Weasel discovered a hidden staircase from which one could access all three floors of the house at multiple points. From there, more discoveries followed. There was, for instance, a second tunnel accessed from beneath the desk in the study and running in the opposite direction, deeper into animal territory.

It was all very fascinating and exciting for Weasel but it also meant the house was potentially more vulnerable, and this was coming at a time when Weasel had every reason to be worried about an attack. Consequently, he had deployed the shrews that constituted his workforce to patrol Toad Hall both inside and out, day and night. It was one of those shrews who had spotted Toad and Rat emerging from behind a false wall at the back of an antique armoire in the master bedroom to try to make a dash for the panic room on the other side.

Of course, Mole knew none of this. He was still playing the part of the probing journalist, though he had decided to try to let a little suspicion and perhaps even his actual, natural anger come through in the performance. After all, there had to be a reason he was showing up so unexpectedly.

“I’m sorry to just appear at your doorstep like this but I need answers and I need them now, Weasel,” Mole said in his most insistent tone.

Behind him, Mole heard the shrews guffaw again. Weasel held up both his hands and clucked his tongue soothingly.

“Sure. Of course. Let’s go back into the sitting room, shall we.”

Moments before, Weasel had instructed his crew to put Rat and Toad into that room while he considered what he should do next. He had no qualms about taking care of Toad for good, here and now. But Rat complicated things for him. Her disappearance would not be so easily explained and she was, after all, a relative innocent in all this. Mole’s position was very much the same, and so when Weasel took his arm and began to gently but forcefully lead him down a hallway to the same cozy room where, months earlier, Mole and Rat had listened to Badger describe Toad’s arrest, and where now Rat and Toad sat now, he still wasn’t sure exactly what he was going to do.

Weasel did want to talk, especially to Mole, just as Mole truly did want answers from Weasel. Or at least, Mole had wanted answers. Now, as he was pushed hurriedly

down the hall, passing by the vast dining room along the way, where he glanced at a handful of animals huddled around the table, chief among them Opossum leering back at him with a knowing grin, Mole was struck with the sudden, stomach-dropping sensation that their plan might have already gone wrong.

This was confirmed the moment Weasel shoved Mole into one of the sitting room's overstuffed chairs, right next to the couch where Rat and Toad sat, silent but with their eyes speaking volumes. It was a moment before Mole realized who was standing behind them. It was his old friend Otter.

Those who did control time, the ones who could stretch it or twist or turn it completely around — whether they be the gods above or the ones lurking in the high grass on Pan Island — they had appeared again. Now, they froze time.

"I knew it. So you lied to me then?" said Mole, unable to restrain himself.

"I did what I had to do," Otter replied in a low growl.

"Does that include killing Raccoon?" bellowed Mole.

"Now, now," said Weasel, grinning ferociously, "Otter had nothing to do with that."

"But you are making Red Willow Juice for him, aren't you?" Mole asked Otter.

"You think you're really impressive, don't you? You think she's impressed?" Otter said to Mole now, gesturing towards Rat.

"Shut up!"

"Calm yourself, Mole," purred Weasel, pouring himself a glass of Red Willow Juice from a crystal decanter. "You chose your side. These are the consequences."

"You were never going to be one of them, Mole. You were never going to get to have that life. And damn you for wanting it too."

"Why? Why is that so wrong? Tell me that, Otter. I mean, isn't that what you all are doing here?" said Rat suddenly.

"We'd never want to be like you," Weasel thundered, slamming his glass down. "You all destroyed this town."

"Liar!" Toad screeched. "My family built this town. It owes all of its prosperity to my family."

"Prosperity?" Weasel looked at him with wrenching, violent anger. "Show me where that prosperity is, Master Toad. Show me who's sharing in that prosperity, because it's not my family."

Toad had jumped to his feet and Weasel was moving towards him, yelling angrily. Meanwhile, Mole wasn't finished with Otter.

"Don't you see what's happening, Otter? Don't you see what you've all become?" he said, desperation filling his voice.

"Enough!" Otter grabbed at Mole and, in an instant, with animal instincts thus provoked, Mole grabbed back.

"Hey! What the hell is going on?"

It was Opossum, who'd come rushing in to see what the commotion was, and now looked more annoyed than anything else.

"Stop wasting time," she said to Weasel. From the corner of his eye, Mole saw Weasel reach behind him and then he saw the glint of a gun barrel.

"Otter, get out of here," said Weasel. He waved the pistol he now held towards the door. Otter didn't look at Mole; couldn't look at him. He simply walked out of the room.

There was a pause now. Rat had pulled Toad back down onto the couch at the sight of the gun. She stared at it still. Toad stared at Weasel. But Weasel was looking at Mole.

"Can't you see it, Mole?" he said. "We're in charge now. True Willows animals — my family, your family — we understand this community and we can make it better for everyone, not just the elite, not just the ones who are willing to lie and cheat their way to power."

"We can rebuild," added Opossum.

"You'll do all the lying and cheating for us, is that it?" asked Mole.

"That's right. We're prepared to do more than that too. Way more," Weasel said, "We're prepared to do whatever it takes to ensure that we get back what is rightfully ours. We'd die for it. And we'd damn well kill for it too."

"Put it down now. You're both out of control."

This was a new voice, but one familiar to everyone in the room. Badger stood in the doorway, wrapped in a dark overcoat and with a derby cap pushed down low. He still had his trusty cudgel but now the aging animal stood tall.

"You're not supposed to be here," Opossum growled, but Badger continued.

"You've got a crime scene across the river and here you are trying to have another one. I can't keep protecting you if you're going to make moves like these."

“I don’t need your protection anymore, you old codger,” sneered Weasel. He pointed his gun at Badger. “In fact, I don’t know why I need you at all.”

Weasel leaned forward and Mole could see his arm tense. It was the moment before he fired at Badger. Now the events began to come one after another, faster and faster. Mole saw Rat spring forward. He saw his own knife in her hand as it flashed through the air and then he watched it sink into the side of Weasel’s stomach.

Immediately, Weasel let out a howl, coming from the deepest part of himself, one of intense pain. He doubled over just as Badger swung his cudgel, striking Weasel on the other side and now the sound of his screams were immediately subsumed by another, a terrifyingly loud explosion that seemed to come from all around Mole. Weasel’s gun had gone off. There was the sound of glass shattering and then everyone was screaming.

Weasel was flailing about, still holding the gun but grasping at his side while Rat seemed suddenly paralyzed. She stood in the middle of the room, paws pressed to her sides and eyes wide in shock as Toad came running right past her, letting out his own blood-curdling cry as he launched his body into Weasel’s. The two crashed to the ground in a heap of arms and legs as the gun skidded off across the floor.

Mole and Opossum both went for it but she was closer. She’d just picked it up, whirling around to face Mole now with desperation in her eyes as well, when there came a tremendously loud clunking noise and then a bright white light came spilling in from the hallway and a voice called out, “They’re here!” A moment later, another voice could be heard booming through a loudspeaker from the front driveway.

“Police! Everybody stay where you are!”

“Shit!” screamed Opossum. She threw Toad off of Weasel and pulled her still whimpering partner to his feet.

“Come on!” she screamed.

As Weasel staggered out, Opossum turned to look back, gun in hand, considering whether it was worth it to finish them off. Badger was on the floor and gasping for breath. Rat and Mole were backed into a corner, defenseless. And now Toad came running back across the room, back towards Opossum, who fired another shot. The sound thundered through the room and a portion of the wall behind Toad seemed to explode, sending a small shower of wood chips falling to the floor. Toad froze. Opossum had missed, barely. And then she was gone and they were left alone.

“Okay, let’s get out of here,” exclaimed Rat.

“No, no. We should stay here. It’s safer,” replied Mole. They could hear a stampede of footsteps, inside and out. There was shouting too, and then a jolt as the house shook with impact. It sounded as if they were ramming the front door.

“They can come back, Mole. We can get back down to the tunnel,” she said. Suddenly, the idea of getting as far from this cursed estate as possible seemed quite lovely, and he nodded in agreement. It was only then — just as they both took a deep breath and prepared to walk out into the storm beyond the room’s walls — that they realized Toad had disappeared.

That animal had no intention of riding out the storm inside any tunnel. Whether Toad had ever really intended to just take Weasel down via a recorded admission of guilt or whether he had more extreme actions in mind from the start is something that will never be fully known. But by the time Weasel had rather gleefully captured him and Rat, lording his power over them while standing in the middle of the house that Toad’s family had built, the latest in that august line of animals had decided that he’d rather die than see Weasel walk away free that night.

It was truly a rare thing for a creature of any kind to find themselves at that kind of a crossroads and to choose the way that pointed towards death. It brought on a singular kind of focus, of a kind that no animal could expect, and yet one that seemed fundamental. A simple equation presented itself. Him or I. Eat or be eaten.

Toad ran down the narrow hallway that led back out to the front of the house, bursting out the other end and into the vast entryway. Through towering windows came the harsh light of dozens of police vehicles, casting everything in stark blacks and whites as silhouettes of figures — animals and humans — moved frantically about outside.

The spotlights caught Toad on full display, a performer on stage and for a moment, his fiery, fearful eyes looked out, searching for something. But then he turned, just in time to see his quarries round a corner and head towards the east wing.

He screamed out, “Weasel, you coward!” but it was lost in the symphony of wailing sirens and bellowed instructions.

Ahead of him, Opossum gripped the gun with one paw and dragged the bloodied Weasel with the other. By the time they’d reached the study, buried at the back of the

east wing, he could barely walk and Opossum was struggling to support his weight. She threw him to the ground and headed towards the desk.

After Weasel had undertaken his inspection of Toad Hall, he'd shared with Opossum his discoveries, and so Opossum was well-aware of the secret hatch built underneath the desk and the particular statue on the shelf behind them that one pulled to open it. She grabbed at the small, gold likeness of a Willow tree — a gift to the Commodore from the Stoat Crick Mart Administrative Council to commemorate the successful completion of the dam — and pulled hard. Behind her, she heard the clank of the hatch falling open.

She turned back to go for Weasel only now Toad burst through the doorway. Without hesitation, she raised the gun and fired. This time, she did not miss.

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There was really no time for Mole and Rat to consider anyone other than themselves. Wherever Toad had gone, he was on his own now. As for Badger, the last few minutes seemed to have taken their toll on the aging animal. He had managed to roll on to his back but didn't seem able to get up, and he was struggling greatly for breath as his eyes stared off at some distant, imagined point.

"Go, go!" he whispered to the two of them.

"We'll bring help," assured Rat.

They went in the opposite direction as Toad, back deeper into the house, a wild-eyed shrew pushing past them, desperate for escape and barely even noticing their presence. At the top of the stairs leading down to the basement, Rat hesitated.

"What's wrong?" said Mole. He could hear voices behind them. The police had entered the house, that much was clear. There was shouting and more hurried footsteps and then the sound of more breaking glass, of the hollow shell cracking open. Mole was desperate to keep moving but Rat was now frozen.

"I don't...I..." she paused, "Nevermind". She started to move again.

"Hold on."

It was a testament to the intimacy that the two would always share that, in this moment, it was Mole who saw through Rat, saw the fear and despair that persisted beneath her frantic need to keep moving, keep planning, keep pushing ahead. So he

held her then, just for a moment. And unlike before, when he'd grabbed her arm back at his burrow, this time he did it not to restrain or direct her. He didn't know why he did it. He certainly wasn't any more composed than she was; no more capable of calming her than she was of calming him. But he took her hands then and she squeezed his back and they could feel each other's warmth.

"Okay," she said. "Let's go."

Off they went, descending into more darkness, the sounds from above chasing them now, the damp, dank air from below rushing up to meet them. Rat was ahead of him but it felt as though she may vanish off into the darkness at any moment and so Mole ran, desperate to keep up, plunging blindly forward, down the stairs.

It felt as if more than just the sounds were chasing them now. Mole could feel a presence behind him, gaining on them. He pushed forward, even faster than before, bumping up now against Rat.

"Careful," she cried, but it was too late. Mole stumbled and fell. He felt Rat work to keep herself from being dragged down with him and then he was toppling end over end down the rest of the stairs. Luckily, they hadn't been too far from the bottom and Mole hadn't had too far to fall.

"Rat, are you okay?" he whispered frantically. He was dizzy, scrambling to orient himself. Then he saw her. She was standing at the foot of the stairs, looking back up.

"Mr. Mole!" called out a human voice, rough-cut and full of wearied, hard-won confidence. Standing above them was Detective Middleton. Gone was the forgettable suit. Instead, he wore a police-issue windbreaker and a matching hat pulled low. But that same superior smile poked out from beneath it.

"I thought that might be you."

He came walking slowly and carefully down now. If he had been chasing them before, any sign of urgency was now gone. Instead, he seemed eerily calm as he turned his attention to Rat.

"Hello there. I'm Detective Middleton. I'm sorry we haven't had a chance to meet until now, though, I have to say, I feel like I already know you."

"Look, we didn't have anything to do with any of this," Rat said but Middleton was now looking at Mole.

“I bet you think you know me too. You’ve certainly been doing a lot of digging. Even after I told you not to.” Middleton leaned in close and smiled. “That was a mistake, Mr. Mole. I can’t have anyone looking into my business.”

Middleton raised the gun and cocked it. Strangely, given the circumstances, Mole didn’t think of his end at that moment. He didn’t think back on his life or his family; what he’d managed to do and what he may never get a chance at. Perhaps there was no time for such a thing. It was only an instant.

Yet in this instant, something else caught his eye. Behind Middleton, Mole had a view into the pantry. He saw that box of powdered soup packs tip forward from its place on the pantry shelf and hang there in air. He saw the wall open up. There stood Otter, his own gun extended. He saw the story before it happened.

“No,” Otter said. Middleton turned suddenly and there was again that horrifying, explosive sound of gunfire. No one moved, and then Middleton fell to the floor, dead. Otter walked out, staring down with the same blank look Rat had had on her face moments earlier, after stabbing Weasel.

There was silence, save for the ringing sound in their ears. They listened as it faded away and then, from above, as the sounds from the chaos there returned. Finally Rat spoke.

“Otter, thank you,” she gasped.

He looked up at them both, and then at Mole. He seemed about to speak, only then something behind Mole distracted him. Turning, Mole saw Skunk standing at the foot of the stairs, a stunned look on his face.

“*Merde*,” he whispered.

Chapter 17: And The River Runs On

The bullet Opossum fired caught Toad in the leg and sent a searing pain shooting through his entire body. Screaming in pain, he fell to the ground, landing just a few feet from Weasel, who had failed in his attempts to drag himself towards the desk and now lay motionless, breathing heavily between soft whimpers.

Weasel looked up towards Opossum who stood now at the edge of the hatch, looking back at him. There were no words exchanged, and yet something was communicated because in the next moment, Weasel closed his eyes and bowed his head, and then Opossum took a deep breath and disappeared down.

For a moment, it was quiet in the study, the greater violence having not yet reached this far back in the house. Toad and Weasel were left to lie there together, each writhing with their own pain, each watching their own aspirations fading away.

This was how Timber Wolf found them when he came storming through the door minutes later. For a moment, he wasn't sure who was alive and who was not, and then a small, green hand rose feebly in the air.

"Don't shoot," Toad said.

Toad's was only a flesh wound, albeit a painful one, and he was soon hauled away, handcuffed to a stretcher, dazed but now strangely happy to be alive. Weasel's wound had been much more severe and he'd lost too much blood. When he closed his eyes and said goodbye to Opossum that night, it'd been for the last time.

That was, in fact, the last time that anyone had seen Opossum. It would be quite some time before the authorities were able to get out to the other end of the tunnel that started beneath the study, the one that she'd disappeared into. That tunnel ran all the way to Low Land, letting out in a tree stump just on the other side of Pan Island and within view of Murid's place. Of course, Opossum was long gone by the time the police got there. Her family swore they knew nothing of her whereabouts, and so all that was

left of her was the occasional supposed sighting, somewhere out in the Wide World, and the stories animals would tell of her daring escape.

Others weren't so lucky, and Weasel and Middleton weren't the only ones not to survive the night. A large portion of Weasel's gang never had any intention of going to jail. The shrews, it seems, were no mere hench-animals but true believers. They were as historically dispossessed a species as any, an underclass even in the times before the Commodore, and the hope that Weasel gave them ran deep. They made their last stand in the rooms of Toad Hall, barricading themselves behind upended furniture and smashing out windows to shoot at the police or hurl the last of the antiques down on to them in a final, desperate gesture before they were overwhelmed. Spiny Lizard was in among them as well and perished in the salon, falling for the final time in a blaze of gunfire, right underneath that portrait of The Commodore.

The body of Badger was also discovered, though it was later determined that he'd died of natural causes. He'd had his chance to redeem himself though, and, in the decisive moment, he'd stood up to Weasel as bravely as any of them. Mole wondered whether or not Badger had known that redemption and gone to his Maker at peace. It was one of many questions left at the end of that fateful night.

He and Rat did their best to try to answer the ones they could, first while huddled in the driveway of Toad Hall as old Dr. Marten, The Willows' longtime family physician, checked them for injuries, and then down at the police station as a still somewhat confused Skunk worked to put it all together for himself. Mole explained what he knew of the partnership between Middleton and Weasel — that they'd set out to take over the business of smuggling Red Willow Juice into human land together, taking out Toad in the process, while each also secretly plotted against the other.

Skunk had made the decision to storm Toad Hall that night following another tip from Middleton, who'd arrived at Raccoon's crime scene saying it was Weasel who had done the deed. Middleton had also been working to convince the animal investigator that it was Weasel who'd murdered Willie Williams as well. He contended that it was Weasel and Toad who were seeking to take over smuggling operations and that Weasel had killed the human after discovering that he'd tipped the police off. Middleton had even gone so far as to summon Skunk to Castle Hill to present him with his evidence, weasel hairs supposedly found near Willie Williams' body. That night outside Covey's, he'd told Skunk that he'd had Raccoon under surveillance for weeks due to his

lingering suspicion about the animal's involvement and so had firsthand evidence it was Weasel who had killed him.

"I think it actually was Weasel who killed Raccoon," Mole told Skunk that night at the station.

"Possibly. Then again, if what you say is true, then Detective Middleton might have as well. Just as he might have killed Willie Williams. All to set up Mr. Weasel," countered Skunk.

"I suppose you're right."

"Perhaps we will never know," mused the detective.

Meanwhile, Weasel's plan to betray Middleton by anonymously leaking information about his crimes to higher-ups in their police department had failed. Those authorities had never acted to stop Middleton, as Weasel had hoped they would, and even now, they continued to resist the idea that Middleton had been dirty. They contended that the evidence was questionable at best, based as it was mainly on Mole's theories and statements from Otter, who the humans were quick to point out, was hoping to lessen his own sentence and had, after all, shot and killed Middleton himself. Even when an enterprising human journalist turned up a decades-old record showing that Middleton had once arrested a teenage Weasel for trespassing on private, human property, and advanced the theory that the two had been criminal partners for years, the police remained unmoved.

The official position of human authorities was that Weasel and his animal cohorts were ultimately and solely responsible for any actions related to the reemergence of the illegal Red Willow Juice trade. That being the case, and with the threat neutralized, the border restrictions were eased and work resumed on the legalization of Red Willow Juice in human lands. Soon after, it was announced that the rabbits would have the first version of the juice approved for sale and consumption there.

Otter was still able to escape with a comparatively light sentence of two years after he proved more than willing to answer questions about Weasel's ultimate plan. He explained how Weasel planned to use his hold over Badger to control the toad family business, and indeed, how that control had led to Weasel taking over the Wild Wood development, among others. Of course, interest in Otter's stories ended right when he began to name the recipients of Weasel and Toad's bribes, and so he learned when to stop talking.

Mole would often wonder what would happen between the two of them. The Willows was a small town. He and Otter wouldn't be able to avoid one another forever, and, despite the obvious obstacles, Mole liked to entertain the idea that they may be friends again in the future. Despite everything he had been through, Mole remained, beneath it all, an optimistic sort.

As for Toad, he had escaped from prison, and, in the eyes of the law, it didn't matter that he might have been unjustly imprisoned to begin with. It was still a crime to defy that imprisonment. But the extenuating circumstances had at least afforded him a change of venue. Gone was the mold and rot, the dripping pipes and dank corridors and tall, imposing walls of Greenleaf. Toad would be serving the rest of his sentence and recuperating from his injuries in the relative comfort of Happy Hills minimum security prison, where the suffering was indeed minimal.

The former Toad Hall had been auctioned off again. Mole was told by his sister that the turnout had been just as impressive as the first time around. Only this time, there was a far more reputable buyer. The squirrels would be purchasing the estate, with apparent plans to demolish the existing structure. Mole supposed this was fine. Toad Hall was less a home now than it was the leftover spoils of some far gone war. Then again, the squirrels' tastes were a bit more modern, and the rumors were that they planned on something more architecturally eye-popping for the site, something that might help to redefine the North End for a new generation of animals. Mole preferred not to think of what this redefinition might entail.

Instead, Mole would think of his friends. Sometimes, he felt like they were all he thought of. He'd be sitting around the family dining table, laughing at a nephew's antics or teasing his mother or even listening to another well-meaning lecture from his sister, basking in the warmth of that familial intimacy, and he'd suddenly think of Otter locked away at Greenleaf and Raccoon, gone forever. And Toad too.

Toad had never had any of the kind of love Mole found around that table. For all his efforts at reforming the family business and improving The Willows, Toad's father hadn't extended that concern to his son, and Toad's mother was, by all accounts, no better. Yet Toad had scratched and scraped for it nonetheless. And then he'd had it taken away. Mole had tasted bitter loneliness but of a kind that could not compare to Toad's. So while he would no longer feel guilty about his role in bringing Toad into all this —

he believed his actions at Toad Hall had absolved him of all that — Mole could still pity poor Mr. Toad, for Mr. Toad had surely suffered.

Mole would never forget the look on his own father's face that night, when he first spotted him from the opposite side of the police station. There was such relief, such a purging of emotions just to see Mole with his own eyes, to know that his son was okay, that he'd frozen in his tracks. His father had stood stock still in the center of that room and let the tears run down his cheeks. And then his mother was pushing through animals and grabbing at Mole and pulling him towards her, and it didn't feel as if she'd really let go of him since.

On the few occasions when she did, Mole liked to go out walking. He especially liked to go in the very early mornings. It was especially cold during that time — the sun not yet having risen high enough to do any of its warming — but Mole liked the way the sharp air made his skin tingle and his breath quicken. He felt ready to face his thoughts out here, out in the open.

He didn't like to be down in his burrow so much anymore either. Mole told himself that it wasn't anything too worrisome, that there just may be a bit of lingering damage from that night at Toad Hall — a distaste for closed spaces, places where one could find themselves trapped or far from a way out. Sometimes he couldn't sleep, so he'd wait until the first rays of light were visible on the horizon and then he'd be up and out, walking down to The Run and breathing in the sharp air.

Sometimes he'd go by Covey's on those early-morning walks, stopping to gaze forlornly at its dingy sign and shuttered windows. One of Raccoon's cousins was said to be taking it over but the bar had so far remained closed. Mole wasn't sure if he wanted it opened. Perhaps it was best if the place stood only as a monument to its late owner. Or perhaps it was best if the bar were simply replaced with something new.

This is what all Weasel's talk of rebuilding had wrought, Mole would think as he stared at that sign. Shuttered businesses and animals gone, never to return. Those efforts had led only to destruction. But then he'd turn and look back at Stoat Crick Mart, at picture-glass windows looking in on sterile stores and their shelves of trinkets and curios. He still had the photo he'd discovered at Porcupine's, the one that showed the Mart back in the days when the weasels ran things, and he'd look at it and marvel at how much more alive the Mart felt then.

The tables were crowded together and abundant in their offerings. Barrels of dried fish and nuts, grain to bake bread and, yes, some Red Willow Juice to toast the setting sun with. Baskets of fruits and vegetables laid out on long tables alongside stacks of textiles, tools to farm with and pots to cook with, practical items to build a community with. And amid it all, the animals jostled and bartered, their faces etched in expressions of exaggerated, playful outrage. Mole could see the entire history of his town in their eyes, just as completely as he could feel it when he pressed his feet into the soft clay of The Run or ran his paws through the long grass that bordered The River.

He couldn't see it when he looked at the Mart now though. It had been robbed of that, and when Mole thought back to what Weasel had said that night, about what The Willows had become, and what it could be in the future, he felt the same anger and excitement and pride that had filled that animal. He knew then that while Weasel may be gone, his influence would remain.

Mole had accused Weasel of taking on all the lying and cheating necessary for the South End to thrive again and it appeared as if many animals agreed with this conclusion and moreover, viewed it as a noble kind of sacrifice. Ultimately, it had destroyed him but, in the process, he had become a kind of folk hero, a martyr.

Fate and Destiny, and all the spirits that run through the current of The River and along the wind passing through the willow trees, they are not always kind. The swift energy can ravage an animal, twist and distort and disfigure them. When Mole thought about Weasel that way, he pitied him too. But there would be others who would spring up in his likeness. Weasel had shown them all what kind of game needed to be played and how to play it. Mole could only hope that they will have learned something else from him by then, something about how not to lose sight of oneself.

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Toad had written to Mole just a few weeks after arriving at Happy Hills. He reported that, unlike Greenleaf, Happy Hills offered a wide array of classes and activities and opportunities to better oneself, which he fully intended to take advantage of. He had started with a painting class, which he said threatened to distract him entirely, and he intended to set up a studio for himself upon his release — someplace small and humble, where he could focus on his craft. Perhaps in Wild Wood.

Toad had also resumed work on the memoir he had begun during his previous incarceration. He would send Mole pages from time to time, asking if he might look them over and offer up any notes, “one writer to another,” as Toad said. The work was, by and large, predictably self-aggrandizing, particularly as it applied to the cunning and bravery necessary to escape from prison as he had. Even so, there were moments of lucidity that surprised Mole — a recognition that his family’s practices hadn’t been entirely popular, and even a hint of derisiveness in his descriptions of North End society.

There was new information as well. In one entry, Toad described those last moments with Weasel back in his family’s study, right before he’d died. These were details that, as far as Mole knew, had not been shared with the police.

“I could hear my old friend turned foe breathing his final breaths, and I was suddenly overcome with tremendous empathy for this creature, and he for I, I believe,” Toad wrote. “We both saw, in that moment, that we wanted the same things for ourselves, that we were destined to journey together. Weasel craned his neck back, straining himself considerably to look me full in the eyes and then he smiled.

‘I always loved this room,’ he said to me. And then he began to move towards the desk, as if he meant to still try to escape. He was bleeding profusely by then, crawling and struggling mightily. But if he were to die, he would die moving. He would die striving. And that is indeed where he met his end — splayed out across my family’s desk, right at the throne he so desperately dreamt of occupying.”

Mole wondered if the story was true. He thought he might ask Timber Wolf what that animal remembered but then he decided not to. He liked to think that Weasel had died striving, as Toad had said, and so he decided to leave it at that.

In his letters to Mole, Toad also mentioned plans he’d begun to draw up for a charitable foundation, something that could provide for investment in small business development in The Willows.

“I feel as if I learned a tremendous amount through all this. Perhaps not practical knowledge but a kind of wisdom that I feel I can bring to this endeavor,” Toad wrote with characteristic hubris. Toad had changed, but he hadn’t changed that much. And though it filled Mole with dread to imagine Toad at the dais of some fundraiser, regaling the crowd with the same life lessons he’d filled his proposed memoir with, he

had to admit that the idea was promising and exciting. Even more exciting was that Toad had floated the idea of Mole taking on some sort of position with this foundation.

“I know you’re good with numbers and organization and all that sort of thinking. You’re from the South End as well. You’ll know what’s needed and how to get things done. But most importantly, I trust you, Mole,” Toad wrote.

Mole decided that he would take Toad up on his offer, should the foundation ever become a reality. He had begun to consider his future while out on those early morning walks of his, and he could see a way for events to play out. He’d move out of the Wild Wood burrow. Development was continuing apace there, and every time Mole came near it, he had that same old feeling, like events were moving too fast for him to keep up. Now, he dreamt of moving into the South End, perhaps digging out a new burrow near to his parent’s or sister’s place. Only on occasion did he allow those dreams to include Rat.

In the months that followed the raid at Toad Hall, Mole saw very little of Rat. Those first predawn hours were a rush of faces and voices and questions that the two of them had faced together. But then his parents had appeared, and Rat’s mother right behind them, and they’d each whisked away their respective offspring, back into the safety of their warm embrace.

The following morning, he’d snuck out of Mole End and journeyed to River Bank and Rat’s mother’s condo, but she’d already gone, quickly headed back out to the Wide World to put as much distance between herself and these events as she could.

“It’s just best that way,” explained her mother, smiling tightly. Mole had never seen her look as alert and intent and serious as she did in that moment. Then again, Rat had been threatened. Her life had been threatened, and she’d had to take extraordinary measures to protect herself. She’d very nearly been lost and, in a way, she still very much could be. And now, in Rat’s mother’s eyes, Mole recognized the same fire he’d seen in his own mother, the unspoken vow that she would never let Rat fall into that kind of peril ever again.

Of course, the investigation was far from finished, but Rat’s participation would hereafter be mediated by her lawyer. In the numerous interviews Mole would give to authorities during that time, he often would hear reference to the testimony she provided, usually accompanied by a fair amount of grumbling from Skunk or the Wide

World officials who'd joined the investigation about her lawyer and the extreme lengths he went to protect her.

It wasn't until the fall, just as the colors on the leaves grew pale, that he heard from Rat herself again. She sent him a letter. It came on fine, sunflower yellow stationery, in her scrunched and fastidious handwriting, the words packed in carefully. It hadn't said much really. She'd said she would be staying in Maple City. Someone at her father's old firm had offered to take Rat under their wing and teach her the business of high finance.

"How are you doing?" she wrote. "How are you coping with things?"

Mole responded and so they traded correspondences for a time, moving gradually from catching up to sharing deeper intimacies. Rat too was still haunted by the events of the last year and a half. It wasn't so much what had happened to Weasel and the responsibility she might bear for that. She never had any doubt of his villainy or of his intentions that night. Instead, she told Mole that she felt a different kind of culpability. She feared that she was exactly the kind of animal that had fueled Weasel's hatred, the kind that took an ironic pleasure in their own entitlement.

"I'm not sure I knew who I was, really," she wrote. "Does that make sense?"

It did to Mole, and suddenly he was able to tell Rat all the things he'd wanted to for so long. He told her all about his own feelings of loneliness and disconnect; how he'd never felt as if he belonged in the South End and how he'd longed for an adventure, only to find that adventure seemingly didn't suit him. He confessed perhaps his dalliance with her had been just another attempt to find his place. He wrote back to her:

"I'm not sure if I know who I was either. I still don't think I do. But the worse part is that I can't help but feel as if we never really saw one another, did we, Rat?"

She never responded to that question, though this wasn't surprising. It wasn't the type of question that could be answered, not unless one wanted to dive right back into the messiest part of a relationship, which Rat did not. Mole, for his part, wasn't quite so sure. Sometimes, he'd still catch himself wishing for the glorious mess of it all.

The snow began to fall early in The Willows that winter. The first dusting — those tentative, initial flakes drifting down from the heavens — appeared in the middle of November, and the first blanketing — that first morning when you wake up to a wholly new and soft and clean world — came the day after Thanksgiving. Then through the

month of December, it persisted. There was never any full-fledged storm, never so much that the snow became a problem. Nor did Nature ever allow the fallen snow to melt away into the dregs of dirt-strewn ice. There was always just enough, as if the world knew that the animals needed this blanket, needed it to cover over and then wash away what was underneath.

Rat returned to The Willows for the first time then, home to celebrate the holidays with her mother. And so on a stunningly clear and painfully frigid night, with the moon's radiance mingling with the greens and reds of the Christmas decorations strung up along The Run to light the way, Mole went to see Rat for the very last time.

They sat together and drank hot cider, just as they had on the night when Rat had told him of Toad's alleged crimes. As with their letters, they both were now reluctant to allow for too much intimacy too quickly. Mole couldn't know of Rat's motives in taking this approach but he was sure of his own. He knew in his heart that he still loved her — would always love her, in some way — and so needed to protect himself. Because he also knew that their time together was now, at last, truly at an end.

"It sounds like you have a lot to be excited about," said Mole after Rat had finished a fuller description of her new job than her letters had allowed.

"I have a lot to prove," she responded. "Everyone will think I'm there only because of my father. That I'm some spoiled, rich brat. Right?"

Mole smiled. "Maybe. But you aren't a brat."

"And I'm only a little bit spoiled," Rat said, smiling.

"You have elevated taste," replied Mole and then they both laughed.

"I'll prove them wrong," she said after a moment, lost in herself. Mole thought back to what Murid had said just after Rat had left The Willows for the first time, about how Rat would eventually return when she realized The Wide World was no place for her. There may have been a time when Murid was right but that time had passed. Rat belonged out there as surely as Mole belonged in here.

"Toad mentioned in one of his letters that you'd be helping with his charity. I think that's wonderful, Mole. You're just the right animal for the job. No one loves The Willows like you do."

Just then, a most wonderful sound made itself known. It started out as a pleasant kind of thrum, a pulse moving through the thin, cold air and then, as the two of them became aware of the sound and stopped to listen, it resolved itself into a myriad of

voices. The voices grew closer and louder. They were carolers, mostly South End field mice and nutrias but with a pair of North End foxes and a single gopher mixed in as well. They all wore matching plaid scarves around their necks and wide, beaming smiles on their faces, stretching from rosy cheek to rosy cheek. They had gathered on the grassy knoll that separated Rat's mother's condominium complex from the adjoining one, at a spot where all the animals of River Bank could hear them. Those animals drifted out from their homes, wrapped in their own scarves and bearing tins of almond toffee and mugs of hot cocoa.

Looking out at the scene, Rat turned to Mole with raised eyebrows as if to say, "See? How could you not love this?" And then they got their coats and their own mugs of cocoa and they joined the group. And though some of the others might have looked askance at the notorious Rat and Mole, it was too joyous a moment to stew over such things and so they were welcomed in, as all were. Rat sang along to one of her favorite carols and Mole tossed his head back and let his hips sway and even if they did not know it then, at that moment they were their truest selves.

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Two days after the new year, and with the winds of a new beginning still at his back, Mole decided to set down his book for good. He'd read it all through in the week before, sitting on his couch through that liminal space between Christmas and New Year's Eve, paging through the pondered and pored-over remembrances, the jotted notes and half-finished theories, the scraps of the newspaper torn from Beaver's old stacks, and jammed between pages of his notebook. It was, to be frank, still all tremendous chaos and Mole could see that there would be no straightening it up. That made sense though because Mole could also now see that the book had never been about anything as linear and orderly as a town's history. It was his own history written through those pages, a history just as unfinished and looping and jumbled as all those notes and scraps.

He took it all and placed it now into a cardboard box. That box joined a few others in the back of his closet and in the backs of all the closets he would live in from then on, filled with the artifacts of his life. And for the rest of that life, Mole would go back to that box, as he would the others, and he would flip through the pages and hold the

trinkets up to the light and smile and shake his head at how lucky he'd been simply to make it all through that, in one piece and maybe even a little bit wiser.

After he'd finished packing away the last of the book's fragments, Mole decided it was time for another of his walks. Only this time, it wasn't because he was feeling cramped or trapped or stifled. In fact, he felt quite free, quite unencumbered all of the sudden.

And when he poked his head outside, he was greeted by a day to match his mood, bright, and beautiful, with a shining sun casting its warming rays down. The snow might even begin to melt soon, revealing beneath it land ready for its rebirth. And now, standing at The River's edge, Mole could hear the faint sound of ice splintering, tiny bursts of energy as bonds were severed. The sound filled the air, a symphony of bubbling and cracking and popping. He stood then in the sunlight, his head tilted to the heavens, his eyes closed, his heart full of promise, and he listened to the music of The Willows.

THE END