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The Adventures of Pebble Short-Bottom

Book Two

STRANGE FRIENDSHIPS

SCIENCE EDITION

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Crocus Butte

Pebble Short-Bottom shifted a little to one side and moved a small rock that had been annoying him. He wasn't sure what had wakened him: was it the discomfort of the small rock, or some outside noise? He thought he could remember dreaming about a journey he had made with his friends, oh so long, long ago.

The warm breeze continued to play with his fur, even though he had shuffled his way further down the south side of the sentry mound, in the dust of which he now lay. He lifted his wizened old face from the dust between his paws. A little bleary-eyed from sleep, from being almost a century old, he looked around at the city that lay sprawled out before him. His city.

Crocus Flats had grown in recent years. There had been abundant spring rains to keep the gardens growing, followed by the warm halcyon days of summer. The city was a verdant greenish-grey carpet that began near where he lay, spreading west and south to the steep rim of Lizard Coulee.

He was just nodding off again when he heard a voice he had not heard in many years. Lifting his head quickly, and then wincing from the pain of doing so, he looked around. He was finding it difficult to remember the sound of someone's voice after years had gone by. Most of his friends had died, and he was sure that this voice belonged to one of them. Puzzled, he looked around, trying to determine if he was still dreaming, or if someone had indeed spoken to him.

"Fiona?" He asked this softly and very tentatively. Surely it had been years since he had last heard from her. He had long since assumed that she, too, had passed on.

"Fiona, is that you?" He turned stiffly to the right, and there, sitting on her haunches, gentle hands draped across her belly, sat one of his dearest friends. "Yes, Pebble. It's me. How are you doing?" She shuffled a little closer as she said this so that she was now lying side-by-side with him, her larger body breaking a little of the cool breeze.

She nuzzled him softly, cheek-to-cheeked him, and then lay quiet for a moment, taking pleasure at being with the Foreteller once again, and simply taking in the view with him. They were silent for so long that the Astiti assigned to protect Pebble stood to see whether they had both fallen asleep.

"Do you remember the time you fell onto the ice of the Whitemud River?" Fiona asked, "We were sure Flint was going to skin you alive after you made him fall. I had come up here to make sure that I could still see your scrawny little self." She paused for just a moment then said, "It's good to see you, runt".

Chapter 1

The Mink and the Grasshopper Mouse

Sandy and Fiona lay shoulder-to-shoulder, paws draped over the sharp rim of the riverbank. Next to them stood Flint, and to his right, Pebble and Juniper sat on their bums, arms crossed over their bellies, staring at the scene before them.

Sandy was the first to break the silence.

“Fiona, is this the river you told us about?” He looked over at her, lying quietly beside him.

“Yes, it is,” she said softly, as though waking from a dream.

Pebble leaned forward and looked past Flint to her.

“Really? This is a river? I’ve never seen a river before. It’s much bigger than I thought it would be. What are we going to do now, Flint? Fiona, how do we get across it?” Sandy how ...”

His rapid-fire list of questions was interrupted by the intrusion of someone else’s thoughts inside his head.

Sandy was about to say something, but the look on Pebble’s face instantly alerted him to the fact that something unusual was happening.

“Back. Everybody... back from the edge!” Pebble was sliding backward on his belly as he was whispering until just his nose was left sniffing the air as it wafted up to them from below. In a second more, all five were lined up side-by-side on their bellies, noses poking over the rim of the riverbank, searching for any trace of danger.

“Fish, I love fish. Where is that fish? Come out, come out, wherever you are. Oh, how I love fish! Fish, fish...fish...fish” was the refrain being repeated over and over in his head. His Foreteller’s gift was on high alert as he searched for the identity of the fish-loving being.

Then suddenly it was there, in the water, floating like a long wet brown log. Except this log had a head which constantly dipped under the water, and a long sinuous neck twisting first to one side then the other; then lifting again with the sound of a wet sucking breath as it inhaled before going under again.

Fiona slipped a fraction of a cubit forward to have a good look at it, and then slid back into the shade of the forest. She looked wide-eyed at her friends and whispered, “That’s a mink!”¹ She looked back at the others. “I know what he would do if he found us, and it would not be pretty!”

Pebble strained hard with his Foreteller’s ability, but all he got was a feeling of hunger and an overwhelming desire for a meal of fish. No immediate sense of danger or threat came from the mink, but still, as Fiona had said, better to remain hidden.

The mink had appeared on the upstream side of the fast-running channel where the water turned into a curved, frozen sheet. The current didn’t appear to have any effect on it, so strong a swimmer was he. He was traversing the opening, one side to the other, floating a little downstream. Then back to this side, bobbing his head up and down.

His body suddenly froze, and he floated completely immobile down the channel for perhaps three or four cubits, then exploded into a frenzy of kicking, slashing, splashing that turned the still surface of the water into a cauldron of turbulence. Then he was still again, head deep underwater.

Eventually, he lifted his head and revealed a fish almost as long as he was. He had captured it with his needle-sharp teeth about mid-back, just behind the tall dorsal fin. He was trying to crush and break the back of the fish, but it was so large, he wasn’t having much luck. At first, the fish just lay there, as though subdued, then it erupted in a violent thrashing that dragged the mink all over the channel.

At one point the fish half-swam, half-pulled the mink across to the edge of the ice, in an apparent attempt to get under the ice shelf. This it did, and in doing so gave the mink a horrible whack on the head, slamming the mink’s forehead into the sharp edge of the ice. Stunned, the mink let the fish slip from his jaws, his little black eyes dazed and unfocused. In the four or five seconds it took him to regain his senses, the fish was long gone, leaving only a rapidly dissipating swirl of blood and scales on the surface of the water.

Still reeling from the blow to its forehead, the mink climbed slowly up onto the ice sheet, into a protected overhang under the opposite bank, and laid down for a nap. From where he lay, in the dark recesses of the undercut riverbank, he was almost impossible to see from where the five of them lay. If they had not watched him go in there, they never would have known that danger lurked just across the river.

Pebble looked over at Juniper, who happened to be closest to him, then indicated with his head that they should retreat a little into the forest behind them. They slid cautiously backward, careful not to make a noise and risk alerting the predator. When they were safely out of sight, they formed a small circle, with all five noses almost touching, and held a whispered conference on what to do next.

¹ The mink (*Mustela vison*) will eat anything associated with the river but are particularly fond of muskrats and fish. With more 50% of their diet composed of ducks and their eggs during the summer, they can also be significant predators of waterfowl (Arnold and Fritzell 1987).

“Well that was interesting,” Flint said. “But it seems he’s gone and should not be a further risk to us.”

Fiona just shook her head in disgust. “Do you actually think, after that fight, that he is going to just forgive and forget? Oh, no, those things don’t forget, and when they lose a battle, they just get nastier.”

Sandy rose a little to peek over the riverbank, and not seeing anything, lay back down. “Clearly. we need to move one way or the other, upstream or down does not matter, but we need to get away from here.”

Pebble agreed with Sandy. “Let’s simply pick a direction and get going.” He shuddered a little and added, “I don’t like being this close to a predator that hungry.”

They turned upstream, working their way deeper into the gloominess of the Thorny Buffalo Berry forest, with Pebble in the lead. They made good time for the first while, following the rabbit trails.

Fiona was in the lead, and when she rounded a corner, she froze in place so fast that Flint’s nose hit under her bum, which rode up on top of his ears. She did not say anything. She did not move. She just sat there, completely still. Sandy worked his way alongside the prairie dog double-decker until he could see what it was that had stopped them.

There, just a cubit in front of Fiona, and about half a cubit off the ground, hung a grasshopper mouse.

It was a horrible sight. Something had impaled the poor creature on a Buffalo Berry thorn. The little tail lay draped flat, lifeless on the ground, and as their eyes followed up past the dangling lower legs to the tips of his front claws, they saw the needle-sharp, blood-smeared spike sticking out of his chest. It had passed through at an upward angle, from between his shoulder blades, and out at the front of his neck. So much spike was exposed that his inert head was held in a resting position on the side of the thorn. Blood soaked his chest and pooled on the ground below him.

While all of this was horrifying, it was the smell that almost overwhelmed them. He had hung there for a long, long time. Either something had done this and then forgotten where he was, or they knew and would be coming back when his flesh was well-rotted and tender.

Fiona’s whole body was shaking in terror. She knew this was how the Loggerhead Shrike prepared his meals, and she could smell that this one was perfectly tenderized. Her shattered paw flared in pain at the memory of the attack and needing no further warning, and without saying a word, she was gone.

Completely unaware of where she was going, her panic drove her on in blind, unrelenting fear of another attack. She had gone perhaps 20 or 25 cubits when she was tackled from behind and sent rolling in a tight ball, up against the bole of a tree stem. She immediately spun and prepared to defend herself, then wilted into a sobbing puddle when she saw Flint standing there with a look of soft compassion on his face.

She stumbled forward and melted into his arms. Lost now as what to do, Flint looked over his shoulder as Sandy approached, and with his eyes flicking back forth, from Fiona to Sandy, gave a clear message that this was Sandy's role, not Flint's. Sandy cheek-to-cheeked Fiona, reassuring her that they were safe, that they had nothing to worry about. Everyone else had caught up by this time, and Juniper said, "I think we best keep going. It's soon going to be mid-day and we need to be across the river by nightfall."

Chapter 2

The White Mud River

Getting across the river was not going to be easy, at least not from where they stood now. Looking down at it from a height of perhaps a dozen cubits, it seemed impossibly far away. The open water channel had continued, and the dark, icy water rippled and swirled slowly by in a channel perhaps two to three cubits wide.

It was far too wide for prairie dog bellies to try to jump. With another glance behind them, Flint led the way once more into the edge of the Thorny Buffalo Berry Forest, searching for trails that would allow them to get through without being skewered on one of the thousands of spines which hung down at every conceivable angle.

They had gone a considerable distance from where they had seen the mink, and despite his best efforts, Pebble could detect no trace of it in his mind. They had just paused to take a rest when Fiona said, “I am very tired of this forest, and worrying about a shrike attacking me at any moment. Do you think we could go back to the river now?”

Flint looked at the rest of them and seeing no disagreement, simply nodded, stood and began to lead the way, twisting and dodging towards the faint glow of daylight that marked the edge of the forest. Everyone gave a collective sigh of relief at being out from under the oppressive branches of the forest, and into the clean, fresh air of the late afternoon.

The edge of the forest lay just a short distance from the rim of the river valley. The ground here was covered with a thick layer of leaves and grasses, compacted by the heavy snows of last winter. Layer upon layer of old and rotting leaves provided a soundless and soft cushion upon which they made their way.

Pebble was the first to edge of the riverbank, and he slowly pushed himself forward until his head and neck were suspended over the edge. He looked upstream, then down, then across at the far bank. The river was still ice-covered below where he lay, with no trace of the cold water he knew lay just under the ice. A short distance downstream, the ice opened up to form the open water channel, but as far upstream as he could see, before the river twisted out of sight, it was nothing but pure white ice.

The far bank of the river rose steeply to a broad sage-covered plain on the other side. Getting up that steep bank was not going to be easy, especially considering the undercut bank that followed

the full length of the river. They would have to find a way around that, or they wouldn't be able to get out.

Pebble put his front feet forward on the leaf litter, preparing to shove himself backward and let everyone know what he'd seen.

But as soon as he put weight on his front feet, the compacted layers of old rotted leaves gave way, separating as if they were individually greased.

With no warning and no time to prepare for it, Pebble was gone, over the brink. He landed in a shower of detritus and debris at the bottom of the riverbank, lying on his back on the river ice.

He lay still for a moment, trying to assess whether he had been injured. Everything felt OK. Still, on his back, he looked back up the bank and saw four prairie dog faces peeking over the edge at him.

"Are you OK?" asked Flint and Juniper at the same time. Fiona began to inch forward but a new avalanche of debris started to slide down the bank and she quickly backed out of sight. Sputtering and spitting out the rotten leaves that were stuck to his lips, Pebble rolled over onto his feet and stood carefully. He gave a huge shake and in a cloud of flying muck, was finally clean. He walked a short distance out on the ice and looked up and downstream. Not a breath of wind. Only silence and a long broad white highway that disappeared in both directions. The open water just downstream beckoned to him, instantly causing a thirst he hadn't been aware of. Within a few strides, he was at the water's edge and lay on his belly, lapping at the fresh clean water.

He was about to return to the point where the others waited when two separate predatory thoughts penetrated his mind at precisely the same time.

The mink had crawled into the dark recesses of the undercut bank and prepared for a nap. Just as his head settle on his forepaws, his beady eyes caught a flicker of motion on the top of the opposite bank. Instantly alert, and completely motionless, he watched and waited. In a moment it was repeated. He couldn't believe his eyes: there went a whole herd of prairie dogs, led by the smallest dog he had ever seen. What were they doing there? He moved deeper under the bank and followed them along. They eventually disappeared back into the forest, but now and then he could hear a branch crack or see a clump of grasses wave as they passed through. He was lying, watching, under the riverbank just where the open water began, when he saw the little one tumble down to the ice. Suddenly his saliva glands were pouring. He couldn't believe his eyes when the idiot came towards him to get a drink of water. He prepared himself for the attack, waiting for the little morsel to turn his back, and begin to return to his friends.

Pebble knew he was in danger. He instantly recognized the mink and knew it was close. He turned and began to run, tiny claws scrabbling for a grip on the smooth ice. The mink charged out from the darkness of the undercut. His longer claws gave him excellent purchase on the ice, and he virtually flew over the ice.

Pebble risked a glance over his shoulder and wished he hadn't. The sight of the mink in full attack spurred him on, and with a fresh burst of speed, he quickly made it to the center of the river channel.

He was going too fast. When he tried to turn, to reach the bank where his friends waited, he lost his grip and went into a tumbling roll.

At the same instant, the other strange thought appeared again. His heart almost stopped at the coldness and cruelty of that thought and was certain that this would be how his life ended.

A golden eagle² had been sitting half-asleep on a branch of a large dead tree just upriver and had seen Pebble fall to the ice. He had just dined on a very tasty jackrabbit and wasn't particularly hungry now. Curious now, he looked a little closer, knowing that he should never pass up the opportunity for a snack.

Even as the thought entered its brain the eagle was falling forward off the branch, huge wings spread to catch the air. It floated silent and deadly, straight towards the unsuspecting snack on the ice.

He lowered his legs, spread his claws and was just reaching forward for the kill when Pebble slipped and rolled.

At the same instant, another animal ran into under his talons, and out of reflex more than any particular choice, he clenched his talons around the back of the mink and with two mighty beats of his wings, was up and out of the river valley.

With an ear-piercing scream of rage and pain from the mink and an ear-shattering cry from the eagle, they were gone. Gone as though the eagle and mink had never existed; and then... nothing but silence.

A second later, Pebble managed to get his feet under him. He ran as fast as he could to the bank below his friends. It was too steep to climb, but it at least offered a semblance of security, should the eagle return.

Sandy, hanging over the bank above, with his mouth open, just stared at Pebble.

Juniper, as ever the one concerned about his well-being, whispered down to him, "Are you OK, Pebble? Did it hit you?"

Fiona and Flint just sat there, stunned. Pebble had survived two attacks at the same time, by two of nature's most efficient killing machines, and he had done it at the expense of the mink. "Amazing, just amazing. The little guys got amazing luck!" was the thought that passed through Flint's head.

² Eagles, both golden and bald do spend portions of the winter in this region. They pass through in large numbers each spring and fall, and it is not uncommon to see a couple dozen sitting on trees like this during the spring migration.

“Are they gone?” Pebble whispered from the base of the bank. “I can’t see them - are they gone?” Juniper anxiously repeated her question and Pebble looked up at her. “Yes Mistress Juniper, I’m fine, it missed me completely. I’m OK. Shook up a little, but otherwise fine. I think. Can you see anything from up there?”

Flint had been searching the banks of the river for a dignified way down when he spied a series of small benches where the riverbanks had collapsed. They lay directly across from the open water, and it looked they could scramble their way up to the top, one bench at a time. He looked back down. “Pebble,” he said, “Go upstream and see if there’s a way down on this side. Hurry, but don’t go too far! We’ll wait for you here.”

Pebble walked out onto the ice a short distance. He looked downstream, in the direction the eagle had flown with the enraged mink, then with a shiver of horror at how close he had come to death, he turned upstream and made his way up the center of the ice-covered river.

He could hear the gurgle of water under his feet, but the ice seemed strong enough to support his small weight. The river twisted first one way, then another, never going straight for more than about twenty cubits at any one time. He stayed in mid-channel, hoping that doing so would allow him to see any predators and still give him time to run for cover. In no time at all, he was out of sight of the others, around the first bend in the river.

A short distance along the river’s edge, a small drainage channel joined the main river. Where the two met the slope was gentle enough for him to walk up to the top of the bank. He debated going back the way he had come but decided to hurry back to his friends, taking this new way instead.

He worked his way through a stand of almost impenetrably tall, thick, blond-colored grasses until he was at the top. He found himself at the beginning of the Thorny Buffalo Berry Forest and within a few minutes, he was crawling under the needle-sharp spines. Within a few more minutes, he was coming up behind his friends.

They were all lined up, shoulder-to-shoulder on their bellies; heads craned to the right, trying to see something below on the ice. He tip-toed up behind them, and whispered to Fiona, “Whatcha looking at?”

With a squeak of terror at the unexpected voice, Fiona leaped forward and landed with a thump on the ice below. Flint, trying desperately to turn and face the unknown threat, slipped on the wet leaves, and he too went tumbling over the edge, followed in short order by Sandy. Juniper was the only one remaining on the riverbank when everything finally settled.

Pebble knew he was going to be in trouble. He peeked over the edge just in time to see Sandy helping Fiona to her feet and brushing debris off her coat.

Flint looked up him, with a glare of anger that Pebble had seldom seen before. “You little, flea-bitten, mangy *gopher!*” he said in a voice just loud enough to carry up to them. “Wait until I get my claws into you!”

Pebble slunk back away from the edge and looked forlornly at Juniper who had stayed quiet during the entire episode. “Well Pebble, that wasn’t a very nice thing to do, was it?”

Pebble looked at her, two huge tears welling up at the corners of his eyes. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to startle anyone.”

Without waiting for any more hurtful remarks, he turned and slunk away along the path to the drainage channel and the river ice below, dreading the coming meeting.

It turned out better than expected, since by the time he and Juniper got back to the others they had regained their composure, and despite his expectations, no claws raked his fur. There were just withering looks from Sandy, Fiona, and Flint for their undignified and unexpected tumble to the ice.

Flint turned, saying over his shoulder, “It’s been a long, long time since I had a good drink. The rest of you watch my back while I have a slurp.”

He cautiously edged his way to the open water and began to drink, and as he did so, looked into the crystal-clear water below.

It was only a cubit or two deep. He watched a small school of minnows³ as they darted between several submerged logs. The logs all were covered by long fronds of algae that waved and swayed back and forth with the current. A small crayfish poked its large, double claws under a log and came out with a cadis’ fly larvae, which it promptly devoured. Flint was so enthralled with this new world that, for the second time in as many minutes, he almost leaped into the water when Sandy asked from behind him, “Can I have a turn now?”

Flint shifted back from the edge. “I’m losing my skills,” he thought. “Letting these dogs sneak up on me. I’ve got to start paying more attention before I get turned into eagle poo!”

One by one, until all were refreshed,⁴ they each crept to the edge and had a drink while the others formed a protective ring and watched every side for an attack. Feeling very exposed out here on the ice, Flint said, “Let’s get going. The sooner we’re out of here, the happier I’ll be!”

He led the way to the collapsed bank, and amid a shower of dry dust and debris, worked his way up, one step at a time, until he carefully raised his head over the rim. Searching in all directions, he couldn’t see any danger, so he looked back down at the others waiting crouched below.

“I think it’s safe, come on up.”

³ The plains minnow (*Hybognathus placitus*) is a species that may be listed as Threatened in Canada (COSEWIC 2012), due to its low population size and restricted distribution. *Hybognathus* is Greek for “swollen jaw”, and *placitus* means “a broad surface”. You can probably visualize the cheeks on this fish now that you know that.

⁴ Like most small mammals on the arid plains of central North America, prairie dogs seldom ever drink fresh water. They get by on the moisture contained in the foods they eat.

With a scramble of his hind toenails, he heaved himself over the edge and onto the flat plain. After a glance around, he raced over to a particularly large silver sage and took cover under its spreading branches. One by one, the others climbed to the top, and seeing Flint wave, dashed over to him.

They lay there for a few minutes, catching their breath, and looking at the scene before them.

Fiona stepped forward and stood as high as she could on her hind toes to get a better look. Her shadow stretched out long behind her as the sun finally settled behind the Whitemud Mountains.

“Those are the Broken Hills,” she said, pointing to the south, “and just on the other side of them is my home.”

She looked back at the others. “Can we go now? We’re so close, I want to be home.”

Chapter 3

Broken Hills

They spent one more night in the Silver Sage Flats, and late the next afternoon they went to the base of a small hill. When they finally climbed to the top of it, they were unprepared for the view that spread out before them in the slanting rays of a beautiful spring evening.

They had done it. The city of Broken Hills lay sprawled out before them.

Silent. Empty. Inhospitable. Unwelcoming.

A single tumbleweed rolled in bounding leaps through the city, herded along by a warm wind from the west. It left behind tiny little puffs of dust each time it hit the ground, bounced again and another dust-puff drifted away. The tumbleweed snagged on the branches of a rabbit bush and hung there quivering, shaking in gleeful anticipation of its next joyous, bounding flight.

The most remarkable thing was the amount of vegetation growing throughout the town. Everywhere, tall dried stalks of grasses and forbs danced and swayed to the rhythmic beat of the warm spring breeze. There should not have been any dancing – tall vegetation does not belong within a prairie dog town.

And the silence!

The sudden loneliness weighed down upon them, pressed them flat down to the ground as though the clear blue sky had somehow shifted and become a vast deep ocean, gravid with solitude and despair.

Fiona sat, stunned by the scene before her.

Sandy had come up beside her.

She pointed with a shaky paw and said, “Over there – that mound was my cousin’s home. The little rascal was always getting into trouble. I don’t know how many times I had to go and get him out of some patch of Sneezeweed or Beggarticks. I hated it when he found a stand of Argueweed – it would take me hours to convince him to come back with me. Over further to the right, besides those two rabbitbrushes⁵, that’s my friend Willowfoot’s burrow. She was the local apothecary.

⁵ Rabbitbrush (*Chrysothamnus nauseosus*) branches were burned slowly to smoke hides and boughs were used to cover and carpet sweathouses by Indigenous peoples for centuries Mashed leaves were packed onto decayed teeth to relieve toothaches (Kershaw 2000).

And there, off in the distance by that reddish colored rock, that's the burrow where I attended school."

She paused for a moment.

"Are they all gone; are they all dead?" Fiona looked a little further to her right and found her parent's home burrow. A tall clump of rough fescue had grown up around it and she could barely see the entrance to the home she had grown up in.

She had no tears, simply the most overwhelming sadness.

Juniper went over to her and lay with her, cheek-to-cheek for a few minutes, not saying anything; just there; comforting and warm in this cold place.

Flint took a huge, quivering breath, stood and stretched. He rubbed his injured paw absent-mindedly for a few moments, then said, "Well friends, it seems our worst fears are confirmed. I hope that Athena is here so we can ask her what happened."⁶

Sandy nodded in agreement. Leaving Fiona with Juniper, he walked back and forth along the hillock edge, looking for a way down. Pebble too rose from where he lay and joined Sandy, who asked, "Do you sense anything; is there anyone home down there?"

Pebble lifted his tiny nose and sniffed, both through his nostrils and with his Foreteller's nose. His ability to find another being with his Foreteller's ability was limited somewhat by distance, and the strength, hunger or power of the other mind. Sometimes a quiet mind up close would be undetectable, while a hungry or angry mind could be sensed from a long way away. He sensed dust, decay, and dry cold bodies everywhere; both above ground and below, but no living prairie dogs.

Just on the periphery of his ability, he thought he felt something; a feeling so faint it felt more like a memory of his time with Grandfather than a real feeling or sense. It nagged at him and he focused hard to test the feeling, but it was so vague that he eventually dismissed it. Probably a mouse or something. "No Sandy, I don't; all I sense is death and decay." Sandy shuddered at the thought of an entire city ruined, then turned slowly and walked back to where Fiona and Juniper lay.

"Fiona," he asked softly, "We need to see if we can locate Athena, see if she is still here. Do you know which direction to go, where she might be living?" It seemed at first as though she had not heard him, and he was about to approach closer to ask her again, when she stood on all fours,

A note about botany and ethnobotany references: Rather than include a reference each time a plant is discussed, please note that all such references are from Johnson (1970), Kindscher (1992), Looman and Best (1983), or Moerman (2016), unless otherwise noted.

⁶ The burrowing owl, (*Athene cunicularia*) often lives in burrows abandoned by prairie dogs, often along the outer perimeter of the colony. The symbiotic relationship between prairie dogs and burrowing owls is one of mutualism, where the owl benefits from the presence of a tunnel she can use, and the dogs receive an additional warning system through her vigilance, when danger approaches. Her Latin name, *cunicularia* means "little digger".

then rocked back onto her bottom. She too began caressing her injured paw as though it could distract her from the scene laid out before her.

“Yes. Yes, I think I do.” She paused, looking around to gather her strength and her bearings. “Unless she has moved from the only home I’ve known her to use, it should to the west, right where the city slopes up to that small hill.”

She pointed across the city as she spoke, and her arm sagged as though she had lost all strength during the brief period they had been here. “When I lived here, she always went away in late summer and came back again in the spring. Some years, though, she might not return, and the next she would. Hopefully, she’s back by now, but she could still be away.”

The line pointed out by her finger passed directly over the opening to her family home. She shuddered, knowing they had to go and look inside, or she would never be at peace.

Slowly they descended the hillock and entered a ghost town.⁷

Flint led the way, fur ruffled in horripilation, with Pebble right behind, searching for danger.

Sandy and Fiona came next, followed a short distance later by Juniper. She had cautioned everyone not to enter a burrow, and to never, ever, touch a dead dog, should they find one. She wasn’t sure how, but she suspected that the disease could spread from one dog to another, and the best way to avoid that was to keep away from those who were sick and dying. Or already dead.⁸

Flint was moving cautiously around a boulder, and was about three cubits ahead of Pebble, when he gave a weak little squeak and, scrabbling hard to stay upright, fell over backward – only to be run over a split second later by a kangaroo rat.⁹ It bounced over and past him in one single bound, hit the ground, dodged to the left at ninety degrees, with its tail whipping around, and knocked Pebble into a tumbling roll. It then straightened out and was gone in a series of bounding leaps that took it out of sight, in less time than it took for Flint to regain his feet.

“What the burr-ball was that?” Flint shouted; angered and frightened at the same time by the huge apparition that had startled him into falling. This was becoming tedious!

⁷ There are numerous instances of 100% mortality in dog towns after only a brief exposure to the plague bacteria *Yersinia pestis*. When the plague affects rodents, it’s called *sylvatic plague*. In 2010 plague struck the South Gillespie Dog Town in Grasslands National Park and left not a single dog alive. It also killed dogs in the Larson Dog Town, but here many survived its initial onslaught. When a colony suffers from plague and the density of prairie dogs’ declines, burrowing owls suffer higher mortalities due to increased predation by species such as badgers (Desmond et al. 2000).

⁸ The fleas that carry and transmit the disease must have a live host or they cannot survive, so shortly after the death of their host, they either find a new one, or they too die. Underground nests can sustain the fleas for a lengthy period, perhaps up to a year, if humidity and temperature are stable (Eads 2014).

⁹ The Kangaroo Rat (*Dipodomys ordii*) uses a saltatorial gait, like that of the grasshopper mouse, to get around. With a body of almost 300 mm (12”) in length, followed by a tail half again as long, it’s a big animal. It is very unusual for it to be above ground like this one, since they are strictly nocturnal, even avoiding moon-lit nights (Kissner 2009).

Fiona looked after the fleeing animal. “That was a Kangaroo rat, and if it’s out and about, something is dreadfully wrong. They used to live in our unused burrows, and I remember seeing one occasionally, but only if I was out in the darkest of nights. I’ve never even heard of one being out in the daylight before.” She paused and looked around, standing with her back to the large boulder that had blocked Flint’s view. “I think we need to be very careful here; something is definitely wrong.”

“OK. Everyone alright?” asked Flint. He puffed himself up, pretending not to be flustered at the encounter. “Why didn’t you detect that thing, Pebble? It was very close.”

Pebble risking Flint’s wrath, said jokingly, “I didn’t even know it was here until it was tickling your fat belly.”

Fiona gave a snort, and Juniper an outright giggle.

“But Flint, I don’t know why I didn’t sense it. Perhaps this boulder shielded it from me. It happens sometimes when something like this is between me and another being.”

Flint gave him a scathing look, then turned and advanced around the base of the boulder. Once again, they were strung out in a line, each trying to stay close to the protection of the base of the boulder. Flint had gone perhaps another five or six cubits when he stopped motionless. “What’s that sound?”

Suddenly prairie dogs were running in every direction. Flint bolted straight ahead, Sandy and Fiona off to the right, Pebble and Juniper back the way they had come.

Lying half in and half out of a large burrow, hidden around the corner of the boulder was the largest rattlesnake they had ever seen. It had just come to the surface, probably after attacking the kangaroo rat in its burrow. Its rattling tail was what Flint had heard and good thing, too, or one or more might now be suffering the paralysis of rattlesnake venom.¹⁰

“OK, that’s it. I am not having fun here!” muttered Flint under his breath.

Sandy came over and shoulder-checked Flint – just hard enough to make the huge Astiti stumble a little.

¹⁰ The prairie rattlesnake (*Crotalus viridis*) is perhaps the most common venomous snake in this part of the Great Plains. It creates the rattle by shaking a series of hollow, dry, loose-linked segments that are made of a material like that of your fingernails. The pods do not have anything in them, unlike a child’s rattle – it’s the segments hitting each other that creates the sound (Stebbins 2003).

The venom of the rattlesnake is delivered in a lightning fast strike. The prey is bitten, and the venom injected; the snake then retreats and waits for his supper to die. It does so first through paralysis, loss of motor control, and then death by asphyxiation. While the venom can cause a severe reaction, and tissue necrosis at the injection site, human deaths are very rare.

Adult prairie dogs can mount an immune response to a snake bite and can survive it. Young dogs, especially pups, do not have that ability and are especially vulnerable (Rundus et al. 2007).

“You’re doing a fine job, Flint. You just keep chasing away those big old nasty mice, teasing rattlesnakes, and who knows what else, and the rest of us will be just fine.” He dodged out of the way before Flint’s charge. “How about we get going again? I’m not comfortable standing out here in the open.”

This time Pebble led the way, with Flint and Sandy following along to either side. Fiona and Juniper tucked in behind, and in a compact group, the friends made their way slowly through the empty streets of Broken Hills.

It had been some time since dogs had last lived here. Given the quantity and height of the grass, it had to have been at least a year since the town had been occupied. As they approached Fiona’s parent’s burrow, she worked her way to the front and was walking next to Pebble when they finally stood at the base of the sentry mound.

So many memories, so many good times. Sad times, too: she remembered hugging her mother, saying goodbye for the last time. Pebble tip-toed to the top of the mound and peeked cautiously inside. No evidence of life, or for that matter of death. No smell of decay drifted up from below, just a dry, dusty unused smell.

Unused, except by the web of a funnel-cone spider.¹¹ Its deep, funnel-shaped web led down into the darkness of the burrow, with the top of the funnel spread across the entire burrow opening. Trapped within it were several desiccated flies, but no sign of the spider.

Fiona came up the sentry mound and cautiously looked over its rim into the darkness below.

“Do you sense anything?” she asked softly.

“No Fiona, I don’t. There hasn’t been anyone here for a long, long time.” Seeing her eyes begin to well up with tears, he quickly added, “I also don’t sense that their bodies are down there – it’s empty, Fiona. They are not here.”

Fiona looked at him, puzzled. “But if they aren’t in there ...where are they?” Fiona stopped and looked around at the streets and alleys around them, wondering if her parents lay out there somewhere, or if a predator had come along and eaten them. Finding them in their burrow Would have been almost preferable to not knowing what had happened to them.

Flint had been listening from below and he limped up beside them.

“There’s no point in going in there, Fiona. Let’s see if we can find Athena. Perhaps she’ll know where they are, or what happened to them.”

¹¹ The Genus *Angelenopsis*, or grass spider, there are at least 13 different species of funnel spiders in North America (Whitman-Zai et al. 2015). In this part of the Great Plains, they build tightly woven funnels that lead their prey to their doom. These spiders are very fast, and chances are you may never see one. When an insect becomes trapped within the funnel, the spider darts out, quickly examines it to determine whether it is food, and if not, darts back down into the darkness below.

Fiona nodded and turned away from the entrance. Sandy came up to her and together they left her memories behind.

Chapter 4

Crossing the City

The dispirited band of adventurers moved slowly away from Fiona's family home and deeper into the abandoned city.

They began to find dead prairie dogs. Some were half-eaten. Some were complete skeletons, all mummified and dried. None were recent deaths. The desiccated bodies were so light that the warm spring breeze shifted their dried shells and created a horrible illusion of life.

Juniper had cautioned everyone again about not getting close to the bodies, but every time they passed one, Fiona was compelled to look closely to see if it might be someone she had known. All were either strangers to her, or so badly decayed she could not begin to know who they were. They made their tortuous way through the city, sometimes having to detour around tall stands of grasses that should not have been there.

There was life though. Several times the group was startled when a grasshopper mouse or sagebrush vole darted away from behind a greasewood shrub.

Each time, five prairie dog hearts would stop, then start again.

Flint was edgy. Every time he smelled the musky scent of a grasshopper mouse his injured paw would ache, and his hackles would rise. He was determined that he would not be taken by surprise again.

Pebble had taken the lead as they went deeper into the abandoned city, cautiously working his way forward, searching for signs of life, but also death. Death, he continued to find everywhere, but something about the number of bodies was bothering him. He ignored the nagging feeling, though, and continued searching. He was sniffing his way around a particularly thick clump of greasewood when he sensed someone hiding behind it.

He stopped, tail raised and flared, in an alarm signal to the others behind him. Nose straining and senses heightened, he leaned forward to peek around a particularly thick greasewood stem.

From less than a cubit away a jackrabbit looked back over its shoulder at him. They stared eye-to-eye for what seemed an eternity, but then, with a blink of a large brown eye, it bolted from behind the dense clump of leaves and stems.¹²

One second, it was there - its warm scent strong in his nostrils - and the next it was gone, leaving only exclamation marks of dust in its path. By the time the first tendril of dust had fallen back to earth, four more were rising and then falling. The jackrabbit seemed to defy gravity with each tip-toe leap forward. It did not run, or hop, or even bounce; but rather seemed to float, rebelling against the forces that tried to pull it back to the ground. It rhythmically touched down on the very tips of all four bunched-together feet – just the toenails dancing and flicking on the dusty ground – then was off again, floating to the next dainty, I-don't-want-to-get-my-feet-dirty toenail flick. Its huge translucent ears glowed pink in the sun and seemed to act as a rudder, helping it change course as it zigged and zagged away; round white tail bobbing along behind as a distraction to whatever was chasing it.

Pebble looked over his shoulder at the others and shook his head. This was the fourth time a jackrabbit had bolted out from under his nose, and each time, his heart stuttered in fright. He was puzzled about his inability to detect them; it was as though they were invisible to his Foreteller sense.

When at its most active, Broken Hills had been many times larger than Crocus Flats. They had approached the deserted city along its eastern border, and as the afternoon sun began to set towards Seventy Cubit Butte to the west, they had finally made their way to the far western end of the city.

As they got closer to the shallow slope there, they began to encounter more and more snakes. A wide variety of snakes, too. Pebble was able to redirect their path around them, and in most cases, before the snake knew they were there.¹³

While none of the dogs enjoyed the thought of being close to a snake, they also knew that unless it was a monster-sized one, or unless they startled it at close range, they were not really at much risk. It takes a mighty big snake to swallow a prairie dog, and if it can't eat you, there's no point in wasting good venom.

Just the same, everyone did their best to avoid scaring one.

¹² The White-tailed Jackrabbit (*Lepus townsendii*) is common on this part of the Great Plains. It is fascinating to watch these animals run. Their speed and agility make them almost impossible for a predator to catch. Jackrabbits use camouflage – they change their hair color from brown to white at the onset of winter to blend into the landscape, and using their cryptic coloration, wait motionless in the hope they will not be seen.

¹³ Snakes do not have an outer ear opening or tympanic membrane, and as a result, they “hear” sounds the way most animals can. Instead they rely upon very sensitive nerves that allow them to pick up the minutest vibrations that travel through the ground. The vibrations alert the snake to the approach of something, and they then begin questing with their tongues to determine what that something is (Friedel et al. 2008).

It was after about the tenth time that Pebble detected a snake, this one a yellow-bellied racer¹⁴ that appeared, looked at them, and vanished in the blink of an eye, that Pebble stopped and asked Fiona, “What the Buffalo-burr is going on here? Is it normal for so many snakes to be in this city?”

“Yes, actually, it is. Look up there to the southwest, across the flats. Do you see where the land slopes gently, and then very steeply to those three buttes? Those are known as the Three Sisters. Way up high, near the very crest of the kills; see that small south-facing cliff? There are a series of deep cracks in the earth. Do you see them?”

Pebble raised himself on his hind toes to better see over the mat of old scarlet mallow leaves. “Yes, I see them now – they run left to right across the top of the slope; as though the hillside somehow pulled away from the butte behind it and left big cracks behind.”

“For as long as anyone here could remember, the snakes have come from all over this region in the fall, hundreds and hundreds of them, and they spend the winter in those cracks. Then, when it warms up again in the spring, out they come, just the way they’re doing now. I’ve never been over there. As a matter of fact, I don’t know anyone who has, other than one wandering dog who barely made it through alive. The experience scared him so much he never spoke another word.”

As they watched, Pebble could see several large rattlesnakes, a couple of bull snakes, and at least a dozen plains garter snakes¹⁵. All stretched out along the slope or inter-twined together in coils and rope-masses; basking in the warm spring sunshine, trying to suck as much heat into their cold bodies as possible.¹⁶

Flint had come alongside and shuddered, “I hate snakes, even the little ones. A massive old bull snake¹⁷ once ate a friend of mine. Grabbed hold of him and then wrapped its body around

¹⁴ The eastern yellow-bellied racer (*Coluber constrictor flaviventris*) is one of 11 subspecies of racers. In Canada it is restricted to three river drainages in Saskatchewan and one in Alberta and is considered a Threatened species in Canada. These are fast, agile non-venomous predators of small rodents and insects and can be very difficult to spot (Gardiner et al. 2011).

¹⁵ The plains garter snake (*Thamnophis radix*) is a common, mildly venomous snake, with a range across the prairie provinces and through the central US to northern Texas (Lind et al. 2005). Females are bred in April / May, shortly after the end of brumation (their winter dormancy). Once bred they then store the sperm of males from breeding through summer, fall and winter. Once spring arrives, she allows the sperm to fertilize her eggs, and after a nine-week gestation period, gives live birth to 9-30 snakelets. Baby snakes that are born live are called neonates, while those that hatch from an egg are called hatchlings.

¹⁶ This hibernaculum is in southern Saskatchewan (Mackay 1987). It looks just as I described it, and it does lay right above a prairie dog colony. Snakes of all species arrive here in the fall. By the hundreds they crawl deep underground to spend the winter in massive balls of snake. Then as the spring sun warms the hillside, they emerge once more, and after a short time, begin once again to disperse all over the region of the park. It’s this spring dispersal the dogs are encountering.

¹⁷ Bull snakes (*Pituophis melanoleucus*) are non-venomous constrictors, they kill by squeezing their prey to death. They can dislocate their jaws so that they can swallow prey much larger in diameter than themselves. Some have been recorded up to two meters in length and they most certainly enjoy a meal of prairie dog (Hoogland 1995).

and around my friend; squeezed the life right out of him. Then it lay there, right in the middle of my Ward, for the next several hours. swallowing the poor dog. Disgusting things!

“So, where to now Fiona?”

“The last time I saw Athena, she was living in that old mound, just to the left of that cluster of three boulders. But you know it’s been years since I last saw her; she might be long gone from here, especially with the city abandoned.”

“Well,” said Sandy, “There’s no point in sitting here talking all day. We’ve come too far to wait any longer.”

He hadn’t gone more than a dozen cubits when he stepped over a small branch that lay in his path. The snake that had hidden there skittered away a short distance, then flopped onto its back, and lay writhing and twisting for a moment.

Then just stopped – dead!

Tongue hanging out, upside down and motionless. The others arrived just in time to smell the most horrendous stench ooze out of it. ¹⁸

“What did you do to it?” Flint covered his nose with both front paws. “And what is that smell? It’s almost as bad as a Pebble fart!”

No sooner had he said this, then the snake flipped back over onto its belly and was gone from sight down a nearby prairie dog burrow.

Sandy looked at Flint and shrugged his shoulders as though to say – “What was the little cactus biter up to?”

“OK, everyone. Let’s stay together. We don’t need anyone else hurt now that we are this close,” said Juniper with just a touch of asperity in her voice. “Let’s find Athena before it gets dark.”

It took only a few more minutes to reach the entrance to the burrow. They approached cautiously, not sure what to expect.

No one appeared to be home. The rim of the sentry mound was overgrown with scarlet mallow and once again, a funnel spider had taken up residence here as well.

Fiona looked around, sure that she had the right place. Then she remembered the last time she had seen the owl’s nest active and with a flash of memory, saw the mound as it looked then.

“Wait,” she said to the others. “I think I know how to find her.” Further along the slope, she saw what she was looking for. She excitedly flicked her tail, and with her usual limp, led the way to the mound. The rim of the mound was covered in a whitewash, where the owl had sat and

¹⁸ The snake was a western hog nosed snake (*Heterodon nasicus*). When startled at close range they use the strategy of playing dead to defend themselves, combined with a noxious excrement designed to make them seem as non-palatable as possible (COSEWIC 2007).

defecated her liquid-white droppings. Scattered around on the ground were bits and pieces of feathers, buffalo dung, and the general detritus of life at an active den.¹⁹

Pebble took the lead, every sense pushed as far forward as he could. Suddenly he felt a tingle; a featherly light push against his Foreteller's sense, a gentle probing.

He had felt this before with Grandfather, but this was different; it seemed to come from two directions at once. He felt the probe from below, in the burrow, but also from behind him, back towards the periphery of the city.

Both were so very faint. Given where he was and what he was doing, he dismissed the further one, and once again focused on the burrow entrance before him.

As his nose slid slowly over the sentry mound rim, he could tell immediately that there was someone down there. Not only was the sentry mound worn smooth, and free of dust, but he could smell something. This was confirmed an instant later by the hissing rattle of a snake's tail.²⁰

Instead of pulling away though, he leaned a little farther in, listening and smelling. The rattle sounded again, but not as fiercely as the first time.

"Hello," he said, softly. "Hello in there?"

Nothing; no movement, no reply. But also, no rattle. Then he sensed movement below him and he backed away.

And then he saw her.

Standing on a small level spot about three cubits down, just where the burrow made a corner, stood the purpose of their quest.

Staring back up at him with the most brilliant yellow eyes he had ever seen, was Athena Cunicularia.

¹⁹ These are indeed the signs of an active burrowing owl den, and it is not uncommon for nesting owls to return to the same region within a dog colony but shift to a new burrow (Smith and Conway 2007). They often move from one vacant burrow to another after their chicks have become active.

²⁰ Burrowing owls can mimic the sound of a prairie rattle snake. They do it to intimidate potential threats and to defend their burrow (Owings et al. 2002)

Chapter 5

Athena Cunicularia

He could sense her surprise. Her eyes widened and her large pupils grew hugely round as she stared up at him, white eyebrows raised and yellow beak clicking and snapping, but whether in excitement or agitation, he was not sure.

In a gentle voice, she said, “I can hear your thoughts. I have been able to as you approached, but I dared not believe it. I hear the others behind you as well.”

Unafraid, she bent her head low and walked her way up the slope towards him, speckled breast rubbing lightly on the burrow floor. Pebble was stunned by the revelation that she too could hear the thoughts of others. He backed away from the edge of the sentry mound and sat waiting for her to appear.

Her small, round head appeared over the edge of the sentry rim until just her eyes were visible. Her head swiveled in place, first one way and then completely around in the other direction; searching the landscape for potential threats. Her head rose and Athena emerged from the burrow.

The small group below all sat back on their haunches, arms over bellies, and waited with impatient excitement to be introduced by Pebble.

Instead, Athena walked down the mound on stilt-like legs and stopped in front of Juniper.

“You’ve come a long way from your apothecary,” she said. “You can rest a while here now; for a time at least you can stop worrying about taking care of your friends.”

The owl looked over at Sandy. “Sandy, my dear, thank you for helping to guide and protect your friends. You appear to have done a good job of keeping their morale and spirits in good order.

“And Flint, you are indeed a fine and brave Astiti. If I ever go to Crocus Flats, I will commend you to your superiors.”

She came last to Fiona and stopped in front of her for several moments before speaking. “Ah, the experiences you have had, my lovely. You have aged much since I last saw you, but the age wears well on you. You have gained wisdom on your journeys and it has served you and your friends well.”

The group sat there in shock; mouths open in surprise; hardly breathing. Then they all started up at once, “How can she know ... How did she know my name...? I can hear her ...” as each of

the four friends reacted to the revelation that not only was she able to hear their thoughts, but that she was able to communicate perfectly clearly with them. This was something no one expected.

Pebble had remained at the base of the slope, watching as Athena went from one to another, then turned and made her way back up to the mound above him. She turned then and lifting one foot and holding it clasped softly against her breast, stood on the other in perfect balance. The pose seemed almost religious to them in some way – it made her seem holy and regal at the same time.

Fiona nodded her head in deepest respect. “Athena, you have no idea ... well, perhaps you do ... of how happy we are to find you here. When we left Crocus Flats, we did not know what to expect, but we desperately wanted to find you and seek your knowledge and advice. Can you tell us what happened here? Do you know where my family is?”

Athena looked at each of them in turn, then a sense of sadness and almost despair seemed to settle over her a dark cloak. “No, my dear, I don’t know what happened. You see, my mate died two years ago after we went south for the winter.²¹ I felt so lost and lonely that the next summer I just drifted from one place to another, never settling long in any one place. Then, when I went south again last fall, I met a wonderful new mate and my life is once again full and rich.”

She scanned the sky and ground around her. “He’s off somewhere right now, foraging for us. He should be back soon.” She paused and looked back out over the city. “I was so excited to come back here this spring and show him off to everyone. But then I arrived and found ... this.”

They could see the lingering pain and the horror of what she had found, written on her face and in the general feeling of despair that stole over her. But she shook herself, ruffled her feathers, and shifted to the other leg and once again, resumed her calm and regal attitude.

“We only just arrived here three days ago and have yet to see a living prairie dog. From the amount of grass growing all over the city, it seems to me that everyone died last summer. It would take that long for things to fall apart this badly. We’ve poked into numerous burrows, and searched the periphery a little, but the city is so big. We’ve not given up hope that someone still lives here.” Athena paused for a moment, not sure if she should mention the persistent feeling, she had that someone else did live here. But, being uncertain, she decided not to. She looked back at Fiona and answered her most difficult question. “I have not seen any members of your family Fiona. I know not whether they are here, or if they have died. I am sorry Fiona, I truly am.”

Pebble came down from the mound and gave Fiona a cheek-to-cheek, then turned back to Athena. “Have you been able to ask any of the other residents what they know about what happened?”

Athena shook her head, “I’ve tried, but talking to mice and voles has never been very productive – they tend to look at me and do their best to hide. Some of the larger ones, the

²¹ No one knows for sure where most owls from this region of the prairie over-winter, but generally, they travel to southern Texas and northern or central Mexico. A relatively high percentage of owls never return to their nesting areas and this may be due to mortalities or simply going somewhere else. They usually return to the northern plains in late March or early April, depending upon weather and snow conditions enroute (Holroyd et al. 2009).

grasshopper mice, have stopped and chatted for a moment, but they don't appear to know anything useful."

At the mention of the grasshopper mouse, Flint looked around and asked, "Are there many of those cactus biters here in the city?" He massaged his healing paw while he sat there, scrutinizing the area around them. When Athena looked at him strangely, he said, "It's a long story. I just don't care very much for their manners."

"No," she replied, "I only know of three or four."

Athena glanced around, then searched the cityscape for her mate. Not seeing him, she turned to the others. "Come inside. It's almost dark. I have some food you might enjoy, and certainly lots of extra space for you." She walked back up the sentry mound slope and seemed to dive headfirst into the burrow.

Chapter 6

Plans Are Made

The friends spent the next several days living with Athena and her new mate. He, too, had expressed shock at what he had seen in and around the city, but like Athena, had no explanations to offer the group.

They had followed Athena into her burrow, and when she offered them some of her food, each felt revolted at the idea of dining with her. Her pantry was large, taking up an entire chamber. It was packed from back to front and from floor to ceiling with dead mice and voles. Pebble poked his head in and even saw the twisted bodies of two small snakes.²² They did their best to be gracious about it, but each, in turn, declined her generous offer. They spent the first couple of days foraging and resting, with brief forays into the city. They returned each time less optimistic about their chances of finding a live dog.

While they were out, Athena was busy getting her nest chamber ready for her coming clutch of eggs and the chicks that would hatch in about late April. One of her favorite nesting items was dried buffalo dung. Juniper asked her why she would bring such a thing into her nest.

Oh, that's simple, my dear. Placing it in the chamber helps to maintain the humidity at just the right level. It soaks up extra moisture when there is too much and gives it back when the chamber starts to get too dry. I really couldn't do without it."²³

²² Burrowing owls do indeed build food caches such as this, storing food for the time just ahead when they must feed a nest full of babies (Poulin et al. 2005). The female usually lays her eggs within about two weeks of arrival. The average clutch size is nine chicks with an incubation period of about 28 days. There are reports of owls storing upwards of 200 small mammals, snakes and amphibians in their food caches. Having this stockpile of food helps to ensure that all chicks survive. Should she not have taken this precaution, the youngest chicks might be fed back to their older siblings.

²³ It's true, they do wander around, collecting bits of dry buffalo poop and then they carry it back into their nesting chambers to maintain just the right level of humidity. The smell of the dung is also thought to mask the smell of the birds in the nest and so protect them from predators. This is yet another example of the dependence of a species on the presence of buffalo on the landscape. Males participate a lot in getting things ready, and once the female begins incubating the eggs, and during the first couple weeks after, he brings her and the chicks every bit of food they need.

One day, as they lay basking on the south side of a mound, soaking up the warm spring heat, Flint said, “It’s been a week now, and there is no evidence that anyone survived. I think we should assume that Athena is right, and they have all died from the sickness.”

After being pressed by Juniper earlier in the day, on what Athena thought, the owl had finally relented and expressed her suspicions about the cause of the city’s death. “I think that everyone here became sick with a disease that very quickly killed them. From what I have been able to figure out, the disease arrived here early last summer, and by fall at the latest, everyone here was gone. I have heard of this disease from other owls, and they all said that once it arrives, no one can escape it.”

It was now late in the day and Flint continued, “I think the time has come for us to ask Athena what she thinks we should do; where we should go next.”

There was a general agreement from everyone else. They all had the feeling that the time had indeed arrived for them to leave, but whether it was to go back to Crocus Flats, or continue searching, they were not sure.

They were discussing this when Athena flew in, wings flapping hard. She landed in a running trot, stumbled and almost fell, then skidded to a stop in front of them in a small dust cloud; out of breath and obviously distressed about something.

“Ah good . . .,” she panted, “. . . you’re . . . all here!” She stopped for a moment, fluffing up her feathers, and then, standing upon one foot, and breath under control, she said, “I have just come from the Low Hills where I had a visit with a migrating great blue heron.²⁴ She told me that she had passed through a prairie dog town several days ago, I think it’s called Monument Flats, and she saw the most horrendous sight.”

She paused for just a moment, then continued, “Her name is Ardea and she was slowly working her way around the town, searching for her supper. Everything was normal, she said, with dogs going about their business as usual. She saw the occasional mouse or bird as well, but nothing seemed out of place or different. Then she said she heard the most terrifying sound, as though someone was being tortured and slowly killed!”

Athena took a deep breath and said, “A pair of black-footed ferrets²⁵ were systematically searching the town and killing everything they could find. It didn’t seem to matter if it was a prairie

²⁴ The great blue heron (*Ardea herodias*) returns from its wintering area at about this time. I once watched a heron, out in the middle of a dry pasture, miles from water, flipping over dried buffalo patties, searching for the insects that lived there. It flipped the patty over with such vigor, that the patty flew a couple meters up into the air, and then shattered upon its return to the ground. The heron quickly searched the ground where the patty lay broken, snatching up every invertebrate it could find, and once finished there, stepped long-legged over to the next patty and repeated the process.

²⁵ The black-footed ferret (*Mustela nigripes*) is usually solitary, and it would be unlikely for three to be hunting together, unless they were siblings in their home colony. To see two of them hunting together like this, away from their natal colony would indicate something very strange, unless they were a mated pair.

dog or a mouse, everyone they met was destroyed!” She looked around nervously, almost as though she expected the marauders to appear any minute. “They did not take the time to eat anything or even to cache it for later. Ardea said they just went about wantonly slaughtering whomever they could find. Now I know that ferrets are perhaps the prairie dog’s most fierce enemy, but this is most unusual, even for them.”²⁶ By this time, she had everyone in the small group thoroughly spooked. The black-footed ferret was indeed their worst nightmare and the news that two of them were hunting together was terrifying.

“Now, I don’t think we have anything to worry about here. Monument Flats is quite a distance away and according to Ardea, they did not seem interested in moving on any time soon.”

“But,” she added, “You came here searching for answers and I think it’s time for you to begin finding them. You were sent by Grandfather and your council to determine what happened here in Broken Hills, and I think we can now be certain that it was the sickness that destroyed the city. The question remains, is it still here, and can it spread back to your city of Crocus Flats. I think it is, and I think it can.” The friends listened in silence but shuffled around and looked at each other as Athena said this.

Juniper, the group’s healer, was the first to respond, “I agree that the risk might still exist and if Crocus Flats could be infected, I think we need to warn them, or at least do something to help. Do you know if any circumstances make a city more prone to infection – is there anything the dogs in Crocus Flats can do to lessen the risk of infection?”

Athena nodded and said, “Very good questions, Juniper, and yes, I think so. From everything I’ve learned about the sickness, it seems to hit cities or towns with dense populations.²⁷ I know from what you’ve told me that Crocus Flats is as full as it can get and dogs are becoming crowded there. The same thing happened here, didn’t it, Fiona?”

Fiona nodded sadly. “Yes, it did. That crowding was the reason I left. I tried for the longest time to find a burrow of my own, but there simply was not enough space for me to dig one for myself, and every burrow in town was occupied. So, I left to find a new home. Crocus Flats was not crowded when I first got there, but there’ve been so many babies born since then, that it, too, is almost full.”

²⁶ Ferrets evolved to live almost entirely upon prairie dogs for their food (Livieri, in Soorae, P. S. (ed.) 2011); so much so that they are known an obligate predator. They are indeed a dogs’ worst nightmare, for the ferret fits nicely inside a dog burrow, can dig rapidly through any earthen plug used to block access to a burrow, and like most members of the weasel family, are very fast (Tretten 2017).

²⁷ Plague does seem to affect populations that are dense, and where over-crowding is taking place (Tripp et al. 2009). That’s known as a density dependent response. With high densities of dogs, fleas have more hosts, and can reproduce faster. Because the dogs are so close to each other, the risk of transmission from one to another increases. Once the disease arrives, it spreads very quickly from one dog to another.

Athena listened to this carefully. “I have given this a lot of thought, and this is what I suggest.” She put her foot back on the ground, stretched a little, and stood on her other foot, lifting the first one back up to her breast.

“I think you must investigate what the ferrets are up to. They pose a huge threat to every prairie dog town or city they encounter, and we need to know more about what they are doing, and if possible, why they are acting so strangely. Perhaps it’s possible to stop them somehow, or at least to warn other towns of their activities. I also think it prudent for Crocus Flats to consider splitting, with some residents moving to a new home and starting a new town. This would reduce the crowding in Crocus Flats and disperse the dogs. Should the disease appear in Crocus Flats, it should have less impact and those who moved away would be safe.”

“So, here is what I propose.” She stood with both feet on the ground now and faced everyone. “I think you should split into two groups. One will go over the Low Hills to the town of Monument Flats and try to determine what the ferrets are doing, and if possible, why. The other group should go north from here and seek out a new home site for some of the residents of Crocus Flats to move to. Once you find it, go back to Crocus Flats and try to convince the council to divide the city.”

Silence greeted her suggestions.

Then Sandy, ever the practical one, said, “What you say makes sense to me, Wise One, but who’s to go where?”

Athena looked at him. “This, too, I have thought about. It is my suggestion that you and Pebble go to Monument Flats. It’s best if only you two go since you need to be as invisible as possible. Pebble’s Foreteller’s gift should keep you safe along the route.” She shuffled a little. “Flint, you should go north with Juniper and Fiona, and try to find a good location for a new colony.”

The group sat there in shock. Split up their group? How could she suggest such a thing? – was the thought that passed through each of their minds. As the seconds ticked away in silence, though, each of them began to see the wisdom in her suggestions.

“I know this is very difficult, but by going in two directions, you can solve two problems at the same time.

“Pebble and Sandy; once you have investigated the behavior of the ferrets, come back to me and we will decide what to do next. It is going to be some time before the five of you are together again and I know it’s going to be hard, but I do think it’s the best course to follow.

“It’s late. I need to get back to my burrow and bring in a lot more buffalo patties²⁸, or I would come with you. For now, good night, and I will see you off in the morning.”

²⁸ Owls also bring dung and lay it outside of the burrow entrance, and there it serves two different purposes. There is some discussion in the literature (Levey et al. 2004, Haug et al. 1993) that they place mammalian dung at the burrow opening to mask the smell of eggs or chicks inside. This is known as olfactory camouflage or masking. A second reason is to provide food for beetles. Dung beetles and other insects are attracted to the dung and are then eaten by the owls.

Chapter 7

New Adventures Begin

Sandy and Fiona looked at each other in mute despair. Separation! They had become so dependent upon one another that the thought was almost too painful to consider.

“Let’s go away from here for the night,” Fiona suggested, “Let’s find a safe burrow, and spend the rest of our time here together.” They explained their intentions to the others, who accepted it without comment. Pebble, Flint, and Juniper each descended one at a time into the burrow they had been using, and there, snuggled next to each other for warmth and security, they fell into a fitful sleep.

Early the next morning found everyone still not fully prepared for the new adventures that awaited them. There was much cheek-to-cheeking, much wishing-you-wells, and come-back-safes from everyone.

Fiona and Sandy had agreed the night before that once they parted from each other, neither would look back, thinking that a clean separation would be easier on both of them. Just as the sun was broaching the rounded peaks of the Broken Hills, casting its feeble light across the silent city, they said their last farewells, to each other and to Athena.

Sandy and Pebble went south-west, down the slope and across the western end of the city.

Flint, Juniper, and Fiona walked north, and onto the low hill that formed its northern suburbs. As they neared the edge of Broken Hills, Fiona stopped and looked back across the city. In the distance, she could just make out the forms of her two friends as they entered the borderlands.

For a moment she thought she saw Sandy stop and wave to her, but the distance was so great that she could not be sure. Just in case, she too stood high on her back legs and waved back to the best friend she had ever had. Juniper came over to her, and stood with her, lending her support to a heart she knew was close to breaking.

There are three behavioral groups of dung beetles (Scarabaeidae); The “Rollers” a male – female pair who collect a wad of dung, then roll it to a place where they bury it. The “Tunnelers” take a chunk and bury it in a tunnel they make close to the manure pat. These two are known as “nesters” because they prepare a home for their young, then bring food to them. The third group are known as the “Dwellers” – they live within the manure patty and raise their young right there (Thomas 2009).

“They will be fine Fiona. Sandy is strong, and Pebble is very good at detecting any dangers that might lie ahead, so try not to worry too much. We’ll be with them again before you know it.”

Flint had waited just ahead for them, but now came back and in a gentle voice said, “Come, Fiona, let’s keep going. We’ve got a long way to go, and as Juniper said, they will be just fine.”

With one last lingering look after her friends, she turned, and with a heavy heart, followed along behind Flint, with Juniper tucked in behind her.

Sandy had indeed stopped and, seeing the other three just about to disappear over the ridge, had waved in the forlorn hope that Fiona might see him. His heartbeat faster when he saw her tiny form wave back to him; then they were gone.

Pebble waited for his friend a short distance away. While he sat there, he let his mind drift. Perhaps it was this calm state that allowed it, but now he was certain there was another dog somewhere in the city; a stranger who could reach out and touch his mind.

It felt like another Foreteller?

Startled at the very faint probing, he stood abruptly and searched the area to the north, far across the city from him. Somewhere out there was another Foreteller!

Sandy came over to him, and with a nudge said, “Come, my friend. It’s time.”

Chapter 8

“Q”

He had wandered the northern Great Plains for years now. Alone, yet not lonely. Neither needing, nor wanting the company of others, yet always searching for someone or something. He didn't know exactly what it was he was looking for, only that he must continue searching. It took him years before he knew what he quested after.

One day he was sitting quietly along a small stream, listening to the tinkling water and the song of a single meadowlark. There, in that calm, it came to him. He was searching for silence. Not the silence one hears on very rare occasions when out in the wilderness, but silence of the mind! He did not even know he had done it, until, sometime later, he understood that hours had gone by and he had not heard a single thought. Just peace.

Quartz Silverback had fulfilled his quest, and now his tormented mind was healed. His restless yearning to travel the world had faded since then, and he now found himself wanting to return to his old haunts. Winter was over at last and he had made good time, traveling over the bald wind-swept hills and drifted-in valleys. He had set out immediately to go back home. This morning had dawned bright and sunny, and so, too, was his disposition when he realized just how close he was to Broken Hills.

He had left his home almost forty years ago, desperate to escape his destiny, to do anything he could to deny his abilities as a Foreteller, and the certain death that the affliction brought with it. He had known that the last Foreteller before him had died a strange and horrible death during the Foreteller's first summer. Given that he was in his second year; Q knew it was only a matter of time until he would die a similar death. Before he did, he was determined to experience life and everything it had to offer.

So, early one morning, before the rest of the city dwellers crawled from their burrows, he had risen, looked back once, and began a journey that would take him almost four decades to complete.

He had survived, and now it was time to return.

He had arrived late in the fall and found the entire city dead and abandoned. He searched all winter for some evidence of another living prairie dog, but to no avail. Once again, he was alone, except for the multitude of ghosts that now populated the city. He almost gave up several times, and even tried to leave once.

It was no use. His wandering days were over, and he had resigned himself that his fate was to spend the rest of his days here in Broken Hills, its sole resident. He knew there were other beings in the city. His mind had reached out and touched several jackrabbits, sage voles, grasshopper mice and even the occasional migratory antelope or deer. Perhaps his most interesting visitors had been a small group of buffalo bulls that had ambled ponderously through the town during the last weeks of winter. Since then' nothing of interest broke his solitary boredom.

Until today.

Today he sensed the arrival of several newcomers, but it had taken him some time to figure out what they were. Their minds were so familiar, yet it had been so long since he had last listened to one that he was not certain. He had cautiously moved towards the small group that had appeared out of the north, doing all he could to avoid detection. His gentle probing had confirmed his suspicions, and after several days of surreptitious stalking, he had finally lain, hidden behind a small boulder, and watched as they wandered through the empty city, searching, as he had, for some evidence of life.

He knew that another Foreteller was with the group, and even from a distance knew that it was the hunted one. He considered approaching them and breaking his decades' long isolation, but old habits were hard to break. Instead, he followed them; watched them from a distance, and listened to them as they talked of their plans and the adventures they had had. He spied upon them when they met Athena and had watched as the small group divided, with two of them going south and the other three headed north, towards him.

It was obvious that they were going to leave, and he had to do something. If he didn't, he would forever wonder what life would have been, surrounded by others of his kind.

He waited until the three strangers had approached within just a few cubits of the burrow he was using as his own, before stepping out and waiting for them to notice him.

He sat, outwardly calm, but inwardly terrified, as they approached. They seemed dejected and dispirited. Each was walking head down, not paying particular attention to their surroundings.

Then the big one suddenly stopped and lifted his head and stared straight at him, not saying anything; just staring. The other two were not aware that anything was happening until the large dog he had ever seen, was run into from behind by a female. Then all three were staring at him, all bug-eyed, jaws open in shock.

"Hi," he said, then sat back and waited for them to gather their wits.

The big one stepped forward a couple of steps, hackles raised, and demanded in a very aggressive tone, "Who are you, and where did you come from?"

This startled Quartz. He had thought he'd be warmly welcomed right away, and to be challenged so strongly, set him back for a moment. Quartz said, "My name is Quartz Silverback, of the Silverback Coterie. I used to live here in Broken Hills, but I moved away some time ago. I only just came back early this spring.

“I apologize if I startled you,” he continued, “but I figured I’d better say hello when I saw you were leaving town.”

It felt strange to talk to someone in his own language after so long alone. His voice croaked. Even this short conversation had dried up his vocal cords. He continued in a raspy voice, “Why are you here? Where are you going? Why are you going? Where are you from?” The questions, once started, came forth unbidden and uncontrolled. Realizing that he was sounding a little strange, he stopped himself; gave a mental deep breath, and sat back on his haunches, waiting for them to say something. And say something they did, asking him much the same questions in return.

Flint interrupted the flow of questions. “How about if we find a nice, sunny spot and get to know each other?”

Quartz nodded his head and looked around. “Let’s go over to the base of that rock. I often lay there and soak up the sun.” After scratching and digging to create comfortable places for themselves on the warm sand, they prepared to listen to what this stranger had to say.

“My name is Flint Twitchtail, of the Twitchtail Ward in the dog town of Crocus Flats; I am an Astiti charged with protecting my friends here.” Flint nodded at Juniper. “This is Juniper Clayback, of the Clayback Ward. She’s our healer and mentor.” He moved over to Fiona and said, “This is Foxglove Brokenclaw. She used to live here in Broken Hills, but she moved to Crocus Flats years ago. Everyone calls her Fiona.”

Fiona had been staring intently at the stranger ever since the introductions had begun. She had heard the name *Quartz Silverback*. Something about that name was teasing the back of her mind, but she couldn’t quite put her claw on it.

As he was introduced to Fiona, Quartz looked at her intently and asked, “Are you related to Gravel Brokenclaw?” Startled, Fiona took a step back, eyes tearing suddenly. “Yes; he is, I mean he was ...;” Fiona took a moment to collect herself, then said firmly, “He was my father. How do you know about him – do you know where he is?”

“Yes, I did know him. Not well, but I remember meeting him on several occasions during my last summer here. He treated me well when everyone else was out to get something from me.” He paused for just a moment, then said, “I’m sorry I can’t tell you anything about where he is or what has become of him.”

Fiona sat on her haunches, and hugged herself, shivering slightly. With some effort, she asked, “Do you know what happened here? Do you know if everyone has died, or if they went away somewhere?”

Her hopeful expression suddenly reminded him of the pressures he had faced the last time he was with others of his kind, and in a flash, he was transported back in time more than forty years.

And for the first time in forty years, he began to talk about why he had left.

Chapter 9

“Q” Can’t Take Any More

“Hey, Quartz! Stop for a moment,” a voice demanded from behind him.

He was walking past the entrance to Gravel Brokenclaw’s burrow when the dog called out to him. He stopped and turned. Someone always wanted to see him, demanding to know this or that, and this was probably going to be another such time.

Gravel had been lying, half in, half out of his sentry mound entrance, almost asleep in the sun. He had finished his Astiti’s shift a short while ago and was relaxing now that his work was done for the day. He had watched the approach of “Q”, as everyone called him, and had seen the harried, furtive look on his face.

“What the hawk, I should talk with the poor dog, see how he’s doing,” he said to himself.

When he called out to Q, he saw the dog jump a little, startled at the intrusion. “Sorry if I startled you. Come over and let’s chew the winterfat together. I just gathered some yesterday, and it’s some of the best I’ve had in years. Excellent crop this year. Come; sit up here with me for a bit, if you’re not in too much of a hurry?”

Q squinted up at him. Gravel sat above him, silhouetted against an azure sky, across which a pair of crows were flying. He hesitated, but then decided, why not? “Yes, thank you, sir. I am a tad hungry.”

“You settle your carcass right there, young fellow, and I will be right back up.” Gravel dropped down into his burrow. He reappeared a moment later, cheek pouches jammed full of fresh winterfat. The silvery stems and leaves had wilted but still glistened in the sunshine. Gravel carefully spat out the repast between them, and said, “Help yourself. Don’t be shy; there’s plenty more where that came from.”

Q reached over, and with one hand, pulled a stalk from the pile. With the delicate fingers of one paw wrapped around the base of the stem, he began to nibble. He started at the tip, and methodically chewed his way down the fragrant stem, carefully nipping off each leaf, one at a time; doing everything he could to not waste a single leaf. Gravel was not quite so decorous; he picked up a strand and without ceremony, began shoving it into his mouth, with wet smacking sounds of enjoyment.

They went on in this manner for some time, with Q carefully selecting each morsel, and relishing both the quiet camaraderie and the meal, while Gravel simply ate as though there might not be another meal for several years. Both reached satiation at the same time, and they lay on their

backs against the side of the mound; round bellies bloated, legs splayed out to the sides, with their heads resting on the sun-hardened, light grey pillow of the mound.

Neither felt the need to talk.

A red-tailed hawk circled high above, the cross of its body and wings starkly black against the deep blue of the summer sky. Several Astiti were on guard, watching the bird intently, ready to bark an alarm should it change its lazy spiraling into an attack dive. The hawk gave the occasional piercing scream in an attempt to startle an unseen mouse into moving. Everyone in town ignored it, secure in the knowledge that one of the vigilant Astiti would alert them to a change in its pattern. It didn't change, and no alarms were barked.²⁹

Q lay there, content. He watched the puffy clouds, so typical of summer as they drifted by, herded along by a warm breeze. He pointed up with one slender arm and said to Gravel, "Look there, that cloud looks exactly like old Mrs. Clay Whitetail over in the Whitetail Ward." The Whitetails were newcomers to the city. A band of them had arrived a few years back and they set up their Ward near the southern edge of the city.³⁰

Gravel looked at the cloud, laughed, and then pointed to another that followed along behind Mrs. Whitetail. "There's one that looks just a buffalo!"

They lay quiet for a few minutes, watching the clouds as they drifted and changed from one kind of animal to another; some so well-formed that they were obvious to anyone watching.

Q sat up, pointing to a cluster of small clouds that followed hard on the heels of a herd of cloud buffalo. "Over there - doesn't that one looks like a flock of cowbirds?"³¹

The warmth of the afternoon sun and a full belly caused Q to dose off, after a bit. He lay there, dreamless, until late in the afternoon. When he woke up, he found himself alone and a bit stiff from lying on his back for so long. He rose, stretched his back and looked around. Sitting on a sentry mound just a few cubits away was an Astiti, who, when he saw Q awake, came over to sit beside him. "Morning, Q."

²⁹ The red-tailed hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) is indeed a significant predator that these dogs were wise to keep an eye on. They can circle on warm updrafts for hours, lulling their prey into a false sense of security, and then, like an arrow shot from the heavens, be on an unsuspecting dog in seconds (Stromberg 1974).

³⁰ There are five different species of prairie dogs in North America (Long 2002), and one of them is the White-tailed Prairie Dog (*Cynomys leucurus*). They live south of the Black-Tailed Prairie dog, and their occurrence here is pure fiction, since their nearest colony is too far away for a dog to travel that distance. It is unlikely that they ever shared a city with another species.

³¹ The brown headed cowbird (*Molothrus ater*) does indeed travel with the buffalo. Their ecology is so closely linked to the vast herds of buffalo that once roamed the Great Plains that it is difficult to imagine a herd without its small attendants tagging along. There is a relationship of mutualism. The birds derive benefits in the form of insects which are disturbed by the passing buffalo, while the buffalo get their hides gleaned of ticks and seeds that get stuck in their hair (McHugh 1972).

He scanned the skies briefly, then turned his attention back to Q. “Gravel had to get on his way and asked me to stand watch till you woke up. Looks like you needed a nap, sleeping out here in the open that.”

Q was surprised at how long he had slept. He had known he was tired, but he had not expected to drop off to sleep, nor to stay there so long. “Thanks for sticking around; I do appreciate it.”

He stretched his aching back one more time. “I’d better be on my way too; get home before it gets dark out. Thanks again and say hi to Gravel when you see him.” He descended from the mound and continued his interrupted trip across the city.

He hadn’t gone two cubits when a dog spotted him and came over. “Hey, you’re that Foreteller, right? My wife’s about to give birth to a litter – can you tell us what sex they are so we can pick their names – I’ve got some boy names I but she thinks they are going to be all girls. Yuck. What do you say – stick out your mind and help a dog out?”

Q looked at him, frustrated. “Sorry, I can’t do that anymore than you can.”

He left the disappointed dog behind as he set off again, only to be interrupted once more, this time by a very distraught female. “Hey, you, are you that dog that’s supposed to be able to see danger before it happens? Why didn’t you save my husband yesterday? Why did you let him get killed by that hawk? Aren’t you here to protect us?”

He turned his back on her and kept on walking, leaving her talking to herself as he moved out of sight into a shallow drainage channel. The dry channel meandered its way from the slopes to the north in a wandering, twisting route through the center of town and out the southern edge, past the Whitetails and into the borderlands below. Because it could flood unexpectedly after even a brief shower in the hills to the north, no one had built any burrows between its banks. It made an ideal travel route for him, keeping him out of sight of most of the citizens as he tried to get home unseen and unbothered.

Eventually, he had to leave the road and venture once more into the crowded confines of the city. Three more times between the drainage channel and his burrow, he was accosted, first by two grieving dogs who accused him of letting their friends die, and one who wanted to know if Q would move his burrow and live next door to the stranger. He ignored them all.

He saw his burrow’s sentry mound just ahead, and relieved, dashed over to it. He had just about made it there when his Foretellers sense screamed danger at him. Without thinking, he erupted into a loud series of rapid-fire alarm barks,³² sending every above-ground dog scurrying for cover. The

³² Alarm calls always have three participants. The first is the initiator, the individual who sees the danger and calls out the alarm. The second is the intended recipient, in this case other prairie dogs in the vicinity of the danger, and the third is the predator. For prairie dogs, being an initiator places the individual at higher risk, because it focuses the predator’s attention on themselves. As a result, initiators often have a higher mortality rate than those that respond to the alarm call. (Stone and Trost, 1991).

red-tailed hawk was in full stoop, straight at a dog who had strayed away from the security of her burrow and was carefully carrying a bundle of herbs.

Q dashed at her as fast as he could and hit her on the side of her ribcage. The impact sent them tumbling head-over-tails in the dust and caused her to throw her load of herbs high into the air, where they were caught by the breeze and scattered. The hawk's right wing bashed Q in the middle of his back, knocking him flat to the ground. Its claws raked the ground in long furrows just behind his hips and ripped clods of clay from the ground.

Screaming in rage and frustration, the hawk pulled up out of its stoop and climbed steeply, in a turning bank as it prepared for a return attack. Not waiting, Q shoved the female dog back to her feet, and together they ran for the safety of her burrow.

They dove head-first into it, just as the hawk stooped again. They were inside when it blasted over the entrance above them, once again shrieking with ear-piercing rage.

The burrow entrance funneled the blast from its wings into the narrow confines of the tunnel and blew their hair backward up their backs.

Then it was gone.

The other dog ran headfirst into Q's stubby black tail, then sat back with a grunt and a curse.

Q twisted around in the narrow space of the tunnel and faced the other dog. "Are you OK? What's your name?"

The dog nodded, and in a voice quavering with rage, she replied "Yes, yes I am, thank you, sir, I'm fine I guess. Where did that hawk come from? I just spent the last three hours gathering those herbs, and now I have to start all over again!"

He let her ramble on for a moment, then said, gently, to help her get her anger under control, "You are very welcome. You still haven't told me your name?"

"Oh, I am sorry to be so rude; my name is Willowfoot - Willowfoot Hornblende, from here in the Hornblende Ward. I'm the Apothecary here and you've just *assisted* me into my burrow."

Q, always fascinated with anything "unexplainable", asked her if she had a few minutes to chat about herbs and healing potions. Surprised, but flattered at the same time, Willowfoot readily agreed.

The rest of the day vanished as the two of them lay close in one burrow storage chamber or another. She finally looked towards the entrance of the chamber and could no longer see the faint glow of daylight.

"Oh, my", she said, "I've got to get going - I've probably missed several dogs already being hidden down here." She stopped and looked at Q intently for just a moment, then said, almost wistfully, "I enjoyed our afternoon together Q. It's so seldom I get to spend time with a dog who wants to *be* with me, rather than just *needing* me for some ailment or another." She cheek-to-cheeked him fondly, adding, "And I do appreciate your saving my life out there. Thank you."

He had no time to say all of the things he wanted to say – to explain to her that’s how he felt every day, but she had turned and was dashing up the tunnel before he had a chance. He thought for a second that she was going to run right out of the entrance and was about to call out to her to warn her to be careful when she stopped on her own. She carefully inched her way up the last few steps to the sentry mound. There she cautiously scanned the area outside before moving out and on her way.

Q climbed out of Willowfoot’s burrow, and after a quick scan to be sure it was safe, he made his way home. He was accosted twice during the short trip, both times by dogs accusing him of failing to save a family member, and it was with a huge sense of relief that he finally reached the safety and security of his burrow.

Grateful to be alone and snug in his nest, Q found a few sprigs of Yumpah³³ for supper, then spinning around three times in a tight circle on his bed of couch grass, to tramp it down just-right; he curled up into a ball and instantly fell fast asleep.

Life went on like this for the rest of the summer. He would sense danger and warn everyone and all would be fine, and then across the city, well out of his range, someone would be killed by a hawk or a coyote and everyone would call him names and heap abuse on him for not providing the protection they expected and demanded. On numerous occasions, dogs would flaunt danger, staying too far away from their burrows, when they knew a coyote lurked nearby, thinking themselves safe because Q was there to alert them if the predator got too close. He looked for Willowfoot several times, but she was always off treating some dog or other. He saw her a couple of times, in the distance or just as she dropped into a burrow somewhere, but never had the opportunity to visit with her again.

As the summer slowly came to an end, his nerves began to fray. He was unable to eat. He was losing weight and sleep and was constantly tired from the stresses placed upon him by dependent, careless dogs; and by a deepening sense of guilt at not being able to save those who died.

Finally, one day; he snapped.

He had had a particularly bad day with six grieving dogs crying at him, accusing him of not saving their spouses or their children, even though he was nowhere close enough to have done so.

Early one foggy morning he arose and said to himself, “That’s it, I need to leave. I can’t do this anymore.” He had gotten to know a few of the Whitetails over the summer and through conversations with them, had learned where their old colony was. With that as a destination, he looked sadly at his nest, at the only home he had ever known. He thought of Willowfoot Hornblende, and how much he would like to have known her better. All these things pulled at him,

³³ Yumpah, or Squawroot (*Perideridia gairdneri*) is a plant that produces a fleshy tuberous root that was used extensively by First Nations People, and hence its name. In the region of southern Saskatchewan, its occurrence is quite rare.

but knowing his very survival meant leaving, he turned his back on it all, and climbed up and out of his burrow.

Then he quietly disappeared from Broken Hills.

Chapter 10

Musty, the Black-Footed Ferret

Musty had been born the previous May into a litter of only two pups, on the very western edge of a prairie dog town that lay to the south and west of the Whitemud Mountains.

The prairie dogs called his home the Seventy Cubit Dog Town.

It was August now, and the heat radiating off the ground in waves that made the distant sentry mounds look like water, shifting back and forth in the languid days of summer.

At the moment, he was lying in wait, behind a vacant prairie dog sentry mound. Somewhere close by, he knew his brother, Coalfoot, was poking about, searching for something to eat. He had seen him approaching, and Musty now lay in ambush, hardly able to contain his giggles of anticipation. The sound of padding feet approached from the other side of the mound.

He shuffled in place, bunching up his muscles in readiness for the attack. He slowly raised his haunches off the ground, front end tight to the ground, face between his forepaws.

Just as Coalfoot's nose poked out from behind the mound, Musty attacked. He hit Coalfoot's left shoulder, bowling him over.

Coalfoot's response was instantaneous.

He rolled with the blow, wrapping his legs around Musty's chest, and together they tumbled and rolled in the warm dust at the base of the mound.

Their wrestling match was interrupted by the arrival of the two sisters, Sootfoot and Nightfoot. These two lived on the far eastern edge of the dog town, but over the summer had become good friends with Musty and Coalfoot. They had snuck up from behind the same mound as he had lain behind and together had pounced on the two unsuspecting brothers.

A free-for-all of tumbling, growling, snapping ferret pups rolled across the warm dusty ground, scattering leaves and dust in a carefree, rambunctious match of skill and dexterity.

All four were panting hard. They stopped their fighting, and sprawled in the dust, chests heaving.

Coalfoot twisted his body around in a sinuous display of flexibility. "Where did you two come from? I've not seen you all day."

“Oh we were just exploring the south side of town,” Nightfoot said. “Have either of you been over there yet?”

Musty and Coalfoot shook their heads.

Musty looked at Sootfoot. “Didn’t your mother tell you not to go over there? Mine said there was a badger there who would enjoy having us for its supper. I’m surprised your mother would let you go.”

Coalfoot was nodding vigorously. “He’s right. I think I’ll go and tell your mother what you two girls have been up to.”

With a bounding, slinky departure, he dashed off towards the burrow, followed closely by the other three pups.

The two females were begging him not to tell on them. Whether it was their pleading voices or the large black beetle that dashed out from under a small log that changed his mind, they were not sure, but he ceased his dash to the burrow and took off after the beetle. It led him on a zig-zagging course past a sagebrush plant, around several dog mounds, and finally into the entrance of a burrow. Just as the beetle thought it was safe, Coalfoot made a desperate leap, and with a snapping of powerful jaws, gulped it down.

The others quickly searched the area to see if they too could find a nice crunchy snack and were busy rooting about under logs and debris when the female’s mother called to them.

“Children, it’s time for your supper!”³⁴

Four heads snapped up in unison. Four heads looked at each other. Then two ferrets dashed the burrow where their mother had once again disappeared, while Coalfoot and Musty set off to their nest burrow further off to the west.

Once there, they dove headfirst into the burrow, down to the natal den. In a chamber lined with dried grasses, lay their mother. She rolled onto her side and exposed her full teats for the pups to nurse. With no table manners at all, the two pups dove into her and immediately began to suckle. Soon, the small chamber was echoing with noisy slurps, and smacking sounds, as the pups drank. The meal did not last long, as she was beginning to produce less and less milk. As the pups aged, they also began to develop sharp teeth that were beginning to hurt her as they nursed.

She looked fondly down at the two hungry pups that were now licking their lips and snuggling into a heap of black and tan bodies. Sleep came stealthily upon them all, and in just a few minutes, the noises of supper were replaced with the gentle snorts and snoring from ferret noses.

³⁴ Black-footed ferrets, like all mammals provide milk to their young. The mother weans her young off her milk when the young ferrets are several weeks old.

Within the next week, both pairs of pups were fully weaned and the bond that existed between themselves and their mothers was beginning to weaken. They made more and more forays out into the dog town, searching for and catching their suppers.

As September approached, they made fewer and fewer visits to their mothers, and then one day, none at all.

Musty and his brother also drifted apart. He had not felt a desire to be with him for some time now, preferring his own company to that of Coal.

He did miss Night though. She had become a very close friend over the summer, and her prolonged absences bothered him. But she preferred the company of the others, so he began to spend more and more time alone. The bond between his brother and the two females remained strong as fall progressed, and they continued to travel everywhere together.

Late one afternoon, on a drizzly fall day, he met his mother while he was out hunting, and stopped to visit with her for a few moments. She was quite cold and distant, but as they chatted, she began to relax.

“Mother,” he said, “I am thinking of going away and starting my life somewhere else.”

She looked at him curiously and asked, “Are you going with your brother?”

He shook his head. “No. I think I’ll head out on my own. Do you know of any other dog colonies like this one, where I could go and live?”

She looked at him with approval. “As a matter of fact, I do; east of here, across the Whitemud River. I passed through on my way here, and I did not see any evidence of other ferrets there.” Thinking back, she continued, “The dogs also tasted very good.”

After she told him how to find the town, he rose, and wishing her well, turned his back on the only family and home he had ever known.

He set off by himself. His mother sat and watched him go, thinking, “There goes the pick of that litter. I wish his brother was as independent as he is, but I suspect he’ll live with me forever. Hmmp.”

Unbeknownst to his mother, Coal had decided that he too needed to leave home. The sisters had also decided the time had come to seek their own adventures, and that they wanted Coal to come with them. They had discussed separating and going their ways, but the two females, Nightfoot and Sootfoot just couldn’t think about being apart, and as always, Coalfoot simply tagged along where ever they went. They left without a word of goodbye to their mothers, and late one fall afternoon, they headed into the Great Unknown.

Chapter 11

Musty Leaves Home

Musty spent most of that first winter traveling east and north of the Whitemud River, searching for a dog town to live in, and one where he might find a mate of his own. He seldom thought of his brother, but often remembered his friend Night and the fun times they had shared. He wondered where they might be now, and whether they too had left home.

Unknown to him, since their tracks had long been weathered away, he had crossed their trail the day before. He subsisted on a diet completely absent of prairie dogs after the first day and that took some getting used to. Sleeping by day, hunting and traveling by night, he meandered his way towards the south where he encountered his first forest of Thorny Buffalo Berry. Intimidated by the darkness and gloom of the forest, he turned and wandered first east, then north, with no destination in mind.

His nocturnal hunting patterns, taught by his mother, were deeply ingrained in him. Prairie dogs slept at night and were easiest to sneak up on then, so he did the opposite. Out here, most of his prey was active during morning and evening, and he began to find the hunting most successful. He had gradually changed from nocturnal to crepuscular. Now he seemed to spend as much time hunting and traveling during the day as he had at night before he left home.

It was on a fine late spring day that Musty finally reached the banks of the Whitemud River again, far to the east of his first encounter with it. Along the way, he had dined on a variety of foods, most that were new to him. Never had his diet been so varied, so rich. Instead of a diet composed completely of prairie dogs, he ate numerous sage voles, several pocket gophers and even two kangaroo rats.³⁵ He had liked them the best. Not so much because of their flavor, but because of the way they made him work for his supper. Bounding and leaping over and around

³⁵ The Ord's Kangaroo Rat (*Dipodomys ordii*) has the ability, due to specialized kidneys, to go through its entire life without ever having a drink of water. They can eat dry seeds and convert a portion to moisture (Frank 1988). They neither sweat nor pant like some mammals to reduce their body temperature. Instead they hide in underground burrows during the day, where the temperature and humidity is moderated, and come out only at night. Their middle ear has evolved to be very sensitive to the sounds of an owl's wing and the rattle of a snake. There are 22 species of kangaroo rats in North America, but the Ord's is the only one in this part of the Northern Great Plains (<https://www.desertusa.com/animals/kangaroo-rat.html>).

obstacles, changing directions faster than a thought, and all in the darkest of nights. All in all, great fun, and a moderately good tasting dinner at the end of the chase.

He had only a vague idea of what a *river* was. The reality of the thing left him shocked and amazed. So much water in one place – it was simply astounding!

The river had dropped considerably after the spring snow runoff, and if he was ever to tackle such an obstacle, now was as good a time as any. Where Musty encountered the river, the water was less than half a cubit in depth. In width, it was perhaps 15 to 20 cubits, and it was gently trickling over and through the boulders that formed its bed.

Musty approached the shoreline with considerable caution. The river had eroded a steep bank on his side, dropping vertically for perhaps a dozen cubits before ending in a pile of rubble, roots, and branches at the bottom. He lay on his belly and slowly inched his way forward, until his head, neck and upper chest were hanging over the cliff edge, his front legs braced below him on the dusty earthen wall. He leaned out as far as he could, tail twitching in nervousness, scanning the area below and wondering if he should find another way down. He slid just a bit farther.

And suddenly, right from under his chin, a bird exploded out from the cliff face.³⁶ He was in mid-flinch when suddenly the entire cliff face erupted in a swarm of birds leaving their hidden burrows below him. They rose upwards in a blizzard of feathers, then turned, swooped and were upon him in seconds. So quick and well-aimed were their attacks that he was caught completely unprepared; and unbalanced. With his front feet still scrabbling on the loose soil of the cliff face, he tried to back away to safety. Just as his front feet found purchase, the portion of the bank he lay upon shifted, cracked, and slumped forward.

He knew with absolute certainty that this was not going to be fun.

The only thing that saved him was his incredibly flexible body. Even as the bank was collapsing under him and carrying him towards the river below, he had gained some grip with his hind feet, and pushing hard, he launched himself in a flying leap towards a patch of softer ground, right at the water's edge.

Time slows perceptively when you are caught in a surprise.

It seemed to take forever for his aerial acrobatics to come to their end. Feeling quite smug with his abilities, he even had a small grin on his face when he landed. The grin faded quickly though when he began to understand what it was he had landed upon. He was expecting wet sand, a soft “plop” and perhaps muddy feet. What he found was mud that seemed to be bottomless. He hit, not with a plop, but with a splat, and immediately started to sink into it. Time suddenly went into

³⁶ There are not many places on the plains for bank swallows (*Riparia riparia*) to dig their nesting tunnels (COSEWIC 2013). They need soft soils to excavate their burrows horizontally into these cliff faces, and in most parts of the northern plains, these are found along the outer bank where a river makes a sharp turn. They live in large colonies, such as the one described here. Depending upon seasonal conditions along their migration route, they may arrive earlier or later in the spring.

overdrive, and now everything was a blur of motion and flying mud, as he tried desperately to extricate himself from the clinging, bottomless ooze.

He had never had the opportunity to swim before, and this was clearly not the right place to practice. He was tiring rapidly from simply trying to stay on top and gradually his panicked motions slowed. As soon as they did, so, too, did the rate of his sinking. Realizing this, he stopped completely, all four legs spread out as far as they could reach, cream-colored chin resting lightly upon the churned-up black mud of the riverbank, nostrils blowing mud-bubbles.

The black mud of the river had made his distinctive black mask not so distinctive anymore. He was almost invisible to anyone watching from above, and he lay for a moment, catching his breath, only his ears flicking back and forth, jet black eyes searching left and right, up and down, and small greyish-pink nose quivering and scenting.

He carefully pulled his legs back against his body, and, trying to be as streamlined as possible, began a sinuous undulation, squirming his way forward across the wetness of the mud. He did not have far to go to the base of the cliff, and he managed to crawl up into the pile of logs, roots and other debris at the base of the cliff. The swallows, now that they could see him again, renewed their attacks with enthusiasm.

Musty ignored them and focused instead on the most tantalizing aroma he had ever smelled. It came from down near the water, just upstream from where he lay, dripping mud and water. He had no idea what it was, but supper had always taken priority over any physical discomfort. Still soaked and covered in mud, he gave a huge shake and mud droplets flew in all directions, splattering several of the swallows as they dove upon him. Startled, they flew back to their tunnels and finally left him alone.

He moved upstream to investigate the source of the smell. The shoreline here quickly moved from quagmire to rocky and his footing was once again firm. He lay on his belly, and “flowed” forward, conforming to every rock and boulder. His body draped loosely and was pushed from behind by his paddling feet. As he nosed his way through the rocks towards the edge of the flowing water, the smell became even more captivating. Suddenly it was right there – touching the very tip of his nose, and almost overpowering him with the smell. He was salivating now, ferret drool dripping off his lips and drifting away in little white gobs on the current.

He gently reached out and pushed the thing with one front foot, half expecting it to dash off and try to escape. It just lay there. Disappointed, he pushed it again and when it threatened to topple into the water, he quickly reached out with both paws and brought it back onto solid ground.

He lay down once again; this time with his catch trapped between his front legs and tried to bite into it. His teeth scratched and scabbled, unable to get a grip on its hard, smooth surface. The scraping of his needle-sharp teeth on the surface of the shell sent shivers down his spine. He flipped it over and tried again.

Still no luck, and now his stomach was growling louder than a pack of grasshopper mice. He stood the thing on end and bit into the side of it and suddenly, his canines found purchase. A thin crack formed around its rim, and with the careful insertion of his teeth, and then his claws, he quickly gained access to the most succulent meal he had ever had.³⁷ Soft and juicy, slimy and wet, it slid down his gullet with no effort. The slightly salty taste, its rich flavor and easy access (it did not try to run away) inspired him to look for more. Up and down the stream he went, nose poking into holes, flipping over rocks in a frantic desire for more and more clam. He found open shells where someone else had dined before him, and a few more intact ones which he quickly opened and consumed.

It wasn't long before this stretch of the river was depleted. He was satiated, though, having eaten about a dozen of them. He found the last one perhaps a hundred cubits upstream from where he had made his less-than-dignified way down to the river. In his mind now, he had "made his way carefully", and should he bump into any of his kin, that's how the story would be told.

Musty now found himself at a bend in the river, and his side of it was facing the western sky and the warm sun that hung there. The sand around him had been heated all day and radiated warmth out to him. He was perfectly sheltered here, both from the wind that blew above him and from prying eyes. His eyes were suddenly becoming very heavy; tired from his exertions, from a full tummy and from basking in the warmth, he felt an overpowering need to have a nap. A short distance above him the high water from last spring had carved a smooth level place, a sheltered ledge overhung by roots.

A perfect spot for a nap. he thought. He stretched to his full length on the warm sand and reveled in the luxury and freedom of his life out here away from home.

Far off to the northwest, clouds were piling up against the horizon, hanging above the pale blue line that was the Whitemud Mountains. Every now and then he could see tiny lights illuminating the interior of the clouds, but no sound made its way to him.

He thought he had probably never found a nicer place, nor had a better meal, and with dreams of clams, he slowly closed his heavy eyelids and drifted off to sleep.

³⁷ There are two species of freshwater clams in the Frenchman River: the giant floater (*Pyganodon grandis*) and the fatmucket (*Lampsilis siliquoidea*). Both are bivalve mussels and are common in these waters. They are a major source of food for a variety of animals that haunt the river. Raccoons, mink, magpies, and even coyotes have learned to eat them.

Chapter 12

The Storm

Sandy came over to him, and with a nudge said, “Come, my friend. It’s time we left.”

Pebble was so focused on the almost non-existent probing he felt from the far side of the city that at first, he did not hear Sandy.

He strained as hard as he could to feel it again. That slight tickle, as though a feather had gotten inside his head.

Nothing.

“Pebble,” Sandy repeated. “What’s the matter?”

He looked across the city to where the others had now disappeared, then back to Pebble. Pebble, meanwhile, had shaken himself out of the trance and turned. “Nothing, Sandy. Nothing at all. Let’s be on our way; we’ve got a long way to go.”

Sandy came over and gave Pebble a soft shoulder-check. “They will be fine. We’ll find out what we need to know and be with them again in no time.”

He tried to sound reassuring, but it was difficult, since he too was having a hard time turning his back on his distant friends, and, though he might deny it, particularly Fiona.

But turn their backs they did, and a few minutes later they were past the outer fringes of Broken Hills and once again headed into the Great Unknown.

After having traveled for several weeks since they left their friends in Crocus Flats, Sandy thought he should be used to being out here in a strange and foreign wilderness. Away from the safety and security of a dog town, of being surrounded by others who were dedicated to looking out for you and your friends.

But he wasn’t. He wasn’t at all. The thought of going out into that vast unknown with only Pebble at his side still made him nervous. The thought of going to seek out a pair of killer ferrets was enough to make his stomach churn with fear. He knew Pebble must be experiencing similar emotions and so he pulled himself together, putting on what he liked to think of as his “Astiti face”, to show how calm and strong he was, and said to Pebble, “You’re right. Let’s be on our way.”

Now, a month later, they were still traveling southwest towards where the dog town was supposed to be. They had begun early this morning and had taken a break in a field of boulders.

Securely hidden, they both had a nap and awakened refreshed and ready to travel. Sandy shook himself out of his reverie and looked around.

He looked up at the sun and was shocked to see it already swung past its midday position. “Surely, that must be wrong; we couldn’t have spent the entire morning and got only this far,” he thought. Time had indeed seemed to drag and slow down, though. And the afternoon *was* well underway.

Pebble had already begun walking while Sandy was thinking, and he had proceeded ahead by several cubits. Sandy ran and caught up a short distance later. Pebble was moving confidently now, a sure determination and sense of purpose in his strides; tail pointed straight up, eyes and nose raised high; focused on the landscape ahead. They traveled like this for the rest of the afternoon: Pebble leading and using his gift to search out danger, and Sandy plodding along behind, watching their back-trail for anything sneaking up on them.

The late afternoon sun was just beginning to set behind a massive thunderhead in the western sky when they entered a field of huge boulders much larger than those where they had napped earlier. The thunderhead towered over the Whitemud Mountains so high, it made them seem like tiny foothills instead of the massive mountain range he knew they were. The cloud appeared bruised; purple and black, with shades of dark green in splotches scattered here and there across its belly.

It seemed to hover angrily over the mountain, snagged and held in place by one particularly tall and jagged mountain peak; hooked and held there against its will. The cloud roiled and churned in protest, seeming to turn itself inside-out, then back again and growing larger and larger. The sun finally slid partway behind the upper rim of the monster, and in seconds, the cloud’s interior erupted into a seething, brilliantly colored cauldron of rage.

Lights began to flash from within the cloud. It had doubled in size while Sandy watched it out of the corner of one eye; the other focused on Pebble who was ahead of him. Strange flickering lights: on-off, on-off in rapid-fire succession, it continued to churn. The upper reaches of the cloud, where they touched the heavens, were as pure a white as he had ever seen. The shadows cast by the various cloud layers created a three-dimensional spectacle, the like of which he could never have imagined. As the sun settled lower, these pristine white mounds shifted first to a pale yellow, like that of the prickly pear cactus that was just starting to bloom, then to a deep pink and finally to blood-red. Wherever the cloud thinned a little, it was shot through by the stronger rays of sunlight from behind in the most amazing display of shifting luminescent hues and shades; brilliant yellows to deepest orange, then back again to deep purple and with a flash of lightning, back to purest, darkest black. A black so dense it looked like a moonless night had formed under the cloud.

They could hear it now: the voice of the sky. Both looked over their shoulders at the monster that seemed to crouch over them, as though waiting for the perfect moment to strike them down. Enraged at its forced captivity on the mountain peak, it announced its anger with one long low rumble that seemed as though it would never end. A vibration felt deep in the chest, rather than

heard by the ears. The bass rumble seemed to travel better through the earth below than the sky above, and they felt it pass by them through the soft pads of their paws. The humidity in the air was building rapidly; the air shifting from a warm dry desert breeze to a moist, almost-clinging heat.

Pebble glanced over at Sandy and saw two tiny, brilliant blue orbs, perched, one on the tip of each of Sandy's ears. He stopped and stared, stunned by the sight of these two dancing, sparkingly transparent jewels; and was amazed at Sandy's apparent unconcern about their antics on his ears.

"Sandy," Pebble began carefully, "Do you feel anything unusual on your ears?" Sandy cocked his head to one side, then tilted it to the other, then back again; eyes turned upwards in their sockets until just the whites showed, trying to see or feel, or hear anything unusual. He gave up. "Nope, nothing."

Seeing the look of concern on Pebble's face, he asked, "Why? Is there something on me?"³⁸

Pebble thought carefully about how to answer that question. He had no idea what beings these were; if they were just along for a ride, as fireflies sometimes did, or if they meant Sandy harm. He decided to pretend that they were indeed harmless glow bugs and said, "Yes Sandy, looks as though you've got a couple of fireflies for company. One is riding on each of your ears. I hear it's a sign of good luck," he invented, to keep Sandy from swatting them away. Sandy looked worried and was in the middle of tilting his head to one side again when the two mysterious orbs simply vanished. They did not fly away as a firefly would; instead just poof ... with no noise or signal of intent, they simply vanished, leaving Pebble wondering if he'd really seen them. Pebble gave his body a huge shake of relief and let Sandy know that the mysterious things had disappeared. Sandy too felt a need to have to shake and settle his fur back down after this episode of horripilation. Sandy glanced back to his right and was shocked to see how the western world had been transformed in just the few minutes he had been distracted.

The first cloud had now been joined by a slightly smaller, but far meaner looking cloud that had slid down along the eastern face of the long mountain range. "Mean" was indeed the first thought that came to mind, and he was becoming a little worried about the violent show that was taking place as the two clouds neared each other.

The newcomer was flashing almost constantly. The huge cloud would light from within, illuminating the sickly pea-greenness, and the other would respond with a similar outburst of rage.

Finally, with a surge of ecstatic, electrically charged freedom, the first cloud ripped itself free of its mountain top snare. The two clouds began a battle that sent Pebble and Sandy in search of a

³⁸ Ball lightning is tiny balls of static electricity that look and behave just as I've described them. When you see these brilliantly blue orbs on your friends, your horses or dogs, you know that the moisture in the air is highly charged with static electricity – so much so that you can occasionally feel the hair on your arms and the back of your neck stand up, but strangely, you will not feel the electric balls themselves. I was riding a horse just before a major thunder storm like this, and two little balls, each perhaps the size of a grape, danced on my horse's ears. They were there for almost a minute, completely freaking me out, then, phsst ... they were gone! My horse did not react to them or even seem to know they were there.

place to hide. The first cloud began sending out vicious blasts of silvery-blue lightning, straight into the heart of the impudent newcomer. Flash after flash of snaking, slashing, almost-blinding bolts that should have shredded the smaller cloud, but instead, merely seemed to aggravate it and make it more powerful; as though it were soaking up the energy from the blasts and storing it, hoarding it, for an explosion that would shatter time and space.

When the first cloud had managed to rip itself free of the ragged mountain peak, it had torn open its underbelly in the process, and the space between it and earth below was now being deluged by vast quantities of dark purplish-blue-grey strands of cloud innards. The cloud's viscera flowed out in broad sheets that waved back and forth across the landscape, forming an impenetrable curtain that completely obscured the landscape behind it. Free at last, but in an agony of liberation and expulsion, the gravid cloud opened, spread itself wide, and ejected a rainstorm unlike any this region of the Great Plains had experienced in many, many years.

Both clouds were now into full-blown battle; attack and counter-attack, sending lightning back and forth and, even more, worrisome to our adventurers – now sending bolts streaking down to the ground in random blasts that struck first far away, then closer and closer to them. Within minutes the two storms had spread across the entire western horizon, from Seventy Cubit Butte to the northwest, all the way to the Three Sisters Buttes to the southwest, and they were rapidly coming east.

The roar was making it difficult to hear, and it was now accompanied by the sound of the wind. Puzzled, at first, and unable to determine what the sound was, it took Sandy a moment to realize that it was a wind unlike anything he had ever heard, and he was rapidly switching from worry to outright terror.

They had crossed a steep-walled drainage channel earlier in the day, and Sandy was debating returning to it in search of a break from the wind, but the thought of turning tail to the wind and losing the ground they had covered soon made him re-think the idea. Instead, he lowered his head and with his nose pointed straight into the wind, continued forward, following the long tail of Pebble.

They had been making their way through a vast forest of tumbleweeds for some time now. Each tumbleweed was shaped like round a ball and they shook and swayed in the pounding wind. Their thin branches provided minimal protection from the blasts which assailed them. The wind passing through the intricate branches contributed to the shrieking wail that threatened to deafen them.

Pebble had stopped just a short distance ahead, and Sandy had to shout to make himself be heard over the violence between the two clouds.

“Pebble,” he yelled as loud as he could from only two cubits behind Pebble's long tail. “Wait for me!”

Pebble heard only the last "... for me!". It was enough, though. He halted in the lee side of a small sagebrush, and Sandy came up and lay next to Pebble in their meager shelter.

"We've got to find a place to hide before this storm hits us!"

Pebble nodded.

"I know," he screamed back. "I've never seen anything like this!"

Sandy scanned around, searching for any potential shelter. Suddenly, his eye caught the shape of what appeared to be a burrow mound behind a nearby greasewood shrub.

He nudged Pebble and pointed. "There, is that a mound?"

Pebble squinted through the dust, trying to see through the leaves and small branches that were flying past. "Yes, I think so. Let's go see if anyone is home."

Pebble stepped from the shelter of the shrub, and in an instant, was blown off his feet and gone, back in the direction they had just come from. He became just another ingredient in the mélange of tumbling, rolling debris that the storm was cooking up somewhere off to the east.

Sandy sat, stunned. This was the second time he had seen Pebble caught by an unexpected wind and be blown away, out-of-sight. The first time, in the blizzard during their departure from Crocus Flats, had ended happily, just a few minutes later.

He was not so certain it would this time. With a shrug of his shoulders and a thoughtless leap, he, too, jumped out from behind the greasewood shrub and entered a world of insanity.³⁹

³⁹ What Pebble and Sandy encountered was a plow wind or *Derecho*. *Derecho* is a Spanish word that means "direct" or "straight ahead" and this is exactly what it does, as opposed to a tornado (from the Spanish word *tornar*, which means "to turn"). They have been clocked at more than 190 km hour in the region of GNP. The winds form at the leading edge of a line of thunderstorms and travel in a straight line, literally plowing the ground ahead of the storm, hence their more common name, a plow wind.

Chapter 13

Musty and the River

He was awakened in the middle of the night by heavy rains. The first heavy drops had come singly; each huge drop creating a miniature crater that exploded outward with considerable force. Within seconds, the sporadic rain had turned into a deluge and Musty was as wet as he had ever been. He dashed up the slope and crawled deep under the overhanging roots. A small cave had been excavated here by the swirling floods of spring, and in it he now took shelter. He gave his sinuous body a shake and water droplets flew in all directions.

“Yuck,” he said. “I hate being wet!”

He surveyed his new surroundings and found them suitable for an escape from a storm. With another vigorous shake, he was beginning to dry, and here in the security of his small cave, warm. He lay down once again and watched the rain as it cascaded down. The screen of old, grey, withered roots that hung down in front, were now turning black, as the rain trickled its way along their slender forms. Soon, water was dripping from the saturated wood, almost equaling the force of the rain as it pounded the sand below.

He drifted off to sleep, lulled by the sound of the rain and the river below.

The rain was still coming down as dawn made a feeble attempt to light up the river valley. He stood and stretched, arching his long back, his tail switching and his whiskers damp from the humidity. He approached the edge of his cave carefully, mindful of the last time he had approached the river. What he saw took his breath away.

Instead of the gentle burbling of the river from the previous night, this morning he was faced with a raging torrent. The river had swollen overnight,⁴⁰ engorged with fresh water, and now it was trying to rid itself of as much as it could, as quickly as it could.

It seemed to have become a living being that was writhing, seething, twisting and trying desperately to free itself from the confines of its banks, roaring as loud as it could in the process.

And it was about to succeed. In the short time, he had been watching the water level, it had risen from perhaps two cubits below the ledge he stood on, to lapping at his toenails. He backed carefully away, and walked a short distance downstream, trying to see through the rain to where

⁴⁰ Flash floods from storms like this are a very real threat to anyone or anything caught in or near a drainage channel. They can be bone dry one minute, and full of a raging torrent the next.

the ledge would take him. He only made it three cubits, and the sandy ledge fizzled into nothingness. It ended in a deep swirling backwater eddy, branches, leaves, even a dead mouse; swirling and dipping, appearing and vanishing again, caught forever in a trap they couldn't get out of.

No hope of going anywhere in that direction. He slunk back to the upstream end of the cave, and tip-toed forward, head straining to see around the corner of the bank that formed the wall of the cave.

He just had time to pull himself back inside as a huge tree came crashing past, branches dragging along the shore and scraping off everything they encountered along the way. He had thought himself safe and had just taken a step forward, when a last trailing branch slid past the opening, snapped into it and caught him just behind the shoulders.

One second, he was standing there warm and dry, the next he was flying through the pouring rain, tumbling tail over whiskers, legs flailing, desperately searching for something, anything to grab hold of.

Nothing.

Just massive quantities of water, pounding him down, down, towards the raging flood below.

Then, with a tumbling crash, he hit the tree, and with every ounce of his strength, he grabbed hold of a thin branch. For a moment he thought it would break. Then it began to bend, and bend, slowly lowering him again towards the flood. He managed to get a grip with his front claws and teeth, but the rest of him dangled precariously. His tail hit the water first, and with a squeak that almost caused him to relinquish his grip, he curled his tail up tight between his hind legs. Then his feet were in the water.

Frantic now, he began to run, first one foot then the other, splashing down and hitting the roiling surface of the river, like a bird trying to take off. His step lengthened as his fear increased, and on one forward-reaching stride, his right hind foot caught on something solid.

Instinct rather than planning caused his middle toenail to grasp at the branch. Now he was stretched out from one end to the other, still clinging to the overhead branch and anchored by one lonely claw to the branch below. Carefully he pulled his other leg forward and managed to get both feet firmly anchored on the larger branch below him. All of this without being able to see a thing except for the heavy grey clouds above him; blinking through the rain that pounded his upturned face.

His eyes swept back and forth in panic, just as a particularly large raindrop hit him square on the end of his nose, flooding both nostrils with a deluge that threatened to drown him. He knew it was coming; felt it deep in his skull and could do nothing about it. The sneeze that was building inside his flooded nasal passages came with a sense of doom. It was so violent that it blew through his nose and mouth, and his weak grip on the branch was lost.

He stood there for what seemed an eternity, balanced only on his hind toenails, swaying to the rhythm of the river below. Then the tree hit a large wave, rose under him and shoved him forward onto the main branch. He clung there; all twenty claws deeply embedded in the damp bark. His eyes had been completely shut during this last bit of his ride, and he slowly opened them, peering ahead into the raging storm and violence of the river.

The branch that had saved him held his body about six cubits above the river, and it seemed stout enough to hold him away from the dangers below. He knew that should he fall into that maelstrom; he would simply disappear. He lowered his body as tight to the branch as he could, and, once again, dug his sharp canines into the branch.

Every so often, the root ball of the tree, floating head first down the river, would catch on something and the tree, forced by the power of the current, would rise vertically; once almost to its former position in life. In death though, it couldn't defy gravity long and it crashed back into the river. He almost lost his grip several times when the tree did this, but each time he managed to hang on one more time.

The end of his ride, when it came, came very fast. He was in the process of shifting to get a better grip when the river rounded a sharp corner. The branches on the downstream side caught on the riverbank and held the tree motionless for a moment. As the tension built, he thought he might just be able to leap over to the riverbank. Instead, like a slingshot, the tree released its pent-up energy and catapulted him away. He was becoming well acquainted with flight by this time and had a vague inkling of what to expect as he tumbled, end over end, towards the far shore.

His world became a slow-motion cycle of river, bank, and sky; river, bank, sky ... bank! He caught a glimpse of his destination just before he hit. The force of the release when the branches snapped back, had thrown him high and long, and approaching him now was the largest patch of prickly pear cactus he had ever seen.

"How does one prepare for such a landing?" was the thought that flashed through his brain, just before he landed, head first in the cactus patch. As he lay there, stunned, he thought, simply, "One does not."

Musty took stock. "My head feels fine – a little gooey, but otherwise fine. My body and legs don't hurt. I don't feel any spines poking through any of my tender parts. How can this be?"

He opened his eyes, and just as quickly closed them. Opened them again; very, very carefully. His eyelashes rubbed against the needle-sharp points of a cluster of cactus thorns – so close that the points blurred out of focus. The rain had left hundreds of drops of water suspended on the tips of every thorn and his eyelashes were wet from blinking them off.

"I'm going to die, stabbed to death by a cactus, of all things. I hope no one sees me, the embarrassment alone would kill me!" he thought as he hung there, head down and face-first into a cactus. Then he wondered, "Why am I hanging here, and why don't I hurt everywhere?"

With just the minutest movements of his toes, he tried to determine what had happened. His toes felt only the smooth, wet skin of the surface of the cactus. Then he focused on his belly, and it too felt only wet cactus hide. “What the beetle juice ...” he thought. Ever so carefully he retracted his body; began to bunch it up under him, pulling away from the thorns that threatened to skewer his eyes. Once safe from imminent death or blindness, he raised his head looked around. He lay, belly down, head low and bum high on a large, sloping cactus leaf. All around him he could see razor-sharp needles laying in disarray.

He braced his front paws against the cactus and raised himself up even further. What he saw almost caused him to close his eyes again. He had flown through the air and had descended earthward, like a hard-thrown spear, headfirst into a large patch of prickly pear cactus.

As he had descended, his chin had hit first, and acting like a plow, had pushed aside every thorn at its base, neatly breaking them off and sending them flying away to either side into the pounding rain. Because his body was not much greater in diameter than his head, it followed along behind and not one thorn managed to penetrate. Now he lay soaked to the skin and surrounded by thousands of killer thorns, uncertain how to extricate himself.

The rain had begun to slacken, and he could see around better. He searched the area right below his nose and saw that he was within a cubit of the ground. If he could work his way straight down, he could be out of this in no time. Hanging on with his hind toenails, he pushed himself forward, front legs outstretched, in a dive towards the ground. He let himself slide down the leaf, gently snipping off every thorn his teeth could reach, and carefully pushing aside those he couldn't cut. They broke away easily, and within a minute his nose nudged the sandy soil at the base of the cactus. He searched the ground before him, and carefully flicked aside any thorns that might poke him when he landed, then let go with his hind claws, and slid onto the wet sand below him.

A large green bug crawled slowly under his nose, from left to right, trying to blend into the ground and escape before this new arrival could detect him. More out of frustration than hunger, Musty reached out and bit the bug in half.

And instantly wished he hadn't. The bug, a big green stink bug,⁴¹ released the most disgusting stench he had encountered since Sootfoot had burped a meat burp back in their natal den. This was worse. It made his eyes water. The good news was that he was gradually losing his ability to smell, with his nostrils clogged by the stench. The bad news was that his sense of taste seemed to be getting more acute. The taste almost had him vomiting, and despite his efforts to wipe his tongue on his arms, on the sand, even on the edge of the cactus leaf, he was unable to rid himself of the putrid, rotting taste.

He knew he had to move. Looking around, he saw what appeared to be a narrow pathway leading under the thorns and leaves, and at the end of it, a faint glimmer of daylight. Turning

⁴¹ These *Clorochroa sayi* are one of the largest stink bugs on the northern Great Plains, reaching a body length of about 12 mm. They, as their name (*Cloro*) implies, are bright green, with sharp shoulders and a large plate in the middle of their back – the scutellum.

carefully, he stretched out as flat as he could, then, snake-like, wormed his way forward along the narrow pathway. It took only a couple of minutes, but eventually, his nose poked out from under a particularly large and thorn-laden branch, and he was free from his temporary prison.

He stood fully upright now, as high and tall as he could on his hind legs and had a good look around. The rain had stopped, and the heavy grey clouds were soaring by in wispy, scraggly bands, broken here and there by small patches of blue.

Musty turned to the east and looked towards the distant hills. Somewhere out there was the dog town his mother had told him about, and perhaps, a mate.

He struck off again, in an ebullient mood, without a glance behind at the river or the life he had left. He bounded his way deeper into the vast forest of sagebrush lay stretched out ahead of him.

It took him two days and two nights to cross the forest. During that time, he had enjoyed a diet of sagebrush voles, lots and lots of deer mice, and more recently the thrill of the chase and a meal or two of a mouse that was so fast, he just about couldn't catch it.⁴²

The first time he saw one, it was a flash of yellowish-brown and white that streaked across and away from him. It was there and gone so fast, he didn't have the time to decide what to do. It left a lingering trail of scent behind, though, and to a hungry ferret, it was very tantalizing.

"The next time one of those shows itself, I'm having supper," was the thought that flashed through Musty's mind, about as fast as the mouse had done.

That next time was only a few minutes later.

This time he smelled it before he saw it and was better prepared when it leaped up from its hidden place, and in bounding leaps, dashed way. In an instant, he was hot on its heels. The mouse was incredibly agile; dodging, leaping, climbing shrubs and clumps of grass, as it wove its way through the sage. And always just out of Musty's straining teeth that were clicking shut with every stride, trying to connect with at least the tail of this infuriatingly fast meal.

Finally, the mouse was passing along the branches of a large sagebrush, and it zigged when it should have zagged. Musty was able to leap upwards and grab it by the tip of its tail. He stopped instantly and the mouse was pulled backward from its branch above him. It landed on all four feet, facing away from Musty's mouth, and with a leap, tried to get away again. It hit the end of its firmly trapped tail, landed and tried again. Musty stood as high as he could on his hind feet and lifted the mouse off the ground so that it dangled straight down in front of him.

With no warning, the mouse curled its pure white belly and using its sharp claws, pulled itself up and up until it was climbing its own tail, straight up to Musty's nose... where it proceeded to

⁴² The Western Jumping Mouse (*Zapus pinceps*) is a very fast, medium sized mouse with a very long tail (about 140 mm), and a body just slightly shorter. It runs, hops and climbs quickly on the ground and through the vegetation canopy. Its scientific name is derived from the Greeks "Za" for very, in reference to its large feet, and "pus" for foot. "Princeps" is Latin for "first" and is used in reference to the animals' unusual appearance.

give him a vicious chewing. Stung by the pain of its sharp claws dug into each side of his nose, and vicious teeth ripping into his sensitive nostrils, Musty threw his head backward, flinging the mouse out and up, opened his jaws, and with a single snap of his powerful jaws, put an end to it.

Despite the pain on his sensitive nose, he thoroughly enjoyed that meal. He decided that from now on, this was going to be his favorite meal.

After a brief nap, he set off once more. As he did, he became aware of a change in the western sky. Storm clouds were building rapidly along the crest of the small mountain range just ahead, and they were now flashing and raging with bolt after bolt of lightning. Vast sheets of purplish-blue rain soon hid everything to the west. It had been calm during his recent hunt, but now he could feel a breeze beginning to pick up and blow his whiskers backward along his cheeks. "Time to find some shelter," he thought, as the wind began to blow even stronger.

Shelter turned out to be meager, just the shallow diggings of a badger. The hole wasn't very deep, but it was dry. The sound of lightning and the pattering of rain outside lulled him and within a short time, eyelids heavy, he drifted off to a dreamless sleep.

He hadn't traveled very far after this nap when he came to the edge of a ravine. He worked his way up to the sharp edge and looked down. It was filled about halfway with a solid mat of tumbleweeds. They were so thick, he was unable to see very far into the stack, but it looked like a cozy place to hunker down and wait out the storm. Even as he sat and looked, a dozen more tumbleweeds arrived up and down the ravine from where he sat, herded along by the wind and settled themselves comfortably as though they knew what was coming and were seeking shelter as well. He carefully worked his way down the steep wall and out into the maze. More tumbleweeds arrived and settled above him. Soon he was completely surrounded and out of the wind, inside a golden latticework of branches and stems. He curled himself into a ball and fell fast asleep.

Chapter 14

The Ferret Trio

It was late September when the two sisters, Nightfoot and Sootfoot and Musty's brother Coalfoot left their home. They headed southeast, if for no more than that was the direction the last prairie dog ran while being chased by Soot. The dog had been out foraging late in the evening, just as twilight was stealing across the prairie. It had been right on the edge of the Borderlands and when she had snuck up between it and the town, it had nowhere to go but into the tall vegetation to the east.

It had led her on a merry chase, dashing from one rock to another, from sagebrush to greasewood shrub, and off to a dense stand of sneezeweed where it thought it could hide. This gave Coal and Night a chance to go around, and then it was only a matter of waiting. It seemed that a prairie dog could hold its breath for about a minute; for that was how long it took for the sneezing attack to begin. It began with just a stifled little snort but soon erupted into a full-blown sneezing bout that nearly blew the dog right out of the sneezeweed patch. Eventually, it couldn't take anymore, and it dashed straight out of the sneezeweed and into Soot's waiting jaws.

Both Night and Coal tried to get a piece of the dog but, would Soot share? No way! She lay there under a greasewood shrub and devoured her meal.

The others gave up and Night just lay there waiting, while Coal tried to find the cricket that was chirping maddeningly somewhere close by.⁴³

He was having a hard time since it was hiding under a thick matt of juniper. The fact that it was pure black and was in deep shadow did not help. Finally, just when he was about to pounce on a spot he was sure it was in, the thing flew up under his nose and was gone. Coal made a desperate, flying leap and just about snapped it out of the air, but missed. Annoyed and still hungry, he returned just as the others were getting ready to leave.

"Well, that was very nice; very nice indeed", said Soot smugly, as she licked the blood off her paws, and preened her chest. It hadn't taken the ravenous ferret very long to work her way through the meal, and she left only the larger bones and offal behind. The other two gave her a disgusted look.

Coal turned to Night. "Let's go a bit further and see what we can scare up. There might be some more careless dogs out this way."

⁴³The field cricket (*Gryllus veletis*) is often pure black. If you have ever walked a prairie grassland you will have heard the loud, non-stop chirping of these insects.

Night nodded and turned, bounding off into the wilderness ahead.

The ferret's home colony lay on an outwash plain at the southern end of the Whitemud Mountains. The land to the west gently undulated, rising and falling away to the western horizon like waves on a grassy ocean. Their route took them south through similar swales and hillocks, small ravines and gullies, towards a distance dominated by a low range of hills and square-topped buttes.

Here it was mostly open grassland, interspersed with tall silver sage and low-growing greasewood. The sage had begun to turn color now that fall was well advanced. The dark, scaly stems were highlighted by a screen of fine silvery leaves. This filigree of silver merged towards the top into the yellowish-green seed heads that crowned the shrub, as though it pretended to be some form of floral royalty. The mild evening breeze had the whole entourage of stately gowned shrubs nodding and swaying, bowing in benediction to the lesser plants that danced around their feet.

The trio slowly worked their way through the sage, searching now for anything remotely edible. The landscape seemed devoid of warm-blooded supper and, growing impatient, Night had begun scanning the ground for any insects that might have the temerity to stand their ground. It was in this cranky mood that she discovered a beautifully iridescent beetle that sauntered; had the gall to *stroll* away from her. The wing covers of the beetle were an incredible iridescent purple, with a head and body that glistening like a highly polished emerald. She could tell it knew she was there, for when discovered, it turned, faced her, rose up on its long dark brown legs and *looked* at her in defiance, waving its useless legs as though it was some fearsome creature to be feared and respected!

It had to die.

The beetle had traveled perhaps a cubit or so during the time it took her to collect her wits. When she did, she was upon it in a single bound. The thing was only about as long as a prairie dog foot, but still, it was food and it had really annoyed her. With one flick of her tongue, she had it in her mouth, and with one crunch of needle-sharp teeth had squashed its insolent juices against the inside of her cheek.

"There," she said to herself, "teach that little bug to ...". She stopped in mid-thought, stunned by the flavor that suddenly erupted on her sensitive taste buds. "What the stale dog is that horrible taste?" Within seconds the vilest, disgusting, stomach-churning feeling overcame her, and she vomited all over the dusty ground at her feet. The taste was so bad she could barely get her breath back, and she stood there, heaving, as she rid herself of the last remnants of the blister beetle.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ The Nuttall's Blister Beetle (*Lytta nuttallii*) is one of over two dozen species of blister beetles to occupy the northern Great Plains. They have a very strong, terrible tasting chemical called *cantharidin*. It's a powerful poison that quickly teaches a predator not to eat one again (Schmidt 2008).

After wiping her lips and tongue on the dry sandy soil and scaly bark of the shrub beside her, she moved away to find her siblings. It took her a while to catch up, and she began to notice that the inside of her mouth, her lips, her tongue and even the tip of her nose were beginning to sting. No; not sting, but to hurt. In rapid progression, she went from mild irritation to outright agony!

The horrible beetle was living up to its name and wherever its juices had touched her, it was causing painful blisters. She caught up to the others finally, and frantically mimed for them to stop.

Puzzled, Soot looked at Coal and shrugged her shoulders. “What’s the matter now?”

Night mumbled, “Itsh my mouthsh – itsh really shore!”

Soot looked at her again. “What did you say?”

This time Night opened her mouth and stuck out her tongue. The raw, blistered surface made the problem clear. Soot went over to a nearby clump of beebalm, and carefully snipped off a couple of dried leaves.

“Here, put this in your mouth; perhaps it will soothe things a bit.”⁴⁵

Gradually the pain subsided. It did not go away, but at least it did numb Night’s mouth a little.

Soot soon set off again, heading away with the rising sun to her left. Morning caught up to them a short while later, and hungry and tired, the trio found a snug shelter under the spreading branches of a juniper shrub. Curled together, they spent their first day away from their home, out on the vast prairie, under the dappled shadow and coolness of the juniper shrub.

⁴⁵ Beebalm (*Monarda fistulosa*) was used by native peoples to help soothe and heal open sores and cuts.

Chapter 15

Into the Storm

The collision of the two storms had created a maelstrom of violence that seemed to go on forever, as did the crazy world in which Pebble and Sandy now found themselves.

As Sandy tumbled into the wind-blasted sage, he caught the occasional glimpse of Pebble, bouncing, rolling, and skittering along the ground ahead of him. It was all Sandy could do just to keep himself from smacking into rocks and shrubs; keeping an eye on another dog in this chaotic, twisting mess was almost more than he was capable of.

At one point, Pebble had managed to grab hold of a low hanging sagebrush branch with both front paws and was flapping in the wind like a ragweed leaf, when Sandy came tumbling past. Pebble saw Sandy go rolling by and yelled “Wait for me, Sandy!”, letting go of the branch to tumble along behind again. The nightmare seemed as though it would never end, until they landed, one atop the other, in a large tumbleweed.⁴⁶

The branches caught them, and bent inwards, like a series of coiled springs, absorbing their impact, but also threatening to catapult them back out into the inferno that raged around them. Sandy managed to grab hold of the main stem with his claws while snagging the back of Pebble’s neck in his teeth and his other arm. Together, they pulled and clawed their way towards the center of the tumbleweed, and in its meager shelter, hugged each other and the central stem for dear life.

The tumbleweed they found themselves in was quite large, perhaps four cubits through the center, and almost perfectly round, though slightly flattened at the base where the central stem and its root attached to the ground. During the summer it would have been a brilliant greenish-blue and covered by dense leaves. Now though, it was just about the same color as their fur – a pale, tawny brown. The central stem rose upwards from the ground in a twisting spiral, from which its branches took off at confusing angles. Each branch, in turn, had numerous smaller branches that intertwined with those around them, creating a structure that was more like a ball with a very strong and flexible internal support grid, or matrix.

The wind was so strong now that the entire shrub was swaying back and forth, straining against the root that held it anchored to the ground. Sandy found himself facing the stem, with both arms

⁴⁶ The tumbleweed common to this part of the northern Great Plains, (*Amaranthus albus*) is an interesting plant. It is known as a *telechory* species – one that uses long-range seed dispersal, through its tumbling action across the landscape. The plant is a *diaspore* – one that disperses seeds and spores, and it is known as a *ruderal* species – one that invades disturbed areas for a period of time, before being gradually replaced by other plants.

and legs hugging the thick stem in front of him. He had to hold his head tilted to one side, and a short stubby branch was poking him right in his left butt cheek. But he at least felt secure.

Pebble, slightly lower down the stem to Sandy's right, was in a similar position. He looked up and yelled, "Thanks for catching me – I don't know where I'd be now if you hadn't!"

Sandy yelled back, "You're welcome." Just then, the wind increased in its fury. The force of the wind had pushed the tumbleweed over until it was lying almost on its side, with the two dogs suspended sideways. The meager light filtered its way through the branches to create a flickering latticework of light. It seemed, somehow, to illuminate the sound of the wind. When sound and light played together inside that complex ball of intertwining branches, it created an experience both exhilarating and terrifying. The wind screamed as though a thousand grasshopper mice with thorns stuck in their paws were trapped inside with them; the lightning flashed, and thunder boomed – they were assailed by a cacophony of sight, sound, and motion that soon had them completely disorientated.

Pebble was just about to readjust his position, when he heard a snapping sound from below him, near the base of the central stem. The stem that anchored them to the ground ... broke.

Then, as though a conductor had stilled his waving arms, the orchestra stopped at a rising crescendo and an almost-silence descended. He barely had time to secure his grip when the world once again went completely nuts.

The tumbleweed began to tumble. The prickly sphere picked up speed, and as it did, the sound of the wind died away.

They were left with the surreal experience of flying, bouncing softly, flying, tumbling, over and over again, but with very little sound.

Their flight came to an end quite softly, when their tumbleweed landed on top of others that had been snagged by the walls of a deep coulee.⁴⁷ As their tumbleweed hung there, quivering in the wind, but now securely fastened to a dozen other tumbleweeds around it, the motion rapidly declined, and their unusual conveyance eventually became stationary and calm.

They were hanging at awkward angles inside the structure, so Sandy and Pebble carefully began to swing around the branches until they finally sat side-by-side on the main stem of the tumbleweed.

⁴⁷ This is the fate for many tumbleweeds in this area. They can eventually completely fill up coulees in such tightly interwoven structures, that no large animal can get through them. Only a combination of natural decay, the weight of winter snow, and then spring flash floods can clear the coulee again. Prairie fires cleaned them out as well. Mounds of skeletal tumbleweeds piled up like this have significant impacts because of the micro-environments they create. They provide shelter and security for a host of small mammal, avian and herptile species, and support a wide range of invertebrate species as well.

By the time they had themselves sorted out, dozens of more tumbleweeds had been stacked above theirs; above, and to all sides, firmly encasing them within a massive structure that seemed to go on forever in every direction.

The wind had created a golden-hued universe of inter-connected stems and branches that faded away into the gloom on all sides. The sound of the wind was muted, and their relief palpable. In the relative calm, they were finally able to talk without having to shout.

Sandy was the first to speak.

“Are you OK, Pebble?”

Pebble looked over and replied, “Yes, I think so. I got a few bruises and a small cut on my shoulder, but otherwise, I seem to be fine. How about you?”

Sandy had been conducting an inventory of his own, to see if everything was where it should be, and his only complaint was a sore bum from where the branch had poked him during their ride.

“Well, we survived that quite well, all things considered. Now, what do we do? I wonder how far we traveled before we stopped here; and where is *here*?”

They could not see the ground in any direction. It was difficult to determine exactly where the ground was: the light that filtered through the dense mass of branches was flat and grey and provided no sense of direction. Even determining what was up from what was down, was becoming distressing!

The spaces between the branches near the trunk were large, and open, with plenty of room to move around. As the branches thinned towards, they merged into the next tumbleweed and into another open space, before shrinking again on the other side. The vast network of branches and stems created a world that could be traversed in any dimension.

Squinting through the holes between the branches, unable to see grass or soil in any direction, Sandy turned to Pebble. “I’m going to break off a branch and drop it, so we can see which way is down; see where it falls and then we can go to one side or the other?” Pebble grinned at the cleverness of the idea, and within a moment, there was no doubt as to which direction was down. There remained considerable doubt though as to which way they should go.

“Pebble,” asked Sandy. “Do you sense any life in here? Can you feel whether anyone else is inside this place with us?”

Startled at the thought that they might not be alone, Pebble stopped what he was doing and focused his abilities; first searching to his left, then to his right, up and then down.

Down!

Someone was indeed down and to their right. He concentrated hard to figure out if it was a threat or not, and eventually reached the conclusion that whatever the being was, it posed them no

risk. The sensation was faint, and he was not able to determine who, or what was there, only that he could detect no threat or danger from it.

Pebble shifted slightly on his branch, looking over his shoulder at Sandy. “There’s definitely something down there but I can’t tell what it is. Do you want to go and see?”

“We might as well. Perhaps whoever it is can give us some idea of where we are, and how we get out of here. You lead the way and keep those eyes of yours peeled – I don’t feel safe in here yet.” Pebble nodded and began to work his way down through the interconnecting pathways formed by the tumbleweed branches.

Travel was surprisingly easy. Both dogs were very adept at using their paws and toes, sharp-pointed claws and teeth to hang on to things, and within minutes they were having fun, swinging from one branch to another, leaping across open spaces and skipping along in a descending route that gradually brought them closer to the source of the thoughts that Pebble had detected. As they neared the ground, the pale, grey light from above had been filtered and re-filtered so many times, that they now entered a world of gloom. The spaces between the tumbleweed stems had turned into dark tunnels that faded off into eternity in all directions.

He knew they were close now.

He could tell by the soft breathing that whatever it was ahead was sleeping and that it was still unaware of them. Still, no danger warnings presented themselves, so, motioning for Sandy to stay where he was, Pebble crept forward, reaching first with one paw, then another, testing each step before placing his weight down. He could smell the being now. A warm, musky, almost oily scent, that caused his paw to freeze in mid-air.

He knew that scent.

His mind was not capable of reacting to the knowledge of what he had done; of who he had just tip-toed up to, and he froze in abject horror.

He dared not move. Lying no more than half a cubit away, stretched out on a bed of branches, lay the vilest creature known to prairie dogs; a black-footed ferret.

The branch upon which he stood began to bend downwards.

Then it cracked with a snap, loud enough to wake up an entire city.

Chapter 16

Q Joins the Quest

Fiona sat on her haunches and hugged herself, shivering slightly. With some effort, she asked, “Do you know what happened here? Do you know if everyone has died, or if they went away somewhere?”

Q sat, lost in some distant reverie. He, too, shivered as though a wind from forty years ago had finally caught up to him, blowing away his thoughts.

“No.”

Once again, he shook himself and turned to gaze over the abandoned city below. “I don’t know what happened here. I don’t know if they all died, or if some managed to get away before the disease claimed them. We may never know. But if there is one thing I have learned during my travels, it’s to never give up hope. You must believe that your life has purpose and meaning.

“Your purpose is to find out what has happened to those who used to live here. You must choose to believe that some left safely.”

Flint had been quiet throughout, and as Q was speaking, he was nodding to himself in agreement. He stood and stretched. “He’s right. He’s right, and it’s time we got going.”

He turned away from the city, looking into the wilderness to the east, and to the flat plain that lay to the north. “Are you ready? Shall we go now?”

Fiona stood also and moved past Juniper to stand before Q. “Are you going to stay here in Broken Hills, or would you like to come with us?”

Flint interrupted before Q could answer the question.

“Can I see you and Juniper over here for a minute?” he asked as he turned away. Once out of hearing he continued, “We don’t know anything about him; he hasn’t told us a thing to make me believe we can trust him. I mean, why is he the only living dog in the city, and why didn’t he come to us sooner if he knew we were here? There are just too many questions to be answered before we accept him or ask him to come with us.”

The others looked at him like he had been eating too much locoweed. “Of course, we can trust him. He hasn’t done or said anything to indicate otherwise, and he may be able to help us in our quest,” said Juniper. Fiona looked puzzled as well, and asked Flint, “Has he done something to make you suspicious of him?”

Flint didn't know how to express his concerns. They were so vague that he couldn't put a claw to it, but something about the dog seemed both strange and familiar at the same time, and this conflict was making him worried.

"There is something different about that dog. I don't know what it is, but he knows a lot more than he is telling us." He looked back at Q, who had been lying there, apparently unconcerned about their conversation. The moment that Flint made eye contact, Q stood and faced the group, and Flint knew with absolute certainty that this was no ordinary dog.

Q smiled a gentle smile, stepped closer, and said, "You do not have to worry about me. I mean you no harm, and in fact, would like very much to help you." He stopped and considered the trio before him. "Do you know what a Foreteller is?"

A flash of recognition exploded over Fiona's face and she exclaimed, "You're him!"

She stood abruptly, and stepped close to him, examining his face intently. "You're the Foreteller that went missing from here all those years ago. Everyone thought you were dead!" She looked at the others as they sat there, surprised at her outburst. "This is Quartz Silverback, you guys. He's a Foreteller, just like Pebble!" Her excitement was beginning to settle now and she moved to sit close to Quartz.

"Please," she said. "Tell us about where you've been all these years. Why have you returned here?"

Over the remainder of that day, the prairie dogs talked, ate, napped, and talked some more. Eventually, even Flint relaxed, and he began to understand the importance of their meeting with Q. He became certain that he must try to enlist the support of this dog in their search for the former residents of Broken Hills.

The revelation that their group had included another Foreteller and that Grandfather Quivertail was still alive and well, greatly surprised Q. All these years he had continued to worry that his Foretelling gift could still do him harm; yet apparently there were two more who appeared sane and sound. And one of them was over a century old!

"Amazing," he said to the others. "I could have stayed here. I could have had friends and perhaps even a family. I could perhaps have saved some of the Broken Hills dogs." He stopped himself there, remembering the pressures that the citizens had placed upon him. "No. If I had stayed, I truly think I would have lost my mind."

He asked Juniper, "You are a healer, right?" Juniper had been examining Flint's paw when Q asked her the question. She finished her examination, satisfied that all was well, and replied, "Yes, I have had had some training as an apothecary and healer. Are you injured somewhere? Is there something I can do for you?"

"No, nothing, I'm fine really." He paused awkwardly for a moment, and then continued, "I just have a question." He looked around at the others, who were quietly going about their business. "I have been alone for most of the last forty years and have grown ... accustomed to being by myself.

Certainly, I have had friendships in passing, but not once in all those years has it been another prairie dog. I left Broken Hills because I was unable to bear the strain of having my friends and neighbors always depending upon me for their safety, and then blaming me when someone got careless and killed.”

Fiona and Flint were deep in conversation and something that Fiona said made the huge Astiti laugh. The sight of these dogs, of how close they were to each other, how comfortable together and how strongly they depended upon each other, led him finally to ask his question.

“Do you think I might come with you?”

Startled, Juniper looked at him and said, “Well, yes. Of course, you can. I thought you had already decided to come, and you must know we all want you to?”

Q nodded. “Oh, I know. It’s just that I’ve been alone ever since I left here, and not once has someone else depended upon me for their survival. If I join your group, you will need my Foreteller ability – but what if I fail you and one of you is injured or killed because I wasn’t able to detect the danger in time?”

She was about to say something, but he held up a paw to interrupt her. “I know, none of us can predict the future, and if something happens, I will do the best that I can. But,” he paused, finally reaching the point where he could ask the question that had been bothering him for so long, “Can you help me not lose my mind if the pressures become too hard?”

The fact that Q still worried about this, four decades after he had left Broken Hills, made Juniper come over and give him a cheek-to-cheek. “Yes, Q. All of us here will help. We are all equally responsible for the safety of each other. Your gift is valuable; no question about it. But it’s no different for Flint, with his training as an Astiti and his responsibility to keep us safe. Fiona feels equally responsible to us since she is the only one of us who has ever traveled the Great Unknown, and I was personally charged with protecting the health of our group. So, Mr. Quartz, you may have a gift we do not, but your responsibility and your accountability are no greater than each of ours.”

The look of relief on Q’s face at this reassurance tore at Fiona’s heart. Instead of making a big deal of it though, she continued to sort through a small pile of herbs which she had collected. She asked Q to go get Flint for her, acting as though their conversation had just been a casual chat, and of no particular importance. Q seemed to understand and with a smile of gratitude, turned without another word and went over to Flint.

A moment later the Astiti was back, “What was that all about?” he asked.

“Oh, nothing much, just getting to know each other better. I’m certain we can trust him, and that he will be of immense value to us. I also think that it’s too late to leave today, and wanted to ask you if you and he could find a good spot for us for the night?”

Flint looked at her appraisingly and nodded. “Fine, I trust your judgment.”

He scanned the sky to the west. A greenish-black thunderstorm was building not far to the west and north, and it towered over the valley. He thought that early May seemed too soon for thunderstorms, but this was clearly going to be a big one. “That cloud looks nasty. You’re right let’s stay another night. We had best find a place on high ground, in case it rains.”

They climbed the lower slopes of the Broken Hills above where Q had lived and found a snug crevice under the edge of a large boulder. Sheltered there, warm and dry, and protected from the raging wind, they spent their first night without Pebble and Sandy, gazing down upon the abandoned city below them.

As she drifted off to sleep, Fiona’s thoughts were of Sandy and she dreamed of their life together once they were safely back in Crocus Flats.

Chapter 17

Long-Foot

The coyote trotted a long trot. The long trot allowed him to cover great distances with very little energy expended.

His feet seemed to barely touch the ground as he padded along. His stride was so long that his hind feet passed to the side of his front feet. So pronounced was his gait that his fellow coyotes had named him Long-Foot.

His nose was constantly searching scenting the air and dipping to the ground as he quested hungrily for his next meal. The trail he followed crossed a shallow ravine that was carpeted with a dense layer of shrubs⁴⁸.

Long-Foot worked his way carefully through the maze, searching for a rabbit who thought it might escape detection in the dark recesses of the shrub understory. With not even a scent of prey drifting in the semi-darkness, he climbed the far slope out of the thinning shrubs, where he emerged onto a high ridge that gently undulated towards the horizon.

He sat and scratched behind his right ear, body twisted, and head cocked to the side, eyes half-closed in that blissful feeling that results from a well-aimed claw – he got it, scratching the itch perfectly. As he sat there, the wind played gently with his fur, lifting it, settling it, and smoothing it. He continued to survey his territory, looking back to the south where he had spent the last few days. The rolling plain showed no variation, no change in character or mood for hundreds of cubits to the south and west. A northern harrier floated by on the wind, dipping, swaying, rising on a thermal, then spiraling back down, its wings beating rapidly, and hovering with head bent and eyes staring at the ground. The bird stopped flapping, folded its wings slightly, and dropped like a stone to the ground. A moment later it rose and floated away on the breeze, a small lifeless brown form dangling from one foot.

Long-foot did not resent the bird its supper, the plain here was crawling with mice and voles and there was plenty left.

⁴⁸ Many of the ravines and coulees of this part of the plains are lined along their bottoms with a mixture of low growing shrubs such as buck brush (*Symphoricarpos albus*), saskatoon (*Amelanchier alnifolia*) and chokecherry (*Prunus virginianus*). The last two played an important role in the manufacture of pemmican by First Nations and early explorers. The fruit was mixed into a pulp with bison fat and pulverized meat and formed the staple of the diet of plains people for hundreds of years.

He knew the area well. He was near the center of his home range,⁴⁹ and the trail he followed was one of many that he used regularly. His range was bordered by a series of scent markers that defined the edge of another coyote's territory. Boulders, shrubs - any elevated object served as a place for them to leave their scent. Long-foot was diligent in marking his posts, the neighbor just as careful about his. To anyone else traveling the region, no visible markers existed, but to the two coyotes, it was very clear whose territory was whose, and they respected the line.

He rose, and turning north, set off in a jog, nose questing, head bobbing up and down, always searching. His territory was bordered on the north by the rim of a huge valley, and it was towards this that he now made his way.

Buffalo passing through this part of the Great Plains had created the trail decades, perhaps centuries ago, and they continued to use it even now. He had crossed their path early in the morning, and their sweetly pungent scent had told him that their passing was recent. Now, he was trailing along behind the herd, hoping that he could catch up to them and benefit from their presence in his hunt. He had done this all his life and he looked forward to a full meal after several days of light fare. He knew that once he caught up to the buffalo, his hunger would be satiated and his belly full.

Besides the diet of mice and voles, he knew that this was the calving season, and with May well underway, it was the peak of it. This meant that the ground should be spotted with after-births, and they were his favorite spring meal.⁵⁰

He also knew that wolves trailed most of the bison herds, always searching for an easy meal. He hated wolves. Every time he encountered one, it seemed that he survived only by the skin of his teeth and fast footwork.⁵¹

He cautiously crested a small hill, searching for any hint of his enemies.

Nothing.

⁴⁹ The size of a coyote home range varies tremendously depending upon such factors as the density of coyotes in the area, the density of prey species, the age and sex of the individual or if it is an adult pair that occupy their territory. Solitary animals like this one often have the largest home range, followed by mated pairs with well-formed packs having the smallest home range. Females in all cases tend to have a slightly larger home range than males do. Home range size can vary from as small as 2 square km up to well over 100 sq. km. (Pruss, 2002).

⁵⁰ May is the peak of the bison calving season. It stretches from late April to early June, and during this period, hundreds of calves are born. Each comes wrapped in a placenta that is left behind as the calf stands and begins to move about. Most cows eat their own afterbirth because it contains a tremendous amount of vitamins, nutrients and minerals that her body craves. It also removes temptation for scavenging wolves and coyotes, who might be encouraged to try to eat the calf as well. If she does not though, it provides several kilograms of food for a coyote such as Long-Foot.

⁵¹ During the days of the massive bison herds, hundreds of prairie wolves trailed along the sides and the rear of the herds (McHugh 1972). For it was at the tail end of the herd as it drifted across the land that the weak, the injured or the aged stumbled along. Hunting in large packs, these wolves were very efficient at killing bison. They did not tolerate the presence of coyotes and would often kill them when they found one (Switalski 1993)

Sure, now that he was safe, he moved further onto the plateau and there, spread out before him was the herd.

It stretched across the entire plateau; filling every swale and ravine, it was draped like a living blanket over every hillock and ridge. He sat for a few minutes, catching his breath and watching the herd carefully. A few of the closer buffalo looked up from their grazing and stared intently at him. They searched the horizon, trying to determine whether he was traveling alone, or as part of a pack. Apparently satisfied that he posed no risk for them, they returned to their monotonously rhythmic, side-to-side cropping of the grasses. A couple of younger animals lay down to chew their cuds, and off to the right, three young calves romped and played with each other. Two had begun a head-to-head shoving match, each trying to push the other backward. The third went into a bucking and kicking frolic, and then, with no warning, turned and charged the other two, hitting one in the chest and almost knocking it down.

Their mothers grazed nearby, watching him and their calves out of the corners of their eyes. With no visible signal to each other, the calves stopped their gamboling and each trotted over to their mothers. The nearest approached its dam from the rear and as the calf's head went past by her hip, the calf swung around so its body was parallel with hers but facing in the opposite direction. With no preliminary warning, the calf shoved his small black nose under her belly, and finding her udder and teats, gave a strong bunt to get the milk flowing. She jumped slightly at the hit, and twice more he lowered his head and smacked her hard. The milk began to flow and even from this distance, the coyote could see the calf gulping and swallowing, could almost hear the wet slurping and suckling sounds it made.

The herd had spread out and were scattered across the grassland, leaving just enough room for a hungry coyote to wander between them. Motionless, he sat there, watching the herd. Everywhere he looked, buffalo were wallowing, sending up small clouds of greyish dust that drifted high, like small columns of smoke that then dispersed on the breeze.

At last Longfoot rose, stretching his back in a downward arch. His tail switched casually back and forth as he leaned forward. He resumed his trot, but this time more slowly, just above a walk. He entered the herd between two sleeping bulls, keeping a wary eye on them as he did. The nearer of the two bulls was in a dry, dusty wallow, resting his massive head on the point of his chin. With every massive exhalation, tiny dust devils rose and spiraled away into the sultry air. The other buffalo ignored him, as they slowly grazed, or walked from one wallow to the next.⁵² Their feet landed with ponderous slowness, and he could almost feel the weight of each stride as it landed. As those hooves landed, they occasionally displaced a mouse or vole from its hiding place. Those

⁵² I have seen this nonchalant attitude between coyotes and buffalo and between wolves and buffalo on numerous occasions. The prey species seems to know when a predator is a threat and when it is not. When a predator like a wolf saunters through a herd of buffalo, they keep a casual eye on him if he behaves like he has no interest in eating one of them. Once he changes his mind though, they detect the change in purpose instantly and the entire dynamics of the situation switch from blasé acceptance to focused watching and preparedness for fight or flight.

that made the mistake of moving when Long-Foot was nearby were quick to disappear down his gullet.⁵³

It wasn't long before his belly was full, but the easy hunting remained too good to pass up. Who knew how long the herd would remain within his territory, how long he would be able to feast like this?

So he continued hunting. Instead of eating them, he collected two or three at a time, bunching them up in his mouth, and then carrying them to a spot he could recognize, near a large lichen-covered boulder. Still holding the dead mice in his mouth, he quickly dug a hole and spat out his prey into it. He pulled, pushed, and sideways-nudged the earth and roots back over his larder. Once covered, he packed it down hard with short, sharp jabs with his nose. Satisfied that the cache was well buried, he went back to the herd and repeated the hunt-and-bury process several more times.

He was about to go back for one last foray when he noticed a distinct change in the behavior of the buffalo herd. Several had risen quickly from their beds or wallows, while others stopped grazing. Some stopped chewing their cuds, and all looked intently towards the rim of the plateau. A resting bull blocked his view, so he cautiously worked his way forward until he could see past the shaggy head and horns of the old bull.

Passing in and out of sight as it worked its way along the outer edge of the herd was another coyote, one he had seen twice before.

During the last encounter they had fought a vicious fight over his territory, and Long-Foot had given the intruder a deep cut to the lip that everyone now called him Cut-Lip. All thoughts of food vanished in a flash of combined rage and curiosity. "How dare Cut-Lip intrude in my territory again! I'm going to tear him apart," was the thought that flashed through his brain as he worked his way carefully through the herd. So focused was he at one point that he passed far too close to the horns of a recumbent cow, and she took a neck-stretching swipe at him as he passed. The tip of her left horn grazed his hip and caused him to stumble a little, but catching his balance, he soon reached the outer edges of the herd unscathed.

Cut-Lip was in the middle of lifting his leg and urinating on a rock that the Long-Foot used as a scent post. The sight of another male, especially Cut-Lip, defiling his territory, made him lose all sense of caution. With a low growl, he charged out of the herd, straight at the intruder.

Just before he hit the unsuspecting coyote, something told him to stop, and he skidded to halt about six cubits away.

Cut-Lip had spun in place and was now standing with his back arched high, head held low, teeth bared in a grimace of defiance and reflected rage that made his deformed lip more grotesque. They danced around each other in a spinning circle, neither making the first move towards an

⁵³ I watched a coyote hunting like this in the middle of a buffalo herd. The coyote tip-toed with complete unconcern between grazing bison, and in a very short time had eaten several small mammals. The coyote then began catching mice and burying them, caching them for later.

attack. Lips curling and teeth bared, backs humped and tails posturing; they danced the dance of rival coyotes. He wasn't certain what had made him stop his initial attack, but the more he watched Cut-Lip, he knew there was something dreadfully wrong, weirdly sick, with him.

Cut-Lip's bloodshot eyes had a yellowish pus crusted around the lids. The soft tissue there was red and raw from the irritation caused by the hard, dry, crusted material. His nose also had been running with pus, and gobs of it still clung to the matted hairs along the edges of his lips. His eyes were glazed and filmy, and it appeared as though he was having difficulty following the movement of his attacker. As disconcerting as the horrible appearance of the intruder's face was the obvious and odorous discharge of diarrhea that had caked Cut-Lip's entire back end, right down to his hind feet. This was one sick coyote.⁵⁴

Long-Foot debated whether to end the misery with a quick dash in for a throat-kill, but something, some vague instinct told him to avoid contact with him. It angered him to have to leave Cut-Lip in his territory, but the sight of him made his skin crawl.

Better to walk away.

Satisfied now that he had made the right decision, he increased the diameter of his circle, until he reached a point along the plateau rim where he could simply side-step downhill and be out of sight.

He left Cut-Lip standing there, looking deflated and relieved at the same time. Longfoot quietly made his way down the slope towards a patch of thick blue grama grass, where he often found a nest or two of meadow voles.

Cut-Lip relaxed at last, as the big male departed over the rim and out of sight. His mind was foggy and thinking clearly had become a major challenge these past few days. His entire body ached; every joint and muscle hurt when he moved. He was constantly exhausted, whether from having not eaten for days, or the repetitive coughing he had experienced, he was not sure. He stumbled away from the encounter site, around the outer ring of the buffalo herd, trying to put some distance between the other male and himself.

His nose picked up the strong scent of freshly turned earth, with a lingering smell of mouse overlaid upon it. He hadn't eaten for so long that his stomach hurt at the thought of food, but this was so strong and fresh that he had to investigate. It didn't take him long to find the food cache, and with a few scrabbles of his front claws, he was into the storehouse in moments.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Sick indeed. He has canine distemper, and these are some of the classical signs and symptoms of the disease in dogs and coyotes. Usually it's a fatal disease, but some survive. Given the symptoms this one is displaying; it likely does not have long to live. The disease is spread from the sick to the healthy through physical contact or through breathing in the virus when the sick dog coughs. It's a highly contagious disease, and easily spread from one to another (Duque-Valencia et al. 2019) It was also the number one killer of black-footed ferrets.

⁵⁵ The act of one animal raiding the food cache of another, or of physically taking food from someone else who had caught it, is known as kleptoparasitism.

Though he tried hard to keep them down, he just couldn't, and within a few minutes had vomited the mice back onto the prairie grasses. Leaving them lying there in his bile, he stumbled away. Tired now, he went only a few hundred cubits before he found a place in the sun to warm his aching body.

He had picked a nice place to die, though that was not his intent. A mule deer had excavated a flat, circular bed a short distance down a west-facing slope in a small coulee that cut a notch in the north slope of the plateau rim.⁵⁶ The soil here was a soft, warm clay that soaked up the sun's rays and radiated it back to his exhausted body. He curled up, nose to tail, and gratefully shut his sore eyes against the glare of the sun.

Finally, at rest and at peace with himself and his aches and pains, Cut-Lip drifted off to a sleep from which he would not awaken.

⁵⁶ If you are hiking in the region of Grasslands National Park and you approach the rim of a plateau from above, be cautious when you peek over the edge. Mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*) and white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) do indeed dig out these resting beds in sheltered places along the steep hillsides of coulee walls. They provide a wonderful anti-predator view, good updrafts to detect approaching threats and a nice warm bed besides.

Chapter 18

Night

Curled together under the dappled shadow and coolness of the juniper shrub, the three wandering ferrets, Night, Coal and Soot, had spent the day snoring next to each other. Curled in creamy-tan balls, noses to tails and back against backs, they slept through the long and cold late-September day. They began to stir just as the sun was slipping behind the western skyline, and they emerged from their shelter, one at a time.

Night's mouth and face were now grossly swollen and deformed. The blister beetle poisons had traveled throughout her mouth, lips, nose and the sensitive lining of her throat. The pain was so bad that she had not slept, and now she was more tired than when she had crawled under the juniper that morning.

Soot and Coal did not seem to notice, or if they did, they didn't seem to care, and with no preliminary "good evenings" or "how was your sleep?" they were off again in their pursuit of an evening meal.

The temperature had dropped throughout the day, and it was cold this evening. The coldest she had ever experienced. A tiny stream ran along the bottom of a narrow channel and it held a small pool of water. The pool had ice on it, and when Night went to get a drink to soothe her sore mouth, she was stunned when her nose smacked into the frozen surface. The agony of the impact brought tears of pain to her eyes and rage to her heart.

"What the dried-dog is this?" she said to herself as she carefully tried to dab a paw in the water. It was like trying to push her paw through a stone, and now she was becoming very annoyed. Moving forward so that both front feet rested on the crystal-clear ice, she looked down and could see minnows swimming around right under her toes. She tried to grab one with her front claws, but they simply left long thin-white furrows on the ice surface. Angry now, she rose up on her back legs and drove her front feet hard against the ice in frustration. To her shock and surprise, the ice film shattered, and she found herself headfirst in water so cold it almost stopped her heart.

The water wasn't deep, and she backed out instantly. Now, wet from her shoulders forward, and temporarily numbed by the cold, she sat back and wondered what had just happened. She tip-toed forward again, and this time was able to carefully lap the water surface and have the drink she so desperately craved. The cold water brought relief from the pain and seemed to bring the

swelling down a little. Able to breathe a bit better, she lay there, lapping the water periodically, then resting again.

By the time her thirst was slaked, the evening had fully arrived, and Soot and Coal were gone. She tried to call out to them, but her damaged throat could make no sound. She bounded over to where she had last seen them, but no trace could she find. Their scent led her to the same pond where she had had her drink, but further down its shoreline. Here, where their tracks stepped carefully onto the frozen surface, she could see small dusty footprints. First clear and obvious, the trail of footprints led to the center of the pond, but then rapidly faded away to nothing. She had no idea which way they had gone. She saw a small hillock a short distance away and clambered quickly to the top. The prairie spread out before her in a complicated mix of small valleys, ravines, buttes, ridges, and long flat plateaus. Nowhere in all that vastness could she see any sign of her sister. Or other life for that matter. She was alone.

Alone.

In a way, she was relieved more than she was alarmed or frightened. Gone were the pressures of keeping up, of having to deal with the obnoxious behavior of her more dominant sibling and her obnoxious friend.

At the same time, a profound loneliness settled on her. She lay there, scanning the eternity of the prairie before her, not thinking now, but just letting the scale and enormity of it pervade her soul.

The return of pain brought her rudely back to reality, and to the knowledge that she was going to be in a desperate situation if she could not get the problem solved. She was angered and disappointed by the very idea of Coal and Soot abandoning her when they knew she was hurting this much. She had expected more from them; had simply assumed that they would stay with her and help her to heal. The more she thought about it, the more resentment and anger she began to feel towards them. With the anger came a resolve that if she should ever find them again, and they were in a situation where they needed her, she would snub them, and walk away without a single regret.

Resolved now and content with her loneliness, she began her solitary journey, in pain, alone, and facing a long cold winter in a strange land,⁵⁷ but determined to survive it and become stronger as a result.

It was in this frame of mind that she followed the tiny stream that drained the pond. She chose this route because of the soothing effects of the cold water, and because it gave her a route that was as good as any other. The stream meandered its way through the valley, dropping over small water falls into pools of open water where she could stop and cool her mouth and throat. In most

⁵⁷ It must be a difficult time for young ferrets. Just weaned from their mother's milk and security; kicked out of home and instinctively driven to search for a home of their own. Add on having to face the onslaught of their very first winter, and to become proficient at hunting a prey that is as big or bigger than it is – it's a lot to survive and as a result natural mortality rates are high among dispersing ferret kits (Biggins et al. 2006).

places, the stream also had a frozen film of ice, so she was grateful when she discovered these little pockets of open water. In one of them, she spotted a large minnow trapped within the basin at the base of a small waterfall. It took only a moment to seize it with her dexterous front feet and claws, and in an instant, it was chewed and gone. She had not had fish before, and the strong wet flavor of it made her want more.

She stayed near the stream as it worked its way down from the high plateau to the plain that stretched out ahead of her. Off in the hazy distance, she could track the course of the stream to the point where it merged with a much larger river. The vegetation down there appeared to be much heavier than she had seen before, and nowhere could she see the bluish-brown barren lands so typical of a prairie dog town. This was beginning to cause her a bit of anxiety. “How am I going to survive the winter without a dog town to live in?” was the thought that kept nagging at the back of her mind.

Over the next several days the pain and swelling began to lessen, aided by frequent baths and soothing drinks of ice-cold water. She also found some more beebalm leaves to chew, and when the first snows of winter blanketed the ground, her face and mouth were essentially healed. She would forever carry with her the scars on her lips and nose from the open blisters that had formed there, but otherwise, she had regained her health and vigor.

Perhaps it was the diet she had discovered of freshwater clams, of minnows and aquatic insects, before the ponds froze over for the winter; or perhaps it was the pocket gophers, sagebrush voles, meadow voles and the occasional small rabbit that brought her health back. It didn’t matter to her. She still had the craving for prairie dog, but over the next few months, as winter raged on around her, she cared less and less. The subnivian realm she found herself exploring in the tall grasses and shrubs along the river provided her with a bounty of food, warmth, and shelter. She had completely forgotten any anxiety she once felt at being alone and couldn’t begin to imagine having to spend the winter in the company of another ferret.

Late one day, as the spring of her second year, arrived, she lay on a sunny slope above the river and watched the world around her. She had crossed the frozen river the day before and climbed the north-facing slopes of the mountain range known as the Three Sisters. She was happy. She was content.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ As I’ve mentioned before, it would be very unusual for a ferret to be this far away from a dog town, and from a diet of prairie dogs. Young ferrets continue to disperse from their home prairie dog colonies to seek out new ones. In Grasslands NP a ferret released on one colony later appeared on another one, a considerable distance away. They were essentially gone from the prairie landscape before scientists had the forethought to learn about their ecology.

Chapter 19

A Fateful Meeting

Pebble froze as the branch he was on cracked, sagged a bit, then held firm.

The ferret lying asleep in front of him stopped breathing. One eye popped open, swiveled left, then right and then appeared to focus on him. Then the other snapped open and Pebble found himself staring into the pitiless, inky-black eyes of a prairie dogs' worst predator. He could see himself reflected in those eyes as they stared back at him, motionless, expressionless; cold, hard and unforgiving. Time stopped. All awareness of space, of being, of motion, froze as the two stared at each other. The ferret's pinkish-grey nose, surrounded by the cream-colored hair below its black mask, twitched just a tiny bit. Then, from somewhere up above, Sandy called down to him, "Pebble, what's happening down there?", and time suddenly sped up again.

The ferret blinked.

Its eyes flicked up towards Sandy, then back down at Pebble without the slightest movement of its head. Its long whiskers twitched, and its nose sniffed. Its long sinuous body, fading away into the gloom behind it, did not move. They lay like this for a few moments more, eye to eye, nose to nose, before once again, Sandy called down to Pebble. This time the ferret reacted to Sandy's call and lifted its head as it looked up to where Sandy sat hidden in the branches above them. It then shifted; bunched itself up as though preparing for an attack, coiled like a spring under extreme tension. Instead of attacking, however, it shuffled back a step, as though to get a less myopic view of the wee thing before it.

And then, of all things, it appeared to smile.

It said, "Hello."

The incongruity of the expression and the word stunned Pebble. He didn't know what to do. He didn't know how to respond, or what to say. His heart was pounding so hard it hurt to breathe. How could he possibly respond?

The ferret leaned forward and said again, "Hello. Can you understand me?"

What could he do but stutter a reply? "Hello. Yes, I can. Hello."

The shaking of branches above announced Sandy's arrival as he dropped down beside Pebble. Sandy squirmed through the inter-connecting spaces just off to Pebble's left, and then worked his

way over to stand with his head pointed towards Pebble's left shoulder. "What's going on? Why didn't you answer when I called?"

Pebble turned his head and looked at Sandy, then without a word, turned and faced forward again, subtly suggesting that Sandy do the same. Sandy looked at where Pebble was staring and promptly fell sideways off his branch. He scrambled to regain his grip, but lost it and fell a couple of cubits to the next branch below, before catching himself again. His first instinct was to run as fast and as far as his legs could take him, but something about the situation caused him to hold his ground and remain where he was.

He looked back up at Pebble and whispered, "Is that what I think it is?"

Pebble, leaning to the side a bit so he could see Sandy below him, glanced down. "Yes, it is, and it just said hello to me."

Musty began to tire of being spoken about as though he was not able to understand. "I am not an "it", thank you very much. My name is Musty, and I can hear and understand you both perfectly well. Who are you and what are you doing here?"

This finally shook Pebble into relaxing a little and he replied, "My name is Pebble Short-Bottom, of the Short-Bottom Ward, in the prairie dog city of Crocus Flats, and the dog down there is Sandy Quivertail, of the Quivertail Ward, also from Crocus Flats." Still sensing no aggression or hunger from the ferret, he added, "Pleased to make your acquaintance, Sir."

Sandy, never one to hold back what he thought, asked from below, "Are you going to eat us right away, Musty, or are we going sit and have a visit first?"

Pebble, horrified that Sandy would even use the word "eat" in the same sentence when conversing with a ferret, wilted on his branch when he saw the ferret perk up at Sandy's question. Musty came a couple of steps closer, balancing precariously on the thin branch that supported him. He leaned close to Pebble; so close that their whiskers intertwined ... and winked!

"Nope." Musty said loud enough for both dogs to hear him, "I never eat anything I can talk to. Just a policy I have. Whenever I meet a new being, I always ask that question, "*Can you understand me?*", and if they do, I enjoy their company. If they do not, I enjoy their flavor. It helps to keep my life uncomplicated, simple - and enjoyable. I must say though that you are the first dogs I've met who've been able to answer me - why is that, by the way? I wasn't expecting a reply from you?"

Relieved now that it seemed the immediate risk was over, Pebble ignored the question and shuffled back a bit to get his whiskers out of Musty's face. He made himself more comfortable at an intersection where several branches came together to form a small platform. Meanwhile, Sandy worked his way up and crawled onto the platform with Pebble and the two of them lay; shoulder-to-shoulder and faced the absurdity of the situation they found themselves in.

Nobody said anything for a couple of minutes, clearly waiting for the other to start. The only sound was the wind overhead, where it continued to pile up more tumbleweed. They could almost

feel the wind as it shook the tangle above them, but down here, in the dim light, there was almost silence... broken only by soft breathing from the two dogs and one ferret.

Sandy made himself more comfortable. "So Musty, I have to say that I have great respect for your policies concerning dinner. A very wise and thoughtful way to approach life ... and us. Do you mind if I ask what you are doing so far away from a dog town? I thought your kind never left the cities?"

Musty carefully brought his left hind leg up from behind him, twisted his head a little to one side, and thoughtfully scratched behind his ear. "You're right, of course. Seldom does my kind ever leave your towns and cities. About the only time we do is when there is no more room in our town for more ferrets, and mine was just about full up. So I heard of a town over this way and have been making my way to it over the past several months. Do you know of it? It should be not too far away now I think."

Pebble and Sandy looked at each other, then back to Musty. Pebble answered, "Yes, there was a town not too far to the north from here. But its occupants are all dead. We think they were all killed by a disease of some kind, and the entire city is now abandoned."

He was about to say that they were on their way to another town when he remembered to whom he was speaking and what he normally ate. It might be better not to mention why they were going to the city.

The sound of the wind had begun to change as he spoke, increasing in volume. It was so strong now that it seemed as though they could feel the vast latticework of the tumbleweed stack vibrate from the force of it.

Musty appeared visibly disappointed to hear the news. "Ah, that saddens me. I had hoped to find a thriving town or city where I might meet a female, and possibly start a family of my own."

He looked from Pebble to Sandy and back again. "I don't suppose you've met any other ferrets on your journey, have you?"

He no sooner got these words out, when the entire tumbleweed structure began to shift. At first, it was merely a slight quiver, and they ignored it. Such quivers had been happening most of their time here. But this quickly became a quake; one that lasted for a full minute. The shaking was not severe enough to dislodge anyone, but it definitely made their toenails wrap around the branches a little harder.

Pebble was about to reply to Musty's question when the quake became a shudder so strong that the entire inter-locking system of tumbleweeds swayed back and forth and seemed to even shift downhill. The roar of the wind continued to increase.

Pebble raised his voice over the roar and yelled, "I'm not sure I like the sound and feel of that."

Sandy left the others and worked his way up through the matrix for a considerable distance to try and see into the pallid light above.

He returned a few minutes later. “Something is happening up there. It almost sounds as though something is coming this way, but I can’t tell what it is.” They could feel the wind as it stirred through the soft fur on their shoulders and backs. It seemed to come from *below*; not from above or from the side as a normal wind would blow.

Musty was getting nervous. “I think I might just go back the way I came in. There’s something weird going on in here, and it’s making my hackles rise.”

Without another word, he turned sinuously in place, then with a scamper and a twist, his head passed by his tail and he faded away into the gloom. Pebble and Sandy looked at each other, then back to the way Musty had vanished. Sandy said, “No one at home is going to believe I said this, but I vote we follow that ferret!”

Pebble replied, “I agree, let’s go ...” He wasn’t able to finish his sentence. It was with a sickening feeling that he realized it was not wind that was causing their maze of tumbleweeds to shift and move, and it was not wind that was causing the roar that now assailed their ears. It was water. Without another word, he leaped ahead along the path Musty had taken. Sandy followed hard on his tail, desperate to keep up.

Their world of inter-twining, inter-locked tumbleweeds had begun to shake violently, and several times both dogs fell from their branches, only to catch the next one or the one below that, and keep on scrabbling, grasping for a grip as they crawled their way through the maze. In a few minutes, the light increased enough that they could finally see about them. The stack of tumbleweeds was getting thinner as they went, letting in more and more light.

Sandy had somehow gained the lead, ahead and slightly above to Pebble’s right. He fought to catch up with Sandy. Suddenly, he was lifted from his branch as an explosive blast of wind picked him up and threw him out of the tumbleweeds, into the open space beside the coulee. He fell hard, rolled, and came to a stop next to a lichen-covered boulder.

Pebble looked back to the coulee and saw a sight that would haunt him for the rest of his life. A towering wall of mud-colored water was approaching them from above, roiling and cascading down the coulee in which they had taken shelter. Overflowing its banks, destroying everything in its path, it roared down the coulee like a black monster, laden with mud, tumbleweeds and unrecognizable debris.

And he was still in its path. With a quick glance around, he saw Sandy’s stubby black tail bouncing along ahead of him, just before it vanished over the top of a nearby ridge. Without another look behind him, he ran as he had never run before, trying frantically to reach the top of the ridge, before the terror of that wall of water reached him.

Chapter 20

Eggs for Breakfast, Lunch, and Supper

Night found a good bed adjacent to a large boulder where a white-tailed jackrabbit had excavated a small area to dust-bathe in. The boulder gave her shelter from the wind and the dusty bed a comfortable place to curl up and lay her head. Tired and heavy-eyed, she rested her pale, cream-colored chin on the dusty ground, and drifted off to sleep.

The day was fading when she began to stir from her long slumber. She lay there for a few minutes, back to the rock, and gazed out on the landscape that stretched out before her. She had traveled up a long and winding valley that, when viewed from the snug shelter of the boulder, stretched away into the distant, pale-blue haze of early evening. It had been a rough night of hard walking, given the rugged nature of the terrain, but she had still managed a good distance. Standing with a stretch and a yawn, Night turned away from the setting sun, and once again set off into the unknown, alone and more than a little hungry.

Morning had finally caught up to her on a boulder-strewn, level area that lay at the base of a long soft-clay ramp that in turn led to a flat skyline high above where she lay panting in exhaustion. She had hoped to make it to the top before she stopped, but this spot had been too appealing. She paused for a few minutes to catch her breath, then turned and began again.

After a strenuous climb that left her winded, she crested the horizon and discovered a plateau that sloped gently south. The prairie grasses grew lush and tall, interspersed with the westward-facing, nodding heads of flowering *Gaillardia*⁵⁹. The spring rains had been patchy, but this area had obviously received its fair share and the prairie blossomed under its influence.

Night had arrived by following the zig-zagging ridge crest of a small coulee that cut down along the flank of the plateau. It had zigged to the west when it finally reached the top, and she climbed gratefully into the golden rays of the setting sun. She gazed down on a vista that seemed to stretch away into infinity, given some sense of scale by the female pronghorn antelope that quietly grazed below her. The pronghorn left a shadow that stretched and rippled across the undulating ground behind her.

⁵⁹ *Gaillardia aristata* is a beautiful flower that blooms from mid-May through mid-June in this region. It has yellow petals that surround a raspberry red center, and when seen in a patch, all the flower heads will be pointed directly towards the sun as they track its progress across the sky.

She froze as above, a harrier floated on the breeze, wings barely flapping as it shifted and swayed, searching the ground, hunting for its next meal. She was probably too large to be attacked by it, but better to be safe. She waited for a few minutes to make sure the harrier had drifted away, then still feeling very, very small and alone, she continued to the plateau. Alone was fine, hungry was not.

She was surprised at how rich and thick the grasses were here on top, after her slog through the sandy clay that lay behind her. Lush grass usually meant good hunting, for where there was dense grass, there were mice. Her stomach gave a tiny rumble of hunger as she decided which way to go.

The small songbirds that lived here had begun to nest recently. Over the past week or so Night had occasionally found a small nest with eggs; carefully hidden from sight.

But not from smell. Within a few minutes of her arrival on the plateau, a horned lark flew out from under a thatch of juniper branches that was speckled with sky-blue aromatic berries⁶⁰. Tucked carefully away from prying eyes, the bird had laid a clutch of four eggs in a neat, round nest of dried grasses. If she had not seen the bird flush, even her keen sense of smell would have failed her in detecting the nest, masked as it was by the sweet scent of the juniper. With a few cautious sniffs, poking her face into small nooks and crannies, and being careful to watch for slumbering snakes, she found the nest and in a matter of minutes had broken open the eggs.

The female lark flitted back and forth, circling and scolding the entire time Night was eating. The lark's tiny horns perked upward as she finally settled onto a nearby rock. Her black face mask was almost exactly the same as Night's own. Combined with her black throat patch, her markings made the lark look even angrier. Night ignored the bird. She licked her paws and lips free of any remaining yolk, and with a luxurious stretch of her long back, turned and began to make her way further onto the plateau, traveling east toward the plateau rim.

Several hours later, the strong, pungent smell of blood made her stop in her tracks. She settled down on her belly, sinking as deep into the grasses as she could. The smell of blood had her drooling at the thought of food, but it also made her hackles rise. Something had died here, and just a short while ago. She waited for what seemed an eternity but sensed no movement, no activity or sound.

Slowly she raised her head until she could see above the swaying grasses around her. Nothing moved. A vagrant drift of wind brought the smell again, there off to her right. She rose carefully and worked her way towards the aroma. Still nothing, but she could tell she was close. There!

Hidden on the south side of a small sage bush, lay the body of a freshly killed sharp-tailed grouse, and next to her lay a well-concealed nest full of eggs. What had done this? She backed off

⁶⁰ The horned lark (*Eremophila alpestris*) is common throughout the prairies and the nest I described above is one I found. Eggs do get eaten by marauding predators such as coyotes, weasels, and I think it safe to assume by a ferret a long way from home. The lark will likely lay another clutch of eggs in the same nest since it is early in the spring.

a short distance, then circled the nest and the grouse. After making a complete circle, testing the wind and the ground for any trace of the attacker, and finding none, she returned to the bird.

The blood she smelled came from an open wound in the back of the grouse's head. Something had clearly hit her hard from behind, and death had been instantaneous. The blow had knocked the bird from the nest, and she now lay on her back, less than cubit from her exposed eggs.

Which was going to be first, the chicken or the egg? Glancing around one last time to be sure that she was alone, Night selected one of the nineteen eggs and pulling it carefully from the clutch, she moved off a short distance, and with one large, jaw-stretching bite broke into the shell. To her surprise, it was not a mouthful of yolk that she found, but a fully developed, ready-to-hatch chick.

Delighted at her find, she quickly devoured the lightly feathered chick, spitting out tiny feathers that stuck to her wet nose and lips. Already her hunger was less, but she returned to the nest for another. After eight more eggs, she lay bloated and content. But now what? To continue her quest or to stay where she knew another full meal or two waited?

She decided to stay since dawn was not far off, but it was still too early to find a bed. With her belly full and her mind at ease, she set off to explore her immediate surroundings, and to see if she truly was alone up here on the plateau.

Alone she was not. Perhaps one hundred cubits away and working his way upwind across the plateau, Long-Foot trotted through the grasses and cactus thorns that covered the plateau. After his encounter with Cut-Lip, he had swung west and was working his way along the plateau rim when his nostrils began to twitch. He, too, had smelled the blood on the wind, and over the past hour had cautiously worked his way along the tendril of scent that vanished and reappeared with the vagaries of the night wind. As he neared the dead grouse, he began to pick up the smell of another being - one he didn't know. This new smell had him drop from his long trot to a slow and careful tip-toe through the grasses, head held low to track the scent as it drifted towards the ground, then held high as he caught it floating a cubit or two above the wind.

It took him a long time to work his way the last few cubits to the nest and the dead bird. The smell of blood had his stomach rumbling, but the smell of ferret and freshly eaten chick made him a worried. He had never smelled ferret before and did not know what to make of it.

Cautiously, step-pause-sniff-look and listen, step-pause-sniff-look and listen, he covered the last dozen cubits in the time it normally took him to cover ten times that far, but despite his caution, he saw nothing. He inched his way the last couple cubits until his nose was resting lightly above the still-warm bird. Only his eyes, ears and nose moved, searching for any trace of danger.

Nothing... just the now-faint, slightly musky essence of a ferret as the wind blew the last traces away. Long-Foot carefully gathered the bird in his mouth, stretching his jaws and lips wide to gather her as deep into his mouth as possible. Then, standing fully erect and his head held as high as he could, wings dangling out of either side of his jaws, he turned and vanished back into the grass.

It was dawn when Night returned to the nest. She had been traveling downwind and, cautious still, she circled the last distance, freezing when she crossed the trail of Long-Foot.

Coyote! She spun in place and with a couple of bounding leaps was gone, hidden in a sage bush and staring back towards the nest. After watching carefully for a few minutes, she cautiously returned to the trail of the coyote.

Certain now that the coyote had gone; she finally crept up to the nest to discover the hen gone. Clearly, the coyote had carried her away, and just as clearly, he would be back for his desert once he had finished with the grouse.

Night lay down and gorged herself on the eggs. After six of them, she could not cram down another. She debated whether to stay for another feed later or to continue. But the coyote: with a last lingering look at the remaining eggs, she turned and with her belly dragging, sought a safe place to down for the day.⁶¹

She dropped back from the plateau rim into the rugged terrain below to travel north some distance, to find a place to sleep.

Finding a thick thatch of juniper that overhung a soft shady bed of sand, she wormed her way under the outer fringe of dead branches and into the coolness of the lair.

When she woke that evening, she spent a few minutes examining the terrain. Around her, it was dry and rocky. The soil was mostly soft clay and it supported a sparse population of rabbitbrush, umbrella plants⁶², greasewood, and winterfat, interspersed with a variety of grasses and forbs.

A flicker of tiny motion at the base of an umbrella plant caught her eye. Just the tiniest movement - she froze, holding her breath. She stared at a spot at the base of the bluish-green shrub.

Nothing moved.

She saw another flicker of movement, higher up in the leaves. and focused her gaze on that.

⁶¹ While walking across this part of the prairie one spring, a sharp-tailed grouse hen exploded out from under my feet. I began searching for and found her nest, just as I've described it. On that visit it contained six eggs. I returned several times over the next week and eventually she produced nineteen eggs. I later found the hen like I described her above. The back of her head had been attacked, very neatly and very quickly. I can imagine a harrier flitting along, searching for the betraying movement of a mouse in the grass, when the hen turned her head at just the wrong moment. The predatory instinct of the harrier is so strong that it probably hit before thinking, and in an instant, the bird lay dead. I don't know why the predator did not stop to eat its prey, or even that it was a harrier. Perhaps it was my arrival that scared it off, for the hen was indeed still warm and soft. I broke open an egg and it contained a fully developed chick. I returned a couple days later, and everything was gone - just a few feathers and shattered egg shells remaining.

⁶² The region supports two kinds of umbrella plant, the yellow umbrella plant (*Eriogonum flavum*) and the branched umbrella plant (*Eriogonum multiceps*). The branched umbrella plant is home to an endangered species of butterfly, the Mormon Metalmark (*Apodemia mormo*).

Lying along the length of a pale, blue-green leaf, was a small caterpillar.

It was slowly working its way along, moving up the leaf towards the tip, and as it did so it delicately nibbled the edge of the leaf. Where it did, the darker lime green of the leaf's interior was exposed. The larvae, while boring to watch for any prolonged period, was quite pretty to look at. Less than a ferret toenail long, the larvae⁶³ was a bright dark purple, with yellow dots and long black hairs speckling its back.

Another flicker of motion at the base of the short shrub. Visible now was a pale grey form with a long twisting and inquisitive nose. The nose was very intriguing to watch, and she again lay perfectly motionless. The stranger was no more than a couple cubits away, yet it was completely unaware of the danger that lay so close. The nose was followed a moment later by the tiny body of a young common shrew⁶⁴. The diminutive beast stood on its hind feet with its front paws resting lightly on the stem that held the caterpillar. The light grey underbelly blended almost perfectly into the leaves and stems of the umbrella plant and would have been invisible had she not seen the earlier flicker of motion.

The tiny predator did a credible imitation of a stalk, as it searched for its prey high above it. With its long flexible nose twisting and questing, tiny claws gripping the stem, it slowly ascended the plant until finally, it was within reach of the larvae. With a quick dash forward, its lips stretched far ahead of its tiny teeth, the shrew grasped the end of the larvae and pulled it back off its leaf. Holding it rather gently in its front paws, it took only a moment for the shrew to slurp its way down the length of its meal. With a few quick sniffs to make sure no other caterpillars lurked in the foliage, it deftly turned and made its way make to the base of the shrub. Once there, a flurry of activity broke out as four siblings suddenly appeared. The air was suddenly filled with a high-pitched twittering sound as they all gathered around the new arrival, and much tussling and gamboling about ensued.

This ended instantly when Night raised her head, bored with the antics of the minute beings. She had vaguely considered trying one to see what it might taste but was not particularly hungry, and the effort was not worth the gain.

She looked back to the spot where the youngsters had been playing and instead found herself watching the shrews line up nose-to-tail and form what appeared to be a small grey snake. The

⁶³ The Mormon Metalmark larvae goes through nine stages of development, from the first where they are perhaps four mm long, to the final stage where they can reach upwards of 25 mm. Then they find a safe place, pupate and finally blossom into the delicate butterfly. The larvae are crepuscular and are only active during pre-dawn and early evening hours, chewing down their meal of leaf before crawling deep into the base of the branched umbrella plant for the day. The butterfly and its larvae only live on this species of plant and are found nowhere else. This dependency upon one species has restricted the range of the butterfly to the range of the plant, and in Canada both have been listed as an Endangered Species (Wick et al. 2012).

⁶⁴ The Masked Shrew (*Sorex cinerus cinerus* – cinerus is Latin for ash-colored) is common, though very difficult to find in this region. Young shrews such as this weigh about 2 grams, but at birth weight only .01 grams. They are slow to develop and are weaned after about 20 days.

artificial snake then began to twist and wind its way around the bases of the umbrella plants. In a matter of seconds, it too had vanished from sight and she once more was alone.⁶⁵

With the stars just beginning to sparkle in the evening sky, she set out once more, searching for a new home.

⁶⁵ When startled, they do indeed form a single file line, with each youngster holding onto the tail of the one in front with its teeth. In this manner they sinuously move across the prairie in a mad, snake-like dash to cover. Perhaps this as an adaption that makes them resemble a snake, an adaptation to fool predators.

Chapter 21

Soot and Coal Find Cutlip

“What’s that smell?” Soot thought as she trotted along the rim of a large coulee.

A fitful wind played across the top of the plateau, the strange smell strong one moment, then completely gone the next, leaving her to wonder if it had just been her imagination. The scent returned, stronger now and coming from a small furry heap almost hidden in the grass. As she neared the mound, she realized that she was looking at a small pile of dead mice, covered with a light layer of wetness. She tip-toed up to it, searching for any hint of danger.

Overlying the scent of the mice was the faint aroma of coyote, which in turn was masked by a smell she had never encountered before.

Something did not smell good here. But the mice did, and once satisfied that no obvious danger lurked, she crept the short distance to the pile, and looking around to make sure that Coal did not see her, she quickly gulped them down.

She rejoined Coal a minute later, and together they wove their way further east along the rim.

Again, a strange smell assailed them. This time it was drifting from over the rim the plateau. Coal was off to her right, nose to the ground, slinking his way this way, then that, then back this way again.

What was that smell? Parts of it were familiar and made her want to run away, but other parts suggested the danger was gone.

Coal had drifted away from the plateau rim, and despite her curiosity, she left the strange smell and followed him further out onto the rolling prairie.

They had not meant to abandon Night, to leave her behind when they awoke.

It just happened. Hungry as usual, they had set off in search of food. Night had gone off to get a drink, and rather than wait, she and Coal began their evening hunt. The discovery of the frozen pool of water had delayed them as they stopped and played, slipping and sliding along. They hadn’t gone far when they discovered a small circle of open water where the stream swirled around some rocks. They both stopped and drank their fill, the water so cold that they both ended up with head cramps and their throats frozen.

Coal had taken a few paces back to see if Night was coming, but not seeing any sign of her, and with Soot already leaving, he paused, looked back one more time, and then, thinking that Night would catch up shortly, turned and followed Soot, searching for their breakfast.

It did not seem so long, yet here it was, spring again. One day blended into another as winter progressed, and it wasn't long before Soot simply stopped thinking about Night and where she might be.

They had soon learned to expand their diet from prairie dogs to anything that moved. She did not care for the diet; she thought she could feel her body wasting away from the lack of a good meal of dog. She caught up to Soot a few minutes later, to discover Soot swallowing the hind end of a grasshopper mouse.

Coal had given up thinking that they would share a meal again. It was find-your-own-food or go hungry these days. They did hunt together when they encountered larger prey, and no sooner had she thought this than her nose was assailed with the warm, succulent scent of a baby rabbit. She stopped in mid bound and growled low enough for Soot to hear. Soot instantly stopped and turned back to look intently at Coal.

With a twist of her neck, Coal indicated the direction to go, and then slunk off, nose to the ground, belly dragging softly, towards a small cluster of sagebrush. "Yes!" he thought, "it's in there." He waited, poised and ready to pounce, while Soot worked her way towards the sage. Suddenly, a small rabbit bounded out of the shrub, straight into Coal's jaws.

He could barely lift the rabbit, but lift it he did, as he tried to run away from the approaching Soot. He couldn't, though, so he dropped the carcass, straddled it, and with a vicious growl, left Soot in no doubt that this was his kill and he would dine first. He tore into the carcass and after a few minutes left, fully engorged. While most of the rabbit had been consumed, there was still a substantial meal for Soot.

The wind had died completely. Darkness was descending now, stars beginning to twinkle against the bright glow of a full moon. Long bluish moon shadows of shrubs and rocks darkened some places, while others were illuminated eerily by the cold light of the moon. Soot lay against the side of a boulder, soaking up some of the granites radiant heat, while Coal licked his paws and cleaned his whiskers following the meal. Soot had done the same, and now, full and clean was a very contented ferret.

Coal came over to where she lay and without warning gave her an off-hand smack to the side of her head, taunting her, wanting her to wrestle. Her stomach was too full for rough-housing and she simply glared at Coal, without moving a toe.

Coal began wandering aimlessly around the plateau, nose to the ground, searching for something to nibble on, or simply something to bother. As he worked his way along the plateau rim the inconsistent wind began again, bringing with it the strange scent that Soot had encountered earlier.

He crept up to the edge of the rim. Soot, seeing the change in Coal's behavior, knew that something was up. She rose from her bed, and slinking close to the ground, crept to where Coal lay waiting.

"What is it?" she asked as she lay down beside him. Coal was silent, his eyes focused on the plateau rim, waiting for the return of the wind and the scent it carried on the updraft.

They didn't have to wait long. A breeze began to rise and with it, the strange mixture of danger and intrigue. Coal stood on all fours, his long sinuous belly slipping softly over the grasses, and with Soot right beside him, slunk to edge of the rim.

As they moved, they could see more and more of the coulee wall below them. The rim was quite sharp here, leaving a long-broken edge that dropped vertically for perhaps two full cubits, then sloping down to a twisting stream far below. Not far from the top, a patch of darkness rested lightly on the slope. Something was there, the something that now shed its strange smell directly upwards to the searching ferrets.

"Coyote!" Soot whispered and was about to turn and run when Coal put out a paw.

"Stop," he hissed.

Coal shifted forward again to see over the side.

Curled in a nose-to-tail ball lay a coyote on a deer bed. It did not move, other than where the gentle breeze ruffled its fur, the tail twitching a little as though annoyed by the tickling fingers of the wind. What was that smell?

Soot looked at Coal. "Get ready to run."

Coal nodded.

Soot moved closer to the edge, and with a flick of a paw, sent a small rock tumbling down towards the sleeping coyote. Both ferrets' nerves were tense as the rock bounced once, twice, and then, in the middle of its third bounce, whacked the sleeping coyote directly between the ears.

Nothing!

No reaction.

Soot shrugged and repeated the trick. This time, a slightly larger rock was sent on its way down the slope, landing on the coyote's rib cage.

Still nothing.

"I think it's dead," Coal said to Soot. "Let's go down and have a look."

Soot looked back at him as though he had completely lost his mind, but Coal had already slid off the ledge. Within seconds, he was crouched above the coyote. Just as Soot came to a stop beside him, she realized what the overlying scent was. It was the scent of death.

He relaxed visibly when he understood there was no threat here and saw Soot instantly come to the same realization. Soot looked over at him and said the obvious, “It’s dead.”

The coyote had obviously lain here for at least a couple of days. It was in a shady area, but death had not been kind to the body. Its hair was sloughing off and now lay in furry puddles. Soot dropped onto the bed and circled the body, looking for some indication of what might have killed it. Seeing nothing obvious, she stepped close and sniffed the long nose of the coyote. The smell was a mixture of dank, rotting fur, overlain with something she had not smelled before. A smell of vileness, of almost evil.

Coal joined her a moment later and carefully circled the carcass, sniffing hard to figure out what had happened. He too sensed the evilness lurking in the body but had no idea what it might be. He reached out and smacked the coyote firmly across the end of its nose, just to make certain it was not alive. He lifted his paw to his nose and sniffed.

“There’s something dreadfully wrong here, Soot,” Coal said as he backed away from the body. “I don’t know what it is, but I’m leaving!”

Coal backed away from the body and, once at the edge of the deer bed, turned and bounded down the side of the coulee wall and into the blackness below. Soot worked her way around the body until she, too, was at the edge of the bed, and gave the dead coyote a hard smack on the nose. Then she turned and dropped into the valley below, following her friend. Neither knew that their defiant smacks to the nose of the dead coyote had put them on a pathway that would lead to insanity and a long torturous road to death; but now, their bodies infected with canine distemper, their future was not going to be long or prosperous.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Canine distemper is as I’ve said, probably the cause of death of most ferrets, yet I’ve always had a difficult time trying to visualize how a ferret can contract a disease like this. The literature says it’s through contact with infected carcasses or body fluids, so presenting the situation as I’ve done here, while fictional of course, may be one method of how the disease spreads.

Chapter 22

Pebble Gets Swept Away

Pebble ran as he had never run before, trying frantically to reach the top of the ridge, before the terror of that wall of water and mud reached him.

He focused hard on the tip of Sandy's tail, trying to will himself up the slope and away from the terror that descended upon him. His front feet had just landed on a small knoll where Sandy had disappeared a second ago when the water hit. He thought he had it made since his front toenails had a firm grip on the exposed root of a juniper, but the force of the rising water was too strong, and he was torn from the shrub.

His world was transformed into a tumbling, twisting series of flashes. One moment the chaotic sky would flash past, the next he was completely immersed in a roiling brown sea of mud and debris, then tossed into the air like a wet leaf. He barely had time to gasp in a lung full of air, before once more being pulled under.

An eternity of endless, slow-motion time.

No pain, no hurt. Just straining lungs and confusion. He felt as if he was drowning after he snorted a lungful of muddy water, but then the torrent spat him out, apparently disgusted with the taste of him.

He landed hard, on top of a large rock in the middle of the stream. Water cascaded around him. He had managed to snag one front toenail in a crevice in the rock and anchored there. His body swung around so that he was facing upstream. He managed to get all four feet secure, then lifted his head out of the water. So much mud-coated his eyes! Careful not to lose his grip on the slippery rock beneath him, he used one paw to clear the goop.

When he could finally see again, he froze.

All around him was madness and chaos. He was in a narrow drainage channel, with steep, wet-black earthen walls rising on either side. As he watched, a large chunk of ebony-black, saturated wall broke free and tumbled in slow motion into the raging torrent just a few cubits downstream from him. Had that happened close by, he would have been carried away by the wave it created.

He turned his head, searching for some way out. Downstream, over his shoulder, he could see a sharp bend in the stream, where it turned to his right. To his left lay another, slightly larger

boulder. It was also closer to the steep bank of the stream, but the bank appeared too high and steep to climb over. He could probably get onto that boulder, but then what?

He was preparing to leap, tiny muscles bunched up and coiling for the jump when he was hit by a large piece of driftwood. It smacked him hard on his shoulder, sending him flying into the vicious torrent below. He had just enough time for one gulp of air, then once more became another piece of flotsam among countless others.

He was ready to give up, his exhaustion so complete that he no longer had the strength to dogpaddle, when the stream rounded a bend and settled onto a broad, shallow pan of hard clay. He tumbled and rolled in the weakening current, but quickly found he could stand and resist the current.

The outwash plain here was slick with clay and difficult to stand on.⁶⁷ All around him, for as far as he could see, the ground was covered by a paws-depth of muddy water, shimmering in the weird light of the storm clouds. Hundreds of mangled tumbleweeds dotted the plain, held here and there by stubborn sage shrubs, while others floated and spiraled away, torn and bedraggled on the thin film of muddy water. He cautiously worked his way upstream and to his right, dodging on-coming debris, knowing that this was the side that Sandy and the ferret, Musty, had reached.

It took him a few minutes to get off the outwash plain, and onto higher ground. Once there he gave a huge shake. His fur lay plastered over his body, wet and muddy, but at least he could move. He stopped and examined his body, testing each limb separately to see what was broken. To his surprise, other than being a little stiff, very cold, and still coughing from inhaled water, he seemed to have survived without damage or injury.

He shook himself again as he staggered slowly towards a small rise above the waterline, and reaching the top, lay in a soggy mess and scanned the bleak world around him.

Sandy and Musty, meanwhile, had made it over the crest of the ridge and had not seen Pebble get swept away. Sandy turned, once he thought he was safe and waited for his friend to appear over the rise. He glanced over at Musty, then back to the rise in front of him. After another glance at Musty, he moved to the top of the rise, expecting Pebble to be just on the other side.

Instead, he saw a scene of utter devastation. The coulee, where they had lain in the tumbleweeds, was now completely clean. He could see down to the very bottom where a small stream still trickled muddily. But not Pebble.

He looked upstream, but Pebble could not have gone in that direction. Suddenly, the realization that Pebble had been caught in the flash flood hit him, and he stood as high as he could on his hind toenails, trying to see as far down the valley as possible.

⁶⁷ Many of the slopes of the buttes and coulee walls in this region are composed of bentonite clay. After a heavy rain, the clay loosens and slides onto an outwash plain at the base of the slope. These small flat areas are rock hard and smooth when dry, as slippery as ice when wet. Large whitish patches of barren hard pan are interspersed with sage, greasewood, or rabbitbrush.

There was no sign of movement anywhere, other than the occasional clod of earth falling with a wet smack into the gully.

Forgetting entirely about Musty, Sandy planted his hind feet firmly and ran downstream, beginning to panic that he would never see Pebble again.

The stream twisted and wound its way down the slope at the base of the high hills behind him. He tried following the edge, peeking into every pool and puddle along the way, but he soon became exhausted.

As he crossed a small ridge, he looked ahead, and in the distance, could see the shimmer of light reflected off the wet, barren hard pan in the valley bottom.

“I wonder if he made it all the way there?” Sandy thought, trying to decide whether it was better to conduct a thorough search as he went or to run ahead and look in the obvious places; places where a prairie dog could get out of the torrent or get hung up.

He was about to dash on, when Musty said from behind him, “I think you should check the drainage carefully, while I bound on ahead and see if he came out below.”

The unexpected sound nearly had Sandy jumping out of his skin, but he recovered, and looking back, he said, “You scared the burr-ball out of me!”

Musty looked at him quietly for a moment. “Sorry. I forget sometimes how quiet my feet are. Don’t you think we should begin looking?”

Sandy nodded. “Yes, you’re right. You go to the bottom of the channel and work your way back up. I’ll start here and meet you somewhere in the middle. If either of us finds him, wait where you are. I’ll do the same. That way we can’t get lost again.”

Musty nodded, spun around, dashed in bounding leaps down the hill, and was quickly out of sight.

Sandy returned to the drainage channel, slipping and sliding his way along the bottom. The water from the flash flood had now drained to a sluggish trickle, and he found the traveling comparatively easy. The mud built up on his feet between his toes, to the point where he was walking on balls of mud, but at least the way was clear of debris.

It seemed to take most of the day to work his way out of the channel and into the relative openness of the coulee. Here, debris was stacked high, thick with mangled tumbleweeds and other material. He climbed up to the top of the bank, and as far as he could see, the plain was littered with debris.

Off to his left rose a small hill, and motion on the top of it caught his eye. He squinted against the reflected glare of the wet hard pan, trying to see what it was. He climbed a higher, squinted again, and finally understood that it was Musty standing on top of the hill, back arched and exuding anger and defiance.

Facing him, across just a short distance was another ferret! And that one appeared to be trying to attack Pebble, who lay inert and unmoving on the small hillock, just in front of Musty. Over the sound of the wind, he could hear the chattering, as the two ferrets faced each other.

Chapter 23

The Horror Begins

Soot and Coal worked their way down off the plateau into the small hills that lay at the base of the main valley wall. They spent the next few days here, searching for and finding lots to eat, but becoming more listless and tired as the days progressed.

One morning Soot awoke from a restless sleep to find herself angry. Not just angry but filled with an almost incoherent rage, one she had no control over. She squinted her eyes at Coal, who still slept near her.

Her mouth slavered and her head pounded. She crept up to the sleeping ferret and lunged at him, grabbing him in her teeth, trying, with all her might, to slash her way through to his throat.

Coal, awakened by the vicious attack, was temporarily stunned into immobility. He had no idea what was happening until the pain of her teeth in his neck jolted him into fighting back.

He rolled onto his back and slashing with both hind feet, sliced into her tender underbelly. The shock of his feet cutting into her skin made her let go, and she bounced back and away from Coal.

The two ferrets backed away from each other, drool dripping from the corners of their mouths, eyes glazed with anger and confusion. Soot gave her tan-colored body a sinuous shake and backed off even further, indicating that she was done for now. Coal quivered and shook in shock, and he, too, backed off a step.

For the past several days both ferrets had known that something was wrong, but they had no idea what it was. Both developed high fevers, a strange weakness that drained their bodies of strength, and the most gut-wrenching, painful diarrhea that either had ever experienced.

“What the dried dog was that about?”

Soot looked at Coal with cold, blank eyes. “You were going to attack me so I attacked you first.”

He looked at her out of the corner of his eye as he turned away, saying defensively, “I wasn’t going to. I was sound asleep when you attacked me.”

Still confused, he turned his back and began to work his way around the base of one of the small hills. He kept his ears cocked back, listening for the rush of another attack, but his muddled mind soon forgot all about it, and he concentrated on, walking in a straight line. His balance was off, and he kept stumbling, saliva dripping off his panting tongue, and cramps were hitting him hard in the belly.

They traveled this way for several hours, finally rounding the corner of the last hill and finding themselves looking down into a large prairie dog town. The wind blew from the city towards them, and the dogs, busy about their various tasks below, had no idea of the horror that was about to descend.

Soot caught up to where Coal lay beneath the branches of a lone sage bush and worked her way up to lay shoulder-to-shoulder with him. Forgotten now was the battle they had fought earlier in the day, as they both lay there, slavering at the thought of fresh prairie dog for supper.

The wind carried the constant yips and chatter of the dogs as they visited with each other. Occasionally an alarm call would sound, as someone spotted a hawk high on the wing, or when one sighted a snake twisting its way through the far edge of the colony. The scene was one which had been going on for as long as time itself, with dogs building mounds, and grazing on the short vegetation in their gardens. Scattered throughout the colony, and particularly around its perimeter, stood the Astiti, protecting the city from attack.

Monument Flats stretched out before the two ferrets in a long narrow belt against the eastern slopes of the Three Sisters Buttes to the west. The city lay in a north-south strip as far as the eye could see towards the distant pale bluish-green band that marked the Whitemud River.

Coal looked at Soot. "I think it's time we had ourselves some dog. Don't you?"

A mad, feral gleam glinted in his glossy black eyes as he said this, his words slightly slurred by the saliva dripping from his mouth. Soot did not even look at him, and for a minute he thought she hadn't heard him. Then, with a nod of her head, she rose into a crouch and slunk forward, out from under the sagebrush where they had lain.

The ground before them sloped gently to the plain where the city began. They took advantage of the cover, to get as close as they could before launching their attack. They moved quickly, yet carefully, heads held low to the ground, sinuously, almost snake-like in their movements, as they advanced on the colony.

The closest dog appeared to be a young male.⁶⁸ He had grazed his way well beyond the perimeter of the city boundary, and he lay blissfully nipping off the short stems of the grasses in front of him. He would nip off a few shoots, grasp them in his dexterous fingers, then with a rapid munching lay there and chew and chew until the mass had been suitably masticated; then inch forward a little without lifting his belly from the ground, before once again filling his mouth with another treat.

He was so engrossed with his meal that he never saw the ferret. He had one quick glimpse of a slathering, gaping mouth full of sharp teeth, then it had him by the back of the neck and in one lightning-fast twist had severed his spinal cord. Death was instantaneous.

⁶⁸ As juveniles mature and leave their natal burrows, they are often forced to outskirts of the city in their search for space of their own. It's how colonies expand in size, but it's also why youngsters suffer a high mortality rate.

Soot twisted and thrashed the dog until she was certain it was dead, then turned and dragged her meal a short distance, into the tall grasses along the city's edge. Even though the dog was young, it was almost her weight, and her legs were barely long enough to straddle it as it dragged along under her.

Coal came up to her, to try to get a bite but she dropped the dog and attacked him almost as viciously as she had her prey. She returned to the dog, straddling it with all four legs and snarled a wet, gurgly chatter-snarl at Coal. Coal looked at her, seething in rage, then turned and slunk away to the edge of the city. Within a few minutes, he spotted a prairie dog as it slipped into a burrow.

He slithered on his belly to the entrance mound, and after a glance around, dropped headfirst into the tunnel after the dog. While considerably longer than a prairie dog, he wasn't much bigger around and he slid neatly into the burrow.

The dog below didn't stand a chance. Coal reappeared at the tunnel entrance, dragging the body between his front feet. He carried his meal off to a thicket of rabbitbrush, then lay down and began to eat.

The entire time he cast furtive glances around to make sure that Soot was not sneaking up on him. So paranoid was he that she was going to attack that he gulped the remnants of the dog as fast as he could, then lay there, exhausted and feeling bloated from the meal. Tired now, and forgetting entirely about Soot, he curled into a ball and fell into a twitching, nervous sleep.

Soot finished her meal with a suspicious survey of the area around her, aware that Coal was close, but not sure where he was. Once done and leaving only the skull and a few larger bones on the ground, she crept off to find a place to sleep. She found an abandoned prairie dog burrow and gratefully slipped into the darkness below. There, belly distended, she too drifted off into troubled dreams. As she slept, the madness deepened further, driving her into an insanity that would shock the city over the coming days.

Evening arrived with grey clouds and a cold, drizzle of rain. Soot emerged from the burrow and she moved into the city, searching for any indication that Coal might be ahead of her. Part of her wanted to be with him. Another part had sunk deeper into insanity and all she wanted to do was kill. It was in this mood that she found her first prey of the day, and within seconds had slaughtered a young dog. She ate only a small portion, then moved on to the next burrow. Descending into the darkness she found two sleeping dogs and quickly and efficiently killed them in their sleep. Leaving the bodies, she returned to the surface to find Coal locked in a battle with a huge Astiti.

The Astiti fought well, but from the start, it was a losing battle.⁶⁹ Even as she watched, Coal managed to get under the throat of the dog and ripped hard. Blood sprayed across his face. He stood there briefly, snarling and quivering with rage, then moved away, deeper into the city.

By this time, Astiti all over the city had seen what had happened and the cries of warning echoed from one side of Monument Flats to the other. Dogs everywhere stood high on their hind legs, focused on the death and destruction taking place near the southern end of town.

Soot moved north, killing wantonly as she went. She ate very little. Kill and move on, kill and move on, driven by madness. Coal moved north as well, paralleling her movements, along the eastern flank of the city.

They did this for days and days, killing, sleeping, killing and sleeping. By the end of the first week in Monument Flats, they had made their way to the very center of the city, where a strange, towering colossus of rock rose above the plain. This was the reason for the name of the city, but neither ferret cared where it had come from or how such a strange monument could have arisen from the flat plains of the city.⁷⁰

Nightfall came, and once again, they rose from their restless slumber. By morning, they had slaughtered their way well past the center of the long town and, finally exhausted, both sought the shelter of a dog burrow to wait out the coming day. The one chosen by Soot had an old withered dog hiding in a chamber deep underground. She knew it was there but didn't have the energy or desire to deal with it. As she curled up in the dog's pantry to sleep, the old dog crept softly past and escaped into another cold and dreary day.

Coal also found a burrow to sleep in along the western edge of the city. He was extremely itchy and he thrashed and rolled around the base of the sentry mound, trying desperately to rid himself of the itch. Finally, with the ground around the burrow torn as though a major battle had been fought there, the itch retreated. He felt he might be able to go to sleep.

He had to drag himself up the side of the sentry mound, he was so exhausted. Unlike Soot, he still had the energy to kill most of the family that had taken refuge below. Pinned in a nest chamber and unable to escape, they died one by one, until the chamber was littered with their torn and ravaged bodies.

One managed to escape up a secondary tunnel before he could get to it, but Coal didn't care. He lay down next to his victims, curled up in his own vomit and the blood of the dogs he had

⁶⁹ Prairie dogs have been observed fighting and winning battles with ferrets. A juvenile ferret matched against an adult male prairie dog that weighs half again as much as the ferret, probably won't win the fight.

⁷⁰ If you visit Grasslands National Park and go to the Monument Dog Town, you will find a stone monument built by the Saskatchewan Naturalist Society in 1965 to mark the successful re-introduction of the black-tailed prairie dog to this site.

slaughtered, and fell into a dreamless, endless sleep. Death came to him while he lay there. The disease had finally taken its toll and put an end to the madness that haunted him.

Giving him peace.⁷¹

High on a ridge that poked down into the city, a Great Blue Heron stalked along; flipping buffalo patties and searching for the grubs she knew lived there. She had been there for several days now and with growing concern had watched the two ferrets slaughter their way through the city. Horrified by the extent of the slaughter, she lifted on silent wings, neck tucked in a curve between her shoulders and her long legs strung out behind. She floated off the ridge and with a few powerful sweeps of her wings, was up and over the Low Hills and on her way to find Athena. Perhaps the owl would know what do to.

Another evening was slowly descending upon the city when Soot stumbled out of her burrow and into the gloaming. She did not see the burrowing owl that stood on one leg a short distance away, on top of a, particularly tall sentry mound. The owl watched her briefly, yellow eyes glinting in the coming darkness. As soft as a silent wraith, Athena lifted on quiet wings and flew east and north, away from the horror that stalked the city.

As the evening darkened, Soot blended into the darkness and once again began her mindless, relentless slaughter, alone.

⁷¹ Death from canine distemper for an infected ferret comes horribly and quickly. Both Soot and Coal would likely have died far quicker than I've portrayed in the story. Ferrets have no resistance to the disease and it only takes a couple days for the disease to take its toll. It is responsible for taking the species to the very brink of extinction. At the end, only 18 ferrets lived in all North America, and of these, 11 subsequently died of disease, even after they had been captured and treated with the best possible veterinary care. All the ferrets living today are descended from the last seven ferrets (Livieri 2011).

Chapter 24

Night and Musty Confront Each Other

Sandy stood motionless, watching the two ferrets as they stood over his friend.

He was torn in anguish at the sight, but uncertain about what to do. Dropping to his forefeet, he set off in a lumbering run down the slope and onto the out-wash plain.

It seemed to take forever, but he eventually reached a stand of rabbitbrush not far from the ferrets faced. They stood perhaps ten cubits apart, backs arched, heads held low, regarding each other with black-masked suspicion, a loud chattering disrupting the silence. The mild breeze carried their scent away from each other. It also carried Sandy's scent down from the hill, directly to them, and as one, they turned and stared uphill.

Never in his life had Sandy felt so alone or so helpless. He desperately wished that he was safely back in Crocus Flats, with Fiona snuggled against his side as they lay in the warmth and security of their burrow entrance. He missed his friends so much it hurt, and now, alone on the great expanse of the valley floor and faced with two of dogdom's worst enemies, Pebble motionless at their feet, he felt at a complete loss.

The breeze shifted and carried the scent of Musty directly towards the other ferret and even from this distance, Sandy could see the sudden change. It was as though they recognized one another for the first time. Their eyes locked onto each other, their bodies relaxed, the chattering stopped, and they stepped closer together.

Between them, Pebble lay quietly, the breeze ruffling his coat, and shifting his long tail a little. Otherwise, he showed no sign of life. Sandy stared as hard as he could but could detect no lifting of Pebble's tiny chest, no sign of breath or life. He backed softly out of sight of the ferrets and crept slowly down to the channel, certain now that Pebble had died and that he was finally, completely alone. With a sadness that pressed down upon him, down as though the weight of the entire world lay upon his back, he turned away and began to make his way back towards the abandoned city of Broken Hills.

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