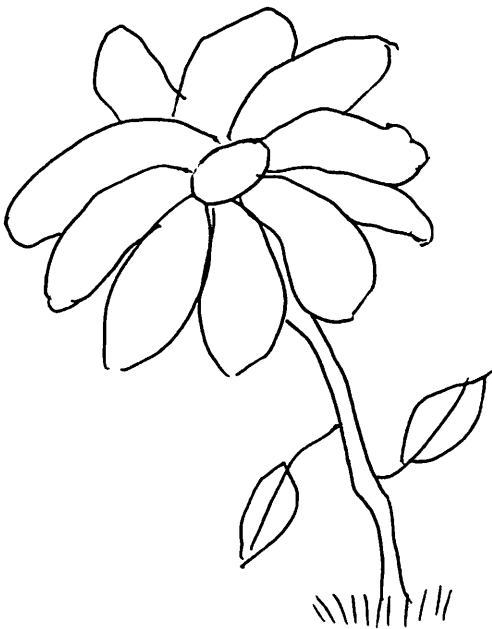


Flora's Garden

A Fairy Tale

Mark F. Owens





FOR ANYA

Chapter One

Flora the fairy was bored. She was very, very bored.

“It has been a long time since I had an adventure,” she thought. “Perhaps I should go find one.” So Flora left her house among the flowers and headed out into the wide world of the garden. She was sitting on a flower blossom looking for an adventure when she saw Turtle slowly making his way across the path and into the daisies.

“Turtle is very nice,” she thought, “but he is not much fun. Still, he might know where I can find an adventure.” Flora flew down and landed on the path in front of him.

“Hello, Turtle,” she said.

“Hello, Flora,” he replied in his low, slow voice. “Can I help you?”

“Oh, I hope so, Turtle,” Flora answered. “I’m very, very bored today and I am looking for an adventure. Do you know where I might find one?”

Turtle stood thinking for a long time. Finally he said, “Well, there is a new spider web near the blue flowers this morning. You might find an adventure over there. But one should always be careful with adventures. They can be dangerous you know.”

Flora smiled, “Thank you, Turtle. I shall go and see it for myself.” With that she flew away.

Turtle watched her go and hoped she would be careful. He continued on his way and soon forgot about Flora. He was hungry and needed to find some breakfast.

Flora made her way toward the blue flowers. From a distance she saw the new web glittering with dew in the morning sunshine. “How lovely,” she thought. “Perhaps I can get a dew drop to drink.”

Flora was quite thirsty all of a sudden. She approached the web cautiously because she knew that a new web meant a hungry spider was nearby. Fighting a hungry spider was not the kind of adventure Flora had in mind. It was far too dangerous for such a small fairy. Yet, she was very thirsty and the dew drops looked so refreshing.

“I know,” Flora said quietly. “I will fly just as fast as I can, grab a drop, and keep going until I am safe.”

“It won't work,” a calm voice behind her said. “The web is too sticky.”

Flora turned quickly and saw Caterpillar clinging to a stem as he munched on a leaf. “Why, hello,” Flora said. “How do you know?”

Caterpillar munched thoughtfully. “I've been watching flies try it all morning. No one has made it yet.”

Just then a black fly flew past them and into the web. In a flash a green and yellow spider ran across the web, caught the fly and quickly spun a web around him. Then the spider bit the helpless fly with her large fangs. Flora shuddered and looked away.

“I am not really thirsty now,” she muttered. “Thank you, Caterpillar. You were very helpful.”

“You are welcome,” he mumbled around a mouthful of leaf as he turned again to the plant and kept eating. Flora watched him for a few minutes but quickly grew tired of it. “Watching Caterpillar eat is not much of an adventure,” she thought wistfully as she flew away, carefully avoiding the beautiful web and the hungry spider.

After taking a nice drink of dew from a lily blossom, Flora sat looking around the garden. “I wonder where my adventure could be,” she thought. At that moment a honey bee buzzed up to the lily and began to gather the nectar inside the blossom. “Everyone seems to be hungry today,” observed Flora. She watched him for a moment and said, “Hello.”

Bee said nothing. He just kept gathering and then suddenly buzzed away to another blossom. Flora flew over to him and said again, “Hello, Bee.” Bee just kept buzzing and gathering, and then he flew away. “Bees are boring,” Flora muttered. “All they do is work, work, work. And he was so rude!”

“Bees have their place in the garden,” a still, soft voice said behind her. Flora turned and saw Praying Mantis hanging upside down on a stem. She was very still as she watched Flora and this made Flora a bit uneasy.

“Pardon me?” Flora said as she backed away.

“I said, the bees have their place in the garden,” Praying Mantis replied. “Their work may seem dull, but without them there would be no garden at all.”

Praying Mantis twisted her head and stared at Flora who was trying to decide if she should stay and talk or flee. Flora knew that Praying Mantis could move very fast, but she also knew that Praying Mantis was very wise. It wasn't every day that one had the chance to speak with Praying Mantis. And so Flora mustered her courage and answered, “I suppose you're right, but he could have at least said good morning.”

“A bee can only be what a bee is meant to be,” Praying Mantis said. “The nature of things naturally makes them as they are and there is no changing it. Bees are bees. Fairies are fairies. Now I too am hungry, so unless you intend to move closer, may I ask you to please move on? You are disturbing my hunt.”

“Why certainly,” Flora said, “and thank you for your time, I think.”

Flora left Praying Mantis where she was and flew around the garden looking for a nice shady place to sit and think. She found a smooth pebble under a large leaf and settled down to ponder what Praying Mantis had said when she was startled by a terrific crash! Flora jumped away just as four giant paws tore through the garden followed by a long tail that thrashed back and forth, knocking petals off flowers and creating an awful mess.

“What on earth is this?” Flora was thinking when suddenly she found herself being sniffed by a giant nose. Behind the nose were two large, brown eyes and a mouthful of white, sharp teeth.

“Oh my,” Flora thought. “This must be my adventure!”

“Who are you?” the giant creature shouted with a booming voice. “I am Lola the dog! Are you my friend? Do you want to play with me?”

Flora stood very still and looked at the dog. She seemed friendly enough, but those teeth were very large. “Are you hungry?” Flora asked. “Everyone in the garden has been hungry this morning or so it seems.”

“Why no,” Lola said, “I am just ready to play!”

“Well, my name is Flora and if you are not hungry, I would love to play with you and be your friend. What games do you know?”

“I know a lot of games,” Lola replied. “There is run in circles, and run through bushes, and sniff and dig, and chase the cat, and bury a stick, and bark at bugs, and roll in the grass. I know lots of fun games!”

“Wow!” said Flora. “That is a lot of games. Can I sit on your back while you play them all?”

“Sure!” answered Lola. “Let's go!”

Flora flew up and landed on Lola's back and then held on as tight as she could while Lola crashed into the woods and sniffed and dug holes and barked at bugs and many, many other things. It was the most fun Flora had ever had so she played with Lola all morning and all afternoon. Finally, Lola had to go inside the big house so Flora flew back to her small house in the flowers.

She was sitting on her roof as the evening began to settle in and the lightning bugs began blinking on and off. As Flora sat remembering all of the adventures she had found that day, Turtle walked by on his way home.

“Hello, Flora,” he said slowly. “Did you find any adventures today?”

“Oh Turtle, you won't believe it!” she answered. And as the sun set and nightfall crept across the garden Turtle stood patiently and listened as Flora told him all about it.



Chapter Two

Flora was tired of the rain. It had been raining in the garden for three days and three nights. Although she was perfectly dry in her house among the flowers, the rest of the garden was soaking wet.

“There is not much to do on such a rainy day,” thought Flora. “All of my friends are inside their homes staying warm and dry and I have not had anyone to talk with in a long time.”

Just then Flora heard a scurrying noise behind her house. She opened her window and looked out and there beneath the thistle bush was Mouse. “Hello, Mouse,” she said.

Mouse looked up with a start, and squeaked, “Hi Flora. I didn't know you were there. I thought you might be the C-A-T.” Just spelling the word made Mouse nervous and he twitched around and turned in a circle looking all about to make sure the cat was nowhere to be seen.

Mouse was a timid fellow who always seemed like he was about to jump out of his skin. He was constantly moving his head from side to side and his nose seemed to have a mind of its own, twitching this way and that all of the time. Twitching made his whiskers dance about and Flora always found it a bit distracting when she was trying to talk to him.

“Well,” Flora said, “I haven't seen the C-A-T all day. Would you like to come inside where it is dry?” Mouse was not Flora's favorite friend, but when you have been trapped inside by the rain for three days, any company seems better than none.

“No, thank you,” said Mouse. “I am actually busy looking for food. Winter is coming, you know, and I have to have plenty of seeds, bulbs, shoots and nuts. Besides, the rain doesn't bother me. Usually it means that the C-A-T is inside the big house and I can gather seeds in peace.”

As Mouse was talking, Flora noticed that he was stuffing thistle seeds into his mouth as quickly as he could. He kept on talking about the cat and how terrible she was, all the time picking up thistles and shoving them into his cheek pouches. Flora found the process so fascinating she completely lost track of what he was saying. “I believe his mouth may explode!” she worried as his cheeks began to puff out.

“..... anyway, it was nice talking to you but I must hurry off!” Mouse mumbled through his bulging lips. With that he ran away so quickly Flora could barely tell where he had gone.

“My goodness,” Flora mused, “Mouse is certainly an interesting creature. And he sure is afraid of the cat.”

Flora was a bit afraid of the cat herself. After all, the cat was big and black with sharp claws and wicked teeth. And she knew how to creep silently through the bushes and lie in wait for an unsuspecting animal to walk close enough for her to pounce and bite! Yes, Flora had a healthy respect for the C-A-T as Mouse liked to say.

The rain kept falling and Flora kept watching it and hoping someone else would stop by to visit. She was actually nodding off to sleep when she heard her friend Robin Redbreast flutter into the garden and hop over to the thistle bush.

“Hello, Robin,” Flora said.

“Why hello, Flora,” Robin replied. “Do you mind if I hunt for bugs in your garden?”

“Well, Robin,” Flora answered, “the ladybugs and earthworms are my friends and do good things in the garden, as do the beetles and the ants. But if you find any grubs or aphids you may have all you like.”

“Thank you, Flora. I was in the mood for some tasty grubs. Perhaps I shall find some. What are you doing on this rainy day?” Robin asked.

“I am mostly staying inside and dry,” Flora replied. “I saw Mouse for a few minutes, but he was worried about the cat so he ran away. Have you seen the cat today, Robin?” Flora asked.

“I have not,” Robin answered, “but to be honest, I wasn't looking for her. I prefer to avoid her, even though I am too big and fast for her to catch. And besides, if she tried, I would peck her on the head and chase her away. Everyone thinks the cat is terrible, but she is really quite easy to handle if you know how.” As he spoke, Robin was scratching at the ground and just then he found a large, white grub buried in the earth. “Ah, dinner!” he said, and picking up the grub he flew away giving Flora a thank you nod as he took off. Robin was much too polite to talk with his mouth full.

“Well, isn't that something,” Flora thought. “Robin says the cat is easy to handle and Mouse is afraid to speak her name out loud. I wonder which one is right about her.”

Flora noticed that the rain had let up and decided to go outside for a few minutes. It felt good to stand in the breeze and stretch her wings, even though there were large drops of water falling off the leaves above her head. She started dodging them as they fell, dancing and laughing and hoping that she might find a shaft of sunlight streaming through the plants. She was so intent on her game that she didn't notice a slithering sound on the dead leaves of the garden bed.

She was looking up through the leaves and flower blossoms when she heard a hiss at her back. Spinning around she saw that she was face to face with a long, black snake.

Now everyone knows that fairies are magical, and when they want to disappear, they can. However, what most people do not know is that once they have been seen by an Earth creature, they cannot use their magic until the creature breaks eye contact. Flora stood perfectly still hoping Black Snake would look the other way for just a second. But Black Snake thought that Flora looked like a tasty meal and had no intention of losing sight of her.

“Hello, Black Snake,” Flora said in a shaky voice. “What are you doing on this rainy day?”

“Hunting,” he hissed, as he coiled his long body up and prepared to strike.

“What are you hunting?” Flora asked, hoping to distract him.

“You,” Black Snake hissed. Flora saw him tense and start to move when suddenly a large, black shape flashed into the garden and grabbed the snake with long, sharp claws. Before Black Snake could react, the cat had his neck in her mouth and quickly bit down with her wicked teeth. She crouched down with Black Snake in her claws and jaw and held tightly as he thrashed about wildly. Finally, Black Snake stopped moving and the cat dropped him.

Flora had no idea what to do. She wanted to flee and hide but she also wanted to say thank you to the cat for saving her life.

“Only,” Flora thought, “what if she does the same thing to me that she did to the snake?”

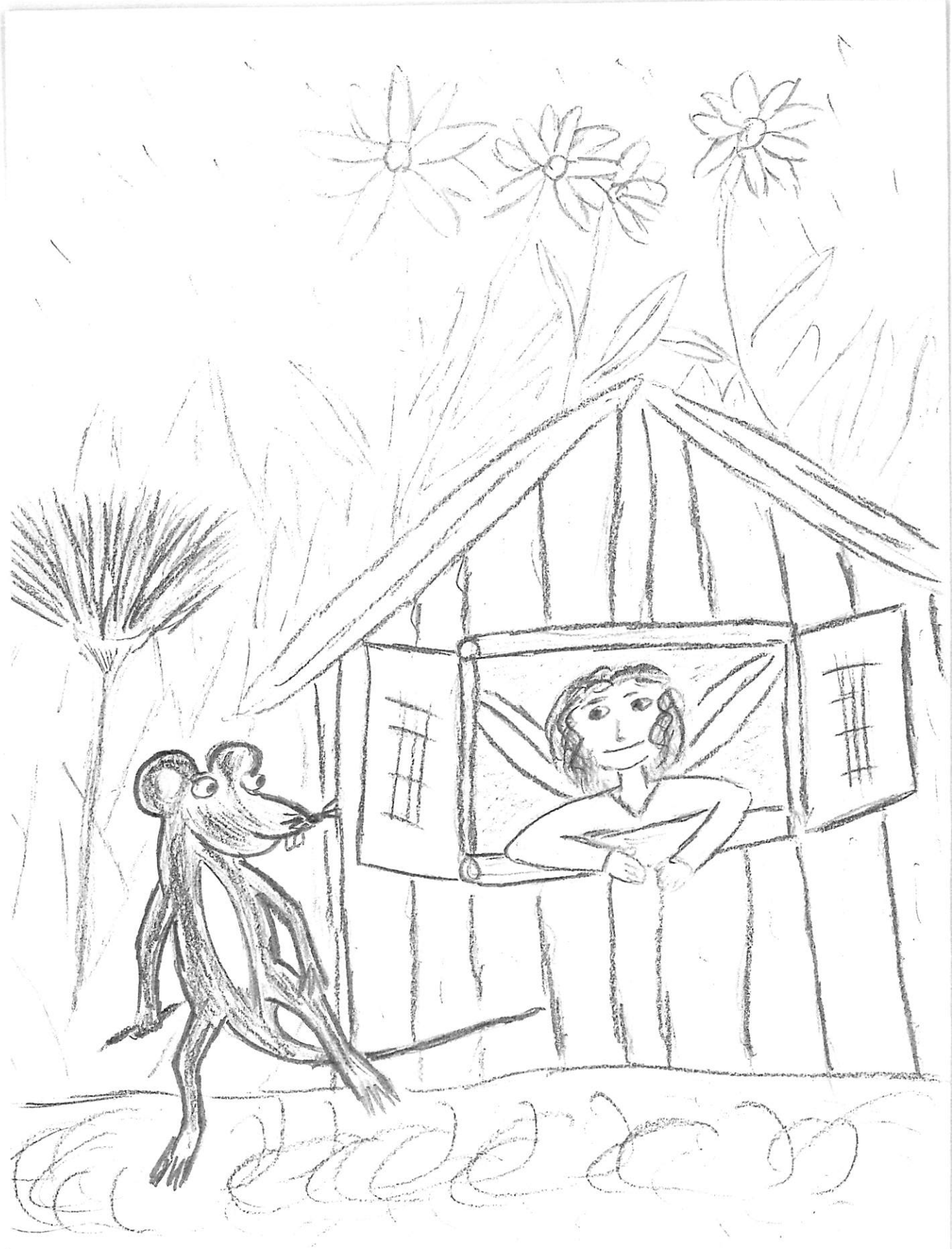
“You must be Flora,” a throaty, purring voice said. “Lola told me all about you. My name is Nyah the cat. You should be more careful when snakes are around.” And with that, Nyah bounded out of the garden and ran across the yard and into the hedge.

“Thank you!” Flora yelled as Nyah disappeared. “Thank you very much!”

Flora stood looking at the dead snake wondering what she should think about the cat when she noticed it had started raining again.

“I think I shall go home and take a nap,” she thought. “This has been a very busy afternoon and I have a lot of things to think about. I do hope Mouse comes by again, though. He will never believe me.”

Flora flew back to her house in the flowers, went inside, closed the window, locked the door and lay in her bed thinking about Nyah the cat and how she rescued her from Black Snake. Finally, as the rain beat steadily down on the leaves of her roof her eyes grew heavy and she fell asleep.



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Chapter Three

Flora was feeling lonely. It was a lovely summer day, the sun was bright and warm and the garden was filled with beautiful colors, rich smells and happy sounds. Still, she felt lonely. She was sitting on a flower blossom watching a butterfly drink nectar and she said to him, "Butterfly, what do you do when you feel lonely?"

Butterfly sat warming his wings and taking a long drink, then he flitted to Flora's blossom and said, "When I feel lonely, I go visit someone. There is no point in sitting around waiting for someone to come to you when you can get up and go to them."

Flora thought about it for a minute and answered, "You're right. Why, I believe you are more wise than Praying Mantis because what you said actually makes good sense! You even gave good advice when you were just a caterpillar! Thank you, Butterfly."

"You are very welcome, Flora," he replied. "Who do you think you may visit?"

"That's easy," Flora said. "I will go visit my cousin, Nightshade, who lives down in the vegetable garden. He is very nice and always glad to see me." With that, she flew away and headed towards the blueberry bushes where Nightshade made his home.

As she flew, Flora was thinking about her cousin and all of the pleasant times they had spent visiting, eating, and telling stories. Nightshade was one of those fairies who was easy to be around. He was relaxed and happy, and although he was a bit shy, he was always fun to visit. Imagine Flora's surprise when she got to the vegetable garden and saw him locked in a battle with a large, angry red wasp!

Nightshade had the wasp by its wing and was holding on tightly as the wasp tried and tried to sting him. Every time it thrust its stinger at Nightshade, he twisted away, but all the time holding fast to the wing. Without thinking, Flora flew down and grabbed the wasp by the other wing and began to pull.

The wasp became even more furious. He twisted, turned, and thrust his stinger left and right trying with all his might to make the fairies let go of his wings. Flora realized that the wasp was stronger than she imagined and she was having trouble holding on. At that moment she noticed that Nightshade was looking at her because he had realized that she was quickly losing her grasp. She saw his face grow hard as he pulled on the wasp's wing with all his strength. Finally, the wing ripped off the wasp with a sickening crunch. Flora let go and quickly flew away out of its reach. She sat on a bean stalk watching the wasp writhe on the ground. It couldn't fly with just one wing, but it kept trying and spinning around and around on the ground.

At last, the wasp grew tired and still. In a flash, Brown Thrasher dropped down into the garden, grasped the wasp in his beak, and flew away again. The battle was finished.

Nightshade sat beside Flora on the bean stalk and caught his breath before he spoke. "Hi Flora, you showed up just in time. I was working in the garden gathering berries when the wasp came up behind me and knocked me to ground. It then flew down and began trying to sting me. It must have thought I was an insect. Lucky for me I was able to grab hold of a wing, but without your help I don't know what would have happened. So thank you!"

As he was speaking, Flora was looking at his face. It was funny, but now that the fight had ended he looked like the easy going cousin she had expected to find, not the fierce warrior who had done battle with an angry wasp just minutes ago. She thought, "There is more to my cousin than I ever realized."

She then noticed that he was staring at her because he had finished talking and she hadn't said a word. Shaking her head she said, "My goodness, cousin, that was close. And to tell the truth it was not the kind of visit I had intended to have with you at all!" Flora laughed and Nightshade smiled warmly.

"Well," he said, "the berries are plump and ripe today and I have worked up an appetite! Let's go get some lunch." Together they flew up into the blueberry bushes and into Nightshade's house where they shared a meal of delicious berries and fairy bread.

Flora sat back with a sigh and said, "Thank you, Nightshade, that was wonderful. Now tell me what is new in your garden?"

"Nothing new," he said, "just the same old things. The plants are growing and making their harvest. The baby birds are growing up and learning to fly and the tangled wood is trying to regain its hold on the land that was cleared away for the vegetables. I spend a lot of time helping the baby birds and tending to the plants. But I'm afraid there is not much I can do to push the old forest back."

Flora knew what he meant. She spent a lot of time trying to pull the weeds that threatened to choke the flowers out of her garden, but it was a losing battle. Thankfully the Lady of the Big House often came and helped pull the weeds as well as feeding the plants and keeping them trimmed and watered. She said to Nightshade, "Does the Man of the Big House still help in your garden?"

"Of course he does," Nightshade replied. "He tills the earth and plants the seeds. He adds the mulch and fertilizes the plants to help them grow, and he gathers the food once it is ready."

"Well," Flora said, "perhaps he can push the big woods back in the autumn."

"I hope so," said Nightshade, "although, I hope he doesn't push it back too far."

Flora noticed that he blushed just a bit and turned his head away from her when he said this. She smiled to herself because she realized that poor Nightshade was still in love with Ivy, the woodland fairy who lived in a vine covered tree in the tangled woods.

“Have you seen Ivy lately?” Flora asked.

“Not in a while,” Nightshade answered, “but Red Cardinal tells me all about her. They live in the same tree, you know, and he sees her almost every day.”

Nightshade looked away wistfully and imagined how nice it would be to see Ivy every day.

“Well, “ Flora said, “why don't we go visit her? Butterfly says it's no use sitting around waiting for someone to come to you when you can just go to see them. That is why I am here today.”

“I don't know, Flora. Do you really think it would be okay? What if Ivy doesn't want to see me?” he said.

“Don't be ridiculous,” Flora replied. “Everyone wants to see you, and besides, we can just go to visit Red Cardinal and maybe we will see Ivy while we are there.”

Nightshade smiled, “Of course! That is a great plan! Let's go.” Off they went, into the tangled woods in search of the vine covered tree.

Flora's garden was in the front lawn of a well manicured yard and she rarely went into the wild woods where the plants grew as they wanted and the trees towered above everything. She always felt a little bit scared in the forest and she was glad Nightshade was with her. Nightshade wasn't really afraid of anything. He loved the vegetable garden because it gave so much to those who tended it, but he also loved the woods with its wild grape vines, blackberries, mushrooms and many other things. The only thing he was scared to do in the forest was talk to Ivy, but that was a different kind of scared.

It didn't take long for them to find the tall pine tree that was covered by a vine all the way into its crown. “This must be it,” Flora said. Nightshade swallowed hard and waited for Flora to go first. The fairies began flying up into the tree, looking for a bird's nest and keeping an eye out for a fairy in the vines. As they were going up, they were startled by a young bird who was going down, fast.

“Oh no, not again,” Nightshade said as he sped away after the falling bird, catching him just seconds before he crashed into the ground. Nightshade was gently talking to the young bird as he helped him fly upwards to the nest. “Remember,” he was saying, “you have to spread your wings before you launch.” The young bird was nodding his head as he listened intently. Flora joined them and met Red Cardinal as he came swooping in with a mouthful of seeds for his children.

“Oh no, not again,” he mumbled. “Thank you, Nightshade. That boy was lucky you were around.”

Nightshade laughed and said, "It has been that kind of day." He began telling Red Cardinal all about the battle with the wasp and how Flora had shown up just in time to help him. As he was speaking he didn't notice the small face that was peering out of the vines. It was Ivy.

Ivy listened to Nightshade's story, thinking that he was a brave and handsome fairy. She wished she wasn't so shy, but every time he came to the tree, she hid from him. "What if he doesn't like me?" she thought. "What if he thinks I am ugly and stupid?" She was still hiding and listening when she was startled by a tap on her shoulder.

Turning around, she found herself looking into Flora's smiling face. "He is very brave, don't you think," Flora asked.

"Yes, he is," Ivy answered, "and he is very kind. Did you see him save the baby bird? He was so gentle afterwards. But so fast and strong."

"Would you like to meet him?" Flora asked. "He came all the way up here to see you, not to save baby birds, you know."

Ivy blushed and giggled a bit, and then realized that Nightshade and Red Cardinal had stopped talking and were staring intently at the vines where she and Flora were standing. Slowly she pushed her head out into the open and looked at Nightshade. He stood there looking at her with his mouth slightly opened and a look of sheer terror on his face.

"Excuse me, I must be off," Red Cardinal said, and he flew away to his nest in the branches above. Nightshade looked like he might fly away as well, so Flora stepped out into the open and laid her hand on his shoulder.

"Nightshade, this is Ivy." Flora said. "Ivy, this is Nightshade. Why don't the two of you get acquainted while I check on the baby bird?" And she also flew away towards the nest, leaving Ivy and Nightshade alone together.

"Tell me about the wasp," Ivy said shyly. Nightshade began talking, and the more he talked, the more she listened. Before long, they both realized how silly they had been to be afraid of one another.

Ivy and Nightshade were still talking and laughing when Flora decided to head home to the flower garden. Evening was beginning to settle down when she finally got there. As she headed towards her house she saw Butterfly still drinking nectar and fluttering from blossom to blossom.

“Good evening, Flora,” he said. “Are you still feeling lonely?”

“No, I am not, Butterfly. And thank you again for the wonderful advice,” she said.

As she nestled into her bed for the night, she thought about Nightshade and Ivy. Knowing that they were probably still talking made her heart feel warm. She lay still and listened as the crickets began their evening song. As darkness enfolded the garden she fell asleep with a smile on her face.



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Chapter Four

There was something wrong in the garden. Flora was sitting outside her house in the flowers listening to a strange humming sound that seemed to come from the ground. She stood quite still and did her best to determine what the sound was and where it was coming from. Try as she might, she couldn't figure it out. As she stood listening to the distant droning, a yellow jacket flew up and hovered near her.

Yellow Jackets are small yellow and black wasps that live in the ground and hunt in large groups. Flora had seen them before, but never this close. As she stood watching it, she realized that it was about to attack her. Suddenly, a long, sticky tongue zipped out of nowhere and just like that, the yellow jacket was gone. Flora looked carefully behind the stone wall and saw Toad munching on a yellow jacket.

“Thank you, Toad,” Flora said. “He looked like trouble.”

“Indeed they are, Flora,” Toad replied in a deep raspy voice, “And there are a lot of them. This was just one of their scouts out looking for food. The swarm is in their nest over near the garden's edge in the Lamb's Ear.”

“Is that what I hear?” Flora asked.

“Yes, it is. There are at least a hundred of them in the nest and before long they will start driving everyone else away from the garden,” Toad growled.

“Well,” Flora said, “This is my garden and we will see about that!” Just then she heard Lola the dog barking excitedly.

“Run, run, run away!” Lola was saying. As Flora rose up above the flowers to see what was happening, she saw the Lady and Lola running into the big house with dozens of yellow jackets chasing them. “OUCH!” she heard Lola cry just as the door to the big house slammed shut.

“Oh my, Toad. What shall we do?” Flora asked.

“I don't know,” Toad said, “But we need to do something.”

“We need help and I know where to find it,” Flora said. “Thank you again Toad for helping me. Please feel free to eat as many of those horrible yellow jackets as you want!” And with that she flew away towards the vegetable garden and Nightshade.

As she was passing the shrubs, she noticed Nyah the cat sitting in the shade licking her paw. “Hello, Nyah,” Flora said, “Are you okay?”

“I will be fine,” Nyah said, “I was just stung on the paw by a yellow jacket. Of course I took care of that one. But there are an awful lot of them today. They attacked Lady and Lola and I bet the Man is very angry. I am sure he will do something about them, but I don't know when or what.”

“Well,” Flora said, “I am off to get my cousin, Nightshade, and we will do something about them right now!” Flora flew away and Nyah thought, “Good luck.” She continued licking her injured paw.

Nightshade saw Flora coming towards the blueberry bushes and he could see that something was wrong. She looked angry, and that was never a good sign.

“Hi, Flora,” he said as she approached. “What is going on?”

“Yellow jackets!” Flora said. “Horrible, mean yellow jackets are trying to take over MY garden! Something must be done about them and I was hoping you could help me.” Flora sat down with a huff and was so agitated that her wings kept twitching and her fists were clenched.

“A swarm of yellow jackets is very dangerous,” Nightshade said calmly. “We will have to be careful, and we will need a lot of help. I will go into the woods and find Ivy and the other woodland fairies. You go and gather as many friends as you can find and meet me under the cedar thicket in an hour. Once we see who can help, we will make a plan. But Flora, remember, if we don't have enough help you may have to leave the flower garden. Of course, you will always be welcome to live here with me if you have to move.”

Flora choked back an angry tear. “I don't want to leave my flower garden. But thank you for your kind offer. I only hope I won't need to take advantage of it. I will see you in an hour!” Away she flew as quickly as she could to find her friends.

Toad was still near her house and she said to him, “Toad, go find as many of your cousins as you can and meet me beneath the cedar thicket in an hour. We are going to make a plan to get rid of those yellow jackets, but we need help!”

Toad agreed to help and hopped off to find his cousins and friends. As he was on his way, he saw Turtle. After he told him about the trouble, Turtle agreed to help, too. “I had better head that way now,” he thought. “It will take me a while to get there.”

Flora cautiously made her way through the garden. Yellow Jackets were buzzing everywhere and she didn't want another run in with them yet. She found Praying Mantis hiding among the lilies and told her about the meeting.

“I cannot go to the cedar thicket,” Praying Mantis said. “But I know how to help. I will find Garden Spider and we will go hunting yellow jackets by the Lamb's Ear. Together we will be able to kill several of them and have a fine dinner as well.”

“Thank you, Praying Mantis,” Flora said, “And do tell Garden Spider thank you, too!”

“Indeed I will,” Praying Mantis said as she flew away.

“I do wish I could find Turtle,” Flora thought, “but perhaps he is off to the woods again.” She continued searching and found Mouse who was quivering beneath a pile of dried leaves.

“Mouse,” Flora said, “are you hiding from the yellow jackets?”

“Yes Flora,” he squeaked. “They are scary! They even stung the C-A-T and that is something. I do hope they go away soon.”

“Oh, Mouse,” Flora said shaking her head, “they are NOT planning on going away. And if we do not do something about them, we will have to go away instead. Head to the cedar thicket for the big meeting that is happening soon. And bring a friend!”

Mouse assured her that he would be there and scurried off. Flora didn't have much faith in Mouse's helpfulness, but she hoped he would be at the meeting at least. As she was about to head to the cedar thicket she saw Butterfly. “Butterfly!” she cried, “Have you seen the yellow jackets today?”

“Yes, I have,” Butterfly answered, “and they are such a nuisance.”

“I am headed to the cedar thicket for a meeting. My cousin and friends are going to make a plan to get rid of them,” Flora said. “Will you come and help us?”

“I suppose I can come,” Butterfly said, “although I am not much help in a fight. But we all must do what we can to help. I will meet you there.” Butterfly fluttered away and Flora headed to the thicket.

When Flora arrived, she was surprised to see a large crowd already gathering. Toad was there with three of his cousins and Turtle was sitting with them. Flora smiled when she saw him. She was also surprised to see several birds. Robin Redbreast, Brown Thrasher and Red Cardinal were all there, and Titmouse was flying in just as Flora arrived.

Flora loved Titmouse. He was a small bird, but also perhaps the bravest of them all. “Fantastic!” she thought when she saw him. “He has many cousins and friends and I know they aren't afraid of yellow jackets.” She was looking for Nightshade when she noticed Mouse creeping in nervously. Beside him was his friend, Chipmunk. When Flora saw Chipmunk, she was really excited, “He is very quick and very brave as well!” she thought. “With these friends we may have a chance!”

Just then Nightshade flew in with Ivy and another woodland fairy named Tumblestone who lived deep in the forest by the wild creek. Everyone grew silent as Nightshade stood in the middle of the gathering and held up his hands. "Friends," he cried out, "This is Tumblestone from the big woods and he is here to help. Not only is he a brave fighter, he has also brought us long thorns from the prickly tree. The yellow jackets have stingers, and now we have them as well!" He held a long thorn high over his head and Flora realized again that her cousin was much more than the pleasant farmer he seemed to be.

When Nightshade looked around and saw the growing crowd, he was pleased. "We have one chance," he said. "We have to trap as many of the yellow jackets in the ground as we can and then take the rest down one at a time. We cannot let the entire swarm come at us or we will have to flee and the garden will be lost." Quickly, Nightshade began assigning duties.

"Butterfly," he said, "Can you and your friends hover above the garden and warn us if the swarm comes out?"

"Yes we can," Butterfly responded. "We cannot do many things in a fight, but this we can do. I can also tell you that Garden Spider has spun her web near the Lamb's Ear and Praying Mantis is hiding in the flowers near the yellow jackets' nest. They are ready to do their part as well."

"Thank you, Butterfly," he said, "That is great news!" Then he turned to Turtle and said, "Turtle, you have the most dangerous job of all. I want you to crawl over and lie down over the hole that goes to their nest. This will trap many of them in the ground. Then you will have to close up tightly and wait for my signal to move. Can you do that?"

"Yes, I can," Turtle declared. "My shell is too hard for their stingers to pierce and my skin is tough as well. I am not afraid of them."

Nightshade smiled. "That does give you an advantage! Thank you Turtle."

Nightshade continued, "Birds, you will need to fly above the garden and catch as many of the yellow jackets as you can. Do you have more friends who can help?" he asked.

"Indeed we do!" Robin Redbreast said. "I have five cousins, Brown Thrasher has three, Cardinal has four and Titmouse has seven!"

"Excellent!" Nightshade said. "That makes an attack squadron of twenty seven! Go find them and be ready to attack when the moment is right." The birds flew away to round up their cousins and friends and wait for the battle to begin.

“Flora and Ivy, you try to lure as many of the yellow jackets as you can towards Garden Spider's web and Praying Mantis. Be very careful and take thorns with you, just in case you need it to fight back! Tumblestone and I will stay with Turtle and fight the ones that try to get back into the nest. Chipmunk, can you carry us all on your back?”

“Why certainly I can,” Chipmunk said, “I am not afraid of them, either. As long as they can't swarm, we will be safe enough.”

“Thank you, Chipmunk,” Nightshade said. “One final thing. Ivy has spoken with the bats who live in the forest. They will be here to help at dusk. If we can kill a lot of them before evening falls Turtle can let the rest out of the nest. Then I believe the bats will finish them off. We have to fight with all of our strength and we have to watch out for one another. If everyone does the best they can, working together, we can free the garden from the yellow jackets.”

“Turtle,” Nightshade said, “Start making your way to the nest. Toads, you go with him and eat as many yellow jackets as you can while he gets into place. Once he has covered the hole and closed himself up, give your loudest cry. This will be the signal for everyone else to attack. Does everyone understand what you need to do?” As he looked around at the serious faces of his friends, he knew they were as ready as they would ever be.



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Chapter Five

The sun hovered high in the afternoon sky as the fairies waited for Turtle to make it to the Lamb's Ear. He was moving as fast as he could, but of course that wasn't very fast. The Titmouse Tribe were sitting high in the oak tree, the Cardinal and Robin Families waited in the cherry tree, and the Brown Thrasher Troupe stood waiting at the edge of the cedar thicket. Flora and Ivy stood anxiously looking across the lawn at Garden Spider's web hanging near the yellow jackets' nest while Nightshade and Tumblestone talked quietly with Chipmunk. Mouse just disappeared and no one knew where he had gone.

Finally, after what seemed a very long time, the Toads and Turtle arrived at the edge of the flower garden. They could see the yellow jackets buzzing in and out of the nest in the ground within the Lamb's Ear border.

"Well friends," Turtle declared, "we are here. Are you ready?"

"Yes, we are!" the Toads croaked together, and they quickly hopped towards the nest and started eating yellow jackets. Turtle moved as fast as he could until he found himself standing directly over the hole in the ground. He then plopped himself down and pulled his neck, legs and tail into his shell and closed up as tightly as he could. He could feel the yellow jackets pounding on his back trying to sting him and get back into the nest and he could feel them pounding on his chest as they tried to sting him and get out, but they could not sting Turtle and he would not move. He was too hard and tough.

When the Toads saw that Turtle had closed up, they gathered together and croaked as loudly as they could, "Now! Now is the time! Go, go, go!!" Then they started eating any yellow jacket that came near them. Their long, sticky tongues caught a lot of them and kept the yellow jackets from gathering together into a swarm. With so many of them trapped beneath Turtle, their forces were divided. They were furious because they couldn't work together.

As they flew around and around the garden's edge they did not see the birds flying towards them and were completely unprepared for the flock that was hunting for them. The yellow jackets were forced to fly away one by one and the birds had an easy time catching them and knocking them down to the ground.

Meanwhile, Flora and Ivy were flying over the nest and hovering to get their attention. Every time a yellow jacket saw them, he flew after them furiously. Flora and Ivy headed straight for Garden Spider's web, stopping suddenly in midair and watching as the yellow jacket flew into the sticky web. Garden Spider flashed out and spun a web around them, removing them from the battle.

Ivy noticed Praying Mantis standing motionlessly nearby and told Flora, “We must bring a meal to your friend!”

Flora smiled and the next yellow jacket that came after them was lured right into Praying Mantis' waiting claws. If it hadn't been so dangerous, Flora would have said it was great fun! But the fairies knew that one sting from the yellow jackets could be a very bad thing, so they did everything they could to avoid the stingers.

After a good while, Flora landed in the garden to take a quick rest. She had been flying for a long time and was extremely tired. As she stood panting in the shade she did not see the yellow jacket lying on the ground nearby. A bird had knocked him to the garden floor, but he was still very much alive. He saw Flora and began working his way towards her. Just as he was drawing himself up to sting her in the back Mouse ran out from under the leaves and bit the yellow jacket into two pieces with his sharp, front teeth. Flora turned and saw Mouse standing there with half a yellow jacket in his mouth and she cried out, “Oh, Mouse! You are brave after all! I am so proud of you!” And then Flora threw her arms around his neck and gave him a giant hug.

Mouse stood up on his hind legs and hugged her back. “Flora, I was afraid, but when I saw that terrible thing trying to hurt you, I had to stop it. You are one of my dearest friends and I could never let anything bad happen to you.”

Flora felt tears running down her face as she held Mouse even tighter. “I have been wrong about everything!” she thought. From that time on she never thought badly about Mouse again because she knew that although he was timid and scared, he was also a true friend.

While Flora and Ivy were luring yellow jackets away to Garden Spider and Praying Mantis, Nightshade and Tumblestone stood near Turtle and killed any yellow jacket that came near with the long thorns. Chipmunk ran in and bit them once they were down. There were dozens of them lying on the ground as the afternoon waned and evening began to set across the garden.

The Toads had already hopped away. They were so full of yellow jackets that they could barely move. Garden Spider's web was in tatters and filled with bundled yellow jackets spun into webs for later use. Praying Mantis had fallen asleep as she clung to the flower stem and the birds were headed back towards their nests as the evening chorus began to waft across the yard.

Red Robin flew to Nightshade and said, “We have done our best and there are not many yellow jackets left flying above the garden now.”

“Thank you, Robin,” Nightshade said, “Everyone has truly done all they could today. Fly home and get some rest!”

Robin nodded and flew away towards the forest edge and his home.

“I, too, must get home,” Chipmunk said. “But thank you for letting me help today!” With that he scurried away to his nest in the shrubbery.

Nightshade was sitting on the ground and Tumblestone stood leaning on his thorn as Flora and Ivy approached. Everyone was exhausted, but they knew there were still a lot of yellow jackets to contend with in the nest beneath Turtle.

As the sky turned purple and soft, the fairies saw the bats swoop down from the woods and head towards the garden.

“Now, Turtle, it is time for you to move!” Nightshade shouted, and Turtle immediately stood up. The remaining yellow jackets poured angrily out of the nest and into the cool evening air only to find themselves surrounded by hungry bats that quickly snapped them all up. In no time at all the last of the swarm was destroyed. The bats squeaked out a quick “Thank you” and flitted away into the night.

Flora, Ivy, Nightshade, Tumblestone and Turtle found themselves standing all alone in the quiet evening. As they realized that the danger was past and the garden was free from the yellow jackets they smiled and softly Flora began to sing a healing song for the plants and flowers:

*Sunshine and dew
Gentle rain and soft breezes
Bees and Butterflies
And good friends be always with you
Be always with you.....*

One by one the other fairies joined in and sang of peace, joy and health to the garden. They were still singing as Turtle slowly walked away to his home and bed. It had been a long day and he was very, very tired.

Early the next morning the Man walked out of the big house with a kettle of boiling water in his hand. He stood looking over the nest in the Lamb's Ear and saw dozens of dead yellow jackets lying on the ground and only a few moving about the nest. With a shrug he poured the boiling water down the nest and walked back into the house. The swarm was finished.



Epilogue

The summer passed quickly and soon the chill of autumn was in the air. The flowers were dying back and Flora's friends were preparing for winter. Butterfly had flown away as had most of the birds. Only the Cardinals and Titmice would stay and face the cold weather that was coming.

Turtle stood outside of Flora's house. "It is time for me to go to sleep," he said, "but I will be back in the spring."

"I will miss you, Turtle," Flora said as she patted him on his head. "Mouse was by yesterday and he, too, is getting ready to go to sleep. Winter is a lonely time," she said.

But inside she smiled. This winter she was planning to stay with Tumblestone, Ivy and Nightshade in the Fairy Lodge deep in the woods where they would play games, weave tales and make plans for more adventures. She knew that come spring, there would be more spiders and mantis', more caterpillars and butterflies, more lightning bugs and dragon flies. And of course, Mouse would wake up, as would Turtle and Toad. Red Robin would come back along with the hummingbirds and the others. The garden would be filled again with friends and adventures.

"Winter is really just a long rest for the garden," Flora thought. "I can't wait to see what the flowers look like next year."

Then the cold wind blew a brown leaf across the garden and Flora knew it was time to go. "Farewell, Turtle!" she cried, "I will see you soon."

"Goodnight, Flora," Turtle replied. "I hope you have a nice time with your friends."

She kissed him goodbye and waved as she flew away to the blueberry bushes.

Before long the days grew short and the nights grew very cold. There was even a snowfall. All the time the garden lay in a deep slumber waiting for the first kiss of spring and Flora's return.

