

Chapter 1: Talking Animals

With so many animals in the world – billions, actually – it should hardly be a surprise that a few of them, here and there, are born with the gift of talking like people.

Some are pets, some live in the wild. But all of them are lonely, because if they use their rare talent, they risk being cast out by their own kind or, possibly worse, captured by humans to be studied or put on display. So they always do the sensible thing: keep their ability a secret and live out their lives the normal way.

Well, not quite always.

Our story begins with a young snowshoe rabbit named Aspen. He lived in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. Because it was late summer, his rusty brown color hadn't changed to white yet. His home was near the Alpine Visitor Center in Rocky Mountain National Park. Located near the treeline, the center is visited by thousands of people every summer, who get there by driving up winding Trail Ridge Road. Aspen shivered with fear around all those tall, two-legged creatures and the noisy rolling things that carried them to and from the center, yet at the same time the place had a strange attraction to him. One summer day, running quickly from bush to bush, the rabbit drew closer than ever before – within earshot for the first time. To his amazement, he was able to understand the sounds the people made with their mouths. One said to the other, "What is the elevation here?" And the second one said, "I don't know, but it's got to be at least 10,000 feet."

For a giddy second, Aspen was ready to bound over and join the conversation. But he stopped himself in mid-leap. What was he thinking? He was an animal. Animals didn't talk to humans. And bunnies didn't talk at all – at least not with words. Nevertheless, he tried it, saying to himself, "What is the elevation here?" And it worked! He sounded just like a human!

Later, off in the forest by himself, Aspen wondered about his strange

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discovery. What if he had talked to that human couple, as he first intended to do? What would have happened? Would they have run away? Called others over to see? How would it have felt being surrounded by those huge creatures? And then what? Would they have taken him with them? Put him in a cage? He'd seen animals in cages, parked in the rolling things. It didn't look like fun.

And yet... and yet... How could he continue now to live as he had, knowing that he had this incredible gift? In the days that followed, he spent hours around the center, within earshot of the humans. They'd say things like "oh, look at the cute bunny!" and throw him food, but he wasn't interested in that. Well, not *too* interested, anyway.

One thing Aspen noticed was that humans sometimes sat or walked around holding colorful objects that were shaped like squares or rectangles. They would open these objects to expose what looked like leaves inside – except that they were squares or rectangles too – and would stare at the leaves for long periods of time before turning them to look at other leaves.

This was a mystery to Aspen until one day he came across one of those objects, lying by a path, where it had been dropped by a little human who'd been running toward his parents' rolling thing. He saw that on the leaves were pictures and markings. Over time, with the help of the pictures – as well as the underlines (which were meant to help small children learn to pronounce words) – Aspen began to understand the markings. One page had a picture of a bunny like him, next to a big letter "B." He was excited to figure out at last that the markings depicted a word he knew: bunny! That helped him start figuring out the other markings.

At last he got real daring and followed some humans inside the center. He eventually was noticed and shooed out the door, but before that he heard and saw enough to gain a better sense for several key terms, such as "ranger" and "visitor center" and "have a good one" and, happily for him, "books" and "reading." Really, the only thing that scared him (other than being stepped on) was seeing row after row of animals along shelves on a wall, including one row that looked like family members! Horrified, he moved closer. To his great relief, he realized they weren't real. They seemed to be stuffed somehow, and he decided, after watching the behavior of the

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humans, that the only purpose for putting them there was to make little children happy.

In the evenings (when Aspen's family members were back in their burrow), he started following people to an open place where they would sit and listen to a man with a hat (the ranger) tell them about the park. From these talks, Aspen learned that he lived in a forested place that had been left unchanged, a place called Rocky Mountain National Park, and that it was 71 "miles" (whatever those were) from a "city" called Denver.

Some of the ranger's information was also in Aspen's book, so that helped him with his reading. For example, the book also mentioned Denver, but told a little more. He learned that it was a big place where lots of humans lived... animals too. He found himself wondering: What if there were other animals like him? Maybe even in Denver?

Another thing he learned from the ranger and his book was the actual elevation of the visitor center – although he had no idea how all those feet had been brought together to make that measurement. He only had four himself. How many bunnies would it take to reach 11,798 feet?

After keeping his discoveries a secret for a long time, Aspen decided to tell his family. It wasn't easy using the rabbit method of sniffs, grunts, thumps, licks and body poses. And of course, they didn't believe him. So he said out loud, "The actual elevation is 11,798 feet." But they all ran away... even his mother!

Later, he tried to seek them out, but they all just thumped at him with their paws, looking very scared.

That made up his mind. He didn't like the thought of leaving the home he'd always known, but it was too late now. He had changed, and he no longer fit in his old life. He had to find out where he *did* fit.

So it was that one morning in early fall Aspen set out alone, hopping away from his burrow and away from the visitor center. His plan was to head for Denver.

He'd tried to think it through. With all the people who drove up Trail Ridge Road to the center, some of them *had* to be from Denver. He could just go down the road. But the rolling things were kind of scary. What seemed more natural was following one of the creeks that flowed downhill from different lakes he knew about in the mountains nearby. The Denver

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elevation was only 5,280 feet. He'd read that in his book too. Eventually, Aspen reasoned, when the creek he followed went down far enough, he'd be there.

Little did he know that at the same time, not far from a couple of the mountain lakes, lived a gray squirrel named Rocky. He too had the talking gift and, like Aspen, had no animal to share it with.

Maybe it was luck, maybe it was destiny... In any case, two days later, after finally escaping from a fox that had been chasing him for several hours, Aspen stumbled wearily into a forest glade where he found Rocky feasting on some nuts he had gathered.

Rocky watched the newcomer curiously. "I wonder who he is," he thought. "I've never seen that rabbit around here before."

Aspen decided to ask the squirrel where he was. He'd gotten a little turned around during the fox chase. He had to think a moment first. It had been a long time since he had talked to squirrels, and he only remembered a few of the sounds and movements they use to communicate. At least this squirrel looked friendly, Aspen thought. It wouldn't hurt to give it a try.

He walked up closer. "Squeee... squay... yeek, yeek, yeek," Aspen said, hoping he had pronounced the sounds right and had been flicking his tail in the right pattern simultaneously.

"What in the world is this guy talking about?" Rocky pondered. "I think he said, 'I'm a goof bird, tra la la,' but I can't believe that's what he meant."

He decided to try a little rabbit talk. He twitched his nose, lifted his right front foot, then made a circle with his tail while lowering the right foot and raising the left front.

"'Mountains ha ha skies run purple'?" Aspen translated silently. "He can't speak rabbit any better than I can talk squirrel."

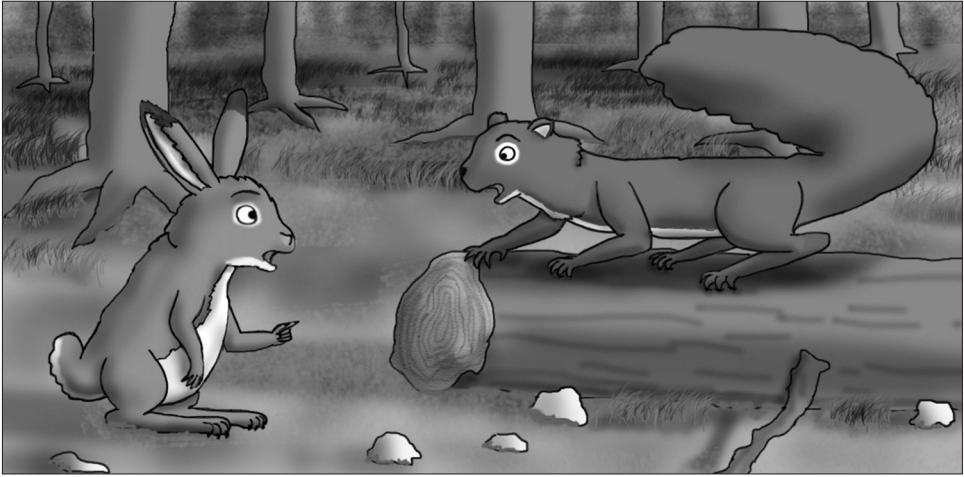
He decided to try communicating in the squirrel language one more time. But no sooner had he gotten to the tail switch than he knew he had messed up again.

"Gosh darn it," he spoke out loud, frustrated.

Rocky's jaw dropped, his eyes widening into huge circles. "What did you say?" he blurted.

"I've been trying to tell you I'm lost and..." Now it was Aspen's turn to

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be amazed. "And... and... you can talk!" he exclaimed.

"So can you!" replied Rocky.

"I thought I was the only one."

"So did I."

"Huuu-WUHH?!!!" A shout of pure joy and disbelief rose from the rabbit and squirrel at the same time, and they raced around the glade in their excitement. If anyone had seen them at that moment, they would have appeared to be stark, raving mad.

Eventually they settled down and turned thoughtful. Rocky explained that he had talked like this almost from birth. The words just came to him, he had no idea how. Up here where he'd been raised, several miles from the visitor center, he'd seen a lot fewer humans than Aspen had – just some who came down to the lakes now and then. His mother just assumed he was doing a bad job of squirrel chattering

"You know," said Aspen, "if this could happen to you and me, don't you think it might happen to other animals, too?"

"For sure."

"Listen. I'm on my way to Denver. Do you want to come with me?"

"What's Denver?"