

BUMPHEAD & EAGLEYE GO TO SCHOOL

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Chapter:1

I Don't Want to Go to School



Three years had elapsed, and the Shellback Creek and Tinsley

Lake residents found themselves at a pivotal moment. They faced new challenges and opportunities that demanded their attention and action.

Bumphead and his partners, Flatface and Brainchild, created the Tinsley Lake Excavation Company and achieved success beyond their expectations. The Tinsley Lake community of groundhogs was recognized for the beauty and precision of the tunnels and homes the company created.

The demand on Bumphead's time, combined with the fact that the soil at the lake was far different from any other soil he had ever encountered, left him gravely concerned for the safety of the tunnel makers and end users. Bumphead's main concern was the long-term stability of the tunnels and the possibility that they might collapse and injure their owners. The Tinsley Lake Excavation Company was responsible for creating safe homes.

There were other reasons to worry about. The Council of Creatures was creating new directives that would affect every Shellback Creek and Tinsley Lake citizen. Some directives would directly impact the company, such as requiring all groundhog excavators to go to excavation college to learn about soil types, compaction, and structural design to ensure solid tunnels. School learning was never easy for Bumphead, and returning to school was a scary and worrisome thought that lingered continuously in his mind.

Shellback Creek had Shellback, a type of mayor who settled arguments between the creek's citizens. But Tinsley Lake citizens needed a leader to provide guidance. Tinsley Lake's population was growing by leaps and bounds, and it sorely needed a steady voice to guide the creatures and their activities for a safe and wonderful community.

So, Bumphead decided to go to Shellback Creek, find Shellback, and see if he could recommend a turtle who could serve as Tinsley Lake's mayor—a mayor who would guide its citizens in a fair and just way. Bumphead thought that to be a challenging task indeed.

Bumphead returned to the 3G's office to discuss things with Brainchild and Flatface before journeying to Shellback Creek. When he arrived, they both looked scared. Tunnel cracking in Tunnel 12 had widened beyond the minimum allowable value. They both said in a panicky voice, "Bumphead, what should we do?"

Bumphead replied, "Look, guys, we're in trouble. We don't know enough to fix the problem. We need to get educated. We need to learn stuff we don't know anything about. It's going to be tough on us. I hate school—not because I learn things, but because I want to work on tunnels, not sit and listen to words all day. The Council of Creatures is creating rules and regulations for digging high-quality, safe tunnels. We will have to dig tunnels the way they want, not the way we want. The council will send its experts to study Tinsley Lake and Shellback Creek's problems and explain the new requirements for creating safe tunnels."

Before I go, I must ask why your names are so strange. Why Brainchild? and Flatface? My dad told my mom just before I was born, "I sure hope this one has a brain." So, Mom chose to name me Brainchild. Everyone makes fun of me because of my weird name. I agree it sure is weird, but Flatface, your name is even more bizarre. Before I go, can we pick a better name for you two? I don't want all these fancy government people looking down on you because of your name.

Brainchild, you do excellent work as a master tunnel builder. That goes for you too, Flatface. Can't we find better names for you two?

Brainchild said, "I always thought Smarty would be a good name for me."

"What about you, Flatface? Why such a name for you?"

"It's a long story, but the short version goes like this: Uncle Stubtoe was clearing rocks at the bottom of a small hill just under the tunnel entrance where Uncle Crouchy was working. Uncle Crouchy pushed a big rock out of the tunnel; it landed on Uncle Stubtoe's face. It flattened it completely. He didn't live long after that. So when I came along, they decided to name me Flatface as a reminder of Uncle Stubtoe and to be careful when digging tunnels."

"Oh my, Flatface, that's a terrible story."

"I know," said Flatface. "That's why I don't like to talk about it."

"So, would you consider changing your name?"

"Are you kidding? I've wanted to change it ever since I learned what it meant."

"Okay, then, do you have a name picked out?"

"Yes, I think Rocky."

Bumphead said, "That went much easier than I thought it would. That's very good. Please use your new names, especially when strangers start showing up. In the morning, I'll head for Shellback Creek. I'll be back in about three days. By the way, put a big rock at all the tunnel entrances to keep other groundhogs out. We can push the rocks away when we are sure the tunnels are safe."

The next day came soon enough, and Bumphead was nervous about everything changing. He did feel good about the names Brainchild and Flatface had picked out for themselves. Bumphead was thinking about the importance of your name and never doing anything wrong that you or your name couldn't be a proud part of.

Bumphead always had a good sense of direction, so he started into the field where it never gets mowed. The grass and weeds grew tall and strong, which was okay with Bumphead. He would find some dandelions to eat along the way. He arrived at the waterfall at Shellback Creek just before the sun was directly overhead. He looked up to see if Eagleye was on duty watching over the creek, and he was. Bumphead yelled up to Eagleye to come on down. Eagleye was so excited to see his friend. He jumped up through the waterfall and swam over to Bumphead. Eagleye jumped out of the water and said, "Wow, it's so good to see you. Are you doing okay?"

"I am fine. I am fine."

"That's great news. What about you, Eagleye? Are you fine too?"

"Well, sort of."

Bumphead had noticed the gleam in Eagleye's eyes was not their usual sparkle. Bumphead said, "What's wrong?"

Eagleye said, "Things are changing, and I don't understand how the changes work. Several frogs from higher up on the creek have decided to live here at Shellback Creek. They are very nice, but they know a lot of stuff I need to learn. They had gone to school to learn about things I should know. There's a job opening at the Creek's postmaster's office. It's important to take messages and pass them on to the correct frog. To be considered for the job, you need to pass a test. The test checks to see if you understand what it takes to do the job. I didn't go to school, so I can't take the test. I need a report card showing I went to school and earned passing grades. I am stuck. When you know stuff, but it's not the right stuff, it's a problem. It makes you feel very nervous and scared."

"I have the same problem. Tinsley Lake's population is growing exponentially, and I need to make many homes for all the new

groundhogs moving there. The problem is that the soil at Tinsley Lake is entirely different from the soil at Shellback Creek. My tunnels are starting to crack and fall in. The Council of Creatures is making regulations for building tunnels and other structures. You have to get a license, which requires all tunnel builders to take a test about the proper way of making tunnels in any soil. I want to know that stuff. If I don't learn it right now, 3G's Excavation Company will have to close permanently. The problem is I hate school. Listening to words is boring. Learning to like learning is a real challenge."

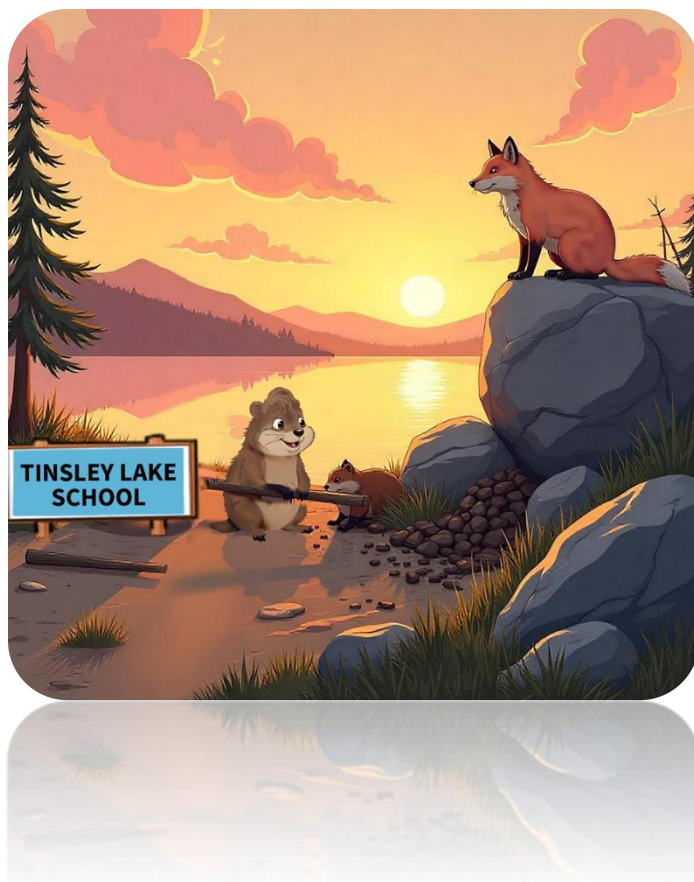
Eagle eye said, "I couldn't have said that any better, Bumphead. That's exactly how I feel."

Eagle eye and Bumphead stood there in complete silence. Eagle eye said, "Come back tomorrow morning. They sent a teacher to teach the best dietary practices. I am trying to understand what dietary means. Someone told me you learn what bugs to eat and what bugs are nasty. Who knows? I signed up for the class but will never know why."

Bumphead said, "Oh, life is so hectic. I'll stop by in the morning."

Chapter 2:

New School



Morning came soon enough, and Bumphead felt anxious about his life and the lives of all his friends and co-workers. What would they do? How would they all adapt to the coming changes, whether they wanted them or not?

The following day, Bumphead shook his head as if to shake off the confusion buried inside it. He saw Eagleye and went over to say, "Good morning."

Eagleye, looking grouchy, replied, "Yeah, right, good morning."

Bumphead said, "You could be happier."

Eagleye responded, "The new teacher's name is Gertrude, but she wants to be called Miss Pinky because she wears a very pink jumpsuit. She says it gives her confidence while teaching. As soon as the class is over, she jumps out of the jumpsuit to take a well-deserved rest."

Bumphead said, "Wow!"

Eagleye added, "Not a good picture."

"I understand your struggle, but I'll leave you to learn about bugs and head home. Shellback and Sharpnose have gone somewhere, and I don't have time to wait for them. I've waited three days, and I need to get back home. Thanks, friend, for abandoning me in my hour of need."

Bumphead looked back at Eagleye and said, "That's what friends are for," with a big smile. "I'll see you soon," he added, running up the creek's bank and into the weeds.

Bumphead's sense of direction was dead on, and he rushed as fast as he could. His mind churned over and over. How could they form a city government for Tinsley Lake? What about all the new tunnel

construction requirements? Was he smart enough to learn new things? Would Smarty and Rocky stay with the company? Maybe they wouldn't like all the changes coming and move on.

It was mid-afternoon when Bumphead arrived back at company headquarters. Everything seemed eerily silent. He looked past the big rock along the lake and saw Rocky and Smarty approaching.

"Where have you guys been?" he asked.

"Please don't get mad at us. We looked over the ground where the new school will be built," Smarty said.

"New school? Why wasn't I told about this?" Bumphead demanded.

"We don't know," Rocky replied. "All we know is this red-haired fox named Karl, who doesn't want to be called Karl. He wants to be called Karool. He gets mad if anyone calls him Karl. There's more. His title is 'Top of the Line.' So, when you talk to him, you address him as 'Top of Line Karool.'"

Bumphead threw himself down and began banging his head against the ground, yelling, "My life, my world, makes no sense."

"We both understand that. We're pretty messed up, too," Rocky admitted.

After a while, Bumphead calmed down and said, "Okay, shoot, give me the details."

Smarty went first. "This Karool guy, as it turns out, is in charge of all schools and site selections. He decided our school will be built on that little hill towards the lake on the north side."

Then Rocky added, "The school will have three stories and be made of native pine and local rocks."

Smarty nodded in agreement.

"Wow, they sure move fast," Bumphead said.

"We learned from one of Top of Line Karool's helpers that only frogs will be teachers. They're smaller, more patient, and learn quickly. That seems okay. Here's the interesting part: every teacher will be assigned a jumpsuit, the color representing the subject being taught. At school, teachers will wear their appropriately colored jumpsuits.

"Beginner classes will start on the first floor, which is at ground level. The second floor is the same, except the teacher's jumpsuit will have a black badge on top, indicating the courses will be more difficult. Then, the third-floor classes will be the hardest, and the teachers on that floor will have another badge on the opposite shoulder."

"That's all we know," Smarty concluded.

Bumphead said, "I guess that doesn't sound too bad."

"They will start bringing in the school wood and rocks tomorrow," Rocky said. "Shellback and Sharpnose will be with them. The Council of Creatures has asked Sharpnose to be the mayor of Tinsley Lake. He told them he wasn't worthy of being mayor because of the bad things he did at Shellback Creek. The Council gave him till tomorrow to make up his mind. He's supposed to tell Shellback, and Shellback will go back to the Council meeting to let them know."

Bumphead said, "That sounds pretty good, especially if Sharpnose agrees to be mayor. That would make my day."

Chapter 3:

Sharpnose Has Integrity?



The sun hadn't come up yet, but the noise of groundhogs pulling logs and rocks toward the new school's location filled the air. It was a long parade of logs and rocks. By the time the sun was directly overhead, all the logs and rocks were lying in neat piles. All the Tinsley Lake creatures gathered to feel the magic of their lake getting a school. It was time for celebration—singing, dancing, and laughter filled the air, and joy was everywhere you looked.

Bumphead, Rocky, and Smarty were looking around for Shellback and Sharpnose. The crowd made distinguishing between creatures nearly impossible.

Bumphead said, "Let's go, guys. Let's head towards the front of the crowd."

It wasn't easy to wiggle through the throng, but they made progress.

Rocky yelled out, "There they are! I see them up by that large stack of rocks!"

Bumphead and Smarty looked and spotted Shellback and Sharpnose.

Shellback said, "It's about time you guys got here. Where have you been?"

Bumphead replied, "What have you been doing? We've been here all day."

"It's tough slogging through the mud and weeds, but we made it," said Shellback.

"So I see," Smarty added. "Let's all go over to where the wood logs are stacked. It's quieter there."

Bumphead said, "Boy, are we glad to see you all! Everything is changing so fast. The Council of Creatures sent an envoy named Karl—"

Sharpnose interrupted, "Don't you mean Top of the Line Karool?"

There was a long pause.

"Yeah, that's what I meant. This guy is going to be a problem," Bumphead said.

Silence fell as everyone nodded in agreement.

Bumphead continued, "We heard the good news—you've been offered the job of mayor at Tinsley Lake."

Sharpnose said, "I disgraced my brother, my family, and all the creatures of Shellback Creek. I am not worthy to be mayor."

Silence fell over them as they pondered Sharpnose's words.

The crowd began to notice Sharpnose and wanted to hear what he was saying. The creatures surrounded him, eager to listen.

Sharpnose began to speak. "I've done bad things in my life. I can't undo what I have done. My conscience continuously reminds me of my shortcomings. The only time I get relief from this pain is when I am doing something for others. My dear brother carries the weight of my mistakes, and I know I've put a black mark on our family. I now appreciate what he has done for me. I wish I could have known and accepted his support before I went down a crazy path of ugliness."

The crowd listened with great concern. A profound silence followed, seeming to last forever.

Then, from the back of the crowd, a voice called out, "Don't you remember how you saved my little Angy from drowning? You risked your life to push her away from the rapids!"

Another voice yelled, "You saved my wife from eating poison grass!"

Yet another voice chimed in, followed by more, sharing stories of Sharpnose doing great things. The voices and stories went on and on.

Sharpnose hadn't realized the things he'd done were special. To him, they were just things any creature would do if given the chance. But the crowd didn't feel that way. They believed his actions were extraordinary, and he should feel proud.

As the crowd spoke up, Sharpnose began to feel funny. He looked down, and tears fell from his eyes. He started to feel, deep inside, that maybe he was a good turtle.

After a while, silence fell over the crowd again.

Bumphead began to speak. "Sharpnose, the creatures have spoken. They want you to be their leader. You've shown them that you can make mistakes and stop. Now we all realize that you do everything the best you can. You've grown in a good way—from a brat to a responsible member of Tinsley Lake's community."

Bumphead paused, then continued, "You overcame your past and refused to go back. In my mind, that makes you a turtle of great integrity. Integrity is a quality we all wish we had but probably don't. So I'm asking everyone here: Won't you please be our mayor?"

In great unison, the crowd yelled, "We want Sharpnose! We want Sharpnose!"

After the crowd quieted down, Sharpnose began to speak. "It's a great honor to understand how you feel about me. I am very touched and grateful to you all. I am especially grateful to my brother Shellback, who never held my mistakes against me. He just wanted me to learn and realize that learning and doing are what life is all about. Thank you, brother. Yes, I would be proud to be your mayor."

The crowd jumped up and down, yelling and screaming with joy.

Shellback could now return to the Council of Creatures with the great news that Tinsley Lake had its mayor.

Chapter 4:

Truth



Things settled down on Tinsley Lake. The school was finished, the courses of study were established, and students had been tested to ensure they started in a class that matched their current knowledge. That way, students could pick up where they left off on their learning journey. The Council of Creatures decided to postpone building a school at Shellback Creek until next year. However, they had selected the spot behind the waterfall to provide schooling for those wanting to work for the community. One of those would be Eagleye, who wished to become the Message Master of Shellback Creek.

Bumphead had tested out of the beginner's class on soil and clay properties, so his class would be on the school's second floor. His teacher was Elsiha, but she was called Stumpy because her one leg was shorter than the other. She said her nickname was okay with her: "Reality is what it is; if we can get a little fun out of it, so be it."

Rocky and Smarty had to start as beginners, and their classes would be on the first floor. Their teacher's name was Pretty, and she was very pretty. Her jumpsuit color was orange. The boys were excited about school—or maybe just about seeing Miss Pretty every day. I don't know if studying was on their minds, but regardless, they still had to make passing grades.

Three new students from a different land just north of Tinsley Lake joined Rocky and Smarty's class. Their names were Eainie, Meanie, and Minor.

Classes were going well. Bumphead was learning about tunnel strength in different kinds of soil. When there was less clay in the soil, curves could be added to tunnels; curves helped the soil stay in position and not collapse. Bumphead knew about two tunnels that already needed curves, which was excellent to know.

Learning was exciting. Making better tunnels thrilled Bumphead; learning had a purpose. Rocky and Smarty were busy learning to recognize regular dirt, dirt with clay, and dirt with sand, which was essential for tunnel diggers.

Eainie and Meanie had been friends for a long time. They decided that school was a necessity, not an option. Learning excavation practices could lead to well-paying jobs. Minor heard about Eainie and Meanie and asked if he could go to school with them. They had no problem with that, so Minor joined them to learn.

The days at school passed quickly. Things were going well except for Meanie. His grades were awful, and he was afraid of failure.

A big test was coming soon, and he knew he had to get a good grade. Eainie was doing okay in his studies but could have done better. Minor, on the other hand, was the teacher's pet. He got everything right every time. Minor, being a non-pushy kind of groundhog, was hard to get to know but lovely in every other way.

Test time was approaching, and Meanie knew he would fail. He paced back and forth, worrying about his future and the test. Desperate, Meanie came up with a plan. He knew the teacher never graded the tests on the same day they were taken. Plus, he knew the drawer where the tests were placed was always unlocked.

When the test day came, everyone took the test as usual. That night, Meanie went to his classroom, opened the door, went to the desk, opened the drawer, and found the tests in a neat pile. Meanie spotted Minor's test first. He wouldn't need to look further if he couldn't find Minor's. Meanie found Minor's test to be neat and perfect-looking. Then he found his own test. The tests were true or false, which Meanie thought was good; it would be easy to erase and change his answers to match Minor's. Meanie felt great. He believed he'd passed the test and wouldn't get caught cheating.

Meanie went home and found Eainie busy studying.

Eainie asked, "Where have you been?"

"I was just out and about."

"Did you see anything?"

"No, not really."

Meanie couldn't hold back and confessed what he had done.

Eainie said, "You're going to get in trouble."

Meanie replied, "I don't think so."

The next day, the teacher arrived on time and brought the class to order. Meanie was very nervous. Miss Pretty looked rather stern-faced in her orange jumpsuit, Meanie thought.

Miss Pretty began, "Education is important, especially when a lack of knowledge could hurt others. Tunnel designs require expertise because poorly made tunnels can collapse and injure innocent groundhogs, especially newborns."

She continued, "I've found an irregular situation in one of the tests. I've scheduled a meeting with Sharpnose right now. Let's head to his office."

They all went to Sharpnose's office, where he looked sullen and serious.

"My friends," Sharpnose said, "I consider you all my friends, as I do all the creatures of Tinsley Lake. What we are about to discuss is a serious matter, and I hope we can resolve it fairly."

"I've already asked the other students in your class some questions, and their answers were satisfactory.

"Mister Minor, Miss Pretty tells me you are her best student and rarely miss questions on tests. Would you agree with that?"

"Yes, I would agree," Minor replied.

"Are you a friend of Mr. Meanie's?"

"Well, sort of. I don't have many friends. I know Mr. Meanie, but we don't talk much."

"Mr. Eainie, your test results are consistent with your past performance, so your grade is honest. Now, do you know Mr. Meanie?"

"Yes, I do."

"Are you good friends?"

"Yes, we've been friends since childhood."

"Mr. Meanie, how would you describe your ability to learn? Do your test scores reflect it? Have you improved recently? Please explain how you scored 100% on this true or false test when you rarely scored above 50% on similar ones."

Meanie thought hard. He was in a mess and hoped Eainie would lie for him.

"I guess I would say I was just lucky."

Sharpnose replied, "After this meeting, let's pick some lottery numbers with that luck of yours."

Sharpnose turned to Eainie and said, "We have no real evidence that your friend is lying, and we want to believe luck was truly at play in his test score. But the truth must be known for Mr. Meanie, for you, and for everyone at Tinsley Lake. We are a family, and the truth helps guide us to make things right. Now, Mr. Eainie, do you have any personal knowledge about this test and Mr. Meanie?"

Eainie was sweating bullets as he thought, You knuckleheaded Meanie, you got me into this. I told you this was bad. I won't lie. Time was passing, and Eainie was turning red. He didn't want to answer. He and Meanie had been friends for so long, and now, when Meanie needed him most, he felt like he was going to let him down.

Meanie stared at Eainie with a scared and pleading look as if to say, "Please don't let me down."

Eainie finally said, "I'm sorry, Meanie. I have to tell the truth. Last night, Meanie told me he sneaked into Miss Pretty's room, found Minor's test, and copied the answers. He erased his mistakes and made sure his answers matched Minor's. Everybody in the class knows Minor always gets everything right." Eainie looked at Meanie and added, "I'm so sorry. I just had to tell the truth."

Miss Pretty said, "Meanie, you made a mistake. It was a terrible one, but it's just one mistake. Sharpnose, Top of the Line Karool, and I thought it best to give you a chance. You'll need to drop out of school for the year and go to Shellback Creek. There, you'll work with Sharpnose's brother, Shellback. He'll guide you and help you learn the importance of truth-telling. Shellback is the best for this, and if you try hard, you will succeed."

Meanie looked heartbroken, his shoulders slumping. "I appreciate a second chance. I'll try hard. When do I need to leave for Shellback Creek?"

Miss Pretty said, “We all think it’s best for you to leave now. Rocky will take you there. Stay strong—you’ll be okay.”

Chapter 5:

Respect Truth



Rocky took Meanie to Shellback Creek and told Shellback and Eagleye that Meanie was on school probation. He said Shellback needed to teach him the value of always telling the truth, no matter what.

Rocky went up by the waterfall. He found Eagleye studying the key to bug recognition.

"Hey, Eagleye," said Rocky, "how's it going?"

Eagleye looked up and said, "You have got to be kidding me. Do you know how many different kinds of bugs there are? Well, let me tell you—kazillions. I knew there were a lot of bug types, but I didn't realize some were okay to eat, and others were not. Other than that, I'm fine. Classes on message delivery will start in the next school session, which should be in about four weeks. So, Rocky, how are Bumphead and Smarty doing?"

"They're good. Bumphead is taking a second-level course on tunnel building, and Smarty and I are in the beginner's class. It's all good. I'm trying to teach myself that learning can be fun, and taking pride in understanding something hard makes you feel good about yourself. It's nice to feel that way."

"Yeah, I see what you mean. I've been feeling that way, too."

"I've got to get back to Tinsley Lake. Top of the Line Karool has scheduled a school program on respect for others. I'm not sure Top of the Line Karool knows what 'respect' means, so it should be interesting."

It was dark by the time Rocky got home, and Smarty was fast asleep. As Rocky got into bed, he thought about the day and how rough it had been for Meanie. But learning good behavior, especially about lying, is so important. The whole world needs the truth and to tell the truth.

The next morning, Bumphead found Rocky and asked, "How did it go yesterday?"

"Everything went well, but everyone was sad for Meanie. He knew that when anyone looked at him, they would think, 'What a dirty liar Meanie is.' Of course, he didn't actually know that. What they were really thinking was, 'I told a lie or two when I was growing up; I just never got caught.' How true that is. Well, we will pray for Meanie. It will work out, especially since Shellback oversees his new reality."

In her violet jumpsuit, Miss Elisha looked very sharp in the morning sunlight. "Miss Elisha is giving my class a geometry test," said Rocky. "The test will show if I know how to connect the ends of two tunnels with the proper curve."

"E-gads! Will I have to learn that too?"

"Absolutely."

"It's about time we got in front of the school. Top of the Line Karool doesn't like tardiness—unless, of course, he's tardy. Then it's perfectly fine because he's the Great Top of the Line Karool. I shouldn't talk about people like that, especially ones who help govern the Tinsley Lake family. Why can't he just be ordinary Karl? It's so much simpler."

"Quiet, please. Top of the Line Karool would like to make a few brief comments on respect for others. There is no need for clapping. Here is Top of the Line Karool."

"Thank you all for showing up. As I look out at the crowd, I believe everyone is here. You there, please step back—too close."

Smarty whispered, "What is he talking about? That's old Madam Crowley. She's one of our greats!"

"As you all know, my job is to oversee the school structure and personnel, as well as all the students. Ma'am, what are you doing? Please, we don't need any holes here. Thank you—that's better.

"Students and faculty have become rude and disrespectful to me and others. Can someone calm this dear lady down? She's starting to dig again. We must always show respect for others. Ma'am, you have to stop this infernal digging."

Sharpnose came to the front, faced Top of the Line Karool, and said, "You need to take your own advice. This dear old grandma groundhog, Madam Crowley, has been here long before Tinsley Lake was named. She has worked and struggled her whole life to make us all safe and feel safe. You have got to stop being so obnoxious and learn to take your own advice.

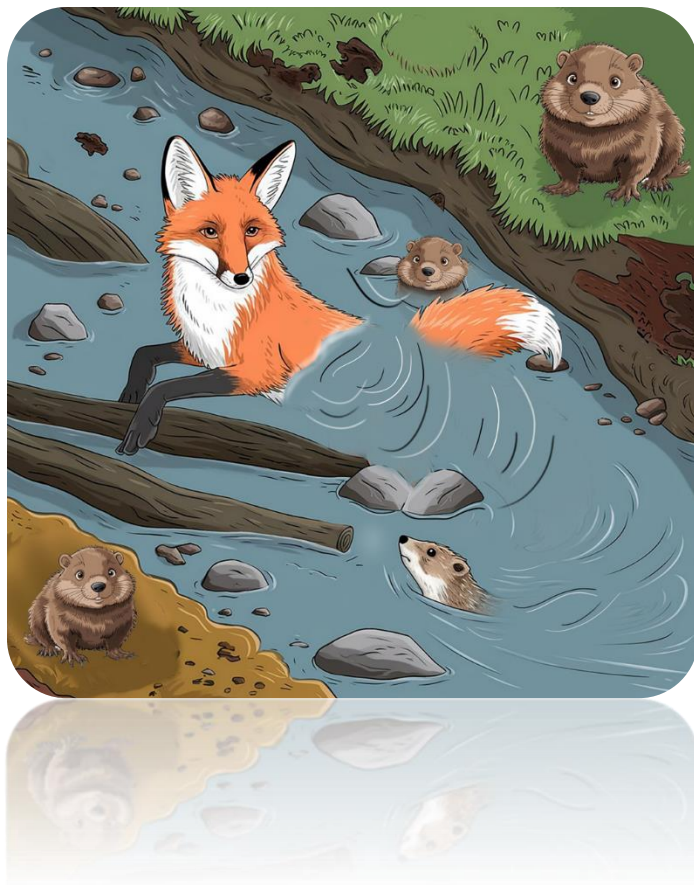
"You see, I know right from wrong, but you can't use that knowledge to help yourself. We won't put up with it any longer. From now on, you are just plain old Karl, just like plain old Sharpnose. We will call you Top of the Line Karool if you prove you're great. Until then, this get-together is over. Go back to your classes."

The crowd was very silent as they headed toward their classrooms.

Karl looked crushed and shaken. A minute ago, he was the Top-of-the-Line Fox called Karool. Now, he was still a fox, but just a fox everyone called Karl. Karl walked away into the field, a beaten fox. It was very sad to see.

Chapter 6:

Let Others Talk



No one could sleep the night Karl got yelled at, so the next day couldn't come soon enough. Everyone needed a fresh start. The sun came up bright, making the blue sky look like heaven.

Karl was nowhere to be found, which made everyone pause to think. I wondered where he was. Classes began on time, and all the teachers reminded us that kindness needed to be the foundation of our lives.

After school, Bumphead, Rocky, Smarty, Eanie, and Minor sat around talking about Karl and wondering why he thought he was "Top of the Line."

It was puzzling because they had never considered themselves top of the line in anything. They talked about the weather and how rain and snowstorms had caught them in bad places where they almost died. Minor tried to share about a time he got on a log after a rain-storm that carried him downstream—it was fun.

Everyone was talking over each other, and it was hard to figure out if any points were being made. Minor got talked over the most. It was exhausting. It was especially tiring for Minor because he always tried not to push his way into the conversation. He wanted to make everyone happy. But Minor thought to himself, "Being a peacemaker is not for me."

The other groundhogs were used to this bantering, but Minor was not.

Minor got tired of it all. If they wouldn't let him talk or be part of the group, he might as well go for a walk. He started walking in no particular direction.

He found himself away from the lake and into the weeds. The weeds felt good on his feet and tickled a bit. He found a deer trail

and followed it around. The trail brought him toward the higher part of the lake where Shellback Creek came in.

It was getting dark, and he thought, I should go back.

Just then, he heard a groan and a small yelp by the water's edge.

Karl was lying on his back in the water, his head just above the waterline.

Minor rushed down and said, "Karl, are you okay?"

Karl said, "No, I caught my foot and leg in a crevice, and I can't get out. I'm getting exhausted. It's hard to keep my head above water."

Minor said, "I'm going for help; try to hang on. I won't be long."

Minor followed the shoreline so he wouldn't get lost in the dark.

It didn't take long, and the guys were still talking nonsense. They saw Minor but paid no attention to him. Minor tried to be patient and waited for a pause in their banter to get their attention, but none came.

Minor took a deep breath, jumped in the middle, and shouted, "Help! We have to help Karl. His foot and leg are caught in the creek where it enters the lake. He can barely catch his breath."

"Why didn't you say so?"

Minor saw Cliplip and said, "Get on my back. We have to save Karl."

Cliplip and Minor were friends, so they both knew that when one needed help, it was serious. Off they went, following the others under the moonlit sky.

Karl was barely above the waterline.

Bumphead took the lead. “Why is your leg stuck?”

Karl said, “I’m not sure. I think it’s caught between that log sticking up and a rock.”

All the guys started talking at once, except Minor. Minor shouted, “Stop it! I brought Cliplip. He’ll dive into the water to see what’s wrong. Then maybe we can get Karl out without hurting him.”

Minor’s directness stopped everyone, and silence fell.

Bumphead said, “He’s right. Go for it, Cliplip.”

Cliplip dove in and went down, finding Karl’s ankle completely squeezed between the log and the rock. Karl must have hit the spot hard to have gotten his leg so stuck.

Cliplip came back up and, while still swimming, said, “You’ve got to pull that log out. His ankle is wedged between the log and a big rock.”

Bumphead asked, “Does anybody have an idea of what to do?”

Silence. No one spoke a word. All you could hear were crickets and bullfrogs croaking.

Smarty said, “Didn’t we learn something from our classes we could use?”

More silence.

Minor said, “We have to dig a hole straight down, a small distance from the water so it doesn’t fill up. The bottom of the hole should be about the same depth as the log. Once it’s deep enough, we dig sideways toward the water. When we’re close, we all dig out the last section of dirt at the same time. If we do it right, the water pressure should push the log away from Karl’s leg and ankle.”

Bumphead jumped into the water, held onto the log, and used his legs to support Karl’s head above the water. Smarty started digging as fast as he could. When he got tired, Rocky took over.

While they were digging, Karl said, “How come you guys took so long to help me?”

No one answered; they all knew the truth—they hadn’t let Minor speak.

Cliplip hollered out, “It’s a long story! We’ll explain when we get you out!”

Digging was tough; there were too many rocks and stones. Karl and Bumphead were both getting tired. Karl’s head dipped below the waterline a few times. He came up spitting and coughing.

“You’d better hurry up! I can’t hold on much longer,” Karl said.

His urgency energized the diggers, who worked even faster.

Minor was at the bottom of the hole, Smarty was next, and Rocky took the highest spot. Smarty said, “Okay, Cliplip, count down from three, and when you get to zero, we’ll all dig out our part of the hole. Let’s make sure Minor isn’t caught down there when the log breaks free.”

The time had come. Cliplip started, “Three, two, one, zero.”

There was a flurry of motion and clouds of dirt everywhere. Bumphead and Karl had dirt falling all over them, but they didn't care. It only took moments before Bumphead said, "I can feel the log loosening. Good job, keep going."

The group dug even harder. Then, like magic, the log started to bob up and fell back against the creek's bank. Bumphead pushed Karl toward the bank. They were safe.

But Minor was missing.

Bumphead dove into the water and saw Minor trapped between the hole and the log. He positioned himself above Minor, pushed the log with his back, and used his feet against the hole. The log floated away.

Minor and Bumphead emerged from the water and looked at each other. Both thought the same thing: That was way too close.

Everyone's attention turned to Karl.

"Are you okay, Karl?" they all yelled in unison.

"Yeah, I'm fine. My leg hurts, but it's okay."

Bumphead asked, "What were you doing out here by yourself in the dark?"

Karl looked embarrassed and said, "I felt terrible about that nonsense of mine—you know, Top of the Line Karool. I wanted to make it up to all of you. So, I found all these different types of weeds that would make good baskets. I finished them and was bringing them closer to the school. I was happy. I jumped to get over a rock, and my foot and leg got jammed between the rock and the log. See, over there, there are two of the baskets I made."

Everyone looked over but didn't know what to say.

They were all happy that Karl was saved and felt a newfound kinship with each other. Yet, there was a hint of sadness for Karl. He had lost his dream of being Top of the Line. It was good that he realized the dream was wrong, but it was still sad to set a dream aside.

Chapter 7

Be a Good Listener



The craziness from the night Karl got stuck in the lake made everyone talk about it. How could this happen? Why didn't Karl get help sooner? The buzz around it caught the attention of Sharpnose and Shellback. It was a serious issue that needed clarity.

A few weeks later, Sharpnose and Shellback organized a school program to show how easily things could be misunderstood.

All the students were called outside their classrooms near the lake.

When everyone was gathered, Shellback retraced the events of that night when Karl got stuck.

Shellback said, "We all know, and we can't stop talking about the night we almost lost Karl. He came very close to drowning. Everyone thinks they know how, why, and who is at fault. I want to tell you that everyone has it wrong. Sharpnose and I have come up with a demonstration to show how easily things can get mixed up and lead to bad results. Sharpnose, take it from here."

Sharpnose began, "Thank you, brother, and thank you all for being here for this demonstration. It will show how quickly situations can go astray and lead to bad results.

"We have new teachers visiting us today, some of whom will be your teachers next year. They're not in their designated jumpsuits because they aren't teaching today. Six of these teachers have agreed to participate in this demonstration.

"Each teacher has been assigned a number, which is on their back, held by a ribbon around their necks. The numbers are one through six.

"All six teachers are currently in the school, sitting in my office. They do not know the purpose of this demonstration; they only know they're part of it.

"When it's time, I will call teacher number one and tell her a phrase. You will hear the phrase along with her. Teacher number one will then find teacher number two and whisper the phrase I just told her. After that, teacher number one will return here to stand with Shellback and me.

"This process will repeat until all the teachers have heard the phrase. At the end, we will hear teacher number six's version of the phrase and compare it with the phrase I initially said to teacher number one."

Sharpnose continued, "Okay, let's get started. Someone, please go get teacher number one."

A short time later, teacher number one arrived.

Sharpnose said, "Teacher number one, I'm going to say a phrase out loud so everyone here, except the other teachers, can hear it. Your job is to find teacher number two and whisper the phrase to her without anyone else hearing. After that, come back here and sit with Shellback and me.

"So here is the phrase: 'IT IS BETTER TO HAVE LOVED AND LOST THAN TO HAVE NEVER LOVED AT ALL.'"

The process began. It didn't take long for all six teachers to be standing with Sharpnose and Shellback.

Everyone was eager to hear teacher number six. The groundhogs didn't see much point in the demonstration, but the frogs, other creatures, and even Karl were curious to see how many words from the original phrase teacher number six would get right.

Sharpnose said, "Okay, teacher number six, repeat the phrase teacher number five whispered to you a few moments ago."

Teacher number six said, "I GOT LOST LOOKING FOR LOVE AND COULDN'T GET HOME."

Everyone burst into uncontrollable laughter, including Sharpnose and Shellback. Some groundhogs, frogs, and Karl even had to lie down because they were laughing so hard.

Sharpnose finally got everyone to quiet down and said, "I think nothing more needs to be said. Go back to your classes and remember—listening is hard. Pay attention."

Chapter 8:

What Did I Learn



The school year had finally ended, and everyone was glad. The guys were going to get together that evening to talk over the year's ups and downs, rights and wrongs, and whether it was worth it. Bumphead thought he would go and get Eagleye to update everyone about his school year. Everyone was so busy they hadn't had time to check up on Eagleye.

Bumphead knew the path to the waterfall and hoped Eagleye would return with him to attend the big get-together. Bumphead got to the waterfall in record time. Eagleye wasn't in his usual spot. Bumphead yelled out, "Eagleye, where are you?"

Some frog activity was happening down by a big rock sitting in the creek. Miss Pinky was reviewing insect dietary practices for frogs. Bumphead watched her intently. I thought she was done with this. It was just a brief review to remind frogs that they are what they eat.

When it was over, Miss Pinky jumped out of her jumpsuit and settled between the grass and cattails, as if to say, "I gotta find another job."

Eagleye saw Bumphead and said, "Well, that was my last review. I'm done until next year, I think," seeming unsure of himself.

"Come with me to Tinsley Lake. All the guys are getting together tonight to discuss the school year. We all thought it would be fun if you were there with us, so you could tell us about your year."

Eagleye bent his head back and forth, up and down, as if by magic. He said, "Let's do it."

Bumphead got down low, and Eagleye jumped on his back as he always did. They started down the path. It was getting easier to travel because the grass and weeds were flattened down, making the path clear.

It didn't take long, and they arrived in front of the school, where all the guys were waiting.

They were excited to see Eagleye. Eagleye saw a pile of cabbages and looked at Bumphead as if to say, "Bumphead, you promised not to steal anymore."

Rocky said, "No, no, Sharpnose and Shellback brought the cabbages. We don't know where they got them, and we didn't ask."

The evening started with a lot of eating and laughing. Then Bumphead said, "This learning thing has me worried. I like learning, but it seems hard, and I'd rather be working on tunnels. But if I don't go to school to learn about advanced tunnel building, I'll have to go out of business because I can't pass the test to get a tunnel license. So I guess I need to find a way to learn for learning's sake. Then learning for a reason, like getting a license, won't feel so special or worrisome."

Rocky said, "I hear your point. It is worrisome to study and take tests. I just barely passed to take the next session on tunnel curvatures. I like making tunnels, but I know how to make large hills, and they all say I'm good at it. So should I stick with tunnels because I like them, or should I go with making hills, something I'm good at? I can't figure it out."

Smarty said, "I hear your points and Bumphead's too. So something like this works out: you get as close to doing what you like as possible and live knowing it's okay not to be Top of the Line in tunnel making. You may not get to do everything, but you'll contribute your skills and knowledge at the level you have. Maybe you'll study on your own to get even better."

Minor said, "I agree with everything said and would add that when learning comes easy, like it does for me, I have trouble deciding almost everything because nothing stands out. Everything looks

the same. On top of that, it makes you unpopular, which makes it hard to make friends.”

Karl said, “I’m not a student now, but I once was. I learned quickly but always saw myself as better than others. I felt confident naming myself ‘Top of the Line Karool’ so I would stand out and be admired. So this year taught me that my life was a sham, a disgrace to myself and everyone I talked to. I learned that kindness and friendship are the things we all need to focus on. Mixing in learning makes for an undefeatable plan.”

Everyone yelled to Karl, “For the last time, you are Top of the Line, Karool. We’re proud of you.” Karl smiled and sat down.

It was time for Eagleye to tell about his year of learning. Eagleye said, “As you know, I want to be Shellback Creek’s message handler. I’ll be out delivering messages all over the place. I didn’t get to learn about any of that this year. I learned about some crazy stuff like insect recognition and the health benefits of eating a proper diet. It was okay, but next year, I’m eligible to study the first course in message handling. If I do well, I can go to year two and take the Message Handler Best Practices test. That’s my plan, and I’m sticking to it.”

It was just another year in the lives of the Shellback Creek and Tinsley Lake creatures.