

Chapter 1: The New Rangers

Things had changed again.

First, the changes involved only Gadget. Four weeks ago, the Rescue Rangers had been to her the family that she didn't have. But then Geegaw, her father, came back after 20 years of having most of the world believe that he was dead. The Rangers helped him liberate his wife Stephanie and another 70 mice from the National Institute for Mental Health. And as soon as they were back home, Gadget learned from her parents that she had a twin who happened to be someone the Rangers already knew from an earlier case. So within less than a week, Gadget got a whole family.

But the changes were not over yet. They went on for the Rangers as a whole. For many years now, they were ruled by the policy never to change a running system. There had always been a few technical improvements, but all in all, the Rangers had stayed the same. It had been Chip's decision to leave them as they were since they proved reliable and efficient the way they were. And now, it had been his decision, too, to drop it and make the team even more efficient. In a certain way, the recent events had affected him as well. That was why he held a meeting on this November morning. However, the reason why he held it before both breakfast and sunrise was exclusively known to him.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Chip spoke out loud while eight other animals stood and listened, "we have all gathered here at the Rescue Rangers Headquarters in these still early hours of the day, because I've got something to announce. I have made a decision. Let me start this way: From today on, the Rescue Rangers will no more be a team of five."

Dale gulped heavily. Did his best friend really dare throw him out of the team? After all they had been through? Even after bringing Chip together with his sister that night? And what did that have to do with the additional rooms which had been created at the Headquarters? And, above all, why should that be a reason to get Foxglove, Tammy, Sparky, and LaWahini here before breakfast? His fear and confusion slowly grew stronger than his hunger.

"You may wonder now what these words of mine mean. And you, the guests, may wonder just as well about the recent construction works and the masses of wood chips we got out of the tree. Actually, I had planned this as a kind of surprise for everyone, and yes, including the whole team. Well, first of all, the two new large rooms are for new facilities. One is a laboratory for both research and investigational works. And the other one shall be an infirmary. The Rescue Rangers have often not been able to finish a case without a certain amount of bruises, so I found it necessary." Once again, he remembered the night in Bethesda when they freed Gadget's mother. It was a wonder that no-one got injured on that case. In fact, it was only due to the excellent teamwork that the Rangers were still five when they were back in New York City.

Sparky's eyes widened upon the word "laboratory", and so did Tammy's eyes upon the word "infirmary".

Chip continued his speech, "Of the smaller rooms, some are for guests, in case they have to spend the night or a longer timespan here. I can read the question from your faces now what the other rooms are for. To give you a little hint, Gadget has not installed a separate girl's bathroom without a reason."

"Golly, that's a girl's bathroom? But I am the only girl here! Well, of course except Tammy and Foxglove and my sister." It seemed like Gadget was the first to have a clue. Even she didn't realize in the first place why she had built what she had built. "Wait, do you mean—"

"I said we have a number of extra rooms. I said we have an additional bathroom. And I said that the number of Rescue Rangers will change today." Chip lifted up his voice saying, "And this can only mean that the number will increase. Yes, the reason for this early gathering is because I'd like to introduce my old team to their new mates."

He walked up to the little red bat. "Foxglove. You have a good heart. You've overcome evil before it got you in its claws—or its vacuum cleaner, to be more specific. You've helped us not only against our only magic opponent so far, but also on many other cases, using your ability to fly without any technical devices. And you've made my best friend happy," he added with a smile. "From now on, you may call yourself a Rescue Ranger. Welcome to the team!" he said, shaking her wing.

A few steps to the side, and he stood in front of the red-haired squirrel, his former teen-age admirer. "Tammy. You, too, have proved useful on some cases so far..."

Dale whispered to Monterey Jack, "Not without a reason, I bet." This didn't stay unnoticed by Chip.

"I've heard, you, Dale. And I must admit that you're right. But, Tammy, you told me yourself that that was long ago, and you're over it, now that you're grown up. I know you've worked hard over the past few years to fulfill a little dream of yours, namely to become a nurse. Well, I hereby offer you your first job as a nurse and a chance to gather some practical experiences... at the Rescue Rangers Headquarters." Hearing this, Tammy's beautiful face shone brighter than the rising morning sun. And like Foxglove before, she couldn't find a word to say when Chip shook her hand as a welcome, so he proceeded to the rat in the laboratory coat.

"Sparky. You and Buzz spent some fine years at the MIT, so I can understand how hard it was for you to hear that they decided to keep Buzz as a mascot, but had no further use for you. Like Foxy and Tammy, you proved useful on the cases into which we dragged you whenever you came to visit us, not to mention the case on which we met for the first time. The least I can do for you now is to offer you your own laboratory." This had actually been a hard decision for Chip, considering that Gadget who was going to join Sparky at the lab may still have some feelings for him.

"My own laboratory? Aw Chip, that's so great! Is it far away from here?" the lab rat wondered.

"It's here at the Rescue Rangers Headquarters, Sparky. And by the way, you're now a Rescue Ranger, too."

"Oh, I didn't know that there's a lab in here!"

Chip had enough experience with Sparky by now to stay calm and kind whenever this little quirk of his occurred. "I've already told you, Sparky. And before I forget it: Buzz has mailed me and

promised to supply us with whatever we may need from the MIT's labs. Now welcome aboard, Sparky!" They shook hands without Chip getting an electrical shock.

Gadget grinned to Monty, whispering, "I told you it was a good idea to place that rubber mat where Chip would be standing to introduce Sparky. I was sure that he'd forget both the gloves and grounding himself."

What came now was the hardest part. Chip stood up in front of the only mouse in the row of four. The Rangers had been on the Hawaiian Islands only once so far, but they had almost paid that one time with their lives, all because of her. They had all sworn that they wanted to never meet Lawhiney again. Not even for finding out why she looked almost exactly like Gadget. Now things had changed. She had been brought back by her family to the land where she was born, she had decided to drop the name the villagers had given her and to take back the name her mother had chosen for her, LaWahini. The Rangers knew why she looked like Gadget, they knew what made her do all that to them, and they knew that she was eager to leave that past behind like she left her old home behind.

But Chip hadn't been there when she met her mother, her father and her sister. So he wasn't all that sure of LaWahini's change of mind, and whether he can trust the mouse who wanted to fry him and his friends in an artificial volcano. It had actually been the decision of all the Hackwrench family to let her participate in the Rangers' casework and look at crime from the other side.

"LaWahini," he started, "I know little about you so far. Most of what I know is from a time when you were a villain. One of our opponents. Yes, you've nearly sealed the fate of the Rescue Rangers back then." The formerly Hawaiian mouse was about to frown and see if she would be given another chance to apologize, but Chip's smirk cheered her up a bit. "But from what your family has told me about you, it was just, well, a phase. Besides, if you really wanted to take revenge on us, you'd have had more than enough chances to do so. So to give you a chance to do good and to start a new life, I hereby offer you a Rescue Rangers membership." With these words, he stretched out his hand to her.

"Chip, you're not doing this 'cause I've kissed you that day, are you?"

"Of course not! Remember that you've played Gadget. I thought it was her kissing me. No, I'm sure someone with your IQ will be useful for the Rangers."

"I still can't see the point. I mean, it's nice that you're willing to have me in your team despite all I've done to you. But I wasn't able to gather as much knowledge and experience as you. I haven't seen much more in my life than Hawaii, that boring village with its stupid inhabitants, and the complete lack of a landscape on that volcano."

"You've defeated the Rangers when you were not much more than half as old as now. Does that make you worthy or not?"

LaWahini took a moment to think, then she shook Chip's hand. "Okay, I'm in."

"Then welcome aboard, LaWahini! Oh, and it's great that you remember my name now."

"Well, I guess I have to remember the leader's name now, right, Chop?" She watched Chip's face form an expression of confusion for a moment. "Hey, I was kidding!"

With the smile returning to his face, Chip continued, "Alright, let's go on with the next point on the agenda."

"There's another point?" Dale wondered.

"Yup. Breakfast."

"That's one bonzer point, Chipper," Monty remarked. "Me tummy's been so loud fer the last minutes that I 'aven't understood 'alf o' what y've said. Mind if I take this over, mate?"

"Of course not, Monty. Show our new members what you can. I believe a very special day in the history of the Rescue Rangers deserves a very special breakfast."

The rotund Aussie mouse went ahead as everyone headed for the dining-room which was still in its old place next to the kitchen. The last to leave the main room were Gadget and Chip. As he watched her walk in front of him, the events of the previous month came back to his mind once more—two certain events, two rather similar events. He thought about how much easier everything would have been if they had actually kissed. But they had only almost kissed. Twice. For him, it wasn't enough to serve as a proof of their mutual love. These almost-kisses were mere hints, and sometimes even a detective like him had to rely on hard facts.

At the table, Chip and Gadget sat down opposite each other. With four new Rangers and the larger table, the seating plan had changed, but still the both of them decided to take seats from where they could still see each other's face. They didn't mind having to think of that certain case; however, they weren't sure if they even desired to be reminded. What they both knew, though, while they more and more began to stare at each other, was that there was something else that had to change. And they wanted it to change quite soon.

Chapter 2: The Last Date

"...Um, Chip? Chip!" LaWahini called the Rangers' leader back to reality. "Earth to Chip!"

"Wha..." Chip turned his head away from one mouse and to another, similar-looking one, stopping briefly in front of himself where he discovered his breakfast which was kind of suddenly there. "Sorry, what's up, LaWahini?"

"I wanted to know if we four shall join you on your casework today."

"Sure, why not? The earlier you start, the quicker you get used to it. Especially you, LaWahini, still have to see what it means to be a Rescue Ranger."

"Alright. Say, Chip, is everything okay with you? You seemed a bit absent-minded." It was clear that she wanted to make up for what she had done to him and his friends.

"I was just... going through our recent plans once more. Y'know, I've organized about everything myself to make it a surprise for most of you, and I wanted to be sure that I haven't forgotten anything."

Except for LaWahini and maybe Sparky, everyone in the room knew or was at least certain that this was a lie. So was even Gadget who had been distracted by Chip's face and by her own thoughts, but she swiftly joined Chip's play. "Well, Chip, from what I've seen, I can say that everything is at its place and has been thought of. No need to worry." At least not about this issue.

The other issue was still being dealt with as Tammy showed. She and Gadget had grown very good friends shortly after they had met for the first time, another reason why she hung around a lot with the Rangers. "Chip, in case there's no case today, at least no major one... I mean, it's Saturday today and all... are there any plans for tonight?"

"No... no plans so far as far as I'm concerned. Dale, Foxy, what about you?"

"Dale has asked me out to the drive-in tonight," Foxglove replied. "They're showing some pirate movie. A sequel of a sequel, and still it's said to be pretty good."

Although he had worked on the Headquarters during the last weeks, too, Dale had had no clue about what all these expansions meant, and what was about to happen until this morning. And his dates with Foxglove were still holy for the two of them. So there was no chance for a night out with all the Rangers on the first evening together. But there were other chances which both Chip and Gadget were grateful for.

Dates... this word started spinning in Chip's head.

"Hey Chipper," Dale remarked, "you haven't been out with Gadget for weeks now."

Zipper made it more precise by pointing out that they were on no date since Gadget got her family back, and wondered if they had lost interest. This was of course far from being the case.

Chip and Gadget exchanged glances. They knew why they hadn't been dating recently. The events on and after the flight back from Bethesda gave them hope, but they scared them just as well. What if things didn't go on as they hoped they would, now that they had some hints about their mutual feelings? And what if they did go on that way? They realized that the most wonderful thing possible was waiting for a chance to happen, but that they weren't willing to give it this chance for some entirely pointless reasons.

Suddenly, Chip jumped up from his seat and from his half-finished breakfast. "Will you excuse me for a minute? I've got something to check."

"Yes," Gadget said as she got up, too, "there's something I'll have a look at, too."

Though they left together, they had different destinations. Gadget headed directly for her workshop. That was where she had hung up her personal calendar. And this day was marked in red with a name written below the number. "Yes, finally!" she almost shouted out. "She has promised me to have it completed in half a year. And today, half a year has passed." For a moment, she stood and stared at the calendar with dreamy eyes. Then, after a while, her mind drifted away from reality, and she saw herself in the store mirror again, just like she did in that dream. "He'll so love it. If I didn't know better, I'd say it'll easily enchant him."

Chip went straight to his room. He had a suspicion which he needed to be approved. Dale was still the fun-loving chipmunk he always was, but throughout the years, he had learned how far he could go with his mischief, particularly without endangering his now many friendships. For example, Chip's nightstand was taboo, and he respected it. Chip sat down on his bed, opened the drawer in his nightstand, and got out a book labeled, "Date Diary." He didn't keep a usual diary, but beside his case log, he wrote down every date he had been on with Gadget into this date diary.

He carefully opened the book. It was not the first of its kind, he had filled some more date diaries so far, the first one being as old as 16 years now. And this one barely had enough space for maybe one more entry. 'One last date,' he thought, 'and the book will be full. One last date...' He looked at the photograph of Gadget that served as a bookmark and sighed. 'I've been dating you for 16 years now. And what has become of us? Nothing. Nothing but a couple of fools who make themselves crazy every few weeks when they put too high hopes into yet another date. And things had just gotten worse since four weeks ago. No, it can't go on this way. I can't risk both the leader and the engineer of the Rescue Rangers losing their minds.' It was now when he noticed the serial number of the previous entry. 499. 'So I was right. The next date will be number 500. That's what I wanted to know.'

Chip closed the book and put it back into his nightstand. 'Okay, I'll take Gadget out on another date. It'll be our 500th date. It'll be the last date in this book. And I swear by Sureluck Jones and all his cases that when we return from this date and nothing has happened again and we're still singles, this'll have been our very last date. Maybe my mind will clear up again when I try to get over that. Even if I'll still see her every day.' This was nothing to get comfortable with easily, but it sounded like a wise decision to him.

When he left his room, he almost bumped into Gadget who was on her way back to breakfast. "Oh, er, hi Gadget," he stammered like he did when she had just moved into the tree.

"Is everything alright with you, Chip?" the mouse wondered, her face showing a slight hint of worries about her teammate. "You haven't been the same since that night. Well, I guess neither have I."

It was then when Chip remembered that no serious new inventions had left her workshop since then, and that all she had worked on in that time were the technical installations in the Headquarters' new rooms.

"Yes, we've been through a lot." They both knew what he meant. "Gadget, what do you think of Dale's remark?"

"That we haven't been on a date since then?"

"Yes."

On the one hand, after the recent developments, she was uncertain of what would happen on the first date since that night. On the other hand, there was something she was going to get that would serve her greatly on a date. "Well, would you like to go on a date again?"

"Sure." Actually, he wasn't sure. But he was keen on getting this done as quickly as he could. He didn't want to wait anymore. "Tonight? We could celebrate the team's and the Headquarters' successful expansion."

"That, and maybe a bit more." She hid her own uncertainty behind a beautiful smile.

"There's still a jubilee. It's gonna be our 500th date."

"Golly, we've been on 499 dates so far? Yes, that's definitely something to celebrate." And a great opportunity to finally finish what they had started so many years ago. "We should make this date something very special. Would you mind dressing up a bit?"

"Not at all, Gadget, not for you."

"And what'll we do tonight?"

"Let's redo our first date. Have a dinner at the Infinity and watch the sunset. Just that we change the order a bit. The sun is setting pretty early this time of the year."

"Sounds nice, Chip. Now let's go back to the others."

Said others weren't all inactive meanwhile. Being able to speak freely, Tammy asked Monty, "What do you think they're doing?"

"Dunno, Tammy, I can only guess. An' I guess they're goin' on another date tonight."

"Yet another date..." Foxglove gave a sigh. "How can it be so hard for them? It was so easy with Dale and me."

"Yes," LaWahini added, "not even Shaka and me took so long to become a couple. And that was only because when I got the hots for him, he still thought girls were stupid."

"Blimey, lads an' lasses, Désirée an' I were engaged after jes' a few weeks. I let 'er go fer a truck full o' cheese, but that's another story."

"Do I know this story?" Sparky wondered.

"Don't think so, Sparky," Monty answered. That was something he liked about Sparky. He could tell him the same old tales over and over again since they rarely got stuck in his memory, if ever. "But I'll tell ya later."

Tammy raised her voice. "Okay, everyone. Hands up, everyone who thinks they need help."

Everyone raised their hands with the exception of Foxglove who raised a wing and Sparky who asked, "Um, help with what?"

Dale tried to explain. "Getting together. Hooking up. Becoming a couple."

"And whom are you talking about, if I may ask?"

"Chip and Gadget."

"Okay, that's all I needed to know. Oh, and who do you think shall help them?"

Tammy said, "Well, I thought we could do that. Chipper always says that the Rescue Rangers help those who are in need of help. And these two are in urgent need of help."

"Tammy," Foxglove remarked, "you're talking about matchmaking!"

"Sure I am, Foxy. Do you have a better idea, that is, other than leaving it all to them? I mean, have you raised your wing or not?"

"No better idea. Hey LaWahini, you're the rookie among us, what do you think?"

Having left a life of crime and loneliness behind, the former Hawaiian mouse was eager to do good. "I'm in. So what are we gonna do?"

Zipper reminded the group of the fact that they couldn't plan anything as long as they didn't know yet what Chip and Gadget were planning. They didn't even know when or even if this date was going to happen.

"That's true," Tammy confirmed, "but we can still collect some basic ideas."

"Shush," Foxglove warned, "I hear steps. They're coming back."

Dale gave his girlfriend a peck on the cheek. "What'd we do if we didn't have you an' your hearing, Foxy?" They were the only Rangers in a relationship so far.

"Yes, I can imagine how great she'd be on surveillance." Chip had just entered the room again, and he had heard Dale's words, but nothing before them. And neither did Gadget despite her not quite bat-like, but still excellent hearing.

The topic changed quickly when LaWahini continued the discussion. "So what about your plans for tonight?"

"I take it that was what you were talking about after we left, what to do with an evening when we're not complete," Chip said.

"Um, right."

"Count Gadget and me out. We're on a date, too."

"Really?" Tammy didn't even try to hide her delight.

"Really. Is that a reason to be so excited?"

"Er... well..."

"C'mon, folks. Think twice. You don't wanna throw a party behind my back when Dale and Foxy aren't here, do you?"

Tammy pretended to give in. "Yeah, you're right, it wouldn't be half as much fun without them. And we don't want them to miss anything."

"Don't worry, lass," Monty picked up the acting, "there's always another evenin'."

So did LaWahini. "Aw, what a pity, he has found out about our secret. Sorry, Chip. That was probably something wrong to do on our first day as Rescue Rangers, huh?"

"Probably, yes."

"Mind if I get back to the date? What are you gonna do tonight?"

"Yeah," Dale added, "what if someone comes with a new case while you're away?"

"Well, I must admit that you don't make it easy for me to go at all. But to satisfy your curiosity, and so that you know where we are in case something occurs: We'll leave before sunset, watch the sunset together, and have a dinner at the Infinity."

"Infinity?" The strange name confused LaWahini.

"A restaurant," Foxglove explained. "Dale and I had our first date there, too. I can show you where it is."

"Ah, thanks. Anything else planned, Chip? Gadget?"

The inventor mouse suggested, "I'd love to take a stroll again after dinner."

"That'd mean that we'd have to park the Rangerwing somewhere," Chip said. "But I can't see why not."

Gadget showed a smile. "Thanks, Chip. Come, let's get some more coffee from the kitchen." Upon her command, they got up once more, took the empty coffee pots, and disappeared into Monty's favorite room.

"Chip," Gadget said, "you let them get away with that party idea? They wanted to take the chance when you're not here!"

Chip pulled her close to him and whispered into her ear. "Shhh. Gadget, there have never been any party plans."

"Not?" she whispered back.

"No, that's all a spontaneous fake. They'd never throw a party without us, especially not on their first day."

"But why..."

"They only lured us into telling them what we're doing tonight. As precisely as possible. And they tried to hide their real intentions and some poor acting skills."

"You mean..."

"Gadget, what does the word 'matchmaking' tell you?"

"'Matchmaking?' Gee willikers! And now they know everything about tonight."

"They know absolutely nothing, Gadget. They believe they do, but they don't. Because we're gonna do something different. Listen." Chip told her another plan that was different enough to not give anyone of their old or new teammates any chance to have any influence on it, yet kept them believing that everything was going on as desired, at least in the beginning.

"Sounds good, Chip."

With two filled pots of coffee in their hands, Chip and Gadget came back from the kitchen. "Aw c'mon, Gadget," Chip said out loud, "Why shall I be so strict? We're not the Army. And when they wanna party, I'd love to party with them."

Chapter 3: The Case Of The Missing Bird

The time after breakfast was used to introduce the four new Rangers to the usual working methods of the small rescuing and law enforcing group. Checking the police station for new cases was part of it. This time, they went there by foot, only Zipper flew as always. That way, the newbies, especially LaWahini who had never really been in this city before four weeks ago, could have a closer look at the surroundings of the Headquarters and the quarter they were in. Besides, none of the Rangers' vehicles was large enough for all of them.

"Here we are," Chip said as the group of nine arrived at the station, "the 5th precinct. An excellent place for finding new cases as the police don't deal with everything, and even if they try to, they can't often solve them without our help."

"That's probably why Spinelli is still a Sergeant after all these years," Gadget supposed. "Most of his cases seem to solve themselves. It doesn't serve him quite well when it's clearly not his achievement that his case is completed."

Monty commented, "O! Spinelli's jes' got the bloomin' luck ta get so many cases that 'e an' 'is lads can't solve without us."

And Zipper concluded that it was practically the Rescue Rangers whom Spinelli, Kirby and Muldoon should thank for saving their jobs, and that it wasn't the Rangers' fault that their careers didn't proceed at all.

"Okay, everybody, we're going inside." Chip motioned the other Rangers to follow him and advised the new members, "Be careful not to be seen. Even if Monty won't. They've given up hunting him long ago, but you may not be as lucky."

"An' robust," Monty added, "don't ferget that."

"Right. He's the only one of us whom mouse traps can't do any harm," Chip explained. "So I don't want anyone to try their luck on that. And stay together so that no-one gets lost in the darkness in there."

The chipmunk in the fedora directed his team through the maze of hollows in the walls of the police station which led to several locations in the building, many of them of considerable importance for the Rangers. He didn't waste a thought on making a map of them; the old Rangers had memorized everything after a while, and the chances that a group of only newcomers would pay the police a visit, that early in their career no less, were about zero. On their way, they used spaces between walls or between floors and ceilings, air ducts and cable ducts. Gadget remembered the latter quite well from past enterprises involving actions like tapping the phone lines or even rewiring worn-out and damaged parts of the installation.

After a while, they reached an exit to one of the office rooms. The working-place of a rather busy policeman was right below. Chip introduced him to the four new Rangers, although some of them may already have seen him on past cases. "Foxy, Tammy, Sparky, LaWahini, this is Sergeant Spinelli."

"The guy who might be Captain or Chief today if he had solved his cases on his own?" LaWahini asked.

"The same," Dale answered.

The rotund Sergeant had just received a new case. And he didn't show any signs of being used to such degrees of strangeness. "Who does he think we are? An animal shelter? How are we supposed to find an escaped parrot? I mean, it has disappeared from a penthouse. It can have flown to who knows where."

"Mr. Jacob said he doubts that the bird has escaped, Sir," Officer Kirby pointed out. He and Officer Muldoon were standing in front of Spinelli's desk. "Someone must have opened the cage from outside."

"But he has also said that he hasn't found any evidence for a burglary," Muldoon added.

Spinelli got up. "And that's the reason why finding evidence is our job. We've been trained to do that. We've got the experience necessary for doing that. Okay, show me what you've found out in that Whatshisname case," he referred to an immigrant from Romania whose name he couldn't pronounce and who rather seemed to be a burglary victim to him than the parrot owner, "and then we go to that Mr. Jacob and take a closer look at his penthouse."

The three policemen left the room. It was now empty except for a handful of animals who took their chance.

"Sounds like a case for us," Chip said. "I bet we can find more about it in the papers Spinelli has left on his desk." It was then when he realized that he had forgotten the foldable fishing rod at the Headquarters. Things like this kept occurring frequently during the past four weeks, and he knew pretty well why. "We need to get down onto the desk."

"Or get the papers up here." After saying this, Foxglove dove down, flew to the desk, and carried the top sheet up to the other Rangers. She asked herself what the Rangers had done on their first two years without a bat's help.

"Thank you, Foxy." Chip started studying the paper. "So this parrot is not only rare and precious, but he's a talking one."

"What's the point, Chipper?" Tammy wondered. "We can talk, too, can't we?"

"Yes, but the humans are used to talking parrots. They'd go crazy if they found out that squirrels or chipmunks can talk, too. We're keeping it secret for a reason. Besides, these parrots don't talk to humans like they talk to other animals either."

"Well, we've talked with Nimmul when his head was on Zipper's body," Gadget remembered.

"Nimmul has been crazy as long as we know him," Dale said, "he doesn't count. Now what's the hassle about that talking parrot, Chip?"

"He knows the code to Jacob's safe. It reacts on his voice."

"Too-ra-loo," Monty commented, "'e's a safe key with feathers."

"And that makes him even more interesting for all kinds of crooks. I say we go back to the Headquarters, get the aircraft, and have a look at this place." Chip pointed to Mr. Jacob's address on the paper before he handed it back to Foxglove who brought it back to where she had gotten it from.

Despite having a longer way to go and slower vehicles, the Rangers managed to arrive at the penthouse in Rangerplane and Rangerwing roughly at the same time as the police. It didn't take them long to find out how to get inside.

As they made their way through a stainless steel tunnel, Chip gave some explanations about it. "There's no door to the roof, and since the penthouse has its own air-conditioning, the windows can't be opened either. So the air channels are the only ways in and out. What makes it easier is that the air-conditioning is hardly used at this time of the year."

Immediately before they reached the air grille, the Rangers were about to learn the hard way that hardly doesn't mean not at all when the air in the channel started moving. "Golly," Gadget shouted, "it's starting up!"

"And there's nothing in here we can cling to," Tammy worried while Foxglove had taken off and was more and more frantically trying to fly against the storm. But soon it grew too strong, and she had to lay down on the ground with almost everyone else. Chip held his hat, and Monty held Zipper. Only Sparky, the now tallest Ranger, stood strong against the artificial gale, he even started walking.

"Sparky," Chip yelled, "what are you gonna do?"

"Solve this little problem," the rat replied as he ran with the wind towards the turbine. The other Rangers watched him run away into the darkness. Then they saw a flash, heard a brief cracking noise, and the air stood still again.

It was quiet for a moment. They all imagined the worst. But then they saw Sparky come out of the shadows with two smoking index fingers. "What a pity, the fan motor has broken down," he said with a mischievous grin. "Must have gotten a too high voltage. These things are sooo sensitive..."

Gadget was the first Ranger to get up. "Golly and a half, Sparky!" she said with a smile. "That was amazing. Thanks a lot!"

With memories of when the Rangers had met Sparky for the first time coming back from where he had locked them away, Chip gave Gadget a glance which could hardly hide his jealousy. Had she found a mind more similar to hers than Chip could offer her? Were things to return to the way they were back then, now that they probably were so close to finally revealing their mutual feelings? Was she slipping away from him towards another one, even before he could get a hold of her?

"Aw, that was nothing but action without thinking," Sparky explained. Finding vulnerable parts on an electric motor didn't involve much thinking for him. He had been de-conditioned a while ago, but along with his little memory problems, his attitude had stayed the same. It was too obvious

that this understatement of his pleased the inventor mouse, even though "action without thinking" usually was not her way at all.

"What was that noise?" the Rangers heard Officer Muldoon's voice. Crime victim and law enforcers had just arrived.

"Must have been the air-conditioning," Mr. Jacob suspected. "It's not quite reliable, you know, it breaks down every once in a while."

So no police investigation inside the air duct. The Rangers felt relieved. Chip decided to shove his doubts about keeping Sparky in the team and about the lab rat's influence on Gadget aside and get back to the case. He motioned his fellows to follow him to the grille and watch the humans.

"Look, Mr. Jacob," Officer Kirby said, "the door and the windows are intact, the latter can't even be opened due to the air-conditioning..."

"They can't?" Muldoon wondered as if he had never been in an air-conditioned building.

"Do you see any handles?"

"No..."

"So how is a potential burglar supposed to open them, let alone from outside?"

"Dunno. I'm no burglar, so I don't have that kind of experience."

"But you should have been a police officer for long enough to know the methods of burglars."

"Well..."

"Anyway," Kirby addressed to Mr. Jacob again, "since a key is necessary to take the elevator up to this floor, and only you, the cleaning personnel and the security have such keys, I doubt that anyone has gotten in here through the door to steal your bird. It has most likely flown out through the door when someone came to clean up."

"And if this doesn't convince you," Sergeant Spinelli added, "we can still have a talk with the cleaning personnel and the security staff."

"Is there no other way?" Jacob asked almost desperately.

"The only other way in and outta here is through the air-conditioning ducts," Kirby pointed to the grille behind which the Rescue Rangers hid. "But I doubt that any burglar would fit through it."

"Actually, I don't," Chip said.

"C'mon, Chip, they'd just get stuck."

"Dale, have you ever taken into consideration that we don't have to deal with human burglars?"

"Chip's right, Dale," Monty confirmed the leader's words. "An' I'm pretty sure that a certain tabby's got 'is filthy paws in this case."

"What makes you think that, Monty?"

The rotund mouse handed the chipmunk in the hat a handful of gray hair. "This was under the grille. Ya learn one or two things when yer livin' with a Sureluck Jones fan."

Chip didn't have to examine the hair too closely to find out who was the previous owner. "Fat Cat. I already had a hunch that he's behind this, but here I have the proof."

LaWahini hadn't been introduced to the several villains the Rangers have to deal with from time to time. "Fat Cat? Do I have to know him, Chip?"

"Well, you'd have gotten to know him sooner or later anyway. As his name says, he's a cat, and he's, well, fat. He used to be the pet of a criminal mastermind named Aldrin Klordane who happened to be our very first opponent. He runs a gambling hall on top of a cat food factory and a small criminal organization with four henchmen, and since Klordane's in jail, he's got a lot more time at hand to run both."

Then the former Hawaiian mouse looked up and down the grille. "But how have they been able to get this out of their way and back in its place?"

Gadget explained, "It's quite easy since the grille is not fixed with screws. At the top, it's held by a hinge, and at the bottom, there's a clip that holds it shut. You can push it open from in here, you just have to apply a little force. I would give you a demonstration, but the humans are still there."

"So Fat Cat has stolen this parrot who can tell him the combination of Mr. Jacob's safe, right?" Tammy summed up the case. She had been in the hands of the feline crook before—literally—, so she had a certain experience with him. "And I bet he'll do anything to get the code."

"You've already won that bet," Chip said. "Let's get outta here now and pay him a visit."

"Why don't we just stay here and surprise him tonight?" Dale suggested.

"Why don't you use your head for something else than this?" With these words, Chip bonked Dale's head.

"Ow! Why have you done that?"

"We don't know if he comes back tonight. I even doubt he does, he won't intrude here as long as Mr. Jacob is at home. Besides, even if he did, I don't wanna cancel my date with Gadget if I don't have to." He earned a smile from the inventor mouse for saying this. "And let's not forget that he has the parrot, and I guess most of us know what he does with his captives. No, we're going to the Happy Tom factory right now."

Chapter 4: A Colorful Captive

The two Rescue Rangers aircraft touched down on a roof opposite the infamous cat food factory. From inside the oversized feline figure on its top, a much less but still oversized feline reigned over his empire. The casino was about as legal as gambling could get; although it was almost without an exception frequented by all kinds of crooks only, he did what he could to ensure that neither his staff nor the visitors cheated. It still earned him a certain amount of wealth, however, most of his prosperity had been gathered illegally. He loved to show it, but he refrained from spending it. On the one hand, he might have to since the Rescue Rangers had helped send his "owner"—some cats referred to the humans they lived with as can openers, but he didn't—into jail, but cash was mostly useless for an animal when it came to getting things from human society, and it was the Rescue Rangers, too, who had put an end to almost each and every of his plots since that day. The main reasons why he still went on were first just because, and second the times when the Rangers were somewhere else and couldn't stop his success. But he had no informant who could tell him where the Rangers were and what they were doing, in fact, he didn't even know where they were based, so the only way to find this out was trial and error. Nevertheless, he had to admit that even if they always won in the end, it was less fun and much less challenging when there were no Rangers to fight.

"Alright, Fat Cat," Chip snarled, "this time it's not five against five."

"Yeah," Monty said, "it's gonna get ugly this time. We've always defeated 'im when we were five, an' now we're nine."

"Do you know why we've always been victorious, Monty? What we have what he doesn't?"

"Mere luck?"

"He's got thugs. We've got friends." Chip stood up from his seat and shouted, "And friendship is stronger than any gang of criminals! They fight for Fat Cat, but we fight for each other!" He suddenly found himself surrounded by applause.

"So what's your plan, Chip?" Tammy asked. The times when she called him Chipper were long gone.

"I don't have one yet. We need to know first where the parrot is and under which circumstances he is held captive—and if he is even somewhere in there. Zipper, Foxy, can you take over this task?"

Zipper saluted and remarked that it would be fairly easy because there would most likely not be more than one parrot in there.

"That's true, but the building is large, so you'd better split. Foxy, you search the factory, and Zipper, you check Fat Cat's empire in the cat figure."

Obedying the leader's words, the two winged Rangers flew over to the old industrial estate and split up right before it. Zipper entered the giant cat through the open window in the janitor's room. Fat Cat didn't really have a janitor at his place, he rather made his henchmen do that work like he

made them do all kinds of work. It was quiet, but the housefly was uncertain whether this quietness was good or bad. The gambling saloon was empty, but it was still before noon, and the casino didn't open its doors until the early evening. Zipper flew on through the halls and rooms, using the knowledge he had gained on countless cases which had led the Rangers into and through this place. But even Fat Cat's large office was devoid of any of the gang's members, let alone the rotund feline himself. Hoping that Foxglove would be more successful, he left the strange structure again.

Foxglove was indeed more successful. As a small bat in a human factory into which she had slipped through a broken pane, she was practically invisible as long as she stayed quiet. But this meant that she could only use her eyes and reflections of some ambient noises to examine the building's interior. An earlier case in which she had met Fat Cat taught her the hard way that cats can hear a bat's sonar pings.

She realized how lucky she was when noises led her right to what or rather whom she was looking for. And this time it had nothing to do with echolocation—she simply heard Fat Cat, his goons and the parrot speak. Right beneath the ceiling, she flew to a place where she could hang and observe the situation much better.

"So you want outta there, huh, Polly?" Fat Cat asked a rather rhetorical question to the parrot. The colorful bird was sitting in a cage which was hung up on a steel cable reaching down from a winch which was part of a trolley running above the hall for maintenance purposes. "To be so honest, I'm not fond of keeping you longer than necessary either. But before I give you your freedom, you have to give me something in exchange."

"My name is Raoul, and not Polly!" the parrot yelled back with a slight latino accent. "Is it just a rumor that cats have such a good hearing, or what? And for the umpteenth time, no, I won't tell you the combination!"

"This is not very cooperative, I fear." Fat Cat turned to his goons. "Gentlemen, it's swing time again!"

"Ssswing time?" Wart hissed. "Alright, boss!" The lizard took the cage, pushed it aside as far as he could, and let it loose while everyone else went some steps away. It started swinging all through the place, and in it, Raoul started screaming and fluttering, trying to brake or at least steer it.

The five crooks just stood and watched. Snout said, "I wonder how long he'll take this time to stop the cage."

"Yesss," Wart remembered and grinned, "he ussed to be fassster. It takessss him more and more time."

By now, Foxglove had seen enough. She took off again and flew back to the broken window. Outside, she met Zipper who asked her if she had seen anything.

"Yes," she replied, "the parrot's in there. And he's being tormented."

As soon as she and Zipper were with the other Rangers again, Foxglove described what she had seen—the crooks, the parrot, the cage, everything. She used the experience she had gained by helping the Rangers with surveillance.

"Sounds like a routine job," Chip commented. "The right difficulty level to get our new members used to casework. I've got a plan. Listen, everybody."

Eight Rescue Rangers gathered around the ninth one, the leader of the group, a chipmunk in an aviator jacket and a fedora hat. This time, Chip had to take some more things into consideration in his plan which he explained to his team. First, the Rangers were nine now instead of five. Some of the new members had already met Fat Cat, Tammy had even encountered him and the Rangers for the first time on the same day; her, her sister Bink and the Rangers more or less had to rescue each other. But for LaWahini, it would be the very first time to meet any villain with the exception of the villain that she herself used to be to the Rangers on their Hawaiian vacation in late '89. She was actually the only one who had never worked together with the Rangers on any case whereas they took on Fat Cat with Tammy, on Norton Nimnul with Sparky, and on the wannabe witch Winifred with Foxglove. Her meeting her family and leaving Hawaii may have "turned her good", but she still lacked experience in crime fighting.

And the second reason looked almost the same as the first. Gadget. Chip knew how tough she was. He had witnessed her take on and take down Bubbles and his army of ninjas all alone. He knew that taking LaWahini's place at the tests when she still was evil Lawhiney didn't strain her beyond the moments in which she had to face the dangers, and even then she coped with them. She even traveled into space to rescue him and Dale. And he had been there to watch her on countless other occasions from liberating the cats from Nimnul's laboratory to liberating the mice from the National Institute of Mental Health—and getting into trouble with guard dogs in both cases. But despite all these previous cases where she showed her strength, this plan of his involved an extra safety and protection for her. He wanted to keep her away from the main action. After all, every case brought a certain risk with it. And if there was something that Chip tried to avoid, it was having already had his last date with Gadget. No, tonight was to be the night, their very night, and he wouldn't allow anybody or anything to get into their way.

He took a glance around at his teammates while he went on explaining. And that included them and their matchmaking schemes.

"That was it," Chip concluded his plans. "Everyone knows what to do?"

"Do I?" Sparky asked.

"You should know that, not I. Gadget, LaWahini, you tell him again what to do when you're there."

"Roger Wilbury," Gadget said with a smile that almost got Chip melting away into a puddle of liquid chipmunk. He was more receptive to her signs than usually.

"Alright, let's show Fat Cat how much stronger nine Rangers are, compared to five." At Chip's sign, everybody got on board the two aircraft. Gadget, LaWahini and Sparky took the Rangerplane to fly into the factory's roof structure, and the Rangerwing with the other Rangers was to land on street level. The very moment they took off, all Rangers except LaWahini shouted out the famous battle cry, "Rescue Rangers away!" The former Hawaiian mouse simply didn't know it yet.

The Rangerplane wasn't slow, but the Rangerwing was still a bit faster, and soon it flew ahead. The speed difference grew bigger when it started to descend to a landing location which Foxglove had spotted on her way to the factory.

While steering the twin-engined aircraft to a large waste bin in front of the factory, Chip gave the little bat the praise she deserved. "That was a good idea of yours, Foxy, to look out for a place to hide the Rangerwing."

"Thanks, Chip!" Foxglove blushed slightly, so slightly that her blush stayed invisible underneath her reddish facial fur. "You know, Dale, your buddy can be a really nice guy." She went on talking by whispering into Dale's ear, and he whispered, too, when he replied to her. Even though he felt tempted and challenged to deciphering their whispering, and even though he had a hunch that he was the subject, Chip had to concentrate on getting the Rangerwing into the narrow gap behind the waste bin without hitting the bin or the wall.

As the Rangerwing finally finished its difficult landing maneuver and touched down on the concrete floor, Chip watched from the corner of his eye as the Rangerplane, piloted by Gadget, disappeared through where the pane of a broken window would be if it wasn't broken. For a moment, his imagination created horror scenarios involving the balloon being torn by the sharp glass and the Rangerplane getting out of control and crashing. But he cleared his mind, shook them off and, as the propellers stopped spinning, jumped out of the plane. Tammy, Monty, Zipper, Dale and Foxglove followed him silently on his way to the closest entrance. Before she had met the Rangers 18 years ago, Tammy might have minded entering a human building, especially through a rough and dirty hole in the wall which had most probably been dug by rats. But now that she not only knew the Rangers but was one herself, she accepted it as a part of her task, her adventure.

Sneaking through the factory, the team of six tried hard to stay as quiet as possible. Foxglove walked instead of flying, and Zipper had sat down on Monty's shoulder. They hid wherever they could hide on their way, and so they managed to stay unnoticed by anyone even when they made it to their final hiding place behind a pillar which carried the upper structures of the building. As they were as close to Fat Cat as they could get, they carefully peeked around the pillar to see what was going on.

Raoul's sense of balance had meanwhile been stirred so much that he had to hold on to the cage with his wings. Fat Cat put on the nicest faked smile he could come up with. "Ah, I see here's someone who's got something to tell me, right?"

"Wrong!" Raoul shouted out with what was left of his power. "You can do what you want, but you'll never get me to tell you the combination!"

"Oh, really? Well, never is a long timespan. And time is precious in my business. I'm afraid I can't wait for so long."

"So what are you gonna do? Kill me?"

Fat Cat stepped up a bit closer to the cage, still keeping enough distance not to give Raoul a chance to snap at him. "Polly, Polly, Polly. Are you really expecting me to say, 'Yes, that'd be the next option,' so that you can say, 'When you kill me, you'll never get the code'? You're so predictable that for a change it's getting boring with you. No, I've got much more efficient methods."

"For example?" Raoul was too exhausted to take another futile attempt at correcting the furry gangster about his name.

"Pluck you. Pluck each and every of your beautiful, colorful feathers. Mepps, the key!"

The parrot was visibly appalled by that thought. Yet, he knew he would be unable to do anything against this fate once he was let out of the cage. Normally, he'd just fly away. But he was too weak to fly, and Fat Cat and his goons knew that and counted on it as if it was part of a plan of some sorts. So he just fell over backwards onto the floor of the cage when he saw the shabby red cat hand over the cage key.

He wasn't the only one, though. The Rangers had watched everything, and Chip had paid attention to the trolley up above under the roof. The Rangerplane crew had left their aircraft behind somewhere in the rafters, and as they made it to the trolley, Gadget laid down the plunger crossbow she had taken with her and gave the other Rangers down on the floor a sign.

Now that everyone was ready, it was time to act. Chip and Dale were the first Rangers to leave their hiding and encounter their nemesis once more. "The game is over, Fat Cat!" Chip shouted. "I demand you to free this bird!"

Fat Cat replaced his false friendliness with real sarcasm. "Lo and behold, the Rescue Rodents! And why do you think I shall do as you demand?"

"Cause we've always won against you," Dale pointed out. "How 'bout that?"

Neither Dale's point nor Monty, Zipper, Foxglove and Tammy revealing themselves didn't convince the criminal mastermind. "You believe that changing your cast improves your chances even further? Where's that mouse girl that's usually with you?"

"The answer is high above you," Chip replied.

This was the cue for the three rodents on the trolley. Gadget had opened the lid to the engine compartment, and now Sparky was tinkering with the contacts to get the trolley under his control. LaWahini sat next to them, watched and kept the plunger harpoon which Gadget had brought in the likely case it would be needed.

Gadget heard Chip's words and took over Sparky's part to remember that it was the cue. "Sparky," she ordered, "pull up the cage!"

"Okay, Gadget!" the lab rat's voice came from inside the trolley. A few sparks were visible, the corresponding noises were audible, but the humming of the motor seemed a bit far away. Besides, the motion underneath her told Gadget that something was wrong. Awfully wrong. The cage wasn't moving upwards, but instead, the bridge on which the trolley ran moved along the hall for a few seconds until it stopped as abruptly as it started to run.

"Whoops, wrong set of contacts," Sparky apologized. But Gadget was unable to hear him. When the bridge had started up, she had lost her balance, and she had failed to find something to cling to.

And now she was falling down and screaming for help.

Chapter 5: The Many Faces Of Gravity

The Rescue Rangers—except for Sparky who was still busy with the electrics in the trolley—watched in horror as Gadget fell. Foxglove and Zipper took off to get a grasp of her in mid-air and slow her down. And Chip ran to the point towards which the love of his life was falling so he could catch her. "Gadget!" he cried out. "Don't be afraid, we'll do what we can to rescue you!"

But before the two flying Rangers could reach her, Fat Cat snatched her right out of the air. "Lo and behold, what do we have here?" He looked down to the Rangers on the ground. "I'd like to see how you rescue her now!" To demonstrate his power and his superior position in this confrontation, he laid one claw against Gadget's throat.

"Set her free!" Chip demanded. He was fully aware of the fact that he had nothing to threaten Fat Cat with. He just said what he wished. And he wished it not to end this way.

"Oh, I will set her free... when you've all left my place! Without the parrot, of course. So get lost, or I'll show you one of my many ways to get rid of you!"

Appalled by the feline's words, Foxglove turned around and landed next to Dale who, like his friend Chip, stood and stared up to Gadget who in turn stared down to her fellows, mostly to Chip, though. Monty, however, didn't give in that quickly. "Careful there! I've got me ways ta get rid o' you, too!" He stomped forward while Tammy and Zipper tried hard to hold him back.

Up on the trolley, no-one was there to hold LaWahini back. She was as alarmed as her new teammates including Sparky who meanwhile had realized that something bad had happened and what had happened that was so bad. "This... this... fat fur ball has my sister?" She never really felt helpless, but when she found Gadget's plunger crossbow lying where Gadget was before she fell, she knew what to do better than ever. She took the crossbow and ran along the bridge, still unseen by Fat Cat.

"Where are you going?" Sparky shouted after her as he saw her run. "Shouldn't you be down there in Fat Cat's hand?"

LaWahini stopped immediately. She took a moment to remember the lab rat's name before she replied, "Sparky, don't tell me you've still not realized that there are two of me! Well, more or less. Look down and tell me what you see!"

Sparky looked down, and LaWahini ran on to the wall. She decided she had no time for discussing the twin sisters issue with Sparky now. He'd get used to it sooner or later anyway, she thought. Her path led her along the wall on the rails on which the crane bridges ran onto another bridge which was not as far away from the first one as that one was above Fat Cat.

"I don't know who you are, tabby," she growled as she shot the plunger on the rope against the other bridge and locked the reel, "and I don't know all about your business. But threaten to do harm to my sister, and I'll do harm to you." With these words, she clung to the crossbow and jumped off the bridge, swinging down and accelerating rapidly.

At first, no-one noticed her. Gadget was too busy to try and rescue herself. "You've heard what he has said," she told Chip, close to tears. "Go out and wait for me. Everyone." But then something made her look up.

With a battle cry, LaWahini almost came flying down to Fat Cat. She adjusted her height by briefly unlocking the reel on the plunger harpoon, and before he could react or at least understand what was going on, she kicked him on the forehead right between the eyes.

It was less due to the strength of her impact than out of surprise that the feline stumbled backwards. His subconsciousness told him that having claws out would not be a wise decision in this unstable situation, so the claw was retracted from Gadget's throat. He even dropped her when he tripped over Mole who happened to stand behind him, and he had to catch his own fall. Mole's attempted apology, "Oh, I'm sorry, boss," distracted him once more, he forgot to catch himself, and his head hit the floor a bit too hard.

"Ow," he said and pointed into the air, "Snout, find out if any of these birds knows the code." Then everything went black.

LaWahini released the reel lock again, came down to the floor and pulled the plunger off the bridge with one tuck on the rope. She noticed the looks her fellows gave her.

"What?" she asked as she caught the falling plunger. "I've saved you. Especially you, sister."

"LaWahini," Gadget explained, "I must admit we've done a lot to Fat Cat since we know him. But we've never knocked him out! What if we did that to all villains?"

"Um, your, I mean, our work would be easier? I mean, why don't you do that whenever it's useful?"

"Because that's not the Rescue Rangers way! Besides, if we go a more violent way against our opponents, they go a more violent way against us, too. Think about it, LaWahini, most of our opponents are much bigger and stronger than us. We even have to deal with humans!"

The former Hawaiian mouse had to think about something different, though, because Fat Cat's goons were heading for the Rangers. And they did not look happy about what had happened.

"Wait a minute, guys," LaWahini addressed to them. "What do you think you're doing?"

"The same to you as you did to Fat Cat," Wart replied.

"Has he told you so?"

All four stopped in their tracks. "No," Mepps said after a long moment of thinking.

"And now you're leaving him behind, out cold on the hard factory floor?"

None of the four knew what to say. The Rangers, however, had a far better position. Tammy joined LaWahini and said, "You'd better get him somewhere that's warmer and more comfortable than here. He needs something soft to rest his head on. Can you imagine what he'll do when he finds out that you've abandoned him?" She could. Of all new Rangers, she knew him the best.

The four henchmen looked at their unconscious boss, at the squirrel, and back at their boss. They all came to the same conclusion, picked him up by the arms and legs, and carried him away without a single word, leaving the Rangers and the parrot behind.

"Tammy, that was great!" Chip praised what his new teammate had just done. "What gave you the idea of this trick?"

"It was no trick, Chipper. This is not the best place to lie when you're out cold."

"So you've done Fat Cat a favor?!"

"I've actually done all five of them a favor. It's been a kind of win-win situation. Well, not so much for Fat Cat, but he could have it worse."

Still holding on to the cage, Raoul had watched the whole action. And now that the trouble was over, he looked forward to being freed. "I take it you haven't just come here to take on that cat, right?"

"Of course not," Chip said. "We'll have you out of that cage in no time." He shouted up to the lab rat on the trolley, "Sparky! Let the cage down!"

An electric motor up in the trolley came to life, and the bearings of the winch groaned as the cage slowly moved down. Chip stood and watched, and as the cage hit the floor, he ordered Sparky, "Stop! Cut the power! The cage is down!" The noises from the trolley ceased.

"And what are you gonna do about the lock now?" Raoul asked curiously. "You haven't got the key."

Gadget got up from where Fat Cat had dropped her and walked to the cage. "We don't need a key. Monty, can you help me up?"

"Fer sure, lass."

Monty heaved her up onto his shoulders, enabling her to pick the lock with her tail. The parrot watched her, and he was visibly impressed. "Do you always pick locks this way?"

"Golly, no, only when I've got no tools at hand. That is, if the lock is big enough, Zipper can fly into it and pick it from inside. But this one is rather small." Gadget showed a smile as the lock snapped open. "And easy to pick."

Gadget jumped off Monty's shoulders again, and Raoul pushed the cage door aside and stepped out of his prison. Glad to be free from the feline criminal again, he stretched his wings. "Ahh, it's so good to be outta there. Don't get me wrong, I don't have anything against a cage, as long as it's mine."

He still felt somehow wobbly and unable to walk a straight line if requested to. Chip was worried about his well-being. "You're not able to fly all the way back yet, Raoul, are you?"

"I wouldn't wanna risk it, to be honest. I'm feeling too dizzy from being whirled about in that cage." He shook his head as if to shake off his dizziness. "Don't they know how sensitive a bird's equilibrium sense is?"

"They do know, Raoul, that's been the whole point all the time."

"I suspected that, yes. Say, how did you folks come here? Maybe you can take me back the same way."

Chip's answer was quite uncomfortable for the parrot. "Actually, we flew."

"Okayyy..." Raoul took a short break to reconsider, "can we have a little rest outside then before we fly back? I need some fresh air now."

Chapter 6: Cute Little Chip

It was almost noon when the two Ranger aircraft accompanied Raoul on his way back home. After a while of resting in what was called fresh air in that part of the city, he had decided that he felt well enough again to fly on his own wings, and so everyone could start the little journey. It was not too far a trip, not even for a bird like Raoul who wasn't used to flying greater distances. Still he was glad when he finally had the roof of the building he called home under his feet.

"We'd better see if Mr. Jacob is there," Chip decided. "He might be at the police station or wherever, but he might as well be at home. And I don't want him to see us bring back his parrot. Zipper, can you find out if he's at home?"

Zipper saluted and flew from window to window, looking into all the rooms of the penthouse. He was ideal for this task, Foxglove was not only too large, but also as a bat a sight quite unusual to see at that time of the day. Zipper checked every room he could access, and Jacob was nowhere to see, so he came to the conclusion that Raoul's owner wasn't there, and reported this to Chip.

"Good, then let's get him back where he belongs. Or would you rather like to stay out here and live on in freedom?"

Raoul shook his head. "Why should I want to? What you call freedom lacks a heating, heck, it even lacks a roof against the weather, I'd have to fight for my food and against predators, no thanks, I prefer my comfy cage."

Monty shrugged. "Ah well, ta each their own. I guess a nice way o' livin' is somethin' else fer you than it's fer me."

For the second time that day, the Rangers passed through the intake of the air-conditioning, however, this time they weren't starting but finishing a case, and what they had been looking for they had with them now. At the end of the air duct, Monty pushed the grid open and motioned Raoul to fly the last bit to his cage. "Welcome 'ome, mate!"

Raoul decided to do a little speech in honor of his rescuers. "Rescue Rangers," he had been told earlier who was dealing with him, "I have to thank you for what you've done. You've freed me, you've stopped my tormenting, you've even saved my owner's wealth. I wish I could do something in return for you."

"You don't have to, Raoul," Chip declared, "it's just our job, so to say."

"You guys are incredible. You help and rescue and fight crime for nothing. I wish there were more like you out there." He took off and flew into his cage.

"That was it, everyone," Chip said. "Let's go have lunch."

Foxglove disagreed. "Wait. There's something else to be done." She flew over to the cage and closed its door. "See, that looks way better. And more like a miracle," she explained as she landed in the air duct again.

From his cage, Raoul waved the Rescue Rangers goodbye. "So long, my friends. Maybe we'll meet again. Until then, always remember: Never give up. Someone may count on you to fight on, even if you don't know."

The Rangers waved back until Monty shut the grid and then walked their way out of the building. Raoul's last words for them wouldn't stop sounding in their minds. Although he didn't really know them, he was able to estimate into what situations fate would send the Rangers on their cases. And indeed, there had been such situations in the past where some or all Rangers had to rescue themselves or overcome strong obstacles before they could rescue someone else who not seldomly was one or more of them.

"A strange bird," LaWahini judged. "That wise saying coming from him... it fits him about as well as a Polynesian rat with a surfboard tucked under his arm. Namely not at all."

"But what he said is true," Gadget pointed out. "I remember how Monty had to fight against his own cheese craving to rescue me. Or how Chip, Dale and I were tied to a hook and had to save Monty from a sawmill. And you should still know how I struggled for rescuing my friends from what you were about to do to them."

LaWahini knew as well that she didn't have to apologize for her past deeds to her sister anymore. She had done enough so, and she'd just annoy everyone if she went on with it. So she decided to shut up.

"Well," Chip said as the Rangers stood outside by their aircraft again, "our first case as a team of nine was successful, wasn't it? Not quite normal, and not too easy, but successful."

"And what comes next?" Tammy wanted to know.

"Lunch," Chip answered. "Let's fly back to the Headquarters." He was about to say, "Let's fly home," but while the tree had been a home to him and Dale for almost as long as they were living in this city, some of his mates had hardly even moved in. And now that Gadget's father was restoring his and her old home, he wasn't sure if she would go on regarding the Headquarters as her current home, despite having a room, her workshop, her long-time replacement family, and spent one half of her life there.

Now that the case was solved, Chip's thoughts went into some other directions while he was sitting next to Gadget in the Rangerwing. What would happen that night? Will it be something special, or just basically a date like most of them? Will he and Gadget be able to evade their teammates and their matchmaking attempts? Or should he rather put his future into their hands? What if this date didn't happen at all? And if it did, what would he and Gadget be in the end? Would he have the chance he had been waiting for for so long now? And would he have the courage to take it and tell Gadget what he had to tell her? All that thinking even raised an uncertainty in him whether she would return his feelings at all.

The first lunch of the new Rescue Rangers together with the old went along quietly. Chip and Gadget were both lost in their thoughts about the past month and their upcoming date. And the others couldn't talk much with Chip and Gadget listening. So they were glad when Chip announced that the rest of the day would be without Ranger work unless there was a case of emergency.

By and by, most Rangers left the Headquarters for different destinations. Dale fetched his hang glider out of the hangar, and he and Foxglove took a last chance for a flight through the Indian summer in the park. The other three new Rangers explained that they went to get some of their belongings they'll need at their new living-place; Foxglove had her few things stored at the Headquarters anyway, and she had lived in the same tree for some years now, only outside in the branches. Monty and Zipper said they had to go to the rodent market and some groceries since nine Rangers needed more food than five. After a few minutes, only Chip and Gadget were left, the latter being on her way out, too.

"Chip," she started as she went through the main room where Chip was still standing, "do you think tonight will be... um... a very special night?"

"Why do you ask, Gadget?"

"Would you like it to?"

"Of course. Gadget, for you I'd even dress up tonight. Put on my best tuxedo."

Gadget smiled. "Well, I'm gonna do something similar. Kind of." Chip knew that Gadget would never wear that red dress on a date with him, and that she didn't have anything else in her wardrobe. So he expected her to replace her goggles with a flower in her hair and stay in her overalls again. What he didn't know, however, since she kept it secret, was where she was going now and for what purpose. After all, Gadget wanted it to be a surprise for him.

Despite this knowledge, or lack thereof, Chip stayed with his decision to wear his tux. "Fine, Gadget. Will you tell me where you're going now, too?"

"Um... there's something I've got to get. Can't go into details." This could be anything, especially technical stuff which she simply didn't want to explain, but Chip would never expect it to be a dress. She knew that well enough to rely on it. So she didn't have to lie to him.

"Okay, I'll stay here and wait for you."

She smiled a little bit more as she opened the door. "Bye then."

"Bye." He couldn't help but smile back. He was china in her hands even if he wasn't really in her hands. Wishing to be there was more than enough.

After Gadget had closed the door behind her, Chip decided to take his tux out of his wardrobe and see if it is okay to be worn on his probably most important date ever. He went into his room, opened the wardrobe door, and the loud screeching of the hinges in the otherwise silent Headquarters made him grit his teeth.

"These things urgently need some oil," he decided and left for where he expected some liquid lubricant to be found.

The moment he entered Gadget's workshop he realized that it was only her who knew by heart where everything was. He would have to search for an oil can. He started to look around. There were all kinds of mouse-sized tools he had ever seen, some modified human tools, an amount of

parts and other to be used in future inventions of hers. But he didn't find any oil can yet. Instead, something else suddenly caught his attention.

There was a something standing on her workbench. A something made of shiny brass. Chip moved closer to have a look at this something, whatever it was, and it became clearer to him. It was a figure of about Zipper's size, but it was a chipmunk. Yes, Chip recognized himself in the thoroughly yet carefully crafted shapes of this figure. The jacket, the fedora, it was him all right. The legs were separate parts, and a key lay next to the figure, so it could probably walk when it was wound up. However, Chip didn't try it, he didn't want to leave his fingerprints on the polished surfaces. He just sat there and admired this beautiful little creation of Gadget's.

"This is incredible," he said to himself, "so different from what she usually builds for us." He was surprised that she could craft something like this. It wasn't mere reusing of discarded human objects, this was rodent mechanics at its very best. He noticed how cute this brass chipmunk was. "Am I really that cute?" Maybe it was because his brass self was smiling lightheartedly, almost dreamily, an expression rarely seen in his own face. And then he noticed something else. The brass figure held something in his hands, carefully pressed it against himself. "A heart? Can it be... a symbol for Gadget's heart? Gadget's heart... yes, what else can it be... Gadget's heart in his hands... in my hands, actually... Gadget's heart is in my hands..." It didn't take a Sureluck Jones fan and experienced sleuth to come to the one conclusion. This little brass chipmunk was what he had waited for. It was no mere hint, it was a borderline proof. No, it was a proof. "She does love me. Gadget loves me." He could barely keep himself from shouting it out loud, even though nobody was there who would have heard him.

He sat down in front of the figure, rested his head on his forearms, and went on admiring this magnificent secret love proof. He imagined how Gadget must have sat there just the same way and watched her little Chip walk by with a smile on his face and her heart in his hands. "I love you too, Gadget," he whispered. "I love you too... my little Gadget."

And Chip Maplewood, the analytic, mind-oriented, bossy, perfectionist, stone cold, emotionless leader of the Rescue Rangers, let a few tears run down his cheeks. They were tears of happiness.

Chapter 7: Gadget And The Amazing Pastel-Colored Evening Dress, Part II

A bit farther away from the busy and glamorous streets of downtown Manhattan, Gadget arrived in front of a fashion store. When a human saw it, he could hardly believe that he was still in the same part of the same city that was rather known for the ridiculously overpriced, but still heavily frequented designer stores on Fifth Avenue which targeted at those who could afford living like they saw it on television. This store was different. It offered rather normal fashion for reasonable prices, and no-one asked which actress wore it or had recently quit wearing it. Its owners obviously didn't even mind having a rodent shop hidden in its walls, or they simply didn't even know.

This shop was one of several shops in the city providing rodents with clothing. As usual, this clothing was tailor-made out of many kinds of materials. Gadget knew this shop very well. It was here where her father used to take her when she still was a little mouse girl, so it was no wonder that she was on a first name base with the owner, Tricia Taylor. Tricia grew up and met her husband Brian in the glamorous surroundings of the Lower East Side. They discovered one day that they had something in common—they were tired of all the glitter, but they were interested in robust and useful working clothes. Some decades later, Tricia still ran her shop. Her husband had left her long ago, he was said to live somewhere in New England, but she didn't care. However, she wasn't alone in her shop, her daughter Tanya—whose name was suggested by one of Tricia's grandmothers who was a Russian immigrant—had learned her crafts and was ready to take over the shop once she would retire.

It was here where Gadget had her overalls made. It was here, too, where Geegaw got his aviator attire, and what Gadget still didn't know was that Tricia Taylor had made Chip's bomber jacket as well. Even today, she could make the same overalls she had designed more than 20 years ago for Gadget. So could Tanya, just as well as her mother, but Tanya had another skill, and that was evening gowns. Tricia could create a dress, too, if it was requested, but Tanya could almost do magic if requested, and Gadget hadn't requested much less from her.

"Ah, hello Miss Hackwrench! It's always nice to see you!" Tricia greeted Gadget who just stepped inside. She was a mouse with a two-tone brown fur whose once brown, now gray hair was tied up in a ponytail. Her white blouse reminded Gadget a bit of the lab coat her mother wore at NIMH, and she combined it with a knee-long purple skirt.

"C'mon, Tricia, drop that Miss Hackwrench," Gadget said as she shook Tricia's hand. She was about to ask if Tanya was there, but the noise coming from one of the sewing-machines she had built herself told her what she needed to know.

"I take it you want to see Tanya, right?"

"Right. She has made something, well, special for me, and she has promised that I can have it today."

"And I kept my promise." Tanya came in from the rooms in the back. She was a few years younger than Gadget. She had a certain resemblance to her mother, and they both wore similar

white blouses, but Tanya's brown hair was cut rather short, and she wore a pair of blue jeans and a red belt to tighten the blouse around her waist. "Hi Gadget!"

Gadget was as delighted to see Tanya as she was to see her mother. Thinking back to her past, she could remember playing with Tanya who was still a toddler back then when she was there together with her father. "Hi Tanya! Is it ready?"

"You can bet. Come here and have a look if you like it." Tanya motioned her to accompany her into the back of the shop where she was working. Gadget followed, and soon they stood at Tanya's working-place. On the sewing-machine was something that looked like working clothes for a restaurant waitress, but next to it lay a matchbox. Tanya tapped her hand onto it. "It's in here. Wanna see it?"

"Yes, please. That's why I've come here. I can't wait to see it."

Tanya made a ceremony out of opening the matchbox and getting a mostly white but partly pastel pink gown out of it, but it was worth the ceremony. "Voilà!"

"Golly..." Gadget stared in amazement at a perfect replica of the gown Rebecca Cunningham wore in two TaleSpin episodes. She had seen this dress on TV, it was beautiful. She had seen it in her dream, she had even worn it in her dream, that was when she realized how beautiful it was. But now that she saw it right before her in real life, beautiful wasn't closely enough to describe it. "Tanya, this is incredible! If I didn't know better, I'd say you can really do magic. I can't believe that you've made something so awesome from a few TV screenshots."

"Actually, I didn't even need your screenshots, Gadget. Up in this house, there's a boy who has all TaleSpin episodes on video tapes, and I've been up there very often and sneaked a peek when he was watching. When I saw this dress, I kinda fell in love with it. I studied it, yes, I learned it by heart. I always wanted to remake it, but I couldn't imagine that any mouse here in New York City would ever want to wear it until you came. It was so fulfilling for me to make one for you, even if it took me almost half a year to get the materials. C'mon, Gadget, put it on and have a look at yourself!"

Gadget hesitated for a moment, then she agreed. Finding something that didn't fit would be better here and now than back at the Headquarters. She changed from her overalls into the dress, and Tanya led her to a mirror that was salvaged from a discarded human powder compact. "Now what do you say, is that a sight or not?"

Gadget was unable to say a word at first. It was as if she was back to Darren's store, only that she wasn't dreaming now. So it was no wonder that she felt even greater seeing herself in that dress than she did in the dream six months ago. She turned around and let the skirt swing. She couldn't remember when she wore a skirt that could swing for the last time. This dress did something to her that she would never have expected a dress to do—it made her feel wonderful. She didn't feel like an inventor who just happened to be female by chance anymore. No, she felt like a woman. And she felt beautiful, because she realized she was beautiful.

"Oh Tanya!" Gadget tackle-hugged the tailor mouse. "This is so... I'm so..."

"Is beautiful the word you're searching for? Then yes, you are. Gadget, I've never seen you so excited. What's up with you?"

"Tanya, this dress means a lot to me. I'm gonna wear it tonight. I'm going out with Chip."

"Again, like so many times?"

"No, this time I want it to be very special."

"Right, you're gonna wear a dress for a change. Don't get me wrong, Gadget, I'm proud of you and your change of mind. Working overalls aren't exactly what the guys wanna see a girl in." Though Gadget looked cute in about everything as Tanya had to admit to herself.

"Not only because of the dress. Tanya, I finally know what I feel for Chip. And tonight, I want to tell him. I want this pointless dating craziness to come to an end."

"Gadget, the date on which you tell a guy that you love him isn't necessarily your last date. You can go on dating as long as you want. Even when you should be married one day." What Gadget didn't know was that Chip befriended Tanya, too. While her mother still made Gadget's overalls, it was herself who had taken over the aviator jackets, and whenever she had to repair one of Chip's jackets or make him a new one after one got damaged beyond repair on a case, he would tell her about the Rangers' adventures. And he also told her about his secretly burning love for Gadget when he felt that he couldn't keep it all to himself anymore. So Tanya knew that it would only take one of them to take the next step and confess his or her feelings to make them a most probably everlasting loving couple. They would have to overcome some difficulties, but once that's done, they could expect a bright future together.

Gadget carefully took off the dress again. "You mean I... we..."

"Dating is not all about getting him. Once you've got him, it's even better, because you know that you love each other then, and you can live that love."

"Anyway, when it doesn't work tonight, I'll quit dating Chip. It has made me crazy throughout the past 16 years. In that case it's gonna be my last date."

"Gadget, don't say that." Tanya was one of the few who knew about her and Chip's mutual love. "What made you crazy was not the dating. It was the love for him that came with the dating. Do you really believe that it'll go, just simply vanish, once you've quit dating? You're still workmates, you two. You're still living in the same tree. You're still spending more time with than without each other. And when you don't even go on dates with him anymore, it'll make you even crazier."

Tanya actually reminded Gadget of her sleepless nights wet of tears. Not those when she cried for her father which had ended a month ago when her father returned. "You want me to go on, no matter what happens?"

"That's the best you can do. No matter what happens." Tanya offered Gadget her help with the overalls. "Don't give up. I'm sure that when you reveal your feelings to him, he won't reject you." She even knew that. After all, she knew how Chip felt for Gadget.

"Really?"

"Really. Why do you think should he reject you? You're beautiful, you're intelligent, you're good-hearted, you're one of the nicest persons I've ever met, he'll never find someone who outdoes you." While she carefully laid the dress back into the matchbox, she fought the urge to tell Gadget right away that Chip loves her as that would spoil everything. None of the two knew that Chip had just found out about Gadget's feelings.

Gadget hugged Tanya once more. "Thank you. Thank you for everything."

"You're welcome, Gadget." She gave her the matchbox. "Now go and enjoy the evening." She spotted a jacket she had made for Chip, but she decided to wait for him to collect it himself. Gadget shouldn't know yet that Chip is one of her customers, too. It would be too awkward for both of them.

"See you, Tanya!" Gadget waved as she stepped through the curtains that served as a door with the matchbox under one arm.

Tricia stopped her as she walked past. "Wait a minute, Gadget. I've got something for you."

"What is it?"

She handed her a brand-new pair of lavender overalls. "I haven't seen you for a while, so I figured you may need another pair. Especially one that doesn't smell like machine oil."

"Aw, Tricia, you didn't have to. I'm working on a way of washing oil out of these fabrics."

"I know. When you started, you came here and ordered four new pairs because of what you called unusually strong wear. Now take them. And try not to wear them in your workshop for a while."

"I'll try to remember. Thank you, Tricia." Gadget put the new overalls under the same arm that held the matchbox and headed for the door. "Bye!"

Chapter 8: Preparations

The warming rays of the autumn sun shone down on Dale and Foxglove as they performed their air dances above the park. They had just taken off from the Rescue Rangers Headquarters and were now enjoying the freedom given to those who have wings of their own, even if Dale's set of wings was a hang glider which Gadget had invented shortly after he and Foxglove had met. He had already developed his crush on her at that time which just as quickly had grown into full-fledged love, otherwise he would not have enjoyed joining a bat on her flights so much.

It was fun for the two of them, but it served another purpose. They kept an eye on the Headquarters and on Gadget who was hurrying away from the tree until they were out of sight. Then they went into a descent and landed at a secret meeting-point close to the Infinity where they met up with the other five Rangers—Monterey Jack, Zipper, Tammy, LaWahini, and Sparky.

"What have you seen up there?" Tammy inquired.

Foxglove informed her, "Gadget has left the Headquarters, but she's obviously not coming close to here. I expect her to be heading for somewhere in the city."

Dale added, "But Chip stayed home. I don't think he's gonna leave the Headquarters before the date."

"Drats," LaWahini cursed, "we can strike the modifications to the Rangerwing that'll make them strand on their way back for a while." She had learned enough technical things from both her sister and her father to roughly know what to do, besides, Sparky would have helped her.

"That's a little drawback, yes," Tammy said, "but not the end of the mission. Now for our other measures." She held up a flash memory card. "Dale, you've said that Gadget has replaced the old radio at the Infinity with an MP3 player/FM tuner combination which has a slot for SD cards plus a pair of speakers salvaged from headphones. I've been to a library with an Internet connection, and I've compiled some songs on this card, a perfectly timed play list of love songs and dancing songs for use at a date. Today is the ideal opportunity for using it." She handed the card over to Foxglove. "You and Dale go to the Infinity for a coffee, and when you're not watched, you insert this card into the player. I'll go and fetch it tomorrow. The player is installed where Chip and Gadget can't see it."

"You're sure?" Foxglove asked.

"I am sure. I've reserved a table for them. Can you imagine that they had no reservation yet? Anyway, I've chosen one from which the player can hardly be seen, so when they arrive, Zipper," the fly saluted, "you sneak into the restaurant through the back door and start the songs on the card."

LaWahini looked up to the cloudless sky. "The weather doesn't have to be dealt with. I'm glad about that, it would have been hard to supply hundreds of pigeons with silver nitrate so the clouds would rain down over Pennsylvania and not even reach the city. After all, we want them to have a perfect sunset. Right, Tammy?"

"I'm glad about it, too, LaWahini. Bink has got no time today, she wouldn't have been able to take the Rangerplane and lead the pigeons on their operation."

"Besides," the former Hawaiian mouse went on, "the fact that Chip kinda guards the Rangerwing means that I can help you with the inspirational part. You know, ask couples to have a stroll near Chip and Gadget's way."

"I could have some of them have dinner at the Infinity, too," Tammy suggested. "There's plenty of space tonight, and I'm not sure if Chip or Gadget will pay that much attention on the couples walking underneath them."

"Good idea, Tammy. Now what this place still lacks is candles. They've sorta run outta them."

"No problem, Tammy lass," Monty offered, "I can get 'em a year's supply. Sparky, now that yer outta the Rangerwing job, can ya 'elp me carry?"

"Why," the former laboratory rat wondered, "are they too heavy for you?"

"Not too 'eavy, too bulky."

"Okay, but I'll need some time later to fix the illumination of that fountain not far away from here."

Tammy noticed that she hadn't taken that into consideration. "Sparky, what gave you that idea? It sounds good. Could work on our plans."

"Oh, it's got nothing to do with the plans." By now, he could memorize said plans. "I just always wanted to do that for about two years now."

LaWahini had an excellent idea now. "Wait. Sparky, can you turn the illumination on and off if needed?"

"Probably."

"And the pumps?"

"Think so."

"Alright. They'll fly past the fountain after dinner. And when they come, you turn them on."

"Turn what on?"

"The pumps and the illumination of that fountain, of course!"

"Will do that."

"On second thought, I'm coming with you, just in case you forget it."

Tammy, however, had a little problem with this. "LaWahini, that'd mean splitting up."

"Okay, Zipper," LaWahini requested, "when you've started the player, can you do the messenger part for us?"

Zipper agreed about his additional task.

"Then let's go. We've got plenty to do." Upon LaWahini's command, the group dissolved.

Another group, a group of four, was still together for a while now. They were about the first blurry objects that appeared in Fat Cat's field of vision as he woke up from his unconsciousness.

"Where am I? This neither looks nor feels like the cat food factory. What happened?"

Snout was the first to speak. "Hey boss, good to see you're okay! You can't remember what happened?"

"The last I know is that I've been kicked in the face by that mouse, and that I've tripped over something." Mole decided not to say a word about this. "What am I doing here?"

"We brought you here after you were knocked out," Wart explained.

"Who has told you to do so?"

"That sssquirrel, you know, that one you've kidnapped sssome yearsss ago. Shhhould we have left you behind on the factory floor?"

Fat Cat felt well enough to get angry again. "You wouldn't dare... Where are they now? What've you guys done to them?"

"We had to let them go," Snout answered. "And I think they've taken the parrot with them."

The feline jumped up and fumed. "Why, you... What are you waiting for then? Go get them! If I can't have the parrot, I'll at least have my revenge for being sent out cold!" He rubbed the back of his head.

"But bawwwss," Mepps asked, "where shall we find them? The city is huge!"

"Mepps. Where do you usually find squirrels and chipmunks?"

Mole jumped up and down with one hand raised. "Here, Fat Cat, I know it, I know it!"

"Yes, Mole?"

"Um, in trees?"

"Brilliant! Well, at least for someone like you. Have you heard, everybody? Trees! Mice and rats are everywhere, but squirrels and chipmunks are in trees most of the time. And where do you find trees?"

"In forests?" Mepps guessed.

"Try again."

"In parks?"

"Mepps, I'm proud of you, you've managed to find that peanut in your head and use it. Now go search Central Park, you bunch of morons, and don't dare come back with empty hands!"

The four crooks escaped from the raging cat's office. On their way down, Snout commented, "He must've hit the floor real hard."

"Yesss," Wart replied, "he'sss talkin' nonsssenssse. How long doesss he sssupposse usss to ssearch the park? Let alone the other parksss in the sssity?"

"Until we've found them. That may be next year or so. That is, given we're lucky enough to find them in a park at all."

Meanwhile at the Rescue Rangers Headquarters, Chip had been sitting in the workshop staring at the little mechanical brass Chip and dreaming of Gadget for a while, and he started drifting back into reality. He lifted his head off his forearms and took a glance at the clock Gadget had mounted on the workshop wall.

"Wha-... have I spent half an hour here? What if someone had come back and seen me?"

He looked back to the workbench and found a small oil can standing right behind the brass figure. He wasn't too surprised that he hadn't seen it immediately. "I've still got such a lot to do!" he said, carefully picked up the can with a cloth not to leave any fingerprints, and got up to grease his wardrobe hinges. He didn't use too much lubricant so Gadget wouldn't be able to smell it. Once that was done and they had stopped making uncomfortable noises, he laid his tuxedo onto his bunk, but he didn't change into it yet on second thought. Instead, first he brought the oil can back to the workshop. He put it at exactly the same position where he had found it. Then he decided to do something to get the excitement about his recent discovery out of his head and went into the kitchen to clean the dishes from lunch.

Chapter 9: Saving The Best For Last

The dishes were cleaned up, so were the whole kitchen and the dining-room, and Chip was busy doing the same with the main room. He had to keep himself occupied and his thoughts on something else than Gadget. Yet he didn't work quite fast, he preferred taking some more time for it and not running out of work too early. And still, he finished the main room earlier than he desired.

"What shall I do now?" he asked himself. "I can't just sit here and wait for the date to go ahead. Distraction... I need distraction..."

He went to the controls of the TV, but he stopped before he turned it on. Most of the time when he was watching TV, Gadget was there, too. She had been sitting next to him most of the times, and he began to realize why. He simply dropped himself onto the couch and hoped for an idea of what to do.

"C'mon, Chip, it can't be so hard to find something in here that doesn't remind you of..."

The noises of the door opening got him off his train of thoughts. He actually expected only one of his friends to come, but even though he knew in advance he would regret it, he turned towards the door. As he had expected, it was Gadget who came in.

"Hi Chip," she said with a wonderfully cute smile. Then again, Chip was in a state of mind in which any of Gadget's smiles would have been wonderfully cute.

He pressed his jacket onto his chest as if to hide the thumping of his heart from Gadget's sensitive hearing. "Hi Gadget," he was barely able to pronounce. Noticing the new pair of overalls and the matchbox, he added the question, "Where have you been?"

Gadget tried to avoid telling him about the dress too early. "I... well, I got myself a pair of overalls and..."

Chip had finally found his distraction, at least a bit of it, and that was the curiosity about what else she was carrying around. "What's in the matchbox?"

"Oh... you'll find it out when the time has come, don't worry." Having said this, she disappeared into her room.

'Has she been to a junk yard?' Chip started wondering and thinking about what the contents of the matchbox may be. 'Does it contain some small parts for a new invention? Or does it still contain matches? Then I don't wanna know what she's inventing again... Wait.' His detective sense kicked in. 'She has been to someone who provides rodents with clothes, the overalls are the proof. And matchboxes are often used for... new... dresses... No, Chip, that's nonsense. She'd never wear a dress unless it's a disguise... or would she? She asked me if I minded dressing up, does that mean she's gonna go beyond a flower in her hair?'

Gadget laid the matchbox onto her bed and opened it. She took the dress out of it and placed it next to it, carefully not to ruin it with any wrinkles. But as she did, something slipped out of the dress and fell onto the floor. "What's that?" Gadget picked it up. It was a tiny black box, too small to

be human junk. "Has Tanya forgotten it or left it in my dress accidentally?" Still, there was something about this box that was more important than its origin, and that was what was inside.

Fully aware of the fact that as a Rescue Ranger she did not only have friends but also some enemies, she stretched out her arms and held it away, turned the joint between the two halves towards herself, and opened it slowly. No detonation, no gas, no acid. "Gadget," she told herself, "you're overreacting." As the box proved to be harmless, she took a look into the half-open box. Whatever was in it, it was somehow shiny. So she opened the box completely.

On a piece of red velvet lay a golden necklace. A locket was attached to it, and on the locket, there was a tiny ruby which was a thoroughly crafted splinter left from the manufacturing of a human gem. "Golly, this is... beautiful," Gadget said, amazed by the piece of jewelry, and wondering where it came from. At first, she thought it was all a mistake. She had to bring it back the next day. Then she began to remember what she had seen on television and in her dream half a year ago. And she realized that what lay in that box before her was a perfect replica of what Rebecca wore with her dress. "Is it really for me?" It would be the very first piece of jewelry she would wear that was no part of a disguise.

But something else struck her. It seemed as if a piece of paper was hidden under the velvet. Obviously, it didn't entirely fit in there, an edge of it was still visible. Gadget removed first the velvet with the necklace on it and then the paper which she unfolded. It turned out to be a letter written by Tanya.

Dear Gadget,

If everything has worked as desired, you should now be in your room with your Rebecca Cunningham replica dress and uncertain about what to do with the matching necklace. Allow me to reassure you: It is yours, you shall have it. Actually, the necklace was the reason why I let you wait half a year for your dress. The dress was finished after a few weeks, but I knew from the very start that it would take me so long to get the gold, the gem, and have the jewelry made. As I have told you, I always wished to make such a dress one day. And I always knew just as well that it would never be really complete without the necklace.

Keep it, Gadget, and wear it with the dress on your date with Chip.

Yours,

Tanya

"Golly and a half... she wants me to wear it tonight..." She realized what a surprise it would be for Chip to see her in a dress—and wearing that jewel. Even she herself was far from used to it. Nonetheless, she decided not to waste a thought on not wearing either of them. "I'll wear them for Tanya. And I'll wear them for Chip."

Chip was still sitting on the couch and trying to make the idea of Gadget wearing a dress without disguising herself sound plausible. However, he quit when he noticed how the sun wasn't shining as brightly outside as it did a while ago. "Is it already... what time is it?" He took a glance at the local time clock on the wall—and jumped up from the couch. "Half an hour before sunset? We're getting late!"

He rushed downstairs and changed from his hat and bomber jacket into his tuxedo. Despite being in a hurry, he made sure that everything sat as desired, and even checked twice in the bathroom mirror. Satisfied with his looks and certain that he would please Gadget, too, he then went upstairs to her room and knocked on her door. "Gadget, get yourself ready to go, the sun will soon be setting!"

"Okay, Chip," she replied to the excited chipmunk from inside, "just give me a few minutes. Will you wait for me in the main room?"

"Sure I will," he said and went. He went back to the main room, and after he had arrived there, he still went on. He walked in circles until he told himself, "Will you stop now, Chip Maplewood?" He exhaled in a strong sigh. "This is not your first date, so what makes you so excited?" But he knew quite well what it was. This was not his first date, but it was probably his most important date, and he counted on it being his last date, at least the last one with Gadget. Dating her had always been for him looking for a chance to win her heart and to tell her how he felt for her. He knew meanwhile that he had achieved the former, but the latter was one of the greatest tasks he would have to solve in his life. Once that was done, and he hoped that it would be the case on that date, he thought he wouldn't have to go on another nerve-racking date. And even if he failed again, he would quit dating her. Still, a part of him wanted to go on dating her, so quitting would not be as easy as he wished for.

While he stood and stared at the police badge next to the front door, he heard Gadget behind him. "Chip?"

He turned around and was struck by a most incredible sight. There she was, standing in the passage to the other rooms of the Headquarters. He saw the mouse. He saw the dress. Upon a closer look, he saw the jewelry. She had always been beautiful, no matter what she wore. But she had never been that beautiful. He noticed that he was gasping when he tried to speak, and all he was able to pronounce was, "Wow..."

Aware of being looked at by the chipmunk whom she loved so, Gadget couldn't help but blush. "Do you like it?"

"Gadget, it's... you're... I can't even describe it! It's... fantastic!" He walked up to her and offered her his arm. "Ready to go?"

"Ready to go," she replied with a bit of shyness in her voice and hooked onto his arm.

Side by side as long as the alleyways in the Headquarters allowed it, they walked down to the hangar where the Rangerwing was standing and having its batteries recharged. Gadget disconnected the wires, and after opening the hangar door, Chip first pushed the Rangerwing out onto the landing strip, and then he proved what a gentleman he was by helping Gadget onto her seat. He went back to close the door and finally sat down next to his Queen of Hearts.

They exchanged smiles. They knew both what was about to happen now. They were both wishing for something to happen that they had been waiting for for many years. And they felt both that after the events of the past four weeks it was more likely to happen than ever before. All they needed was courage.

"Let's go and watch the sunset now," Chip proposed. Gadget nodded silently and switched on the motors. The Rangerwing hovered up from the landing pad, and when she switched to cruise mode, it made its way out of the tree.

As they flew through the park, they passed by above many rodent couples. There were so many couples that even these two lovebirds in their mechanical bird couldn't overlook them. These couples were walking together, some of them hand in hand, they were hugging or even kissing each other, and some others were even waving up to the Rangerwing.

"Look Chip, they're waving at us," Gadget remarked.

"I'm sure we don't have that many fans," Chip said.

"Maybe they're just happy being together with each other, and they're showing their happiness."

If he was together with Gadget, Chip thought, then he'd rather be alone with her and not disturbed by some flying contraption. Besides, although the weather was perfect, he had never seen so many loving couples in that part of the park before, not even on St. Valentine's Day. Perhaps it had something to do with certain plans of certain friends of his. It would have been a success for them in that case. Because now he desired to be with Gadget even more. All those couples down there gave him a warm and fuzzy feeling inside.

After a while of flying, they left the park and landed on top of a taller building. It was no skyscraper, though. Chip would have suggested the Empire State Building if it wasn't way too obvious, a cliché too overdone, and, apart from all that, a bit too far to fly. No, this building was just okay. Both him and Gadget climbed onto the backseat where there were no controls between them. Somehow, they did so unconsciously, just driven by their hearts, because they suddenly noticed where they were both sitting. Anyway, Chip took his chance and carefully laid his arm around Gadget. She let a sigh hear, moved a little bit closer, and put her head onto his shoulder.

It was all almost too wonderful for them. The sunset right before them. Chip feeling Gadget's head on his shoulder, her hair against his cheek, and the desire to snuggle into it. Gadget feeling Chip's arm around her. Both feeling each other's warmth. They forgot about everything else. All the crime they had fought together and they still had to fight. The matchmaking schemes of their teammates. It all didn't matter. All that mattered was them and the sunset.

Gadget felt like telling Chip that she loved him.

Chip felt like telling Gadget that he loved her. Again.

And still, they stayed silent.

"Chip?" Gadget broke the silence after a while.

"Hm?" Chip expected everything from her. Somewhere near the top of his list was her love confession.

"It's wonderful to be with you." That wasn't so far up the list, but nice to hear.

"It's wonderful to be with you, too." His free right hand wanted to hold her left hand.

"Thanks, Chip." Movements on the far side of her body, registered by his left hand, told Chip's subconsciousness what she was doing, that she was moving her hand over to him. And he took it. And they held hands from that moment on.

The time went on as the sun went down. A time in which plenty of chances were given to them to tell each other how they felt. Yet they still didn't.

When only a slight red glow on the horizon was left of a colorful sunset, Gadget lifted her head off Chip's shoulder again. It wasn't before then that they realized they were holding each other's hand. With a just slight hint of awkwardness, they let go of each other and slowly moved onto the front seats again.

Gadget let the Rangerwing take off again. "Chip," she asked, "shall I fly directly to the Morning Sun?"

"No," Chip answered, "let's have some fun with our mates. Fly to the Infinity first, and then take a path to the Morning Sun that they can't follow. They're certainly waiting for us, at least some of them, but I don't want them to find out where we are."

"Okay!"

In their hiding near the Infinity, five Rescue Rangers, two of them being new members of the team, were waiting for Chip and Gadget to come. They were sure that they would come flying in the Rangerwing on such an important date, so apart from looking out, listening to the ambient sounds was necessary, too. And they should not be disappointed.

Foxglove did the listening part. Of all Rangers, she had the best hearing. Suddenly, something caught her attention. "I can hear something buzz... electric motors with ventilators or propellers..."

"Is it them, Foxy?" Dale asked impatiently.

"Wait... yes, it's them!" she whispered, knowing about Gadget's hearing.

"Everyone get ready now," Tammy ordered, whispering, too. She, Dale, Foxglove and Monty hid and watched while Zipper waited for his cue to fly into the restaurant and start the MP3 player.

Like they had expected, the Rangerwing approached. It slowed down as if to hover and land. The waiting Rangers could even get a glance at Gadget's dress. But what they saw next came unexpected. The Rangerwing started to accelerate and climb again. It was out of sight for them soon.

"Zipper," Tammy said, "forget it. They've fooled us. Go and tell Sparky and LaWahini to come here. The operation is canceled."

The fly suggested following Chip and Gadget and see what can still be done.

"Do you know where they're going? Then tell us."

Zipper shrugged. Admitting the matchmaking task force's defeat, he left and flew to the broken-down fountain.

"What's up, Zipper?" LaWahini asked as she saw the fly. "Have they skipped dinner, or are they doing a little flight around the park before it?" As Zipper shook his head, she went on, "So we've got a problem, huh?"

He explained her briefly what had happened and what had not happened.

"That was it, then. Sparky! It's canceled! Let's go back to the others!"

The former lab rat came out through an open hatch. "What do you mean, 'that was it?'"

"They found out about our operation, and now they can be anywhere. It's over. C'mon, let's go."

Sparky was about to go but stopped in the tracks. "I can't leave this unfinished." He went into the hatch once more, the water pumps started, the illumination lit up for the first time in two years, and he came back and joined LaWahini and Zipper on their way back.

Not very far away, four animals of sinister appearance, a cat, a lizard, a mole and a rat, were searching for something—or rather somebody. They had been doing that for some hours, and they were running out of hope.

"Central Park is too big to search for a handful of rodents," Snout complained. "And the darkness doesn't make it easier."

"Shhh!" Wart requested silence. "I believe I hear something."

"Do you think it's them?" Mole asked quietly.

"Most likely," Snout said. "I can hear a strong Australian accent."

Said accent came from a burly mouse from down under. "Crikey, mates, all those preparations were in vain. Ya jes' can't trick a super sleuth like ol' Chipper."

Tammy's disappointment was easy to hear, too. "There's nothing more to do here. Let's go home."

"You ain't goin' nowhere, missy!" someone suddenly hissed from behind. And a few seconds later, the matchmaking team found themselves caught in a net. Only Zipper managed to squeeze himself through the meshes and flew away. He headed for the Headquarters, the only place where he was sure to meet Chip and Gadget sooner or later.

"Hey Wart," Mepps reminded his reptile partner, "that fly is escaping!"

"Doesssn't matter. We don't have them all anyway. And he'll lead the otherssss to usss."

Chapter 10: When Things Turn Around

A warm light was shining and music was sounding out of a hollowed-out stump somewhere in the park. Outside, the Rangerwing was standing, and inside, a chipmunk in a black tuxedo was dancing with a mouse in a white evening gown.

Chip appreciated how things had changed since his and Gadget's first date. She had stayed focused on the date itself and on him instead of running away and repairing whatever was there to be repaired, to give only one example of her former quirks. But maybe it was simply because of how she felt for him. 16 years ago, he could not predict how Gadget would behave once she would seriously fall in love with someone. He wasn't even sure if she could fall in love at all beyond that little crush she had certainly developed on Sparky. Now he knew it. All he still had to do was make her confess her feelings to him to make it "official." And of course tell her how he felt.

The dinner itself was still fresh in his memory. He remembered looking into her eyes way too often. He remembered her looking into his eyes way too often. He remembered the little stain on her cheek which he carefully wiped away with his napkin in an almost caressing way. He remembered how she blushed as he did that, and how his own cheeks went hot. He remembered how he asked her to dance after dinner. He had done so countless times, but this time he was more nervous than ever before in similar situations.

And now he was dancing with the mouse of his dreams on the dance floor of a little restaurant named The Morning Sun. He had no clue what excited him the most—the girl in his arms, the dress she was wearing, what he had found out about her earlier that day, or the fact that her uncle and aunt were running the restaurant. Maybe it was a mixture of it all, anyway, it was hard for him to stay calm enough for that slow dance.

It was almost impossible for Gadget not to notice that Chip was partly lost in thoughts. They were still dancing, and he was still leading, but his look told something different. There wasn't much more she was interested in looking at than this beautiful pair of chipmunk eyes.

"Chip, is anything wrong?"

If there was something Chip would always react upon, it was Gadget's voice. "Uh, no, everything's just fine." 'So far, that is. As long as the date is not over, there will be a lot of chances for doing why I've taken you on this date.'

"Is it okay that we've been dancing for so long?"

"Gadget, I love the way you're dancing. Remind me that I wanna thank your father for the dancing lessons he gave you." Years ago, Gadget had told him that it was Geegaw who taught her to dance. He believed that sooner or later, there will be a boy who'd want to dance with the beautiful girl she'd be then.

The owners of the restaurant, Franklin van Zant and Suzanne Wheatfield van Zant, had little to do as Chip and Gadget were the only guests. So they stood and watched their niece and the guy with whom she had come. Gadget had spent a lot of time in that year's spring and summer with them after she had found out about her uncle and aunt. Unlike the Rescue Rangers, they were real

relatives to her, closer to a family than her friends and even Monty would ever be. Her visits got fewer when her real family was reunited after being ripped apart for decades, but The Infinity was always a good place to go for a date.

"What a beautiful couple," Frank said quietly so that Chip and Gadget wouldn't hear him.

"Yes," Suzanne approved his words. "One can clearly see the love between them." She remembered how she met Frank. They were much younger than Chip and Gadget, but the age of two lovebirds didn't matter much to her. She went on watching them dance and took Frank's hand.

Another song came to an end, and the Ranger couple stopped dancing. They felt both at the same time that they had danced enough for that evening. As their senses opened up for other things than the music and themselves, they recognized three mice, the van Zant family, standing at the side of the dance floor and smiling at them.

"No more dancing?" Frank asked.

"No, Mr. van Zant," Chip replied, "as nice as it was, but even nice things have to end sooner or later." So did that evening, but Chip didn't want to think about it too much.

"Has anyone ever told you that you're two great dancers?" Suzanne praised them.

"Golly, thanks, Aunt Suzanne." Gadget had stopped counting the times she had blushed on that date.

Chip led her back to their table. "I can say the same about you, Gadget. I've rarely enjoyed dancing as much as with you, and I've danced with a lot of women." He referred to past cases in the course of which he had to dance and to his pre-Ranger time. "Would you still like something? A drink, maybe?"

"Thanks for the offer, Chip, but no."

This meant that their presence at the Morning Sun had just run out of its last reason, and the rest of their date would consist of nothing more than the flight home. "Shall we... go then?"

"Um... yes... I think it's time now..." Gadget still hoped for some more chances, as did Chip. And they set their hopes on the flight.

"You're already leaving?" Dawn asked. She was Frank's and Suzanne's only daughter. Although she was in her mid-twenties, she was still living with her parents and helping at the restaurant from time to time. Besides, she was the first member of the family Gadget had met, and so the ties between them were very close.

"Yes, Dawn," Gadget answered. "We can't stay here forever." Her words and her expression showed quite a bit of disappointment. "See you." She walked towards the door with Chip, but a part of her wanted to stop, hold him close and tell him what she longed for to tell him.

"See you, and good luck, you two." Dawn waved after the two Rangers and hoped that they understood that her good luck wishes not only meant their Ranger work. Although Gadget had never talked about love with her, she knew too well what was going on between these two.

On his way to the Rangerwing, Chip felt how every step got harder and harder to take. He kept on moving forward, though, as if driven by his own fate, whatever this fate had in mind for him. But whatever it was, he didn't want it to have it the easy way.

"Gadget, would you mind me fly the way back?"

"Why should I? I know you can fly the Rangerwing."

Chip was about to say that it meant a lot to him, but he wasn't so sure about it yet. He led her to the passenger's side of the aircraft and helped her on board once more before he climbed up himself.

As they were sitting there side by side, he gathered all his courage and spoke to her, hoping that it was enough courage. "Gadget..."

"Yes, Chip?" She turned to him, her face showing a strong hint of expectation. It would be much easier for her if he said it first. If he wanted to say it at all.

"I... I just wanted to say that..."

"Yes?"

It was not enough courage. "...this was a wonderful evening. I've enjoyed every minute of being with you."

"I've enjoyed it, too." But now she was sure that if they didn't reach that ultimate goal before they got home, she would spend half the night crying with a freshly broken heart. She hadn't soaked her pillow with tears since her father was back.

She was still staring at him when she felt the Rangerwing lose ground contact. All she could build her hope upon was the remaining time until they were back at the Headquarters. Unknown to her, Chip thought just the same.

Above a place much busier than the Morning Sun, namely his very own casino, Fat Cat sat behind his desk. One hand established the connection between his head and the forearm by which it was supported, the other one scratched the surface of the desk. The immediate aftermath of his knockout was over, and he had fully come back to senses.

"What a stupid idea was that? Go find the Rescue Rangers somewhere in Central Park? How should I know that they are in Central Park at all? I mean, we've got so many parks here in New York City. They could as well be based in... Battery Park or wherever. Next time I give these imbeciles an order, I'm gonna wait until I can think properly again. They're gonna spend the whole night out there. Or even the rest of the month."

Fat Cat was just considering getting himself another team of henchmen when those who were currently working for him surprised him by entering his office unexpectedly. Snout was going ahead and carrying a net over his shoulder while the others walked behind him and took care that the content of the net didn't dare misbehave. "Sssurprissse, boss!" Wart hissed.

Fat Cat's eyes widened in disbelief. "Have you got them?"

"Yes... well, not all of them, only half a dozen" Snout admitted. "The leader and the mechanic mouse weren't there, and the fly was able to escape."

Despite having more Rangers than he would have expected the day before, the broad tabby was not wholly satisfied with the work of his goons. "Not all of them?! I would send you out to get the others, too, but I doubt you'd have that much luck a second time."

"We don't need to go," Snout explained, "the fly will get his friends, and when they come here to rescue the others, we'll have them all."

"Not bad... that idea's not bad. Why can't you all be that clever?"

The rat placed the net onto the floor, and the other goons watched. "Here, I'll let them out."

Before Fat Cat could react and tell him not to do that, he heard Monty's voice say, "Awright, mates, at three." Snout opened the net. "Three!"

Up above in the air over Central Park and shone on by the full moon, Chip and Gadget still didn't know what happened and what was happening to their friends. Their minds were occupied by entirely different things. They had both put so high hopes on that date, and now it was almost over.

Chip steered the Rangerwing over more familiar parts of the park when memories of special times together with Gadget began to haunt him. His mind replayed their very first meeting 18 years ago. The time when Dale started dating Foxglove and ending his hunt for Gadget 16 years ago. His own very first date with Gadget shortly after that.

The tree was visible in the distance.

Some other special moments from past cases and dates came back.

The lights next to the front door and on the platforms could be seen.

Chip remembered the night when the Rangers liberated Gadget's mother. How he and Gadget stood in the dark and were about to end as a giant guard dog's midnight snack.

He had to switch to hover mode to slow the Rangerwing down now.

But in his mind, he was on board of Geegaw's plane, yet still together with Gadget. His memory of nearly kissing Gadget was almost as intense as reality.

The plane was in the crown now, and it was time to lower the landing gears.

Chip saw himself standing at the end of the very same landing platform. Gadget was next to him. They held each other tightly. And again, they were moving closer and closer...

"No!" The landing gears flapped up, the motors tilted back, and the Rangerwing shot out of the oak tree's crown again, piloted by a chipmunk who firmly wrapped his hands around the bottle cap yoke.

Gadget was totally taken by surprise, albeit not a bad one. "Chip, what are you doing?"

"This night's not over yet, Gadget. Nor is this date."

Chapter 11: Confessions Under The Moonlight

Chip steered the Rangerwing away from the tree and through the park for a while until he landed on the broad edge of an illuminated fountain. "I wonder when they've fixed it." He rather jumped than climbed out of the aircraft, went over to the other side, and offered Gadget his hand. His heart ran like the Rangerwing's motors did one minute ago.

Gadget took both his offer and his hand and left the aircraft, too. He led her a few feet away. And there they came to stand, face to face, eye to eye. Chip started searching for words to say as he stared at the slightly taller mouse.

"Gadget..." he rather stammered than spoke, "there's something I'd like... I need to tell you. We've been teammates for... quite a long time now... and... and we've been... we've been dating for... for a not so long time..." He barely managed to take her other hand. He went on talking while his mouth dried out. "And I'd like to tell you... why I took you on this date... and on all the other dates, of course..." Gadget's face was not only breath-takingly pretty, but even more looking back at him in expectation. 'Help. If someone out there can read my thoughts, help me.'

Suddenly, Gadget looked up from Chip and to the sky. It seemed as if an old quirk of hers broke through in what appeared to be a most inappropriate moment. "Isn't the moon beautiful tonight?"

Was that the Chip had requested? He took a look at the moon, too, and unconsciously pulled her a bit closer. "Yes..." Somehow he felt relieved. Relieved enough to finish what he had started, and to do so elegantly. "But not half as beautiful as you, Gadget." He turned back, looked right into her eyes, and took all that was left of his courage to say what he had wanted to say for so long.

"I love you."

He had said it. He had finally said it. Revealed his very feelings to her with these three words. It was to him as if all the world around them came to a halt. It was just the two of them. Now he needed to hear the same words from her. He was certain that she wouldn't want to hide herself from him.

He loved her. This was what Gadget had so wished for to hear him say all through the evening. Now it was her turn. But it proved not to be easy. Chip's behavior had already given her a hint about that, and now she felt it herself. She had to say it, though. She couldn't escape anymore. Even if a part of her wanted to. She couldn't make herself move, run to the Rangerwing or elsewhere. No, she had to go through this, and once she was through this, she would be rid of another grief. But if she quit now, another night wet of tears would most likely await her. This was the chance of her life.

"Chip..."

She gave her otherwise dominant mind the boot to turn loose all the thoughts running around in her head and let herself lead by her emotions. And her emotions had her say it.

"I love you, too."

Slowly, her hands moved up his arms and around his shoulders until she and he were engaged in their very first tender embrace after their mutual love confession. A burden had been taken from both of them. They didn't have to play anymore, they didn't have to struggle for each other anymore, they had reached their ultimate destination. At least, so they felt. Feeling the warmth of the chipmunk in her arms and on her cheek made Gadget repeat her words. "I love you, too, Chip."

After the embrace which seemed to go on forever and yet to be much too short, they still held each other and looked into each other's eyes. As they were so close, they felt the same longing they had felt twice after the nightly rescue of Gadget's mother. The main difference, however, was that they were now a lot more aware of what was going on and why it was going on. What their love needed now was a proof and a seal at the same time. They allowed their feelings to guide them. Bit by bit, their faces approached each other, they closed their eyes, they wrapped their arms a bit tighter around each other, their lips met halfway between them...

And the full moon above New York City cast its magical light onto Chip Maplewood and Gadget Beatrice Hackwrench as they were standing on the rim of a fountain and sharing their very first great kiss.

Nothing and nobody was there to disturb them as they lived their love for the first time, as they proved their love to each other. After the kiss, they shared another tender hug.

"Eighteen years..." Chip said. "I've waited eighteen years for this day. For this moment. For this kiss. Gadget, this is the most wonderful day in my life."

"Yes, it's almost the same for me," Gadget replied. "Only the day when Dad came back can beat it."

"I fully understand you. After all, it was Dale and me who rejoined you and Geegaw."

"Thank you, Chip. Thank you for... for all the time we spent together. For tonight. For the kiss. For being the wonderful guy that you are. For helping me gather my family together. For helping so many others in need of help. For... for everything." She pressed him closer to her as all the thankfulness and all the overwhelming emotions started floating out of her in two streams of tears.

"It's okay, Gadget," Chip whispered and softly stroked her back. "It's okay. You're always welcome... my love..."

As all had been said and done, as this date had fulfilled its original purpose for Chip and Gadget, they flew back to the Headquarters. Like on the flight before, Chip was the pilot. After their landing on the platform in front of the hangar, he offered Gadget his help at getting out of the Rangerwing again. But this time, he stretched out two hands, and she laid herself into his hands and let him carry her down onto the floor where, as they held each other in their arms, they shared another kiss.

The Headquarters were strangely quiet as they walked inside. Not only quiet, but also surprisingly empty. The lights in the main room were on, but as they discovered when they stepped into it, nobody was there but a very excited housefly sitting on the couch. As he saw the two dressed-up Rangers enter, he lifted off and dashed right towards them.

"Zipper, what's up?" Chip asked the fly gone wild, and he told him what had happened to the other Rangers.

"Fat Cat got them?" Gadget did the opposite of blushing, she went pale. "Golly, I knew it, whenever I wear a dress, the Rangers get into trouble!"

"Calm down, Gadget. That's what being a Ranger is all about, we constantly get into some trouble, no matter what you wear. Now let's change into something more casual and go rescue them."

Zipper wondered why they wanted to waste that much time instead of leaving immediately.

Gadget explained, "I don't want to ruin this dress. It means too much for me. Besides, I can move better when I'm wearing overalls, and I expect that to be necessary."

They left their winged teammate alone to peel themselves out of tuxedo, dress and jewelry, and to change into bomber jacket, fedora hat, white shirt, overalls, and goggles. Only a few minutes later, Chip's head peeked into the main room. "C'mon, Zipper, let's go! Rescue Rangers, away!"

For yet another time on that day, the Rangerwing soared through the park and the surrounding parts of the city. Zipper sat in the middle of the backseat and noticed that Chip and Gadget both held the throttle levers, or rather that Gadget, being the pilot, had her hand on the throttles, and Chip had his hand half on and half in hers. Of course, he knew what that meant.

The Happy Tom cat food factory was dark, but the cat figure on its roof was where the action was at night. The Rangerwing landed behind it so that the casino visitors didn't see it, and the three still free Rangers entered the structure through a back door not to have to pass through the casino. Zipper flew ahead to see if there were any obstacles on their way, such as Fat Cat's goons. But there was none of them, so they proceeded to the chubby villain's office. Weird noises were sounding through the door. Always expecting a trap or an ambush, Zipper opened the door, and neither he nor Chip nor Gadget could believe their eyes.

Fat Cat was there. And so were his henchmen. All of them were tied up and gagged. Fat Cat's fur was even standing off here and there as if he had come into contact with a considerable dose of electricity. And the six Rangers were standing or sitting and waiting.

"Yeah, try an' call fer yer goons," Monty snarled at Fat Cat. "They won't be able ta come, not only 'cause they're already 'ere."

"Hey Monty," Dale tried to catch his attention, "look who's come!"

Everyone turned towards the door and saw Zipper hovering in front of Chip and Gadget—who had laid their arms around each other.

"You're still here?" Chip wondered. "Why haven't you gone home?"

"It's so far to walk," Tammy complained.

"Yes," LaWahini said, "we were waiting for you to pick up."

"I 'ope y've come with both aircraft," Monty said.

Gadget looked to the ground. "Um... no... we've kind of forgotten that in all the excitement."

Dale finally noticed that there was something between her and Chip. "Wait. Are you two... have you..."

"Yes, Dale," Gadget answered, "Chip and I love each other." And Chip added, "We're now officially a loving couple. And we've made it without your help." He gave the matchmakers a wink.

"Yay!" Foxglove pounced Dale and gave him a bat hug. "Do you know what that means, cute stuff? We can finally marry!" Dale lost his balance and fell over onto his back, and as he lay there, unable to escape, Foxglove kissed him all over his face.

LaWahini was totally confused now. "Wait. What does the one have to do with the other?"

Dale turned his head to the side, allowing Foxglove to peck and snuggle his cheek only, and explained, "Soon after Foxy and I became a couple, we got engaged. I asked her if she wanted to marry me." He chuckled. "You can imagine her reaction. But we agreed to wait with our wedding until Chip and Gadget made it. Well, and that's the case now." He turned back to the bat. "Aww, Foxy, it's okay, we wanna go now."

"Okay, let's go," Tammy agreed, "but how shall we all fit into the Rangerwing? Gadget, do you think it can carry all of us?"

"Sure it can," Gadget approved. "It's designed to carry greater payloads if necessary. Achally, it can carry more weight than the Rangerplane."

"But it still has only five seats. Where shall we all sit?"

A few minutes later, the Rangerwing took off from the roof of the cat food factory and headed back to the Rescue Rangers Headquarters. This time, Monterey Jack was the pilot, Zipper sitting on his shoulder. Tammy had found a place in the middle of the backseat, and to her sides, Chip and Dale held Gadget and Foxglove respectively on their laps. And due to the lack of space, Sparky sat next to Monty on the co-pilot's seat with LaWahini on his lap and his arms wrapped around her as makeshift safety-belts.

And for some reason, she wasn't all unhappy about it.

The End