**Chapter Nine**

**The Cloud Scooper**

Word count: 2339

Curly Connor had stationed himself on the rug inside Captain Sodpeg’s front door. He was watching Baggy load the dish washer while keeping an eye on Abigail, who was relaxing in the recliner.

The Captain was outside on a lawn chair beneath his favorite tree, reading the Sunday paper. He had prepared a buttermilk pancake breakfast for the two families. The Blusterbuffs had gone home to make spanakopita for their dinner meeting.

"What do you say, Curly Connor?" asked Baggy, emerging from the kitchen, "Do you think we can talk her into a walk to the pond?"

When the Fluffer-Noodle rushed to her and placed his head in her lap, she countered, "Do you think we can convince him to show us whatever they were talking about last night?"

"I was planning to, but it’s really no big deal," he said, beginning to worry that she might be disappointed.

With the prospect of a fine, warm afternoon ahead, he packed his old film camera and binoculars. He put a water bottle, some crackers and dog treats into another pack for Abigail, who had forgotten to bring her day pack. Curly Connor was harnessed, and after a quick goodbye to the Captain, they headed down his stony, tree-lined driveway to Elfin Pond Road.

Elfin Pond was between the Sodpeg and Blusterbuff driveways, on the other side of the road. Covering several acres, it was an irregular shape. Two large sections were connected by a narrow channel. The meadow sloped down from the road to a sandy beach on the north side of the pond. Walking along the eastern shore, they passed the channel and a huge willow tree before coming to a rectangular dock. To its left, a row boat was upside down on the bank. Off shore, two black inner tubes, tied to the dock’s ladder, were drifting in the calm water. Curly Connor guided Abigail down the bank and paused before stepping onto the dock.

 "Why don’t you tell him to find you a seat," Baggy suggested, and she suspected that this might have something to do with his secret.

Curly Connor chose to walk around the dock clockwise, keeping himself between Abigail and the edge, a little something he had picked up in subway training. He crossed in front of her and stopped. Under his nose, she found the smooth, narrow, closely placed boards of a bench and sat down. Baggy joined her, and the Fluffer-Noodle sprawled across their feet.

"This is nice!" she said; it was an uncommonly comfortable bench. "Is this what you and Mr. Blusterbuff made?"

"Well, it’s a bit much to say that we made it."

There were two special things about the bench. The wood was from a cedar tree which once stood across the pond in the woods by the cove. When it came down in a storm several years earlier, Thaddeus Blusterbuff had milled it into boards.

"All we did was cut them to size, sand them smooth and bolt them to the standards."

"Standards?"

"The bench standards. Reach down under the side of the seat."

"Yuh mean this metal thing?"

That was the other special thing about the bench. There were two wrought iron standards, mirror images of each other. They had been made by Phesty Mushrot. Baggy had found them in Captain Sodpeg’s barn covered in cobwebs and bird droppings.

"Phesty’s the one who knows how to make a comfortable bench. All we did was fasten the boards to the places he provided. You can’t make an uncomfortable bench using these standards … well, not unless you’re a real moron, anyway."

Abigail got up and knelt on the dock facing the side of the bench. She found a filigree of stems, leaves and …

"Ouch! Thorns! … Oh, it’s raspberries!"

At the top of the bramble toward the back, a bird had its beak in a cluster of berries. Along the edge of the back boards, bigger leaves and a thicker stem, bent at the top, led to the raggedy petals and nubby dome of a sunflower.

Abigail had assumed that Phesty Mushrot was a blacksmith, because he lived over the blacksmith’s shop at school. She wondered, though, how his bench standards had ended up in the Captain's barn.

"He did Phesty some kind of favor … I don’t know what … You know the Captain, he’s so tight-lipped about everything. I’m surprised I got that much out of him."

"Did you ever find out what he does for a living?" she said returning to her seat. The matter of Captain Sodpeg’s profession and why he was called Captain had been a curiosity ever since Baggy had moved in with him.

"Nope. All I know is that there is a room in the back of the barn with no windows that’s always locked. Every now and then, he gets a small package in the mail and goes out there for hours."

They sat in silence, listening to birds flying back and forth from the woods across the pond. Then, Baggy took several pictures of Abigail with the Fluffer-Noodle. He was about to suggest that they take the unit to the edge of town and walk to the ice-cream stand, when she asked about the sky. It was deep blue with puffy white clouds.

"Do clouds ever remind you of anything?"

"There’s one," he said taking her hand and pointing, "that looks like an old Volkswagen. And, that one … looks like an ice-cream cone on its side with the point of the cone squashed. Or, maybe an acorn."

"How can it look like an ice-cream cone and an acorn?"

"Well, you know an acorn’s hat … If it was upside down, it could look like a scoop of ice-cream on a squashed cone."

"Acorns have hats?"

"Sure, next time I see one, I’ll show you." He continued perusing the sky and then added, "There’s one over there above the cove that looks like a boat. When I was a kid, I used to make sailboats out of half a walnut shell. That’s what this looks like … But, the sail is almost horizontal, and it looks like there’s a plough on the front. That’s interesting … If I shield my eyes, there’s a sunbeam from the bow down into the trees, like an anchor line."

In the silence that followed, Abigail conjured vivid images of the three clouds. Then, Baggy removed his binoculars from his pack.

Staring in the direction of the cove and adjusting the focus, he whispered, "That’s weird." He stood up abruptly and put the binoculars away saying, "I need to go check something … You don’t mind?"

"No," she said feeling too comfortable to move.

She listened to his footsteps as he walked off the dock and continued along the eastern shore. He walked around the pond to the west side which was more rugged and woodsy. The rhythmic crunching of twigs beneath his feet stopped across from her.

After a while, he called, "Abigail! Come here!" You’re never going to believe this! Bring our stuff!"

Curly Connor led her off the dock and followed Baggy’s path as though he had been waiting to be asked. As they walked through the dappled shadows, they breathed in the cool, woods air, heavy with aromatic pine. Baggy met them and took Abigail’s hand.

She dropped the harness handle saying, "What’s up?"

"Well," he laughed, unsure how to explain, "that cloud that looked like a boat?"

"Yeah?"

"It’s more like a boat that looks like a cloud. Come see."

They walked into a clearing which contained two things: the stump of the old cedar tree from which the bench had been made and the most extraordinary staircase either of them had ever seen. A dozen flights of stairs were suspended on golden cords from something high above the trees. The banisters and balusters were made of the same, stiff, braided cord. Golden mesh risers connected the treads which were nothing more than milky white cushions.

Walking up the first flight of pillowy steps was actually fun, but the higher they climbed the more the stairs swayed and wobbled. Abigail grew increasingly uncomfortable and at each landing had more and more trouble talking herself into continuing. Baggy, who had great confidence in matters of balance, did not find it at all challenging. As they passed the treetops, Abigail noticed a brisk breeze and a bubbling sound which reminded her of the froth on a giant soda.

"I think," Baggy mused, "that the hull must incorporate a helium balloon. What's that effervescent sound, though? It reminds me of … something!"

When the stairs leveled out, they were far above the leafy canopy of the woods, halfway between the bow and mid ship on the starboard side of a large, white boat.

"You’ll have to climb over the side," Baggy said, hoisting himself in, "I don’t think the boy will mind … It’s a soft landing."

Abigail handed him the leash, and Curly Connor, who had braved the strange staircase only because Baggy was in front of him, jumped gratefully in.

Before following, Abigail touched the side of the vessel. It was smooth and gracefully curved. The top was a wide, rounded rail which curled over the outer edge. It felt like a well-crafted wooden boat, but it wasn’t wood. It wasn’t aluminum or fiberglass either.

"It’s like a big futon," she said, sitting on the edge and swinging her legs over.

"Yeah, I think there must be hollow tubing underneath to give it its shape. Maybe the tubing's filled with helium too."

The ship’s deck was spacious and entirely empty. Allowing the Fluffer-Noodle to poke around on his own, they walked up and down the cottony boards enjoying the gentle rocking motion. High above their heads hung, not a sail, but an enormous canopy; a thin, white, rippling dome which shielded them from the worst of the sun’s rays.

"Maybe there are solar panels on top."

While Baggy occupied himself with thoughts of what it was and how it worked, Abigail wondered whose it was and whether it was all right for them to be there. Baggy reasoned that it was either on the Captain’s or the Blusterbuffs'; the boundary went somewhere through the pond. Since he hadn’t been told to avoid the woods, it had to be OK to look.

"Hey," said Abigail, "Maybe this is the cloud Mrs. Blusterbuff saw."

"Yeah, I was thinking the same thing."

"Is there really a plough in front?"

"Oh, there’s a plough," he laughed.

She considered this and then said, "Well, then, let’s call it the Cloud Scooper."

After wandering around in silence for a while, Baggy noticed an indentation in one of the deck boards near the bow. It turned out to be a handle which he used to pull two seats up from under the deck. He found more handles which revealed more seats and several tables. When he uncovered a set of stairs leading below deck, he went down to take a look.

"It's all blocked off," he said in frustration when he returned, "I can't get a look at how it works!"

Baggy was tucking another row of seats back into the deck when he noticed the Fluffer-Noodle pawing at a board in the center of the craft. It was a storage area containing a long, rectangular case that turned out to be a portable, instrument control panel with a stand.

He set it up in front of two seats. It had an altimeter, two-way radio and a full color display of their surroundings.

After staring at it for a few minutes, he gave a "Whoop!" of delight. Rushing to the port side, he leaned over the edge looking toward the stern. He repeated the process on the starboard side before returning to Abigail.

"Well, it must like your name. It now says 'The Cloud Scooper' on both sides, in big, sky-blue letters. And listen to this." He read from the screen on the instrument panel, "'Owners’ Manual & Operating Instructions for The Cloud Scooper, property of Baggy Brichaz and Abigail Goongleheimer Jones. See the world from your own private cloud. Travel in comfort, invisible to the naked eye.'"

Now that it seemed apparent that the Cloud Scooper was theirs, Abigail was anxious to go for a ride. Baggy, however, wanted to read the manual. He wasn’t about to haul up the anchor until he knew for sure that the Cloud Scooper would operate as promised.

A lever inside the ship controlled the staircase, which collapsed upwards into a compartment below deck on the starboard side. Baggy let out the anchor line to give himself more room to practice every conceivable maneuver. When changing altitude, the Cloud Scooper could go straight up or down.

 "That’s odd," he said checking the instruments, "It won’t go any lower than about thirty feet above the tree tops. You have to moor it; you can’t land it."

He read over the instructions for reeling in the anchor. He would have to haul it in to see if it worked. What if it wouldn’t go back out again?

He suggested that Abigail take the Fluffer-Noodle down to the clearing while he practiced, but she wouldn’t hear of it. In the end, he hauled in the golden anchor and practiced flipping it around several different branches until he was satisfied that his skills were up to snuff.

They took a slow tour around the pond. Baggy banked the Cloud Scooper hard to the left and then to the right, hanging over the edge to look at its reflection. He was relieved that he could not see the large blue lettering mirrored in the water.

"Hey, Baggy," said Abigail on an inspiration, "Let's fly to Applebutter Hill. We could go to the carriage house, and I could get my day pack … it’s got my capo and pick … Nobody’s there, Damari went to Mythragopolis to see her Dad, and I’ve got my keys."