

## The Rayman Book 2

### Chapter 1 Getting Lost

Donna was lost. She had to admit that to herself. She had simply not been paying attention. She'd been thinking and became so engrossed that she missed a turn somewhere. She'd been on this route only once before, when the Woodsmen were going to the festival. She had just followed along and there'd been no need to find her way. The trail had seemed so easy that she succumbed to her favourite pastime, thinking. She thought she knew where she must have gone wrong, but it was at least half a day's journey back and she was reluctant to turn around. It seemed unappreciative not to consent to this unexpected adventure. At least she was still moving in roughly the right direction, although the trail was getting steeper and less well trodden. There hadn't been any small side trails for some time. This path was probably going to lead her to a dead end at some lonely farmstead, but she continued to follow it anyway. The worst that could happen was that she'd be turned away. It was more likely that she would get a bed for the night with perhaps some interesting conversation. If she had to go back the way she'd come, she would, but she was stubborn and the path must lead her somewhere eventually. She had left the Woodsmen compound five days before, leaving them a note to tell them what she was doing. They were a warm and friendly community, and she felt loved and welcome, but being with them meant that most of her brain was starving to death. She was young, and she knew that even if they had decided to let her go, they would have wanted to send someone with her. Nobody really had time to spare. After her beloved Pops died they all tried to spend time with her and help her when they could, but no one filled the gap he left. He had always listened to her questions and would talk with her for hours about practically anything. Some of what he said was a bit vague, but if he didn't have the answers she wanted, he invariably knew someone who did. They'd taken many fun journeys together to find something out. She liked seeing new places and meeting new people. Since he had gone she felt more and more cut off. She knew the Woodsmen would try to help her, but she also knew she'd have to listen to endless discussions about who should go with her. She would then have waited until whoever was chosen had sorted out their work in order to take some time away. She felt she could look after herself perfectly well on her own. She did feel a little guilty about running away, but what else could she do? She had tried. She had read and reread all the books they had acquired for her at last summer's festival. She had long ago exhausted all the information she could glean from anyone locally. Locally for Donna meant within three days' journey. Three days there and back, which she had discovered was the limit of time she could be away before someone noticed and became worried. She had endured much advice from concerned elders who kindly tried to explain the

error of her ways. She had tried her very best because she loved them, but she couldn't deny her curiosity for long. She just had endless unanswered questions. Her new friend Carrie had been a great source of information, but Donna's interest in her hadn't lasted once she exhausted the limits of her knowledge. She was somewhat preoccupied with the Rayman anyway. They were always fun to visit, but that was no longer enough.

Carrie had lent her lots of new books. One book on musical theory had been absolutely fascinating. Its author was a man named G Ang or something like that. It was hard to tell because the cover was very worn. He had pushed her far beyond any other author. He had a complete understanding of his field and she perceived that to have accomplished this he must also have a very broad knowledge about all of life. He gave tantalising glimpses of things Donna had never even heard of. Although the mental workout had been fun, music was not her real passion. Knowledge, all knowledge, was fascinating, but she had yet to discover which branch of learning would consume her. She would know it when she found it, and this insight continued to fuel her endless searching.

That book was also the cause of this journey. When Donna asked Carrie if she knew where the author came from, she'd only been able to tell her that the book was very old and the writer was probably long dead. This was a great disappointment, but Carrie also told her that the book had come from way out west. Her mother had brought it with her when she came back with her father. It had been her great grandmother's, and Carrie said they came from a much bigger community. Unfortunately it was a very long way away. They were sophisticated in ways that no one around the mill could understand. Carrie remembered that her grandmother knew an awful lot about almost everything. There had been constant visits from their neighbours. People came because they wanted to ask questions about things that nobody else could answer.

Donna liked the sound of the old lady and had tried to find out more. Through Rick she even managed to visit the mill to speak with Carrie's mother. It took a long time to persuade Rick to take her. Peewit worked on him for her. In the end she wore him down and he agreed, mainly just to shut Peewit up. Of course Peewit refused to be left behind and they all had a jolly time together. Patty was pleased to have a bit of time on her own, so everyone was happy. The flight to and from the mill was very exciting, and Donna had toyed with the idea of becoming a pilot, like Rick. Margaret, Carrie's mother, was very forthcoming and spoke at length about her old community. She told Donna it was so large that all the people in it would be more than had ever gone to the festival since it started twenty years ago. She even showed her a rough map of where it was. It sounded most interesting. Surely someone there would be able to instruct her. She decided that she simply must visit it. She couldn't talk about the idea with anyone, not even her best friends, Jed, Carrie or the Rayman. She couldn't risk them speaking to the Woodsmen about it, because then she'd be in trouble.

The trip to the mill had taken four days and questions had been asked. Rick and Patty covered for her, but she knew she wouldn't get away with doing that again. She realised that unfortunately no matter how much he was pestered, Rick would never agree to leave her anywhere. She thought long and hard and decided she would just have to go on foot. It would take much longer but, so what, at least she'd be doing something. She planned the trip carefully and had all the essentials she felt she needed in a rather heavy pack, which was gradually getting lighter. She didn't eat much, but she did have to eat. She could work here and there to replenish her supplies, but she would only do that when absolutely necessary. She could live off the land for short periods and that would have to be enough to get by.

The path she was following continued uphill through thick woods. It was getting late and she would have to camp soon if she didn't find a homestead. Just then she heard a dog barking not far away and she smiled in relief. If there was a dog, then there would have to be people. Looking in the direction the noise came from, she could just make out an odd-looking tower that rose high above the treetops. She didn't hesitate when she came to a junction but took the path that headed straight towards the tower. When she got closer she found a very strange-looking construction. The tower seemed to have a house perched on its summit. Who on earth would live up there? Whoever it was would be bound to be interesting. A wet nose on her leg made her jump, and turning she found a large, bouncy dog and a tall, skinny woman. She must have been very quiet on her feet. She looked old but very fit, and she had a most engaging smile.

'Cup of tea?' she asked.

None of the endless, Who are you? What are you doing out here on your own? Those were the questions she was used to.

'Love one,' Donna replied, and they both laughed.

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Donna realised quickly that she had met someone like-minded. She found Mona delightful. Her mental gymnastics stimulated Donna like no one she'd ever met before. Mona too seemed enthused by their meeting. They felt just like two old friends even though they'd only just met. Sitting high up on the balcony overlooking the vast panorama, they literally talked the sun down and then back up again. With occasionally nibbles and copious drinks her hostess had completely charmed her. Mona explained that after her partner died she came here to live with her brother. Her children were all grown up and she didn't get on very well with them or their partners or their numerous relatives and friends. There was not one of them who could hold a decent conversation. Her brother had been very difficult, but then so was she. He was also very clever, which meant they were pretty well suited. Unfortunately he had recently passed on and she was on her own again, apart from Floyd, the dog. Floyd was a lot of fun and a good companion but not very talkative. She'd

been waiting, not very patiently, for some inspiration or something new to come along. Donna, it appeared, was it. Fantastic and silly as the tower was, it was too isolated and remote, and Mona had itchy feet. She needed new sights and new stimulation.

Without any fuss Donna suddenly had a willing and extremely able companion. In a remarkably short time they assembled the things Mona thought they needed. Without even asking she emptied and carefully repacked Donna's pack. She left out what she thought was less useful, like her dictionary, and included a few things Donna would never have thought worth taking, like a hair brush. When confronted she told Donna she probably knew more words than were in the dictionary. She also supposed that Donna knew it pretty much off by heart anyway. That was true and Donna couldn't come up with a really good reason to take it other than it was an old friend. Mona had plenty of food and added that instead. The pack looked huge but didn't feel as heavy as when she set out from the Woodsmen. Mona's own pack was a little bigger.

With Floyd out of the way the squirrels would soon take up residence in the tower. To keep them out they closed all the windows and doors. It was harder than it should have been, because nothing had been closed in years and all the hinges needed oiling. Mona was incapable of doing a half-hearted job so it took a long time. Eventually when she was satisfied they set off along the path.

When they reached the main path Donna turned away from the way she'd come without even thinking about it. But Mona had other ideas and remained at the junction, waiting. Looking into her eyes Donna glumly realised she intended to resolve the issue with the Woodsmen before they went anywhere. She could also see that nothing she said would make the slightest difference. Mona was much like Pops. Donna didn't like the idea of walking all the way back to the Woodsmen to explain and to introduce Mona, but obviously there was no alternative. It would dispel the lingering sense of guilt she felt. Sighing deeply she gave in and set off towards what had once been home. Mona gave her a quick hug and smiled at her in sympathy. Floyd bounded on ahead. He seemed happy to be out and about, though he seemed happy about almost everything. They walked most of the day, continuing their conversation from the night before. Donna hardly noticed the journey or how far they'd come. They were well past the junction where Donna had gone wrong when they spotted some people in the distance coming towards them. As they got closer, Donna recognised Carrie, the Rayman and, much to her surprise, Jed. She stopped in her tracks feeling a little apprehensive, but Jed ran up to her as he always did and gave her a big hug. So did the Rayman and Carrie when they reached her.

'Well, did you change your mind and decide to come back?' Jed asked, setting down his pack and sitting on it.

'Not really, but I had to come back to explain. This is Mona. She's coming with me.'

'How do, Carrie. We've met afore and everyone knows the Rayman, but I don't know you,' Mona said, fixing Jed with her gimlet gaze. She nodded to Carrie but ignored the Rayman's outstretched hand. At that point Floyd decided to join in and there was chaos while he was settled down. They decided to set up camp next to the path under a magnificent oak tree. They needed time to talk things through, and they might as well be comfortable. Jed had found Donna's note and gone to the Rayman and Carrie for advice. They figured that Donna would be making for the mill and decided to go after her. Jed insisted on coming too. After a long, tedious discussion with the Woodsmen, Jed had been given the right to speak for them. Donna was very surprised but pleased that she could explain herself to her best friend from the community, rather than going all the way back and speaking to all the elders there. They moved a short distance away and set to in earnest, Donna speaking very fast and Jed saying nothing.

'He's matured a lot since his accident,' the Rayman commented, watching them go. 'He's completely in control and Donna knows it.'

'I sees that, but he seems a good lad and loves Donna,' Mona responded. 'He won't hold her back.'

'Are you really going to go with her?' Carrie asked.

'Yes. Since Bill died I've been getting rather lonesome. I need someone ornery to keep me on my toes. The lass will do that, I reckon.'

The Rayman laughed. 'She's needed someone to take an interest in her after Alan died, and she's made it clear we can't keep up with her anymore.'

'No, we can't, but she's very young and still needs nurturing,' Carrie said.

The Rayman just burst out laughing. He moved out of the way quickly as Carrie leaned across to swat him.

'Happen that little thing is going to do sumat big with her life one day. I would like to be around to see it.'

Both Carrie and the Rayman turned to look at Mona.

'You know, you could be right,' Carrie mused quietly, looking in Donna's direction.

They made their camp with the ease of long practice. After a while Jed and Donna joined them. They said nothing but Jed's decision was obvious. If Mona hadn't been with Donna, things would be different, but now that she was, Jed had little choice. He did have the responsibility of making sure that Donna would be cared for and began to ask Mona a series of personal questions. She answered them frankly, perhaps more frankly than Jed could handle, and he soon stopped asking. Without any more being said, it was clear that Donna could go with Mona anywhere she felt she needed to go. That settled, they sat down for a fairly jovial evening, although Mona remained a little apart and lay down early. Floyd was more sociable, but he became a bit of a nuisance because he liked to sing. Unfortunately he couldn't really carry a tune. The Rayman conjured up his blue wolf, which caused absolute mayhem and much laughter. They had to almost sit on Floyd to settle him down. He kept leaping up trying to find his new playmate. They had more fun than good

music, but they kept trying until eventually they were all so tired they had to go to bed.

In the morning Jed set off back to the Woodsmen. Carrie and the Rayman offered to go with him, but he said he'd be fine on his own. They could see he would relish arriving home relatively quickly with good news. Before he left he gave Donna a long hug. 'Come back, if only to let us know how you got on,' he said before walking away. He turned once on the path to wave. Carrie held Donna close while they watched him disappear gradually among the trees. Carrie and the Rayman decided they were so near the mill they might as well all go and see Carrie's parents for a few days. They packed their things, cleaned up the camp and set off. Donna tried to continue her conversation with Mona, but she seemed reticent and wouldn't be drawn out. Donna was a bit worried that she was having second thoughts. She tried to ask her about it, but Mona just said, 'Ah, don't mind me, lass. I never was much for company.' Only the Rayman and Carrie were with them, so Donna couldn't see the problem, but she let it go. She was on her way now with no reservations or sense of guilt, which was tremendous. Mona gradually fell behind and Donna joined her. She seemed pleased with that and they started talking where they had left off.

They arrived at Carrie's parents' house late the following afternoon. Margaret welcomed them all with open arms. The house was large and there was plenty of room. Michael was still at the mill, and Carrie decided to visit him there. She hadn't been alone with him in a long time. The Rayman had broken a string on his instrument when fooling about the previous evening, and he was in the main room restringing it, because, as he said, if one breaks it means the others are probably going to. Mona had disappeared to visit an old friend who lived close by. This left Donna with Margaret, who was in the kitchen preparing a meal. Donna told her she wanted to visit the big settlement her family had come from, which pleased Margaret. She enthusiastically began to describe what to expect on the way. 'It will take quite a while to get there, you know. It's a very long way from here. I can lend you a map and there are several people you can drop in on as you go. They'll give you directions – although it's quite easy really. But you won't be able to get there and back before winter. It's much hotter there in summer but also colder in winter. It's fairly high up and the seasons can change pretty quickly. Are you sure you don't want to wait until spring?'

Donna thought about it and shook her head. 'I'm ready and I don't really worry for cold.'

'Hmm ... you say that now, but have you ever been really cold? It stays pretty warm down here among all the trees.'

Donna looked doubtful and vulnerable for a moment. Then her face hardened and she straightened her shoulders. She was about to speak, but Margaret smiled and gave her a hug. 'I think there's a warm coat of Carrie's somewhere that'll fit you. She loved it and hated to stop wearing it when she got too big for it. It's probably still in her cupboard. I'm sure if I ask her she'll let you

have it. You need better boots too. I'll have a look through her cast-offs.'

Donna's face betrayed her feelings transparently and Margaret looked down at her thoughtfully. 'If you don't take these things that nobody here needs or wants, I'm sorry, but I can't give you the map or tell you the directions.'

Donna looked so sorrowful that Margaret regretted her words immediately, but she knew the mountains. She had to do something for the poor girl.

Grabbing her hand she almost pulled her out the door and up to Carrie's old bedroom. She pushed her backwards onto the bed, opened a large cupboard and began rummaging through it.

'Aha!' she said, pulling out a beautiful felted coat, which she threw to Donna.

'It's old and the colours have faded, but it will still keep you warm.'

Half an hour later Donna was unrecognisable. Margaret had carefully stripped her and redressed her. Everything she now wore fitted and suited her better than any of her own clothes ever had. They would also keep her cosy without overheating her. She could take off or put on layers as needed, just what you needed in the mountains. When Carrie came back in, 'Wow!' was all she said. Donna looked a bit nervous but Carrie pushed past her and dug around in a chest of drawers. 'The finishing touch,' she said, handing her a pair of really warm-looking gloves. 'I hardly ever wore them; it's not cold enough here.'

'But...!' Donna started, then stopped when she saw the looks on their faces. She blushed and managed a quiet 'Thank you.'

They went back downstairs to find Michael and the Rayman deep in conversation. Ever since the festival last summer, the Rayman had been trying to find out more about Talma. He and Carrie had travelled home with Ree, John and Angel. During one of their evening entertainments, John asked the Rayman to show them the dancer he had created at the big performance. He was puzzled at first, but Carrie eventually figured out who he was talking about. The Rayman wanted to thank her for her help and had lots of unanswered questions. Michael felt that thanks would be a waste of breath. Talma needed nothing from anyone, and she preferred people to work things out for themselves rather than ask her a whole string of questions. But the Rayman kept on asking Michael about her, which he found very funny for some reason.

Margaret had no time for 'all that nonsense' and went into the kitchen. Mona had just come in and the two of them were discussing the trip when Donna joined them. Mona started when she saw her and then a big smile spread across her face. 'You looks mighty fine, youngster. My visits may well have been wasted.'

It appeared that Mona had been seeing a few old friends looking to improve Donna's wardrobe and her own. She knew about mountain weather too. 'Turn you around and let's see you,' she said. 'Well, who would have believed it? You're right pretty under all them old rags of yours.'

Donna wasn't used to much attention and blushed, dropping her eyes, but neither woman seemed to notice. They'd already turned back to the map they

were studying.

'This is the quickest pass but it's very steep and you need your wits about you. This one takes a lot longer but only goes up about half as high. I would advise you to go that way if it's your first time, but it's long and tedious. The traders who come this way all use it, which means you'll probably be able to get a ride at least part of the way. There won't be many out this time of year, but there are always a few.'

'How much longer be it?'

'About twice as far, say another ten days or more.'

'Hmm ... you don't make it sound very appealing.'

'Perhaps not, but how are you on steep climbs? The other way goes almost straight up for more than two days.'

Michael came in as she said this. When he saw the map and realised what they were doing, he said, 'The third way is best.'

Margaret laughed. 'He means not to go at all, but then he never liked the place.'

'Way too smart for me,' Michael muttered, winking at Donna.

'Don't mind him, Donna. He's not a book learner like you and me.'

Donna didn't mind Michael. In fact she really liked him. He was an amazing listener, she'd discovered when she went to see him at the mill. Carrie had told her so many stories about him and his mill that when she visited Margaret with Rick and Peewit she made a point to look in on him. His big grin of welcome, even though she'd never met him before, was now one of her most treasured memories. Only Pops had ever been so open to her. After he'd shown her around and they were sitting watching the big waterwheel turn, she found herself telling him all sorts of things about herself, sharing things she'd never told anyone, not even Pops. When she finished he simply looked deep into her eyes and smiled, and she felt his deep love and acceptance of her. She felt very alive in his presence. The fact that he had no use for book learning was irrelevant. Not many people did.

Mona looked at Donna and asked, 'How are you on hills, young'un? Do you like the high way or shall we be safe and bored?'

Donna didn't mind hills; she'd spent her whole life running up and down hills. But these weren't hills, if she understood it right. These were very high mountains.

'I don't mind either way. I'm never bored and I can manage up.'

Mona laughed. She knew that Donna climbed like a goat. 'Let's decide as we go, cos as I see it, it'll take us a while to get that far.'

'You'll need plenty of provisions if you go the long way,' Margaret said, sounding a bit concerned. 'There's nothing much out there, or at least there wasn't the last time I went that way. You should decide here where you can at least get the things you'll need.'

'Hmm ... well, if you puts it like that then we goes up. I don't mind a physical challenge.'

Margaret could see that Mona was fit enough, but it wasn't an easy path to

follow and you could easily get lost when the clouds came down. They kept talking about it as they ate their meal, but once Mona had made up her mind she was impossible to budge. Carrie looked thoughtful and wasn't talking as much as usual. She was about to say something when Michael put his hand over hers and just said, 'No.' Carrie started to speak again but Michael said, 'Talk later.' She was startled enough to remain silent.

Later turned out to be the next day. Carrie had to go down to the mill to find him. He stopped what he was doing and took her to their favourite sitting spot. Without any preamble he said, 'It would upset Mona if you two tag along. It's not you but the Rayman. Mona was a brilliant musician in her day and well known hereabouts. Her story is her story, a rather sad one, but only she should tell it. Just be aware that to be with the Rayman causes her pain. It's not his fault, just bad memories, but she wouldn't like his company.'

Carrie was intrigued but could see that was all she was going to get.

'There's another reason that you shouldn't go yet, but you will find that out in time.' After this last cryptic remark he went back to work.

Carrie began to understand how her mother must feel sometimes.

The Rayman was puzzled. He'd never met anyone who didn't like him. There were those who envied his talent. They were often overly flattering, which made him feel awkward, but they were never hostile. He was sensitive enough to notice that Mona was uncomfortable in his presence, but he couldn't understand why. She left the room quietly whenever he approached, nothing obvious but definitely a strategic withdrawal. He had moved to the seat outside the kitchen to be out of her way while she and Donna spoke to Margaret. He was deep in thought and didn't notice Margaret watching him over the stable door.

'It's not your fault, you know,' she said, making him start. 'It's all right; she's taken Donna to visit an old friend.'

Margaret pushed open the door and came out to sit beside him. She sighed a long sigh and then took one of his hands in hers and laid it on her lap. 'It seems I must tell you so that you can stop fretting about it. It happened a long time ago, not long after I first came here. Mona is a pretty fine musician and we played together fairly often. She had a child and was partner to another moderately talented musician who played several instruments. He played none of them particularly well but he could always be relied on to round out a band. Anyway one day another man turned up at an impromptu concert and his playing was absolutely unbelievable. He hung around for a season and we played together a lot. He stole Mona's heart without even realising it. His sensitivity and jovial sense of humour were the opposite of Mona's partner. He was a kind man but not particularly aware of other people's feelings. He often upset Mona without even knowing it. She felt torn in two. The main trouble was that her love was not returned. The man left one day without saying even a quick good-bye, and we never saw him again. What has any of this got to do with you? What if I tell you that the man's name was Jeffrey?' 'My master!' the Rayman gasped.

'Yes, and you play and behave just like him, which is only to be expected. You can see how this upsets Mona. She still comes to my concerts but she's never played again. She lost her music when Jeffrey left. She hardly ever plays at all anymore. The first year you turned up caused her quite a trauma. She saw in you the child she could have had if only things had worked out differently. Her own children are indifferent musically and none of them has her brains. You have everything she ever wanted in a child, but you're a stranger to her.'

They sat in silence for a while.

'I can probably help her,' the Rayman said at last.

'You probably could, but if I were you I would just leave it. You may unsettle her and she'll be fine once you've gone.'

Just then Carrie arrived back at the house and Margaret returned to the kitchen. The Rayman remained sitting silently where he was and then suddenly took off. Carrie watched him stride up the lane and then went into the kitchen to see if she could find out where he was going.

Margaret wasn't very forthcoming.

'Did you two have words?' Carrie asked.

'Hmm ... yes, dear, we talked a bit.'

'What about?'

'Oh, just this and that, nothing of any importance.'

Carrie knew the signs. Her mother had been interfering again and now she was feeling guilty. Knowing her, she'd probably just told the Rayman Mona's whole life history. Oh well, at least he would share it with her if it was of any significance to them. She'd forgotten what it was like to live with her parents. Life was a whole lot simpler with the Rayman. Humphing a bit, she went through the kitchen and up to her old bedroom. There were a few things she wanted to take back with her, some old friends that would enjoy her new home. It was about time she cleared her things out anyway. Her mother would never do it. She began to sort through everything, making a pile of things she wanted to take with her and another of things to be given away. When Donna arrived she was still at it, sorting through the contents of the chest of drawers she had emptied onto the bed.

'Can I help?' Donna asked.

'Well, if there's anything in that pile that you want, please take it.'

'I think I have more than enough stuff.'

'Well, you don't have to take it with you. You could leave it here and collect it on the way back.'

'If I comes back.'

Carrie looked at her and saw that she meant it.

'If'n I find someone who can teach me everything I want to know, do you think it will only take just a short while? If I do learn, will I want to go back to the Woodsmen again? I don't think so. What would I do there? Explain all I learned to the mules?'

Carrie realised she was right but could think of nothing to say and changed the subject.

'Did you see the Rayman when you were out?'

'Yes, that's why I'm ere, e wanted to speak to Mona on his own for some reason. I don't think she wanted to listen but e was quite insistent, so Floyd an I left em to it and come back ere.'

'Oh dear,' Carrie said, 'looks like he's taken on some healing again.'

Donna looked quizzical. 'Is there summat up with Mona? She looks pretty spry to me.'

Carrie didn't comment.

The Rayman had made up his mind to confront Mona. It was stupid to be lugging around regret and sorrow from long ago, and he was sure he could do something about it. He could feel Mona not too far away and headed in her direction. When he found her, she was with Donna and Floyd. He asked Donna to take Floyd and leave them so he could speak with Mona alone for a while. Donna left quickly and after a few words from Mona, Floyd reluctantly followed. Once they were out of earshot the Rayman turned to face Mona, who had sat down on a low wall. She looked very uncomfortable.

'You knows,' she said quietly. 'But there ain't nothing you can do and it ain't really none of your business.'

The Rayman said nothing. She was right, of course. It was none of his business, but he felt he could help and he wasn't going to leave without at least trying.

'Just leave me alone,' Mona said, bowing her head.

He ignored her and waited.

Mona looked up and glared at him.

'I can help if you will let me,' he said quietly.

'How?' she demanded.

'Let me show you,' he said.

'Ain't nothing broke. I heard about your healing. I don't need none of that stuff.'

'Can I at least try?'

Mona kept glaring but gave a slight nod of her head.

The Rayman decided not to touch her. That would make her even more uncomfortable. Instead he let himself tune in to her with all his senses. He inhaled deeply as he was suddenly overwhelmed by her grief. He immediately started to re-channel it and felt her gasp as the weight of it lifted momentarily.

'I can do more if I can touch you.'

She looked at him with something approaching panic on her face, but then she seemed to compose herself. She nodded slightly. He walked over to her and put both hands on her head. He was ready for it but it still took all his strength. What saved him was his own experience with Clearsight when he thought he'd lost his music. He clung to that memory like an anchor and slowly brought himself and then Mona back into balance. He went much further than Clearsight had because he knew intimately the emotions he was dealing with. He restored Mona's equilibrium, leaving her just who she was.

It took a long time. He had managed to ease her to the ground when she almost collapsed. Then he bent down and squatted over her to continue working on her. He had just about reached the limit of his endurance when he felt her pain finally dissolve away completely. Now he didn't have the energy to stand up. He was a bit dizzy and about to sit down when he felt strong hands lifting him up. Whoever it was seemed to restore some of his energy too. Once on his feet he turned to see Talma smiling up at him.

'You must be a lot stronger than you appear,' she said.

The Rayman felt an implied warning in her words.

'That is good; I have work for you and Carrie,' she said, then disappeared.

'Who was that?' Mona managed to croak.

The Rayman turned to see her slowly getting to her feet. Her face had a blank expression but her eyes looked bright and clear.

'That was Talma.'

'Talma! I thought she was a myth.'

'Well, she is a myth but rather a lively one.'

'What did you do to me, boy? I feel like I just ran up the tower without stopping.'

The Rayman felt much the same, but he didn't say so.

'I can give you a hand to get back to the miller's house if you like.'

'I may be knackered but I'm not feeble.'

They set off together and the Rayman had a hard time keeping up with her. He noticed that Mona stood a little straighter, though she'd been pretty straight before.

As they neared the house Mona said, 'You know, I feel like playing. If I have any puff left, we might have a little get-together. You play quite well and I haven't had anyone who could stretch me in years, not since that rascal Jeff.' She gave the Rayman a friendly shove on the shoulder which nearly knocked him over. 'Come on, youngster, let's see what you can do.' She quickened her pace.

They entered by the back door and Mona yelled loudly, 'Maggie, you old baggage, have you still got your drum? I need someone who can keep time. You're probably still good to bang in time, even if you sing like a frog.'

Margaret was sitting at the huge kitchen table. She looked rather shocked but let herself be dragged up by a grinning Mona, who towed her towards the rehearsal room.

'Come on, boy, go get your thing-me-bob and that girl of yours. We need someone who can really sing.'

Mona's racket brought Carrie and Donna downstairs and dumbly they followed her to the rehearsal room. On her way through the hall Mona searched in her pack and pulled out a flute.

They played for a long time. Mona was absolutely on fire and the music they made was extremely wild. Once the Rayman got settled he gave of his best. The word – or music – must have travelled; the room was soon filled to overflowing. A few other musicians joined them with drums and other

percussion instruments. People sat on the floor at their peril because Mona danced about them with no regard for fingers or toes.

She led them into a joyful place the Rayman had never been before. She seemed entranced and oblivious to all around her. She was releasing so much energy she looked likely to explode. Then suddenly with no warning she seemed to fade and sat down rather hard on the floor. She looked different somehow – otherworldly. Her eyes, which had always been piercing, now glowed. Once the music stopped, the magic which had held the audience mesmerised seemed to gradually slip away.

Conversations started and there were a few words of praise as the crowd slowly dispersed to the kitchen, where drinks were soon handed out. They'd grown used to a very high standard from the Rayman and although they were more than happy to listen, they didn't shower him with praise as much as people normally did. That really pleased him. They also seemed to want to keep their distance from Mona, who stayed where she was on the floor, looking into space and grinning. Donna hovered around her looking a bit concerned but could think of nothing to say. In the end she went and got something for her to drink.

After taking a sip Mona said softly, 'You know, young Donna, that was probably the best I ever played.' She turned to the Rayman, but he was talking to Carrie with his back to her. 'Phew, that young man sure can play.'

Donna relaxed a little but she still felt some concern. Her new friend had shocked her with the abandon of her music. She'd grown used to Mona being steady and reliable. This wildness was a bit unsettling. Margaret came over and joined them on the floor.

'That was probably the craziest piece of music I ever heard in my life. You're full of surprises today, Mona Lidle. I should have broken my drum on your head.'

Mona laughed. 'Can't keep up anymore, Maggie. Your daughter stolen your spot.'

'Yes,' Margaret said proudly, 'she does make me sound like an old crow.'

'Ah, she's something special, right enough, and what about that young man? He can sure poke out a good tune. If I was staying, which I'm not, I'd sure like to play a bit more of him.'

'I bet you would, you old scoundrel. I've missed you, you know. We had some rare times, you and I.'

'That's as maybe, but now I's off to that grand place you kept going on about. Donna and I have got a calling, ain't we, young'un? Right now I'm pooped and best get to me bed for a bit of a lie down, ay Floyd?'

Floyd had sneaked back in, having been sent out for barking. He wagged his tail and Mona ruffled the top of his head. She made her way a little unsteadily towards the door. People melted out of her way.

'That was an unscheduled success,' Margaret said to no one in particular. She rubbed one hand with the other. She was a little out of practice with her drum and had smacked the rim quite a few times. Having Carrie and the Rayman to

stay was always fun, she thought to herself as she pushed her way through into the kitchen. She loved the house full of people as much as Michael hated it. She wondered what the Rayman had done to Mona. She was completely her old self again. She'd really missed her caustic humour. Mona had always livened up the place. After she went off to live with Bill, Margaret had hardly seen her. She was always a terrific musician but this performance had definitely been the best she'd ever heard from her.

Carrie cornered the Rayman and he brought her up to date. She was intrigued by Talma's statement that she had work for them.

'But then, that's how she operates. Look how she asked Rick to fly me to the lake and Bill to make the necklaces,' she explained. 'Those are the things they were really good at. Well, we're both good at music. Perhaps Talma wants a song.'

The Rayman didn't think that was very likely, but he didn't say anything. They wandered into the kitchen. Margaret was cooking, which she loved best after music. She was making enough for everyone. Carrie and the Rayman were put to work scraping and dicing. Donna joined in too and before long they had a huge feast ready. Michael came in and sat quietly at the head of the table patiently waiting for his share. Only about half the people stayed on, but it was still very crowded, which was Margaret's favourite kind of meal. She especially enjoyed cooking when she had a big audience. Mona hadn't reappeared and Donna went off to find her, but she came back saying she was sleeping. Margaret put some food aside for her and they thought no more about it.

Mona slept for nearly two days. The Rayman checked in on her but she seemed fine; she was just exhausted. When she woke she seemed completely rejuvenated and skipped about like a child. It took her only a couple of days to get everything she and Donna needed for their journey, and then they were ready to go. Carrie watched them, wondering if she would ever see them again. Her mother was sad to say goodbye too and said so. She had enjoyed having her old friend back.

The Rayman and Carrie stayed another day and then headed for home. They had both spent time with Michael. When the Rayman explained what he had done for Mona, Michael looked grave and to their chagrin began to outline the consequences.

'By removing the distress Mona had carried for years, you took away the opportunity for her to free herself. At least you gave her the choice before you touched her. She had been working on herself for many years. Now her life no longer has any real challenge and it is unlikely she will remain with us for long.'

This was a shock for both of them.

'You also did something that was extremely difficult and could have hurt you both. You were fortunate that you had your own experience to guide you and knew what needed to be done. That wasn't because you knew what you were doing. When someone is hurting it doesn't mean you have to do anything for

them. True wisdom comes when you can tell the difference between what is necessary and what should be left alone.'

For Michael this was a lengthy speech, and both Carrie and the Rayman remained silent for a long time. They'd never considered their healing ability in this light. They always healed anyone who hurt because they could.

After a while Michael added, 'Was Mona grateful for what you did?'

The Rayman thought about it and then shook his head.

'I didn't think so. She no longer felt the pain and to her it felt like she'd never been in pain. It's how people behave. It's natural. She no longer hurt and even the memory of it had gone. That is a true healing. But Talma doesn't appear for nothing. That alone should give you an idea of how much you had taken on and how dangerous it was.'

Carrie and the Rayman looked at each other. The Rayman felt a little confused. It seemed he had much to learn.