The Chinese Zodiac

Are you a snake, a dragon, or a rabbit? There are 12 animals in the Chinese zodiac. Here’s the story of how it all began.

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CHARACTERS

Present Day
*Jasmine: a 12-year-old girl
*Grandma
*Matthew: Jasmine’s 10-year-old brother

Ancient China
Jade Emperor: the god of Heaven and Earth
Jade Empress: Jade Emperor’s wife

Panda: Jade Emperor’s chief adviser
*Announcer 1 (Quan)
*Announcer 2 (Chang)
Tiger
Rabbit
Cat
Horse
Snake
Ox
Rat
Dog
Rooster
Sheep
Monkey
Pig

*Indicates large speaking role

Scene 1
Grandma’s kitchen on Chinese New Year’s Eve

Jasmine: I’m done sweeping, Grandma. Is there anything else I can do to help you?
Grandma: No, if you have swept out all the bad luck, we are ready for our guests!
Matthew: Grandma, these vegetable dumplings look great. May I have one?
Grandma: No, no! The tradition is to eat the jiaozi at midnight.
Matthew: Midnight! (He sighs.)
Jasmine: Grandma, why don’t we celebrate the Chinese New Year on January 1st?
Grandma: Because on the traditional Chinese calendar, the year begins when the first new moon appears in the sky. That’s usually in late January or early February.
Jasmine: What’s a new moon?
Grandma: It’s when the moon is between the sun and the Earth.
Matthew: When is everybody going to get here anyway? I’m ready to party!
Grandma: Soon, my impatient little snake, soon.
Matthew: Why am I a snake?
Grandma: Because that is your Chinese zodiac animal.
Matthew: Right, but I mean—why?
Grandma: Because of the year you were born. There are 12 animals in the Chinese zodiac. Each represents a different year. For example, you were born in 2001, the Year of the Snake. So you are a snake. Jasmine was born in 1999, the Year of the Rabbit. So she is a rabbit.
Matthew: But I thought that 2011 is the Year of the Rabbit.
Grandma: It is. The cycle repeats. It’s been repeating and repeating for thousands of years.
Jasmine: Who created the Chinese zodiac?
Grandma: No one knows for sure, but I can tell you a wonderful story about it . . .

Scene 2
The Jade Palace, ancient China
Jade Emperor: Noble wife, I’ve been thinking that the humans need a better way to keep track of time.
Jade Empress: I agree, noble husband. They are always getting confused.
Emperor: Exactly. What they need are names
Nervous?
Tiger: Nothing scares me, man. Bring it on!
Announcer 2: Rabbit, how about you?
Rabbit: Thank you for asking, sir! I’m having a great time. It’s fun to be surrounded by so many other animals!
Announcer 1: Cat? Any worries about the swimming portion of the race?
Cat: Yes, yes, I’m very nervous. I am a terrible swimmer.
Horse: Neigh-ver mind, Cat, you have many good qualities—like your beautiful fur.
Cat: Thank you, Horse, but my fur doesn’t help me run fast like you.
Snake (to himself): S-s-s-so true. I’ll think I’ll s-s-s-slip into Horse’s hoof and hitch a ride.
Ox: Cat, would you like a ride? I would be happy to carry you.
Cat: Thank you, Ox! You’re so dependable.
Announcer 2: I’ll tell you, Quan, there are a lot of amazing animals here. But in my book, the one to watch is Rat. You never know what plans that little guy is cooking up—right, Rat?
Rat: That’s right, buddy. (to Ox) Oh, Ox! Yoo-hoo! Can I hitch a ride too?
Ox: Sure, my back is broad enough for two.
Cat: Great! Hop on, Rat.

Scene 4

The race
Announcer 1: There’s the sound of the gong. And they’re off!
Announcer 2: Look at Tiger and Dog go! They’ve got this race locked up.
Announcer 1: Hold on. What does Rat have in his hand?
Announcer 2: It’s a stick! He’s tossing it away from the racers—and there goes Dog, running after it!
Dog (running after the stick): Stick! Stick!
Announcer 1: Too bad! That’s really going to set Dog back. He is just so easily distracted.
Announcer 2: The contestants have now reached the swift-moving river.
Rooster: Monkey, Sheep—I suggest that we work together to build a raft.
Sheep: That's not a ba-a-a-d idea.
Monkey: Sounds like fun. Let's do it!
Announcer 1: Ox is looking good out there in the river with Rat and Cat on his back.
Announcer 2: It looks like Rat is pointing at something in the water.
Rat: Cat, do you see that delicious fish?
Cat: Where?
Rat: There!
Announcer 1: Cat has jumped into the river! Oh, boy. Looks like Cat is out of the race.

Panda: Yes, O Wise and Mighty One. The lanterns are lit, and the feast is prepared. The crowd awaits our 12 worthy winners—and here they come!
Announcer 2: Ox is about to take first place!
Announcer 1: But wait! What just jumped off his back?
Empress: A rat! EEEK!
Announcer 2: A smart move by a clever competitor! Rat is the winner!
Rat: I'm number one!
Emperor: I hereby declare that Rat will represent the first year of my zodiac calendar. Anyone born in this year will be clever like Rat.
Announcer 1: Ox has taken second place.
Ox: We can't all be first. Second is fine by me.
Emperor: The second year will be the Year of the Ox. Children born in that year will be easygoing and dependable.
Announcer 2: Tiger's next, followed by Rabbit and Dragon.
Announcer 1: And here comes Horse—no, wait!

Scene 5
The finish line
Empress: Happy New Year, noble husband!
Emperor: Thank you, noble wife. This is really quite exciting! Panda, is everything ready for the party?
Snake just appeared out of nowhere.
Snake: Yay! I'm s-s-sixth! And Horse is s-s-seventh!
Panda: And here come Sheep, Monkey, Rooster, and Dog ... and Pig.
Pig: Hey, everyone. I would have been here sooner, but Rat told me about a great dumpling house not far from the river. I brought some dumplings to share.
Emperor: Vegetable dumplings! My favorite!
Empress: And they're shaped like gold nuggets. That means we'll all be rich.
Emperor: Congratulations to the winners, and good health and happiness to all!

**Scene 6**

Grandma’s kitchen, present day

Matthew: Wait, Rat won? Isn't there a Chinese proverb that says cheaters never prosper?
Grandma: Well, yes ...
Jasmine: And Cat totally lost? She didn't get a year named after her?
Grandma: No, she did not. And that's why, to this day, cats hate rats and water.
Jasmine: Great story, Grandma.

Grandma: We finished just in time. I hear fireworks.
Jasmine: The doorbell's ringing. I'll get it.
Matthew: I hope our relatives bring us red envelopes filled with money like they did last year.
Grandma: Let the New Year's celebration begin.
Jasmine and Matthew: Gung hay fat choy!
Grandma: Yes, may you be happy and prosperous in the new year, too, my darling grandchildren.

**WRITE TO WIN!**

Find your Chinese zodiac animal and write a paragraph describing why it fits you—or doesn't. Send it to "Zodiac Contest" by March 15, 2011. We'll send 10 winners Grace Lin's *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon*. See page 2 for more details.