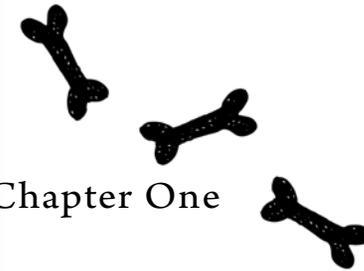




Chapter One



MR DOG AND MOTHER RABBIT

The rabbit was running as fast as she could.

The dog was gaining on her. Her fluffy white tail bobbed about as she darted left and right, trying to give him the slip. But the dog was too fast.





The rabbit rolled over on to her back as a long furry snout loomed above her . . .

‘Tag! You’re it!’ The dog nudged the bunny’s belly with his nose and snorted. ‘Now it’s your turn to catch me – if you can!’

‘Wait!’ snuffled the rabbit. ‘I’m all puffed out.’

‘Very well. I *shall* wait.’ The dog sat down for three seconds, then jumped straight up again, panting. ‘There! Ready to play now?’

The rabbit thumped a hind leg in excitement. Most dogs she’d met were scary and chased you because they wanted to get you. This dog was different.

He was a scruffy, scraggy mutt, his coat black except for his white nose and front paws. In place of a collar he had a red and white hanky tied round his neck. His long tail swished all about, busy as a broom, and his shaggy eyebrows were full of expression.



‘What’s your name?’ asked the curious rabbit.

‘Mr Dog,’ the dog replied. ‘What’s yours?’

‘Mother Rabbit.’ She paused, whiskers twitching. ‘If you don’t mind me saying so, Mr Dog is a funny name.’

‘No, no, no. Figgy-Jig is a funny name.’

Mr Dog danced a small jig on his hind legs.

‘Bafflehonk, Wiggy and Dumpy-Drawers are all funny names. But Mr Dog is . . . elegant.’ He bowed his head. ‘Rather like myself!’

‘Did your owners name you Mr Dog?’

‘Owners?’ Mr Dog’s eyes widened. ‘I don’t have owners. I’ve had a few pet humans, if that’s what you mean. But I prefer the travelling life.

Right now I’m staying in a garden.’ He licked his nose. ‘Perfectly nice woman who lives in this house, but she will insist on throwing away perfectly good balls, however many times I take them back.’

‘Well, I’ve never gone further than this field,’ Mother Rabbit admitted. ‘I was born here, and so were my own bunnies. They’re sleeping in their nest right now.’ She got up and stretched. ‘I have to wait until dusk before I go back to feed them. I’d hate to lead something hungry and horrible there.’

‘Quite right.’ Mr Dog snuffled at her. ‘So . . . another game of tag, then?’



‘No, thank you.’ Mother Rabbit wrinkled her nose. ‘I need my strength to mind my little ones. I’m hungry – and my nose smells fresh carrots!’

‘Carrots?’ Mr Dog looked around. There was only grass in the big field for as far as he could see . . . grass that was surrounded by two big green hedges and one solid wooden fence. Beyond the fence, Mr Dog could just see the tops of some tents and caravans. ‘There aren’t any carrots growing around here, Mother Rabbit. But maybe there are humans eating carrots behind that fence?’

‘The Big New Fence, you mean? Goodness knows what happens behind there.’ Mother

Rabbit’s ears waggled and she shook her head.

‘Now, if you’ll excuse me, Mr Dog, my nose is *extra*-clever when it comes to carrots. I can smell them . . . this way!’ And off she hopped towards the nearest hedgerow.

Mr Dog watched her go. ‘Ah well,’ he said. ‘There are loads of other rabbits here. Maybe one or two of them would like to play?’

But the next moment his ragged ears pricked straight up at a squeak of dismay from the hedgerow. It was Mother Rabbit, he realised, and ran off to investigate.



Soon he saw what Mother Rabbit had not – there was a trap hidden in the long grass. As she'd run inside it to get the carrot she must have knocked a stick holding the trap door up. Now it had snapped down, and she was caught inside.

'Help!' Mother Rabbit was hopping about anxiously. 'I can't get out! What is this thing?'

'I'm afraid it's a rabbit trap.' Mr Dog pushed his muzzle up against the catch on the door, but it was on a steel spring and wouldn't open. He batted at it with both paws, but soon his tail drooped. 'It's no good. I can't get you out!'

'Oh no.' Mother Rabbit looked at Mr Dog with wide eyes.



'So many bunnies have gone missing from these fields ever since the Big New Fence went up. I thought they'd just hopped away. They must have been caught, like me!'

‘But why?’ Mr Dog felt sad. ‘What harm can rabbits be doing running around and burrowing in a field?’

‘I just don’t know.’ Mother Rabbit shook her head. ‘Oh, Mr Dog! What about my poor little bunnies, asleep in our burrow? They’re only two weeks old! What will become of them if I never come back?’

Mr Dog knew the answer, and it wasn’t good. ‘You *will* come back. There must be a way to open this rotten thing . . . He closed his jaws round the wire of the trap door and rattled it. ‘Come on, come on . . .’

‘Oi, dog! Get away from that rabbit!’

Busily trying to force open the cage, Mr Dog hadn’t noticed a young man with dark hair and muddy clothes close by. ‘Where did you come from?’ he woofed in surprise.

Of course, the man didn’t understand him. He just picked up the trap with Mother Rabbit in it and turned away.

‘Dear me, what shocking manners you have.’ Mr Dog grabbed the leg of the man’s jeans in his jaws and tugged very hard. ‘Mmm, but what tasty trousers!’



‘Hey, get off – WHOA!’ The man tried to pull away but overbalanced and fell to his knees. He put down the trap. ‘Silly dog!’

‘Close, but my first name is *Mister*, thank you very much!’ Mr Dog scabbled again at the door to the trap, trying desperately to pull it open.

‘Mr Dog!’ Mother Rabbit spoke quickly. ‘You can’t help me, but please help my little ones.

If you find another mother rabbit with a litter like me, perhaps she’ll take them in? Follow the Big New Fence towards the road,’ she went on.

‘You’ll find our burrow there.’

‘I promise I’ll help.’ Mr Dog looked into her dark and frightened eyes. ‘I’ll get you out. You’ll see.’

By now the man had got back to his feet and was glaring down at Mr Dog. He reached for the spotted hanky round Mr Dog’s neck. ‘Aha, no collar on you – just a neckerchief – which means that you probably don’t have an owner. And if you don’t have an owner, then it’s the dog pound for you . . .’

The man’s fingers seized hold of the fabric.
Now Mr Dog was trapped too!

