

# DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

CHARLES HIGGINS



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PRESS

## **Down the Rabbit Hole**

(Book 2 in the *Rabbit* series)

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*For the Griffiths,  
who are stuck with me now.*

*And of course, for Will,  
who is the reason  
this took me so very long.*

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# 1

## WHEN RABBIT BEGAN AGAIN

I think (for what my thoughts are worth) that as unpredictable and irreconcilable as the luck of Rabbit is, he—as a person—is even more so.

Trying to understand the way Rabbit's head works is like trying to take a hike with some of the finest philosophers. You are quickly lost, and better off asking no questions but only nodding and hoping that he will spare you by taking the shorter loop. If you keep quiet your concerns, he will let you home much faster.

But then again, what's the fun if you don't ask any questions? What's the fun if you never get lost? You never know—maybe you will get something right one day, hit upon a rabbit trail that leads somewhere important. Maybe it will matter.

It is easier to say this at home, placidly writing my papers with a cup of steaming hot chocolate (serving less as a stimulant and more as a distraction), looking

through the window at a rainy day. I know for a fact that I never think this way when I am lost in the woods, hiding in a basement, dangling from the rafters.

But *someone* has to be an idiot for the good stories to happen, and I'm not necessarily talking about Rabbit. I think sometimes the dumber person is the one who follows: the blind man following the blind... and whom would that be but me?

I almost did *not* follow, the day luck came back, but I am hardly to blame for that. I had thought for a good while that the luck was long gone.

I will never forget the summer after the snatching of the sheriff. It was quiet, calm even, and if I were a sailor I would have shaken my head and known that the longer the calm the bigger the storm, as the saying goes. But I was only landlubber Aubrey White, and two months of quiet were wild to me. Those days were so unremarkable that they *became* remarkable.

Not once—not *once*—did Rabbit's lucky foot go tapping over the heads of any baddies. Not once did a suitcase full of cash come crashing to the ground at his feet. Even ordinary Rabbit, the one who aced pop quizzes and found lost left socks and never got bit by as many mosquitoes as I did, was no longer lucky.

It was not just that the big, flashy luck was gone. The everyday, found-a-nickel-on-the-sidewalk luck was gone.

At first I was relieved. The obvious conclusion was that criminals were gone and life was off to a much better start. So what if luck had flown the coop? We no longer needed it.

But Rabbit did not seem to think so. It was very quiet at first, but eventually the Rabbit I knew got...sad.

Don't get me wrong; we had a grand old time the rest of that summer. Fishing trips, camping excursions, working on Mrs. Carmi's farm, lots of cookies, etc. But something was off and we both knew it. I never asked him about it, and I wonder if I ever will. But it is strange to look back at that summer. It is like standing in a room that looks normal but for a faint slant in the ceiling; only, you do not know where the slant is. Luck was gone, and we felt like someone had changed the saturation of the world by only a fraction of a percentage.

But gone it was. At least that was the opinion (or perhaps the hope) of my parents.

"No robberies, no embezzlement, no carjackings, no pickpockets—almost three whole months of a practically perfect town." Dad set down his mug. "What on earth will Rabbit do with his free time?"

"Probably get bored and go hunting snakes." My mother sighed. (She had often tried to curb these tendencies of Rabbit's.) "Aubrey, can you pass the salt?"

“He *has* been hunting snakes,” I said, handing over the salt, watching as Paul tilted his head to observe the pieces of food floating in his sippy cup.

“Has he really? Have you told him—”

“Yeah, I’ve told him they’re deadly. But he’s convinced he knows the venomous ones from the ones that aren’t.”

“And he’s lucky.” Dad smiled up from the paper.

Mom set down the salt—she had been absentmindedly sprinkling more and more onto her eggs—and looked at Dad quite seriously. “I do not think snakes give two figs whether or not a twelve—”

“Eleven.” I took a bite of bacon.

“—Eleven-year-old boy thinks he is lucky.”

“He doesn’t just *think* it,” Dad said, still grinning over his paper.

Mom’s eyes are very clear, and can stare into the deepest crannies of your head. You know those eyes are looking straight through you when the pupils grow a little smaller, and her bottom right eyelid twitches.

“I know you both have...*opinions* on this,” she said, turning her mug in a slow spin on that table. “But as far as I am concerned, what happened *then* is over now. One day Rabbit is going to have to join the real world, and you two aren’t helping.”

“I’ll tell him to stop hunting snakes,” I offered. “But you know he probably won’t listen.”

Dad folded up his paper. “Sometimes you have to get bit in order to learn.”

“Not by a snake!” Mom glared at him. “Seriously.”

Rabbit was not soon to be bitten by any snake—but it was not snakes that were after him that day.

The sun had been doing its due diligence in scorching the cement, but now the world was thinking about cooling down, and the grass was reviving, trying to put its freshest face first. A colder breeze had bumbled in like a lost bird and those of us who would take any excuse for hot chocolate declared it to be autumn. We soon surmised that summer was out. I scuffed the leaves beneath my feet and sniffed the crisp wind. It did not yet smell like cider, but I could bide my time.

I checked my watch, looking in both directions down the sidewalk before school. I saw the figure fumbling up, hands in his pockets, hair flapping above his head as he bounced.

School had rumbled back in, much to Rabbit’s chagrin. It was day one, and a dark one at that—but despite my fears, Rabbit was on time and only a minute later than we had agreed. Even more to my surprise, he had kept his promise and worn his shoes (at least, as the deal went, until we got into our seats). I had told him that I wanted our first day of seventh grade to “start on the right-shoed foot.”

And so we did, advancing upon the day like two backpacked and bully knights, metaphorical swords swinging by our sides. However, neither of us saw the dragon coming until it landed with a wallop on our desks.

English was the first class. We selected our seats, carefully grabbing the ones we wanted for the year. Stretching and yawning our sleep away, we watched Mrs. James enter the room. She is a tall, striking figure—a sort of vitalized exclamation mark, but the exclamation mark you use to end imperatives, not exclamations. She turned on us and her big black brows met over her nose as if trying to shake hands.

“Mr. Jenkins.” She loomed above Rabbit’s desk like a grey storm about to break. “What are you doing in this classroom?”

Rabbit looked around the room, and then at me, confused. Shaking it out and smiling, he looked up at her. “Sitting.”

She continued to scowl down. “Your parents should have received a letter.”

His head tilted.

“A letter about...last year.”

All of the class got quiet...except for the one person in the back who oohed.

“Come with me,” Mrs. James said.

Off Rabbit went, with the walking exclamation.

I did not see him until recess, and that was only seeing him from a distance when he clambered over the fence. By the time I had run up, calling for him to wait, he was long gone, off into the field, and I had to do the rest of the school day all by myself, grumbling and bumbling along.

He was not at school the next day. That afternoon I struck out into the wild, sure of finding him exactly where I did: in the creek. He was standing in the center of it, looking off into the distance, while limpid water circled around his trousers. His bridge, wherever it had been before, was as long gone as last year. He stood there, hands hanging limp by his side, as if trying to find just a semblance, just a memory, of where his bridge had been. He can be strangely sentimental, for a boy.

“Rabbit, what are you doing?”

He turned to me. The water was tasting his trousers and minnows were mumbling away. The sun was stark behind me and cast my long dark shadow down over him. My shadow seemed strangely still and sturdy with all the almost-cold wind whipping past. Rabbit seemed short and shriveled compared to it, as he looked up at me.

“What?” he asked.

“What are you doing?”

He shrugged and turned.

“Why did you skip school? We talked about this. I thought you were going to come to class on time—oh, and what was Mrs. James asking you about yesterday? The letter? It wasn’t like detention or anything...it’s only day one...and I know you can get in trouble, but seriously, day one?”

He splashed the water at the other side of the creek and stomped out. Without looking at me he moved on.

“What’s wrong? Rabbit, you know if you don’t tell me I will just follow you around all day until...”

He had stopped.

“Thank you,” I said.

Huffing, he kicked the ground with his heel, and stared at his folded arms.

“Come on, Rabbit,” I said. “It can’t be that bad.”

“I...” He grimaced.

“What?”

“I...Grade. Didn’t—pass.”

It took me two seconds to interpret. “You didn’t pass last grade? Like, you failed the whole *year*? As in...” I stopped, because this was one of those things that even I did not have a solution for. “I guess it *can* be that bad.”

He stalked off, feet stamping into the ground, sinking into the dead leaves. He kicked them aside with a crinkle and a crackle. To my bewilderment, he was kicking them aside with fully-shod feet.

I stared at the shoes. “Rabbit...are you okay?”

He nodded, still stamping away, and shoved his hands in his pockets.

I ran up next to him and tried to look him in the face, but he kept his head down, glaring at the ground.

“So...this is a for sure you-have-to-do-the year-again situation? Like...we don't have class together anymore?”

Rabbit nodded.

I put my hands in my pockets and somberly walked beside him as the wind whipped the world. We both said nothing. What does one say when you lose the only other person in your class with whom you are really friends?

---

To all appearances, what I did the next afternoon may not seem brave or bold or heroic, but I think that morning gave my soul more wrinkles and grey hairs than any snake hunt or criminal-capture with Rabbit.

Maybe this was because I had to sit outside the door to the office and dread it, while the clock in the corner ticked at me like an old lady clicking her tongue, and the shame I had no reason to feel was building up in my face as the clock hammered on. I knew, for a moment, what it felt like to be one of

those troublesome kids, sitting outside the principal's office and waiting for doomsday.

Maybe it was because I was quite sure that my petition sounded a little silly, but maybe it was just the fact that it was the indomitable Mrs. James. You know those stories of babies who were raised by wolves? I have often wondered if some very angry bears, bears who missed their chance to hibernate, stumbled upon Mrs. James when she was a tot and raised her in their angry, sleep-deprived ways.

The time came. The door opened. I poked my head around the doorframe like a mole wary of hammers.

"Mrs. Principal James?" (I am never sure how much of the title to keep. Ought I to add a *ma'am* at the end? What if I accidentally said *sir*? I had done it before.)

She blinked from her desk and caught my gaze like a spider in a cup. I swallowed, and looked down at the small glasses on her nose—so small and minuscule under the big black brows—but those small glasses were my lifeline in a sea of staring.

"Yes?" she said.

I stood in the doorway and stared at my shoelaces. "Well...well, I was thinking about Rabbit—"

"Aren't we all?" she asked, her voice dry.

She tossed me off my guard with this careless remark. I had to blink several times before I recovered. "Uh, yes. The thing is, I think—no, I'm sure—that if