

RABBIT

CHARLES HIGGINS



NOGGINNOSE
PRESS

Rabbit

ISBN 978-1-956611-04-5

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Cover illustration by Catharine Gildner (catharinegrace.com)

Design and content layout by Houseal Creative

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Nogginnose Press
PO Box 96
Smithville, AR 72466 USA
nogginnose.com

*For all my family and friends
who helped me along, but
especially for Mom and Dad.*

*For Dad who gave me the name
and the support, and for Mom,
not just because you're the only
reason this is here but because you
were the first person in my corner,
reading, editing, encouraging.*

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1

WHEN RABBIT CAME TO TOWN

I told him that if he did it again, I would start writing them out. He snuffed at me (which was not a no), and believe it or not it was only a week before he hit me over the head with another. So here I am, wetting this pen tip with my tongue, trying to decide how to start.

All these pages look so big and open and ready. So many things have happened! So many strange things, things you wouldn't believe, I wouldn't have believed. But here we are. I suppose it's best to start at the beginning. It was so long ago, and I thought about everything so differently—but I remember it all down to the dust in the air.

Let me sketch it for you. It is Monday morning, right before lunch. The sun is shining as bright as a stage light with no cloudy curtains to close it out, while green grass wilts just out of reach of the playground's shadows. The whole world is in a boiling frame of

mind. You would think fall would have the decency to mellow out a little; a proper September would have had a breeze.

The steps where I sit are only a little cooler, steeped in the school's stove of a shadow. Sweat is trickling down my nose, collecting dust as it rolls onto my lips. A sorry spectacle, probably. I'm not much of a spectacle even when the weather likes the world. I am not exactly large; not exactly small either. Sort of stuck in the middle, like a fern in a forest, towering over mushrooms but cowering under aspens. I've got a hard chin, plain brown eyes, some dimples I'm not proud of, and hair that Dad says wants with all its heart to be red, but can't quite cut the mustard.

There you have it—first and eldest daughter of the White clan, a few months new to the neighborhood, putting her best face forward. I am yawning, sweaty, and bored, assuming that the most interesting event of this year (besides moving) was the election of Ronald Reagan. Oh how little I knew!

The playground is surrounded by a tall, metal fence that keeps us wild ragamuffins from running to kingdom come. Right now it is about as hot as the actual sun. No matter the wilting heat, the coming homework, no matter if an ice cream truck wanders by, no one would risk climbing that fiery fence. If a

tornado were to pop in on a visit, we would take our chances in the slide.

So, the scene is set. Me on the steps, teacher moseying not too far off, other kids wandering aimlessly about, and a long, burning fence on a long, burning day. That was when I first ran into Rabbit.

He was a shadow at first, a flicker of movement from one big bush to the next on the opposite side of the fence. The shadow jumped to its feet, quick and nimble, and much taller than I had thought. A boy—and a boy outside of the fence, at that. He was maybe my height, with mousy brown hair splattered on his head like a melting mud cake.

He tested the metal fence and recoiled. Head tilted, he scratched his ear. After stiffing his upper lip, he shook out his hands and glanced around. Nodding to himself, he lurched over the fence like a wincing, indelicate monkey. I flinched in sympathy and flinched again when he met the ground like a jongleur. The boy staggered to his feet, dust flying in a miniature storm below his knees. He stayed bent for a moment, with his hands under his armpits, scanning for observers.

He looked up, saw me, and froze, like a deer caught in the headlights of my notice.

He gaped a little bit, staring at me like I was some goblin at the bottom of the rainbow: a potentially magical, potentially helpful, probably dangerous

creature he was not tempted to tango with. For a moment, we just stared at each other.

He broke eye contact, shook his head hard and walked away with his hands still under his armpits. I blinked, thought my many thoughts, and moved on with my life.

I saw him later in my classroom, slipping into the chair right before mine, barely making the final bell. The back of his head and his shirt were covered in dust and sweat. He kept his head down, forehead almost on the desk, apparently ready for a nap—but his fingers rattled against the side, and his foot thudded almost as fast.

Maybe he was in my grade; I was still new enough to be finding fresh faces, but then maybe *he* was new. *What a terrible way to make a first impression*, I thought, *tsk-ing* inside. The principal had to be furious.

Mr. Laze walked in and did not notice the new addition. In fact, Mr. Laze didn't even see him until he was handing out joint assignments.

"Oh—" Mr. Laze blinked his watery, tired eyes at the new boy, who was hunched over his desk, avoiding eye contact. "I..." Mr. Laze paused. "What's your name again?"

The boy muttered something unintelligible.

"Hmm, well...Reesegan, yes, and Aubrey." Mr. Laze handed me the sheet. "Due Thursday."

The boy disappeared after class. I looked all over the schoolyard, but he had pulled a magician's rabbit and vanished into the hat of the world.

For a little bit I assumed he had forgotten about the project or thought we would talk tomorrow, but I wised up quick. He was trying to dump the project on me and get a free ride. I had handled turkeys like these all through third, fourth, and fifth grade; I had spent more energy forcing others to work on projects than the energy I spent on those projects. Maybe the passion is misplaced, but it is now a matter of principle. War was inevitable—little did he know, I was built for this.

I prepared myself over breakfast, poking my spoon at stranger-boy's invisible face, waving away unspoken rebuttals as my father bent his forehead over his no-touch notebook, and my little brother sucked on his toast until all the jelly was gone. He was left whining over soggy bread until my mom, oblivious to his masterminding, gave him more jelly.

"The church was robbed," my dad said thoughtfully, without looking up.

"Again?" my mother asked.

"Again. Reverend won't put it in a safe like I told him last time."

"Just after the donation, too. Well, the nerve of some people, robbing from Jesus' own house—"

“Aubrey,” my dad said, “you’re dripping milk on the table.”

“Sorry.” I slipped my spoon back into my bowl. “Just getting ready for school.”

I came on Tuesday like a knight on a dragon, barreling about the place, hunting for the fence-climbing, class-skipping, stupid-named Reesegan.

He avoided me through all of our first classes, and only managed to hide from me during recess because a teacher summoned him. In Mr. Laze’s class, he sat right in front of me again, twitching.

“Reesegan!” I poked his shoulder, and he blinked over at me. “We need to talk about our project. I’m Aubrey, by the way and—”

“Alright class, settle down. Today we will discuss...”

“After school!” I hissed.

But of course, Reesegan vanished just as class was done, racing through the others like a squirrel through the forest. I tried to find him during lunch, but he was nowhere to be seen, and in the other classes he was as stealthy and speedy as a wren. It was not until the end of the day that I had my chance. I was walking through the front gates when he darted past me, kicking up dust behind him.

“Hey!” I shouted. “You! Reeseagan!”

He jump-twitched to the side and glanced over his shoulder. It was barely a glance—hardly a flicker—before he was back up and running.

“Hey!” I yelled again, starting to run. “New-kid! You! Brown-hair! Twitchy!”

He ran off down the road and darted to the pasture next to the school.

“We have an assignment!” I chased him through the field, but he was just getting started. He ran through the small pasture by the school, across the street, between two houses, over the small picket fence, and down into the woods.

I am not a cross-country runner, long-legged, or full of stamina. But I am stubborn. Dad says a stubborn person is either going to do something great for the world, or break a lot of backs. He hasn’t decided which way *my* stubbornness is leaning, but whatever the case, I kept up with speed-demon.

I caught up to him there and flying-tackled him. We hit the ground in a roll, flying through the weeds and dirt, with a cloud of dust kicking up behind us. I slid to a stop, but he rolled farther. I blew the sand off my lips and scrambled to my feet as he did. I could see his body tense, about to take off again.

“Wait! What is your deal?”

He curled his nose at me, as if asking the question back. I remembered that most people do not make acquaintances via football tackle. Well, he should have waited.

“Look, I just need to talk about the school project, that’s all.”

He paused, nose twitching.

I stepped closer and held out a hand. “I’m Aubrey.”

With his shoulders tensed through and through, he stared hard at my hand. After an awkward pause, he shook, hard and short. He didn’t look up at me; he just stared down at the ground, one foot digging its own grave.

He was dustier than I remembered, and freckle-free, though I could have sworn he had freckles before—there was something in the way his face twitched that made me think he had no right to walk about with such clear skin. His eyes were squinting, but I thought they were brown. His face was plain, but tight and quick, and his ears were a little large. He said nothing; just twitched, not quite meeting my eyes—waiting, I suppose, for me to get it over with.

I sighed, still panting hard. “Look, do you want a decent grade or not? All we have to do is...” I related my plan as he twitched, dug a deeper hole in the ground with his foot, and looked over my shoulder at the burning sun which was considering setting. I wiped

sweat off of my forehead, feeling the grit in my pores and the irritation in my gut, and finished. "So, do you want to meet at my place or yours?"

He flinched. His eyes jerked to meet mine for a second before looking away. He pointed at me.

"What?"

He pointed at me harder.

"My house?" I guessed.

He nodded.

"Okay." I pulled out a piece of notebook paper. "Give me your back." He blinked at me. I rolled my eyes and explained why I wanted his spine. He turned, and I wrote out the address on his dusty, hole-speckled shirt. I am pretty sure it was the same shirt he had worn yesterday.

"Come tomorrow after school, four-thirty." I gave him the sheet. "Bring the potatoes. I'll have the rest."

He twitched again and nodded, looking over his shoulder. He sighed, and stamped a foot, but said nothing.

"What's wrong?"

He rubbed both his ears, staring at the ground.

"Are you alright?"

He turned on me suddenly, his eyes intent. "Lost."

"You're lost?" I asked.

He shook his head and stamped his foot. "Suitcase."

“Oh.” I blinked at him. Whatever that meant. “Okay. What’s your name again? It’s not really Reesegan, is it?”

He shook his head, staring off at the sun.

“So, what is it?”

He said something under his breath, and blinked at the ground, still digging that hole with his foot.

“What?”

He mumbled it, turned, and ran.

“What?” I called, but he was already gone. “Fine!” I yelled at a plume of dust. “Reesegan it is!”

I kept him in my sights all Wednesday, just in case. He avoided eye contact but that did not stop me: I glowered down on him like an all-knowing owl. He was jittery, antsy, distracted. I guess he had his reasons—I wasn’t even on the top of the list. The guy hated talking. If I had not heard him before, I would have thought he was deaf. He did not say more than one word to a soul if he could help it, and even that one word was like a bashful dog trying to talk. Weirder, though, was the fact that he did not seem abashed about it, as if one word every other hour was perfectly normal.