

C Y N T H I A   L O R D

**Because**

**of the**

**Rabbit**



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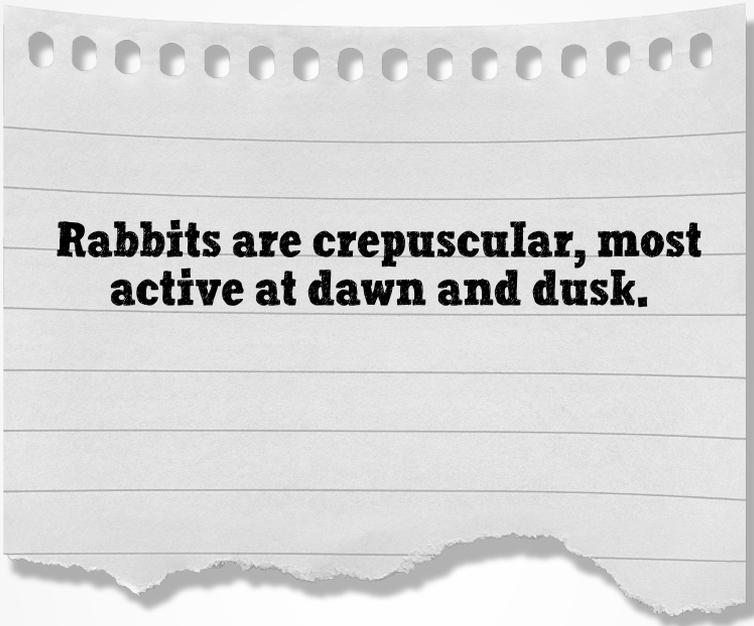
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“A rabbit?” I heard Dad say into the phone. “Is he hurt?”

Mom sighed at the bowl of mashed potatoes in her hands. She likes it when all four of us can eat supper together, but when a Maine Game Warden gets a call, he has to go. Even if it’s suppertime and tomorrow is the biggest day of my life.

“How long’s the rabbit been there?” Dad asked.

Mom had made all my favorite foods—meat loaf, mashed potatoes, corn on the cob, and blueberry pie for dessert—but I was too excited to eat very much.

My older brother, Owen, leaned toward me. “Who’s ahead? Excited or Scared?”

I grinned. When we were little, whenever we had mixed feelings about something, Owen and I’d pretend those feelings were running in a race. We hadn’t done it in a long time, though.

“Excited is way ahead, but Scared is coming on strong,” I said.

Mom passed me the bowl of mashed potatoes. “I’m sure most kids feel that way on the night before school starts.”

I nodded, though we both knew I wasn’t “most kids.” Most kids went to school for the first time in preschool.

Or kindergarten.

Or maybe first grade.

Not many started in fifth. In fact, I was pretty sure I’d be the only fifth grader at Lakeview Elementary School who’d never gone off to school before.

It wasn't that I hadn't done school*work*. I'd done plenty. My lessons had been at the kitchen table, though. Science experiments were done in the bathroom or on the front porch—in case they exploded or leaked. I read books on my bed or on the couch or even floating in a kayak on the lake in front of our house.

Being homeschooled had many good parts, but the best part had always been Owen. We made up games and shared secret jokes. We told each other stories and collected rocks together. When Owen did something, he'd ask me if I wanted to do it, too. Being four years apart didn't matter.

Until last year.

Owen told Mom and Dad he wanted to see what public school was like. So he went to high school and was gone all day. He made new friends. Then he added *after*-school things like theater and playing right field on the baseball team.

What he subtracted was me. Mom said it sometimes happens as brothers and sisters get older, but I didn't think it'd happen to us.

“Maybe Excited has marbles in her pocket,” Owen said. “And she drops them on the track so Scared will slip on them.”

I imagined Excited pulling a whole handful of marbles out of her pocket and dropping them one by one.

“Okay. Give me your address,” I heard Dad say. “Don’t touch him. I’ll be right over.”

As he put his phone in his pocket, Mom said, “Let me fix you a plate to take with you, Gabe.”

“Thanks, but just put it in the fridge,” Dad said, pulling on his green warden jacket. “I’ll warm it up when I get back. This shouldn’t take too long. A woman found a wild rabbit stuck between two wooden pickets in her fence. Guess he tried to jump through and only made it halfway. I hope I don’t have to take the fence apart. The lady is already fuming about being late for something.”

“Can I come?” I asked.

“But, Emma, I made all your favorite things,” Mom said. “And you haven’t eaten more than a few bites.”

“Thank you, Mom. I love it all, but my stomach’s too jumpy to eat.” I’d thought about school all summer, but

now the big day was *tomorrow*. Little worries were creeping in. What if the other kids knew things that I didn't? What if everyone already had their own friends and didn't want more?

Scared jumped right over those marbles.

"I could pass you tools," I called to Dad. "And the lady will probably be nicer with a kid there."

He paused, his hand on the doorknob, and glanced back at Mom.

She sighed. "All right. We'll save the pie for later. Don't keep her out late, though, Gabe. She has to be up early."

I bolted from my seat so fast that our golden retrievers, Molly and Maggie, started barking like there was an emergency.

"Aren't you coming?" I asked Owen.

He shook his head. "I have to call Jordan. I'm hoping to convince him to try out for soccer with me."

*Soccer? When did he decide that?*

"You can tell me all about it when you get home," Owen said.

"I hope we can just wiggle the rabbit free," Dad said

as I caught up to him on the front porch. “But let’s bring something to put him in, just in case he’s injured. I’ve got a big plastic bin in the barn. That should hold him until we get to the rehab center.”

“A bunny in a box!” I said.

Dad smiled. “Rabbit wrangler. That’s my job.”

Animals are my favorite part of Dad’s job. If the rehabilitation center is already closed for the night, Dad might even bring an injured or orphaned animal home with him. Once I came downstairs to breakfast and found a fox kit sleeping in a box by the woodstove. Another morning Mom screamed when she went to put water in the coffeepot and there was a turtle with a cracked shell in a plastic tub in our kitchen sink. A beaver with a bad foot even slept in a cage in our barn one evening. Owen says we run a wildlife bed and breakfast.

Our dogs, Molly and Maggie, are used to it. They just give the newcomer a quick sniff and then accept it as belonging.

Sometimes Dad even lets me come with him to

release an animal back into the wild. As soon as he opens the cage door or the box flaps, a look flashes into that animal's eyes that I can't explain. But it knows it's free. Then there's a rush of wings reaching for the sky or paws racing for the woods and it's gone. The whole thing is over in seconds, but it's the best moment ever.

The worst part of Dad's job is when he catches someone breaking a hunting law. They might have to pay a fine, or even go to jail. Sometimes that conversation happens way out in the woods with no one else around, and the hunter is holding a gun.

Dad would never take me on a call like that, though. Only on quick, simple animal rescues. Like freeing a stuck rabbit from a picket fence and watching him hop away if he's okay or helping him out if he isn't.

I should've known better, though. Rabbits are tricksters. When I was little, I'd always begged my grandfather to tell me stories about Monsieur Lapin, Mr. Rabbit. "It happened once," Pépère would start, and it was like the whole world slowed down to listen. I'd hang on his every

word until Monsieur Lapin had cheated and sneaked his way through every near miss and danger.

Little, smart, fast as the wind on a mountaintop, and full of surprises.

Anything is possible with rabbits.