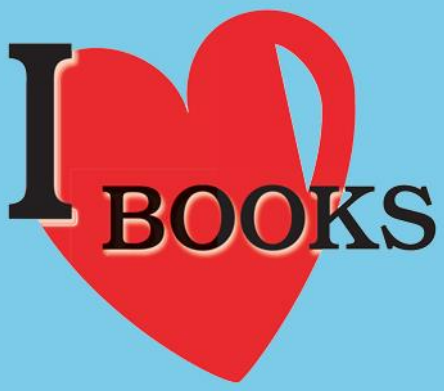


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A Duckling Called Button

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Chapter One
"Put That Down!"

"Good girl, Truffle," said Jasmine, bending down to scratch her pig behind the ears. "Good girl."

Jasmine and her best friend Tom were walking Truffle around the edge of the biggest field on Oak Tree Farm, checking Jasmine's dad's flock of Southdown sheep. It was a lovely warm March morning. The sky was a beautiful pale blue, with high fluffy clouds.

The sheep were due to lamb next month and they had to be checked twice a day to make sure they were all right. Jasmine always took Truffle

with her on these walks. She had rescued the pig from another farm, as a tiny newborn runt, and nursed her back to health. Now four months old, she lived happily in the orchard next to the farmhouse, but she loved to go for walks with Jasmine.

"That sheep's stuck," said Tom, pointing towards the bottom of the field. A ewe lay upside down, arching her back and kicking her legs in the air, trying to get on to her feet.

The children walked quickly towards the sheep, Truffle trotting beside them.

"She must have rolled over to rub an itchy patch," said Jasmine. "She's too heavy in lamb to get up again, poor thing."

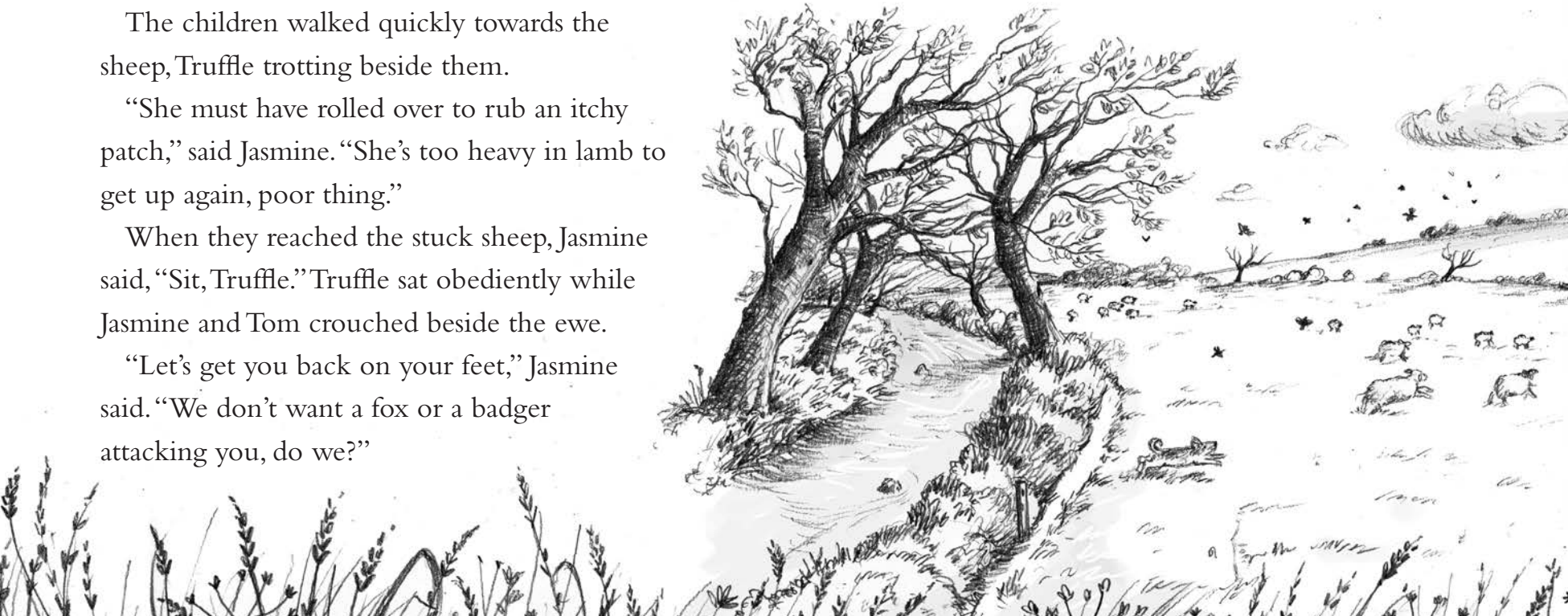
When they reached the stuck sheep, Jasmine said, "Sit, Truffle." Truffle sat obediently while Jasmine and Tom crouched beside the ewe.

"Let's get you back on your feet," Jasmine said. "We don't want a fox or a badger attacking you, do we?"

They placed their hands under the ewe's side and heaved her up. She scrambled to her feet and trotted off without a backward glance. Jasmine watched her happily. But Tom was frowning.

"There's a dog over there. Down by the river."

The far side of the meadow bordered the river. Trees and bushes grew on the banks. Some of the sheep had been grazing peacefully over there, but now they started running across the field, baaing in panic.



Jasmine saw a flash of brown amongst the bushes.

"Off the lead, in a field full of sheep," she said. "It must be a stray. You run and get my dad. I'll stay here to chase it away if it tries to attack the ewes."

"Ugh," said Tom. "Look. I bet it's hers."

A girl in purple wellington boots and a black coat with a fur-trimmed hood was walking along the public footpath that ran across the fields by the river. Somebody Jasmine and Tom knew all too well. Bella Bradley, the most annoying girl in their class.

Fury surged through Jasmine. She grabbed Truffle's lead and marched over to the girl.

"Bella Bradley! Is that your dog?"

Bella barely glanced at Jasmine. "Duh," she said. "Who else's dog would it be? I can't see anyone else around here."

"Well, you need to put it on a lead."

"Why should I?"

"Because these sheep are all in lamb. If your dog chases them, they could lose their lambs."

"My dog doesn't chase sheep. And you can't tell me what to do."

She strode off across the field.

Jasmine, boiling with rage, was about to retort when a tremendous squawking and beating of wings came from the direction of the river.



She turned to see what was going on.

Bella's terrier shot out from the bushes. In its mouth was a duck, flapping its wings and quacking madly.

"Hey!" shouted Jasmine. "Put that down!"

She and Tom raced across the field after the dog, the duck clamped in its jaws. Tom picked up a clod of earth and hurled it at the terrier, but it missed.

When it reached the hedge, the dog dropped the duck and squeezed into the hedgerow. Jasmine and Tom fell to their knees beside the duck. It was a female mallard. Jasmine placed her hands on the soft warm underbody.

There was no movement beneath her feathers.

No heartbeat.

"She's dead," said Jasmine. "That dog killed her."



Chapter Two

"What If She Was Nesting?"

Tom sprang to his feet. Jasmine had never seen him look so angry.

"Hey!" he yelled.

Bella carried on walking. "Rupert!" she called. "Rupert, come here!"

"Rupert?" scoffed Tom. "Stupid name for a dog."

Jasmine got to her feet, cradling the duck in her arms. She and Tom ran across the field, stumbling over the rutted ground, Truffle trotting beside them.