THE ROYAL RABBITS OF LONDON

THE HUNT FOR THE GOLDEN CARROT



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CHAPTER ONE

Deep beneath the state rooms of Buckingham Palace, in the secret headquarters of the Royal Rabbits of London, Shylo awoke with a start. He didn't rub his eyes sleepily as he usually did and he didn't yawn. He sat bolt upright as if his little body had been seized by an electric shock.

'Today I'm going home!' he cried with excitement, jumping up on the mattress and breaking into an excited dance. He bounced up and down so energetically that his big, floppy ears flapped about





his head like clumsy wings. 'Today I'm going *ho-ome*! Today I'm going *ho-ome*!' he sang, kicking out his big feet and wiggling his fluffy tail.

It was late summer, and Shylo hadn't seen his mother since the spring. The thought of being with her again filled him with happiness. The little bunkin had left his home in haste to warn the Royal Rabbits of a plot to harm the Queen, and there had been no time to say goodbye to any of his family. He never imagined that a weak and feeble bunny like him would then be invited to join the elite organization of rabbits who were sworn to protect the Royal Family and handle threats to British security. But it was true. He really *was* a Royal Rabbit.

Shylo briefly thought of his brother, Maximilian, and his five other siblings who had always cruelly teased him. He was sure things would be different on his return home. He wouldn't let them bully him any



more, not now he was a brave Knight of the Crown!

A moment later, his bedroom door opened and Belle de Paw appeared in a pink nightdress decorated with shiny silver sequins. Her soft amber fur was standing on end because she had just got out of bed. Unlike little Shylo, she was rubbing her eyes and yawning sleepily. '*Oh là là*,' she murred in her soft French accent, realizing why Shylo was bouncing on the bed. 'You're leaving The Grand Burrow today.'

Shylo stopped bouncing and hopped lightly on to the floor. 'I can almost smell the sweet scents of the forest,' he told her happily, pressing a paw to his chest where his heart was swelling with longing. 'Harvest will be finished and the fields will be full of spilled grain and discarded corn for us to collect. Mother makes the very best corn and barley stew.'

Belle de Paw smiled at the little bunny, of whom she had grown so fond, and reached out to straighten

the red eyepatch he wore to cure his squint. 'We will miss you,' she murred, patting him gently. 'You have not been with the Royal Rabbits for long, but you are one of us now. And, don't tell the others, but in my opinion you are the *cleverest* of the team!'

'We've had lots of adventures together, haven't we?' Shylo said proudly, recalling the time they had sneaked into the Queen's private apartments to return the precious Siberian Diamond and nearly been eaten by corgis. Who'd have imagined that a simple country rabbit would have an adventure like that?

'And we will have many more when you come back to us. But remember, you must keep our organization secret,' she warned him gravely. 'No one must know.'

'What will I tell my family?' asked Shylo.

His mother was aware that he was a Royal Rabbit because he'd sent her the medal he'd earned for his first mission and Shylo's old friend Horatio had



then told her the truth about Shylo's whereabouts. Horatio had stressed that she must keep all that a secret. But now Shylo wondered where the rest of his family thought he was. How was he going to explain his absence to them?

Belle picked up his paw and turned it over to reveal the Badge, the red palm that was the special mark of a Royal Rabbit. 'Hmmmm,' she murred thoughtfully, then her brown eyes lit up with an idea. 'You will tell them that you work on a beetroot farm. That is why your paw is red.'

Shylo grinned and gazed at her with affection. 'I think *you're* the cleverest of the team,' he said.

'That is why you are so dear to me, Shylo!' she laughed. 'Because you never doubt me. Now hurry and get dressed so you can make the journey home!'



After dressing and feasting on a carrot and celery smoothie sprinkled with watercress, and a large slice of lettuce with honey, Shylo hopped off down the winding corridors of The Grand Burrow to the war room for the usual morning meeting with Nelson, the Generalissimo. As he reached the big double doors, Frisby, the plump, white rabbit whose ceremonial red-and-gold uniform stretched over her round belly and who flaunted her title of 'Major-domo' as if she was the most important rabbit in The Grand Burrow, barred his way with her bejewelled gold staff.

'There's something very odd going on in there!' she whispered to Shylo, twitching her nose and narrowing her eyes. 'Very odd indeed. I'd come back later if I were you.'

'I'm sure I can handle it,' Shylo declared, putting on an important voice. He might not have been as strong as the four very high ranking Hopster rabbits,



Clooney, Zeno, Laser and Belle de Paw, but he was still a Royal Rabbit and always tried to act like a Hopster even when he didn't really feel like one. 'Now please let me in or I'll be late for the meeting!'

Frisby clicked her tongue and huffed. 'Don't say I didn't warn you.' Reluctantly, she opened the door and announced the little bunny.

Shylo was surprised to see that the Generalissimo was not at his desk or leaning over the map table. He was on the floor on all four paws with his tail in the air and the Hopster rabbits around him didn't seem worried that their elderly leader was in such an undignified position. In fact, besides Laser, the straight-talking American doe, who was standing over the Generalissimo, giving instructions of some kind, none of them even seemed to have noticed.

Clooney, the dapper and handsome buck, was lounging on the sofa in his immaculately pressed black

tuxedo, crisp white shirt and scarlet bow tie, stroking his whiskers. Belle de Paw, who was usually at the periscopes, looking into the rooms of Buckingham Palace above them, was arranging the feather fascinator on her head in front of the large gilt mirror. Studying the map table was Zeno, the enormous black and muscly Marshal of the Thumpers, the highly trained fighter rabbits. Old Horatio, Nelson's battle-ravaged brother, missing most of his left ear and sporting a long scar down one cheek, was sitting in an armchair with the stump of his lost hind paw resting on a stool, reading a book.

'Push your heels towards the ground, Generalissimo,' said Laser, putting her paws on her hips and tapping the whip in her belt. The red, white and blue fur on her arms, dyed in the stars and stripes of the American flag, shone brightly in the lamplight.

Shylo hopped over. 'May I ask what you're doing?' he

murred softly, assuming that if none of the Hopsters thought it peculiar then neither should he. Frisby was clearly overreacting.

'Humans call it yoga,' said Laser in her American drawl. 'But I like to call it Bendy Bunnies.' She grinned at Shylo, revealing a gold tooth. 'The Generalissimo has a bad back. He's getting older and–'

'Steady!' growled Nelson.

'Sorry, Generalissimo, but Royal Rabbits gotta stay healthy.'

Nelson pushed himself up with a great deal of huffing and puffing. Laser handed him his walking stick and he took a moment to steady himself - standing with your head upside down can make you very dizzy. 'If I remember rightly, today is the day you're heading home for a week's leave.' He looked down at Shylo with his kind old eyes. 'Now I need to tell you three important things before you go.'

Shylo gazed up at him, one ear flopping over his eyepatch because Nelson's face was very serious and, when Nelson got serious, Shylo got a little nervous. After all, the Royal Rabbits are a secret order dedicated to fighting evil across the world - so Shylo guessed he was about to face some kind of challenge, like duelling with the foul Ratzis, defeating the Russian minks, meeting the foxes in the Fox Club or heading off to Hampstead to find a white tiger. His stomach made a funny gurgling noise. Definitely not hunger this time.

'One: don't forget who you are. You're a Royal Rabbit who has earned his place among our secret order. Two: you are braver than you know. Three: don't get too comfortable up there in the countryside. We want you back in seven days' time to help watch over the King and Queen of Holland's state visit next week.'

'And four,' added Horatio, hobbling across the room



on his walking stick, 'life is an adventure. Anything in the world is possible - by will and by luck, with a moist carrot, a wet nose and a slice of mad courage!' He pulled the little bunkin into his arms and a lump formed in Shylo's throat because, as happy as he was to be going home, he was sad to be leaving too.