

CHAPTER SEVEN



What a happy scene of grunting, snuffling, squeaking joy there was in the garden of 5A as the girls were woken to be told the good news! And what a jolly crunching of snails there was as the family celebrated with a feast!

After it all, Max slept heavily, and by evening, when he reappeared, the neighbour had come

through the hedge twice, once to enquire if Max was back and again to ask if he was quite well.

At first Ma and Pa felt a little uncomfortable at these visits, Ma because she knew what Pa had done, Pa because he knew that the neighbour knew. But the matter was not mentioned.



They had been wrong, they found, in supposing that a family of hedgehogs lived next door. The neighbour had never married and, as elderly bachelors often are, he was rather lonely and very fond of children. He had already invited Peony, Pansy and Petunia to come and play in his garden

whenever they liked and, seeing that they were not sure how to address him, had asked them to call him 'Uncle'.

'Uncle what?' they said.

The neighbour scratched his head thoughtfully with his hindfoot.



'Let's see now,' he said. 'I live in the garden of Number 5B. How about "Uncle B"?''

After dark the family were worm-hunting on the lawn when there was a rustling in the dividing hedge and the three girls ran towards it, crying,

'Uncle B! Uncle B! Uncle B!'



'Who's Uncle B?' asked Max.

'Our next-door neighbour,' said Ma. 'That's what the girls call him. They've been playing in his garden.'



‘But, Pa,’ said Max, ‘I thought you couldn’t stick him?’

Pa was saved from replying by the approach of Uncle B, and now Max recognized him.

‘Oh hello, sir,’ he said politely. ‘You’re the gentlehog I met in the Park. Thank you very much for your help.’



‘Don’t mention it, Max,’ said Uncle B. ‘Glad to hear from your parents that you’re, um, totally recovered.’

‘You should stay in the garden, son,’ said Pa. ‘You’re safe in here.’

Max considered this. He had no intention of giving up his research. The neighbour had helped

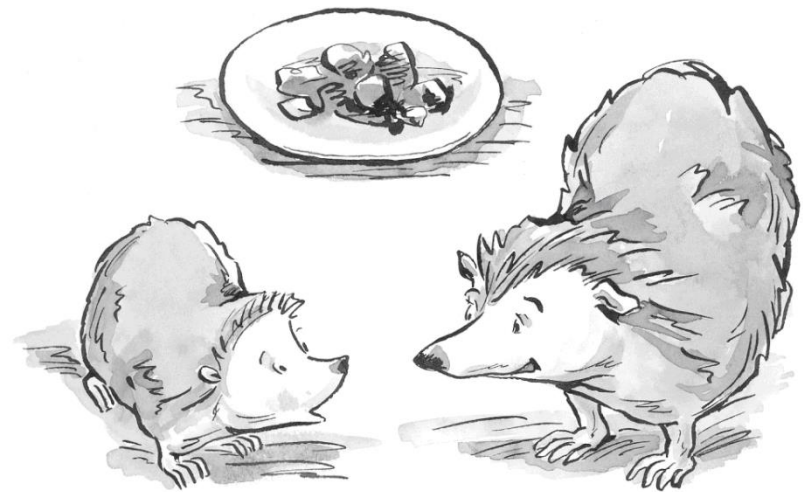
him once. Maybe he could do so again. As if reading his thoughts, Uncle B said, ‘Well, I must be running along now. Any time you feel like having a chat, Max, you just pop over.’

The next night Max popped over.

‘Hello, young fellow,’ said Uncle B. ‘Have some Munchimeat. They always give me more than I can manage.’

‘No, thanks. It’s your advice I need,’ said Max, getting straight to the point.

‘Shoot,’ said Uncle B.



He listened carefully while Max told him everything that had happened so far in his efforts to find a safe hedgehog-crossing. 'I must say,' he said when Max had finished, 'I admire your spirit. And your ambition. Finding a really safe way to cross roads would benefit the whole of hedgehogkind. But the two methods that humans use don't seem to be suitable for us. No better, it appears from your experiences, than the old time-honoured way – look right, look left, look right again, before going across. One thing strikes me, however.' Uncle B paused.

'What's that, Uncle B?'

'All your research so far has been at night-time because hedgehogs are nocturnal. But humans aren't. They don't see at all well at night, which is why they keep on clobbering us. Now if you could only find a place to cross in broad daylight, then at least they could see us coming. It might pay us to change our habits. Better to lose your sleep than your life, that's what I say.'

'Well,' said Max, 'I suppose that either of the two ways I've tried would work in daylight too. Trouble is with either of them, you've got to get across so quickly. Now if only there was a human who could

stop the traffic and make absolutely sure it didn't move till you were safely over.'

'There are humans like that,' said Uncle B. 'I saw one once, when I was out during the day – not something I often do. He was a big man dressed in blue, with a tall domed hat on his head. He just held up his hand and everything stopped while some small humans crossed the street. Once they were safely on the other side, he waved the traffic on again.'



Max pondered this. ‘So,’ he said, ‘there might be lots and lots of small humans who have to cross the street by day?’

Uncle B nodded.

‘And the big humans,’ Max continued, ‘would worry about the small ones getting across safely?’

‘Oh, yes. Just like hedgehogs.’

‘So there simply must be a special perfectly safe daytime crossing-place for small humans – now where on earth could that be?’

‘You tell me, Max. You tell me,’ said Uncle B.

‘I will,’ said Max. *‘I will!’*

Task – please answer the following questions.

1. How did the family celebrate Max’s return at the beginning of Chapter 7?
2. How did their neighbour, Uncle B, get his name?
3. What advice did their neighbour give Max about what time of day to go out? Why did he suggest this?
4. Who is the “big man dressed in blue, with a tall domed hat on his head”?
5. Where do you think the “special perfectly safe daytime crossing place for small humans” would be?