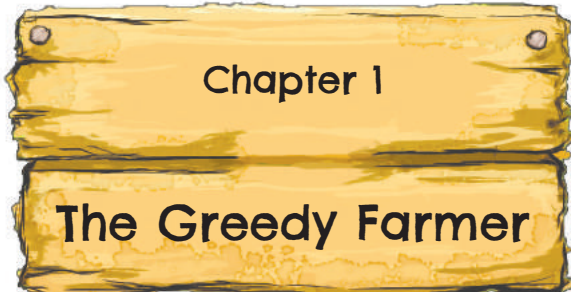


ESCAPE
from
NETTLE FARM



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Chapter 1

The Greedy Farmer

It was a crisp early morning and the late autumn sun had started to rise, the orange hued beams piercing through the cloudy skies. The rays of sun kissed a tired looking farm, brightening the dull farmhouse and outbuildings. Near the farmhouse an old barn stood in disrepair, its grimy broken windows letting in the morning light, creating dappled patterns that danced on the floor. Birds chattered noisily crowding on the arms of an old, twisted oak tree but suddenly paused. When they continued, their song had changed. It was no longer a happy tune but one of concern and urgency – the farmer was coming!

The farmer, a tall wiry man, stomped towards the barn, mud flying from his boots.

Bang! The door of the barn flew open and clattered against the outer grey stone wall, hinges protesting at the treatment. The birds flew from the

weary tree, the sound of flapping wings filling the air like thunder on a stormy day. The farmer cast a carefree glance at the fleeing birds, the touch of a cunning smile creasing the corner of his mouth. With the birds gone, a silence fell over the farm broken by the occasional bleat from the sheep in a nearby field.

He stepped through the door and paused to admire his collection of vintage tractors, his pride and joy, lovingly restored by his own calloused hands. He would do anything to see his collection grow. After a minute the farmer made his way across to a pen in the far corner, his heavy footsteps echoing on the cold stone floor. He arrived at the pen and looked in. There was a rough makeshift wooden shelter, with an old rusty metal trough for food and some small brown plastic bowls for water. However, the occupants of the pen were not the sort normally found in a barn. Huddled together in the middle of the pen were six black puppies shivering in the cool damp air. Their mum, a Newfoundland dog named Bella, lived inside the large farmhouse with the farmer. Bella was tired as this was her second litter this year. All the farmer wanted was to sell the pups as quickly as possible to make more money. The farmer had no family of his own and liked it that way. He believed that he

had all the company he needed with the animals on the farm and wanted only to enjoy his passion for renovating tractors.

The pups were almost six weeks old now and would usually be playing together, but the morning coldness and the sound of footsteps made them frightened and nervous. They moved into the shelter and cowered together, waiting for the familiar, but not so friendly, face of the farmer. The farmer rested his old worn tan stained boot on the metal fence, which was surrounding the pen.



The fence was just below knee height and more than adequate to stop the pups from escaping. “You lot

had better be good today as I've got people coming round to collect you," grumbled the farmer. He rubbed his hand across his brow, pushed back his grey thinning hair and reached into the tatty bag he was carrying. He pulled out some dry food and, without care, threw it towards the trough. Some of it landed in the trough and some of it scattered on the dirty floor. He begrudgingly topped up the plastic bowls with water from the old rusty tap on a nearby wall. Then he turned on his heel and walked right back out, his footsteps echoing again as he headed for the door. He grabbed the door as he walked through and, in a well practised motion, slammed it shut behind him, without even the slightest glance back towards the pups. The puppies listened to the footsteps fading away until they were sure he had gone.

The pups relaxed and cautiously moved towards the trough to investigate the food. Not knowing whether this might be their only meal of the day they ate greedily pushing and shoving each other. Sometimes the farmer would come back later in the day or sometimes the following morning. They didn't know why he was so angry all the time.

One of the pups was much smaller than the others and he stayed in the corner whilst the rest

ate. He had tried to eat with them before but they kept nipping him and pushing him back towards the corner. This made him feel sad, but he had learned to wait until they had eaten all they could before picking up what was left. He also looked different from his brothers and sisters. As well as being smaller he had really big feet and ears, which looked completely out of place on such a skinny little dog. It didn't bother him, but he got the feeling that it amused the others! But how could they laugh at him when they all had little numbers marked on the back of their necks in white paint? Didn't they realise how silly they looked. Far sillier than big feet and ears – at least they were the same colour as his coat! His mum hadn't minded that he looked different when she was around, and the farmer, no matter how cross he was, didn't seem to notice either. In fact he never looked at the little dog, his eyes were always on the others.

The little puppy eventually stood up and joined the others eating at the trough. He kept getting pushed out of the way so he started eating the food strewn on the floor, despite the fact it was now squashed after having been trodden on. He went over to get a drink from one of the plastic

bowls. The water was cool and refreshing and he took a long drink before laying back down.

The little puppy looked around the barn. It was made from old grey stone with big oak doors and a tin roof. Time had taken its toll on the neglected barn and holes had appeared in a few places along the walls where stones had fallen out. There was one particular hole in the wall at the back of the pen, which had been patched with wooden panels, and the shelter had been put in front of it. These repairs were always hurriedly done with no real care about the upkeep of the building or the occupants inside. The pup, soon bored of looking around and full from the food, laid back down and drifted off to sleep.

Later that day, the pups were playing with the end of a piece of blue rope. The rope was hanging from two small pieces of wood, which had been tied together to block the hole at the back of the pen behind the shelter. Even the little puppy joined in the fun! They were having a great time pulling and tugging and tumbling over each other. They paused when they heard the sound of an engine and the squeal of brakes as a car pulled up outside. The farmer's voice could be heard but this time

it sounded strangely pleasant. He was talking to other people and the voices were getting closer. The door of the barn opened without the familiar bang and the farmer came in accompanied by a man, a woman and a child. The pups raced to the front of the pen jumping up and tails wagging. They remembered the family from a couple of weeks ago when they had spent about an hour looking at the pups before pointing to one. That visit resulted in the first white number being painted on the chosen pup. Other families had visited during that same week until all the pups had a white number on their backs. All the pups that is, except the skinny little one. The family stepped over the low metal fence and into the pen. The pups fussed around them, tails wagging and pushing and shoving each other to be stroked by the girl.

“Aww, look at them all Mum, they all want to come!” cried the little girl. “Even the funny looking one!” She laughed as she rubbed the little puppy’s head and tickled him behind his big ears.

“Yes, they are all lovely sweetheart, can you remember which one you chose?” asked the little girl’s mum.

“Oh yes, that’s easy. It was this one here. I can tell without the number.” The little girl was so happy as

she scooped up one of the puppies into her arms. She held her chosen puppy tightly and gave it a really big cuddle. They climbed back over the metal fence and started to walk away from the pen leaving the remaining pups wondering what was happening. On the way out of the barn the man pulled his wallet, stuffed with money, from the back pocket of his brown trousers and took out a wad of notes.

“How much do I owe you?” he asked the farmer casually.

The farmer’s eyes lit up at the sight of the money and he hopped excitedly from foot to foot. “Oh, er...”

“It’s already sorted dear,” chipped in the woman, “I have written a cheque.” She fished the cheque out of her handbag and began to wave it around. The farmer was struggling to take his eyes off the money in the man’s hand but the man put the money back in his wallet and the wallet back into his pocket. Unfortunately, the wallet missed his pocket completely and slid down his trousers to the floor, landing quietly on a patch of straw. The farmer blinked and shook his head wondering if anyone noticed or if he should say anything. He looked back to the woman who was waiting for him to take the cheque.

“Thank you,” he said quietly, taking the cheque and stuffing it into the front pocket on his worn blue jeans. He was thinking how he could distract them from looking back and noticing the wallet. “Let me get an information pack for you,” he said quickly, gesturing for them to walk towards the door. They all walked away and the voices grew quieter until they could no longer be heard. The wallet lay forgotten on the floor, open where it had fallen.

The door had been left open and a gentle breeze blew through the barn, slightly warmer than the morning breeze but cool enough to still feel fresh. The remaining puppies returned to playing with the blue rope, pushing and climbing over each other and really enjoying their game.

As the farmer was saying goodbye to the first family, another family arrived. The farmer, thinking about the wallet, led the family into the shed and stopped at the patch of straw. He bent down to brush his boot and slyly scooped the wallet up and casually put it in his torn pocket. The family didn’t notice and soon left with another one of the puppies. This happened three more times until there was only one puppy left, the little one without a mark on his back. He laid down in his usual place in the lonely corner.



It was much quieter now, it didn't feel the same without his brothers and sisters. 'That's what the marks were for,' he thought sadly, 'for the ones who were chosen to live with families. Why wasn't I chosen?' He was really sad and tried to think back to happier times to cheer himself up. He thought back to his mum and how kind she was to him, always making sure he got some milk, despite being pushed away by his brothers and sisters, and keeping him warm at nights. His thoughts were broken when he heard a

noise outside. The familiar bang of the door and heavy footsteps announced the farmer's arrival. The last puppy cowered in the corner of the pen and with sad eyes looked up at the farmer as he approached. 'What's going to happen to me?' he thought.

"Right you poor excuse for a dog," the farmer said, "I've sold all the other pups and I was just coming to deal with you when the phone rang."

The little pup noticed an old dirty woven sack in his hand. 'What's that for?' he wondered. 'It's not very big, you wouldn't get much in that. I would only just fit in and even then it would be a tight squeeze!'

"The farmer down the road has got an old tractor frame that I have wanted for a long, long time. He has said he will give it to me in exchange for a good working dog. I've told him that you are the best of the breed to get the deal, and not the worthless mutt you really are. He's a tough taskmaster and he'll soon get you working hard around the clock or else he will beat you." The farmer casually dropped the sack outside the pen. "I'll just leave this here until the morning," he said as he left the puppy all alone in the barn.

The sad little pup didn't like the sound of that.

‘What have I done wrong? Why haven’t I got a nice family coming to collect me?’ These were his thoughts as he settled down for a long, lonely night all by himself.

The little pup didn’t sleep at all that night as he was so worried about what would happen to him. By the morning he had reached a brave decision. ‘I’m going to find my own family to look after me,’ he thought. ‘As soon as I get a chance, I’m getting out of here... but how?’ He looked around the pen and saw the solution staring back at him from behind the shelter.

He noticed the hole in the barn wall, the one which had been hastily covered by the two small pieces of wood. The wood was tied together with the blue rope that he’d happily played with, along with his brothers and sisters. All the pulling and tugging they’d done had frayed the rope and loosened the wood behind. ‘If I can pull the rope off I might be able to get the wood out and then I could squeeze between the gap and be free!’ he thought. ‘It’s going to be difficult but worth trying.’

The little puppy set to work. He tugged, and pulled, and chewed the rope and although he made good progress, it still didn’t come undone. The rope was proving to be as tough as he feared

it would be. Exhausted from his efforts he paused for a rest. 'Perhaps I'll just close my eyes,' he thought sleepily. 'Just five minutes...' Worn out, he drifted into a deep sleep plagued with dreams. He dreamt first of being back with his mum and then of playing with his brothers and sisters. He dreamt of how happy they were being taken by loving families and then him being chosen too. His dream soon turned to a nightmare as he was taken to a farm. He had a plough attached to his back by a heavy wooden harness that he had to pull from light until dark. He woke with a start, panicking over his dream and trying to work out if it was real or not. He had been asleep for longer than he had intended, sleeping for an hour instead of five minutes, but he soon realised that the farmer had not yet been in to see him. 'Oh dear,' he thought, 'I need to be quick!' He stood up but swayed. 'I'm still so tired, but I need to be careful. I won't have long before the farmer gets here.' The little puppy worked frantically, pulling on the rope and suddenly he felt it slip a little although it was still holding the wood together. He heard the farmer around the back of the barn and paused to listen which way he was going next. He knew that the mean old farmer

would soon be in the barn for his morning visit. Urgently now, the puppy increased his efforts to undo the stubborn knot.

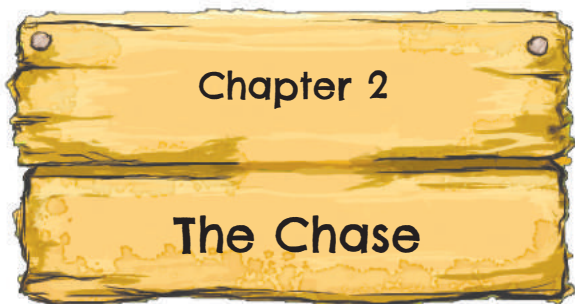


Slam! The door opened in the usual manner but was ignored by the puppy who was fully focused on the rope. Heavy footsteps started to approach the pen. With one final tug the desperate pup pulled on the rope and to his surprise an end came free in his mouth, leaving the two pieces of wood no longer secured together. 'Wow! Now I've just got to squeeze through,' he thought.

He began to push and could feel the wooden boards moving. The footsteps were now getting much closer and he could hear the farmer

grumbling under his breath. The farmer seemed to get to the pen quicker than usual. With only one dog left he had no desire to waste time when there were so many more important jobs that needed doing. He stepped into the pen and lifted the roof off the makeshift shelter. "Right, your time is up and..." He stopped what he was saying in mid-sentence, astonished. He couldn't quite believe his eyes.

The puppy had gone.



Chapter 2

The Chase

The farmer looked round the pen open mouthed in disbelief, saw the gap in the wall with the wood and rope on the ground. He jumped out of the pen and ran out of the barn, not bothering to close the door behind him. He hurried around the back of the barn and saw how the temporary repair had been pulled apart leaving the gap just wide enough for a little puppy to squeeze through. "Where have you gone?" he bellowed.

A flock of birds took flight, scared by his angry outburst. The farmer looked towards the house but couldn't see any sign of the puppy. He looked over towards the cattle shed but again could not see him. He looked south across his fields and caught a glimpse of the little puppy running towards the fence bordering the road.

"Got you!" he said gleefully. "You won't

get away from me, my tractor frame is waiting on your delivery.” He ran into the farm house, through the back door and into the boot room. From a corner he pulled out a big catch net and ran after the puppy, his long strides quickly eating up the distance.

The little puppy made it to the fence and easily crept underneath it. The fence was separating the farm from the main road that ran by the side of it. At the other side of the road was another fence and behind that was a small dark forest that would give him some cover. The little puppy paused, nervously thinking what to do next, he had never been outside of the barn and didn't quite know what to expect. He saw a white monster speeding along the road and it zoomed passed him.

He bolted back under the fence and into the farm for a moment of safety. The feeling of fear soon passed, leaving him filled with excitement. A whole new world to explore was so much more fun then being stuck in that pen.

He happened to glance behind and was glad that he did, because he saw the farmer coming out of the farmhouse. He was holding a long handled object with some netting at the end. With his mind

made up, the young pup quickly made his way back under the fence and stopped at the edge of the road.

'Beeeeeeep!' Blared a loud horn from another monster speeding by, this time a red one.

Afraid, he took a step back until he brushed against the fence and cowered down in the undergrowth. Heart beating fast, he glanced again behind to see that the farmer was still coming and would only catch him if he stayed here. He paused a moment longer to collect his thoughts and, with his mind made up, ran across the road as fast as he could.

Safely across, he bounded through a gap in the fence at the other side and bolted off into the dark forest.

The farmer reached the fence shortly after the little puppy had disappeared from view. He crossed the road and paused against the fence at the other side to catch his breath. As he was resting he looked over the fence into the forest and saw two trails of footprints, one small and the other much bigger.



“It was a good try little one, but little puppies have little feet. Your tracks will be easy to follow.”

He set off, smirking, his eyes seeking the smaller set of footprints and followed them deeper into the forest. The ground was soft and damp because it had rained for the last few days. The trail was clear to see and easy to follow. The farmer quickened his pace, carelessly trampling anything in his path.

The puppy was getting tired, he must have travelled about a mile and his little legs could hardly run any further. He had never been this far before... only ever around his pen. He paused and listened and could hear noises behind him getting closer. He looked around for a place to hide but all

he could see were some dense bushes. He tried to break through but found that there was no way into them so he continued to run deeper into the forest. Although he was exhausted, the fear of being caught by the farmer made him run even faster.

The hunter was now moving as fast as he could, certain he was getting closer to his prey. After a while, he slowed down to climb over a fallen tree, then continued more cautiously through the undergrowth away from any paths.

The tired pup was out of breath and knew he had to stop. The forest was much thicker here and he could see some hiding places that he could wriggle into. He found a suitable space under some tall bushes and laid down.

He became alert, listening carefully for any sounds. This wasn't very easy as his heart was beating fast and the noise was ringing loudly in his ears. He tried desperately to stop panting but struggled, being so in need of a drink.



The farmer had slowed in his approach. His route was becoming harder and harder until it was almost completely blocked by thick bushes. He paused, looking through the thick shrubs into a dark space like a small den. Squinting, he could just about make out the shape of a small dog. He smiled as he raised his net and leapt through the bushes.

The little puppy heard a rustling sound and spun around.

The farmer landed with his quarry caught in his net. "Ha, got you!" His loud shout could be heard throughout the forest. The birds in the trees flew off in all directions and other animals in the vicinity rushed away in fright. The farmer dragged the net closer and looked inside. "A fox cub!" he cried, "What the... where on earth has that darned dog got to?"

The little puppy had turned to see a small light brown rabbit run and stop close by. It sat back on its hind legs and raised its head listening cautiously. Whilst watching he heard a loud shout ring out clearly across the forest. The startled rabbit disappeared instantly. The little puppy was frightened but crept back to the clearing to see if he could see anything. The sound was a long way off but he recognised

the farmer's booming voice. 'He must have followed me!' thought the puppy. 'But how?' He looked down at his big paws and could see his footprints in the mud. He looked behind him and could see a clear trail in the mud showing his path across the forest. 'I see,' he thought. 'I need to do something about that.' Hearing the trickling of running water up ahead, he went to investigate. He cautiously peered through the branches of some shrubs blocking his path to check that the coast was clear. It was. He could also see a small stony bank leading to a shallow stream. The stream ran along for a short distance before disappearing out of sight.

In the meantime, the farmer had made his way back to the fence where he had first seen two sets of footprints. 'I must have followed the wrong ones,' he thought angrily. He looked at the trail of the big paw prints, unbelievably big to belong to a puppy. "Strange dog," he mused. "I should have looked at him more closely, but there's no mistaking it now. I did follow the wrong tracks."

Picking up the other trail he followed quickly, pausing to catch his breath against a tree stump where a squirrel had been having its breakfast. He followed the prints a bit further and noticed them

disappearing behind some shrubs. Holding his net ready in case the puppy was on the other side, he jumped through the shrubs. What he found on the other side wasn't what he was looking for! He landed in the stream with a splash and slipped on a rock, ending up on his bottom in the shallow water. He jumped up, shocked from the cold and frantically looked for any more signs of the paw prints. He could see the trail leading from the shrubs to the stream but could not see any more. He let out a frustrated shout and turned for home red in the face and very angry. He was angry with himself for being outsmarted by that foolish dog. He was also very wet!



The puppy heard the shout but by this time he was quite a long way upstream from where it came. The trees had thinned here providing a clear view of the grey skies above. The water in the stream was cold as the late autumn sun was too weak to provide any real warmth. It wasn't deep though, and the bed of small pebbles made it easy to walk on and he liked the feeling of the shifting pebbles under his big soft paws.

He continued to follow the stream, not knowing where it would lead, and every step was a new adventure. He paused to catch his breath and for the first time really noticed his surroundings. He could smell the peaty odour of damp earth. He could hear the birds chatting casually in the trees and the rushing water splashing as it churned against the rocks. He could see so many beautiful things he hadn't seen before in such rich colour. His earlier fear slowly faded away replaced by excitement and happiness.

His plan to hide his trail had worked. He looked behind and was pleased to see no paw prints trailing behind him and showing anyone where he was heading. 'I hope the farmer doesn't catch me,' he thought. 'I'm really, really tired and

can't go on much further. I need to rest.' Travelling a little further he saw that the stream turned again to the right, leaving the forest behind. To the left there was a small well-worn track leading up a muddy bank to an old rickety fence. Built into the fence was an old wooden stile, the faded wood smooth with use. He followed the track keeping to the grassy areas and looked under the fence. At the other side he could see no houses but lots of plants growing in neat rows. There were lots of patches of soil, each with different plants growing and a number of small wooden sheds dotted around. He went back down the bank to the stream and took a long drink whilst he thought about what to do next. Then he went back up the bank to the fence to investigate again, still keeping to the grassed area to avoid leaving a trail. Once through the fence he had a quick look around the area to see if there was any immediate danger. He didn't see anything or anyone and noticed a shed that didn't have a door on it. He looked inside and saw a few old tools and sacks lying around. He sniffed around and the lack of scent told him that no one had been there for a while. The little puppy was so tired from the chase that he really had to rest. He

pulled a few of the sacks around with his mouth until he'd made a rough bed and he laid down. As soon as his head touched his paws he fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.



He woke a few hours later, still sleepy but thirsty and hungry. He peered quietly out of the shed to check all was clear. It was. He had a good look around his surroundings and found water overflowing from a bucket underneath a dripping tap. 'This is easier than the stream,' he thought. After a long drink his stomach rumbled reminding him that he was hungry. He remembered that one of the sacks in the shed had been lumpy and went to see why. He nuzzled around the sack and

found something he believed was food, although it wasn't a smell he was familiar with. Enjoying the new smells, he redoubled his efforts to get to the contents. He found the opening to the sack and stuck his head inside. He found that it held a number of long orange roots with familiar little leaves sticking out of one end. He picked a small one out with his mouth and gently had a bite from it. It didn't really taste of much but as he was so hungry he wolfed down the rest of it and bit into a second one. Looking around he saw even more of these sacks stacked at the back of the shed. 'That must have been what was growing in the fields'. They were all full to the brim with the same things. This would give him plenty of food for the time being. He went back to sleep and woke an hour later to the sound of a man's voice. 'The farmer is back, he's found me!' he thought. Panic set in and, before the voice came any closer, he bolted out of the shed and away from danger.