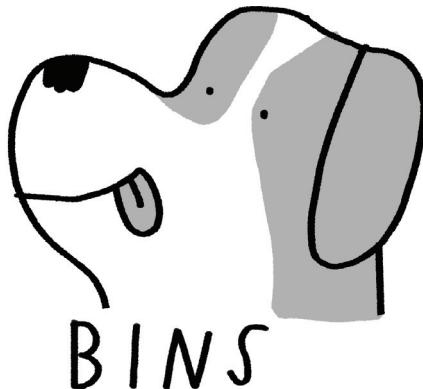


## CHAPTER 1



My dog Monster is the best in the world: FACT.

Dad says he's probably half-dog, half-mole because he's so good at digging tunnels: mainly underneath our garden fence. He's really round, so it's a miracle he doesn't get stuck.

I watched him do it once. He sat on the flower bed and stared at the wooden panels, as if he was trying to work out how to tackle them, and then he began to dig. Loads of dirt flew from under his wagging tail and then he did this weird shuffling-along-on-his-stomach thing with his back legs flattened either side. The next second he was gone.

When he escapes, he always heads to the same place: Mrs Banks's front garden. He charges at her bins, knocks them over and then, like a big furry vacuum cleaner, snaffles everything up. And I mean *everything*. He threw up a pair of knickers on to the lounge carpet once and Mum wasn't sure if she should wash them and take them back to Mrs Banks. I pointed out that if they were in the bin in the first place then she obviously didn't want them, did she?

Mrs Banks caught Monster going through her bins for the third time this week. She arrived on our doorstep with him tucked backwards under her arm. His tail was wagging round and round, like it does when he's happy, and she had to put her head to one side to stop it from hitting her in the face.

"You do realize that this animal is completely out of control, don't you, Mrs Beckett?" she said. Mum was a bit flustered because she'd been in the middle of an argument with Dad when she answered the door. Monster stopped wagging and began to wriggle, but the more he wriggled the more Mrs Banks gripped on to him.

"He's been going through my bins again. *And* he left a 'present' on my lawn."

"A present?" said Mum, rubbing her forehead.

“Yes, Mrs Beckett. A present. The foul, smelly, disgusting kind.”

Monster’s tail wagged again as if he was showing us all where the “present” had come from. I snorted and Mrs Banks shot a look at me. There was a high-pitched yelp as she tightened her grip around my dog even more.

“You shouldn’t be holding him like that!” I shouted. “He doesn’t like it. You let him go right now, you mean old . . . cow!”

“Maxwell!” said Mum.

Mrs Banks’s eyes went so wide I thought they were going to fall out of her head.

“Are you going to let your son . . . your *child* talk to me in that way?”

Mum looked at me and opened her mouth but nothing came out. It was as if she didn’t have a clue what to say. Monster’s tail had stopped wagging now and he began to whine. I jumped off our step and tried to grapple him out of Mrs Banks’s arms.

“You’re hurting him! Let go of him! Let go of him, now!”

Mrs Banks let out a squeal. “Oh! Get off! Get off me you . . . you horror!”

“Maxwell! What has come over you?” cried Mum,

pulling me back by my shoulder. Monster dropped to the floor with a yelp. He gave himself a quick shake then trotted inside as if nothing had happened.

“I’m so sorry, Mrs Banks. Maxwell isn’t usually like this.”

Mrs Banks swept her fringe out of her face.

“I beg to differ, Mrs Beckett. Your son is a thug and a beast. I know it, the school knows it and, I’m pretty sure, *you* know it. I suggest you get that dog *and your son* under control, or I’ll inform the authorities.”

She turned on her heel and stormed off down the pathway and through the space in the wall where the gate used to be. Mum closed the door, taking a deep breath. I knew she was about to have a go at me but Dad started yelling from the kitchen:

“Amanda?! Have you been at my chicken pasta? Taking the sticky note off doesn’t mean it’s yours!”

Mum gritted her teeth then stormed off down the hallway.

“No, Eddie! I haven’t touched your flipping pasta!”

I huffed. My parents had this stupid arrangement where they each bought their own food and put sticky notes on what was theirs. If they thought the

other one had eaten something that didn't belong to them, they went nuts. My sister Bex and I didn't use labels; we just ate whatever Mum or Dad cooked for us. I hated those sticky notes. I hated them nearly as much as I hated Mrs Banks for hurting my dog.

Mum and Dad had a massive row that night. One of their worst. I was trying to go to sleep but I could hear them through the bedroom wall shouting at each other.

I wanted to go into Bex's room and sit it out with her, like we used to do when we were little during a thunderstorm. Bex would never let me in her room now though. She's fifteen and a total nerd. She's even got a poster on her wall with the names of all the Kings and Queens of England on it. I mean, who does that? Why doesn't she have a pop group or a film star or something a *normal* fifteen-year-old girl would have? Still, I'd have rather been in her room than on my own listening to them argue.

Mum and Dad shouted about Monster and Mrs Banks and then turned to me. They were blaming each other for all the trouble I kept getting into at school. I wrapped my pillow around my head and tried to doze off until finally, at about midnight, I

heard the front door slam. I sat up and listened as Dad's van started and sped off down the road. I relaxed a bit then. Dad just drives round and round until he's calmed down, and he comes home when we're all asleep.

I pulled the duvet over my head and curled up into a ball. If Mrs Banks hadn't knocked with Monster under her arm then there wouldn't have been all that shouting. It was all Mrs Banks's fault. As I drifted off to sleep I thought of a way to get my revenge.