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Opening extract from

Tiger Moth

Written by

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I don't know why he threw the thing so far, but I love a challenge so I went straight after it. I think I almost flew off the rocks. I moved faster than my legs have ever moved and I didn't take my eyes off it for a second. I could hear all five of them shouting my name, but I kept on going. Further and further I went. At first it felt easy, but then it started to get harder and harder. Something wasn't right. But I was not going to give up. I would never give up; my best friend says I'm the most determined thing he's ever met.

Their voices were getting fainter now and I started to panic. I started to think I wouldn't make it after all and suddenly my legs didn't want to move any more. I think that the last thing I heard was, 'Oh no! Somebody do something!'

And, as a silence surrounded me, I knew that it was too late.

1

Alice

I'm not like you. I'm not like everyone else. I wasn't born. I was chosen.

Mum and Dad say this: 'You were special. We chose you and then we took you home.'

Well, it was sort of like that.

Ten years ago, I arrived in the world at five past six on a very rainy November morning, but, unlike all of the other babies who had been born that day, I didn't go home with my real mother. She went back to her life (I think) and I was taken somewhere else. I was driven out to the countryside to a huge house with lots of other wriggling babies.

Mum says that she had wished and hoped that, one day, she would be lucky enough to have a little girl to love, and in December they got a telephone call to say that I was waiting

for them. Mum says that it was the best day of her life. Dad says he was so happy he cried and laughed all at the same time. Sometimes I imagine that, when they arrived at the house with all the babies, they were shown into a room which had rows and rows of cots. I like to think that they walked up and down the aisles of wriggling, gurgling babies and when they got to my cot they knew that I was their daughter. I like to think that even though I was only four weeks old I saw my mum and dad and I knew straight away that they were the ones for me too.

Mum and Dad say that I am the best thing that has ever happened to them, that I was the missing piece in the Richardson family jigsaw and that I was the perfect fit. They say that life at Culver Manor just got better and better when they brought me home. I was the happiness that took all the sad feeling away. I was the laughter that brought the old house back to life.

And it's a very old house. Culver Manor is where my father was born and his father before him and his father before him, and the main part of the house was built when Henry the Eighth was King of England. There are ten bedrooms, four sitting rooms and a hall that's a bit like a church inside with beautiful stained-glass windows that shimmer in the sunlight. There's a library too and it's even bigger than the one in the village, but I'm not really supposed to go in there on my own because there are lots of very special books which Dad says are valuable and that no one should touch.

There are tons of other places to mess around in and, even though I have a really big playroom, most of the time I think my bedroom is the best room in the house. It's kind of extra special because it's at the top of a 'secret' staircase. There's a really grand staircase in the hallway, but the 'secret' stairs are wooden and spiral upwards to the first floor where there's a little window shaped like a diamond (my dad is always leaving his reading glasses on that window ledge and forgetting all about them). Between my bedroom and my parents' room is a very long hallway with three windows that all have seats that you can snuggle up on and hide behind the long, heavy, red velvet curtains. When my cousin Florence comes to stay, we always camp out on the window seats, pull the curtains closed and share ghost stories.

Apart from my bedroom and the window seats, my other favourite place is the garden. It has loads of different places to hide too. There's a kitchen garden where we grow all our own vegetables, a big pond with a summer house, a tennis court and a large walled garden with lots and lots of roses. They flower all through the summer: palest pinks and brightest reds, climbing roses with tiny white buds and lilac ones with petals so fat and heavy that they droop down from the wall as though they're too tired to stand up tall. They fill the garden with a delicate perfume and if I leave my bedroom window open I can smell them as I lie in bed. I love the old cherry tree which has a swing on it and you can swing back and forth, looking down the garden and out to sea. When I

was little, Dad used to let me sit on his lap as we swung our feet as high as we dared.

I know that Culver Manor is a very special place, and I'm really lucky to live there. Sometimes I invite my friends round and they can never believe how huge it is. They think it's like something out of a book.

The one place in the house that I'm not allowed to go on my own is the attic. I'm only allowed up there when Dad or Mum is with me. Last week I went up with Dad, so he could find some old photographs, and he got me a little stool to stand on so that I could see out of the really high-up windows that look out to sea. I could see all the way across the Bristol Channel to the Black Mountains in Wales even though we live in Somerset.

While he was searching through piles of dusty boxes, I found a little door in the corner of the attic and when I opened it I got quite a surprise. It was a small room, no bigger than a cupboard, with walls covered in maps and posters of footballers. Tucked under the little window was a table and three chairs. On the middle of the table there was an abandoned model aeroplane, with paints and paintbrushes next to it, so that it almost looked as though it was waiting for someone to come back and finish it.

I must have stood in that strange little room for quite a while, just staring at all the dusty little aeroplanes which hung down from the ceiling on bits of string. I lifted my hand up towards one that was kind of grey, but when I blew the dust off I saw it was actually painted bright

yellow. I couldn't believe that I didn't know this room existed.

I didn't hear Dad walk in, but, when I looked up and saw him, his face was really strange. I asked what the matter was, but he just shook his head. Then I noticed that the backs of the chairs all had a different letter painted on them. T, D and K. I knew the D was for my dad, David, and the T must have been for his brother, Tom, but what did the K stand for? When I asked Dad, he shook his head again and pushed the three chairs over to the far corner, stacking them up neatly so the letters were hidden. He said we should go back downstairs and pulled me towards the door, but as he did something caught my eye. One of the posters on the wall was peeling away and I swear I saw a sort of drawing underneath it. Was it a map? I couldn't be sure and as I followed Dad back downstairs I kept wondering about the secrets of the small room. Whose chair was that? What did the K stand for? What was the drawing on the wall?

Apart from the attic, there's one more place that I'm forbidden to go.

Culver Cove.

The vale where we live is green and beautiful. The shoreline is made up of two large beaches which curve along the coast like the number three, but they're not sandy beaches. They're all stone. There are big stones, very big stones, medium-sized stones, small stones and ever so teeny-weeny stones. And each one is very different. Some are blue. Some are grey. Some are palest pink. Some stones have a white

stripe. Some stones have two white stripes. Some are round. Some are oval. Some are really very flat indeed. But all of them are the same in one respect alone. They're all very smooth. Smoothest of smooth. But the beach at Culver Cove is sandy. It's the only sandy beach and it can only be reached from our garden along a dark, dangerous, winding footpath, but I have never been.

Dad says that years ago there was a landslide and the footpath is so covered with rocks and mud that it's too difficult to walk along. If I ever ask why we can't clear the path, my dad will pull a funny face, tell a silly joke or ask me to name all the planets. The last time I asked it was the day before his birthday and even though it was September it was really hot. '*Can we go to the cove, Daddy? Can we, please? We could have a birthday swim?*' I had begged, but my dad looked really, *really* weird. I waited for ages for him to answer and he and Mum kept giving each other strange looks.

'David,' Mum had said, tipping her head to one side and stroking his cheek. 'Maybe we should tell Alice the . . .' but my dad suddenly pulled away from Mum's gentle hands and looked quite cross.

'No,' he said in an angry sort of voice. 'Leave the past alone, Sophie.'

Mum opened her mouth to say something and I swear that as he left the room there were tears in Daddy's eyes.

In the end Mum said, 'Let's make your daddy a carrot cake for his birthday instead. Why don't you come and help

me?' And I did. I love carrot cake the most. I think it's my favourite food. That and watermelon. Mum always makes me and Dad a carrot cake on our birthday.

Even though my birthday is on November 8th, every year on December 6th we have a family celebration too. We call it our family birthday and I think it's pretty great because I get presents then and eighteen days later it's Christmas. Everyone at school says I'm lucky, but one time my cousin Florence told me that no one else has a family birthday so I asked her why.

She looked at me and rolled her eyes. 'Because, Alice, I live with my real family, silly.'

Then she sort of laughed and took a bite out of her apple. I wasn't really sure I knew what she meant, but that night, when we all sat down for dinner, I looked up at Mum and asked her where my real family was.

She spat out her drink, started coughing and Dad dropped his knife and fork so that they sort of clattered on to the plate. They looked at me and it was as if they were angry or really upset, and when Mum spoke again she was sort of crying.

'This *is* your real family, Alice,' she said. 'Your real family is the one that loves and cares for you the most.'

She looked so upset that I got up from my seat and gave her the biggest cuddle I could. I didn't want her to be sad. I didn't want her to cry any more. I wanted her to smile. And she did. So, even though I sometimes have so many questions about my other mother that it feels as though my head

will explode, I didn't ask again. But I didn't feel really sad or anything like that because my family is the best family in the world.

Well, it was.

Everything was just perfect until it wasn't.