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Opening extract from

First Aid for Fairies and Other Fabled Beasts

Written by

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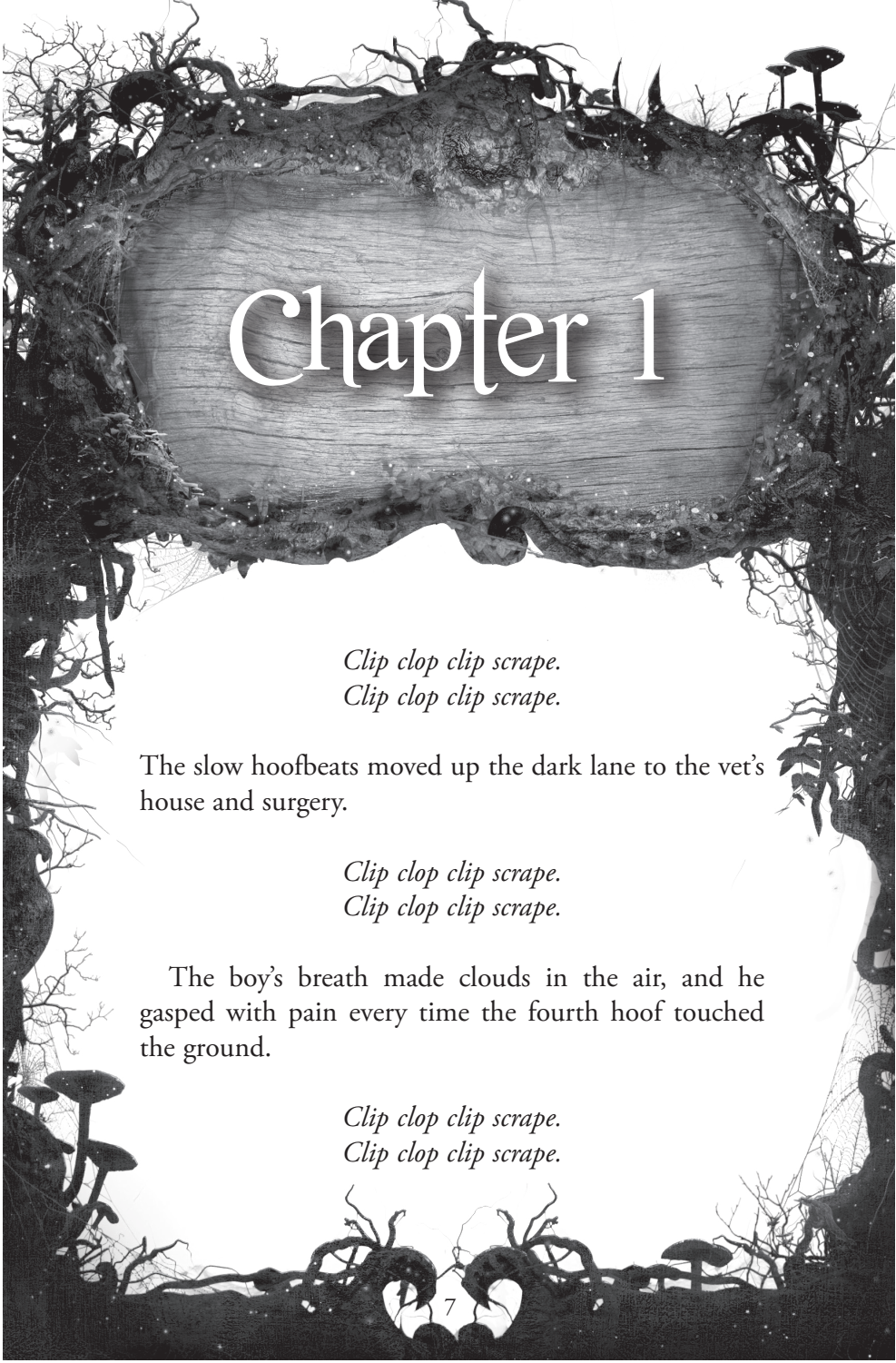
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Chapter 1

Clip clop clip scrape.
Clip clop clip scrape.

The slow hoofbeats moved up the dark lane to the vet's house and surgery.

Clip clop clip scrape.
Clip clop clip scrape.

The boy's breath made clouds in the air, and he gasped with pain every time the fourth hoof touched the ground.

Clip clop clip scrape.
Clip clop clip scrape.

Helen closed her diary after another entry of school, violin practice, tea and homework. She wondered whether she should just write "same as yesterday," as she had done nothing new for weeks. Like yesterday, she still hadn't found the perfect tune, so she hadn't been able to practise the most important piece of music. She sighed. There was only a week left to go until the concert.

She put the diary up high where Nicola couldn't reach to scribble on it, and went to the window to close the blind. She saw a shape moving up the lane. A horse? She opened her window a little.

Clip clop clip scrape.
Clip clop clip scrape.

The horse looked odd. It was limping, the rider was leaning too far forward over the horse's neck, and she couldn't see the horse's head. It must be hanging down very low. Yet the horse struggled up the lane.

Clip clop clip scrape.
Clip clop clip scrape.

Mum wouldn't be pleased if this was a late patient. She'd been out all evening with a flock of sheep that had run into a barbed wire fence after being panicked by a strange dog. Now she was soaking in a hot bubbly bath with a book and some biscuits. And Dad wouldn't be pleased if the doorbell woke Nicola, he was trying to get some urgent work done on the computer.

If it was just a local rider and a pony with a stone in

its hoof, Helen could give them a hoof pick and a torch and they could sort themselves out.

She crept downstairs and grabbed her fleece and her wellies, hoping to get out into the garden before the rider rang the doorbell and disturbed everyone else.

Helen opened the front door as fast as she could, still waggling her feet into her boots. "Hold on a minute," she whispered.

Just before she pulled her fleece over her head, she saw a bare-chested boy on a chestnut horse, standing in the front garden.

No. He wasn't on the horse ... he *was* the horse!

The boy and the horse seemed to melt into each other.

Helen stopped for a moment with the red fleece over her face. She shook her head, yanked the fleece down to her shoulders and looked again.

The boy had a horse's legs, back and tail.

The horse had a boy's head, arms and chest.

The boy's head said clearly, "Are you the horse healer? Can you heal me?" He pointed to the horse's back leg, which was bleeding from a deep open gash.

Helen looked behind her. No one in the house seemed to have heard.

"Shhhh," she said. She put her arms through the sleeves of her fleece, grabbed the bunch of keys from behind the door, and stepped out into the garden.

Without saying another word, because she couldn't think of any sensible ones, Helen led the lame horse-boy to the large animal surgery by the side of the house.

She unlocked the sliding doors, put the lights on, and ushered him in. He squinted at the bright light

shining off the white cupboards and the gleaming metal equipment, then he limped inside. His hooves were loud on the concrete floor.

"Shhhh!"

Helen looked at him, seeing him properly for the first time now they were out of the night. But even in the clear clean light, she couldn't understand what she saw.

She remembered what men's torsos on horses' bodies were called. *Centaurs.* But that was a mythological name for a fantastic animal. They weren't real. She doubted they'd even existed in ancient Greece, let alone in the south of Scotland in the twenty-first century.

"You're a centaur."

"Yes. You're a horse healer. Kindly heal my leg."

"I'm not a horse healer. My Mum is the vet."

"Then fetch her ..."

A gust of freezing winter wind blew in through the door, and Helen turned to close it. As the door started to slide shut, the creature crouching in the bush just three steps away grunted with frustration. Now he couldn't see the centaur or the girl with the curly black hair. Should he wait here until the colt came out, or go back now and tell his Master that the young fool had involved a human child? Helen shoved the door until it clicked closed. She shouldn't have taken a stranger into her Mum's surgery, and she didn't want anyone to see the light.

She turned back to the centaur in the middle of the floor. "My Mum doesn't believe in centaurs or cyclops or sirens or anything like that. She only believes in science books. If she doesn't believe in you, she can't really bandage you up."

"Do you believe in me?"

Helen examined him from a distance. He scowled back at her.

The glossy horsehair on his horse body seemed to grow from the same skin as his boy's tummy and back. The tangled hair on his boy's head was the same reddish colour as the horsehair. Most of the hair on his head was hanging long onto his shoulders, but some was tied up off his face in a small ponytail above his forehead. She noticed scrapes and bruises on his bare skin. The horse and the boy had both been injured recently.

"Do you believe in me?" he demanded again.

He didn't look like a circus trick. He wasn't half a pantomime horse. But there was only one way to be sure.

Helen was used to boys in the playground and horses in the fields and she wasn't afraid of either. This horse-boy shouldn't frighten her.

So she took a step forward. She reached out her hand and ran it from his boy's back to his horse's flank. He hunched his shoulders, clearly annoyed at being touched, but he didn't shy away. The boy's skin was warm, and so was the horse's hair. There were no joins.

"Yes, I believe in you."

"Then you can bandage me."

"No, I can't. I'm not a vet. You have to study for years at university to be a vet. I'm not even at the high school yet."

"Hasn't your mother passed her skills and knowledge down to you? Don't you watch and learn from your elders?"

Helen knew how to wipe dog hairs off the table in

the small animal surgery in the house, and how to clean horse droppings off this concrete floor. She knew how to take messages from farmers about lambing and how to spell the names of the most common worming pills. But she didn't really want to know any more.

All her friends thought it was so cool having a Mum who was a vet – cute kittens, pretty puppies – but Helen saw the bitten fingers and the stinking overalls, and heard the stories about putting old pets out of their misery. She didn't want to be a vet. She wanted to be a musician. She wanted to work in a nice warm theatre or studio. Perhaps the occasional outdoor performance, in the summer. No mud or blood or dung.

"No. I'm not learning her skills and knowledge. I'm learning my own. I'm not a healer. I'm a musician."

The boy closed his eyes and sighed.

He was much taller than Helen, because his horse legs were longer than her human legs. But with his scowling eyes closed, and his confident voice quiet, he didn't seem much older than her. Suddenly he looked sad and in pain.

He opened his eyes again.

"What can I do, healer's child?"

She looked at his leg. It was dripping blood all over the floor. At least she was qualified to clean the floor, but perhaps she could have a go at cleaning the leg too.

"Stand there."

She went over to her Mum's supplies. She often tidied them in exchange for pocket money, so she knew where most things were.

Helen gathered big antiseptic swabs, horse bandages and a bottle of pink antiseptic solution. She pulled a low stool over to the boy's back legs.

Then she thought, what would Mum do? First she would take notes. So she pulled a new notebook from the desk and asked, "What's your name and how did this injury occur?"

"I am Yann. And it's none of your business how I hurt myself."

"Yes, it is. If I'm going to fix you, I need to know what hurt you."

"I cut myself jumping over a wall," he muttered.

"Was the wall too high for you?"

"No wall is too high! I misjudged it a little. I was distracted."

Helen grinned. She recognized the excuses boys at school made when they missed an easy shot at goal.

"I'm just going to wipe the dirt out of the wound, then put a covering on to keep it clean. It might sting a bit. Try to stay still."

"I am not afraid of pain."

"Well, aren't you brave. But if you aren't a little bit afraid of pain, you'll just keep damaging yourself."

Yann snorted, but didn't answer her.

Helen tore open a packet of swabs, soaked one in antiseptic and started to clear away the blood. She had hoped that once the blood was cleaned up, the wound would be quite small. But it ran right from his hoof, past his fetlock, up to his hock, and then curved round in a jagged edge. His lower leg had been ripped open and a flap of skin was hanging off.

He hissed and one of his front hooves scraped the floor jerkily as she cleaned under the flap. But his back leg stayed still.

"You're doing really well. Just a little bit more." She

recognised the sing song voice her Mum used to calm animals.

She gently cleaned blood, hairs and dirt out of the cut, and dropped the swabs on the floor.

She examined the clean wound.

"I can't just bandage you. I think this needs stitches."

"Go on then. I won't move."

"But I can't do stitches. I need to go and get my Mum."

"But you said she won't believe in me."

"She'll believe in the wound, Yann. She'll fix your leg before she worries about your top half."

"Then what will she do?"

Helen shrugged. "She'll either think she's dreaming, or she'll call the police. But I'm sure she would stitch you up first."

"What's the police?"

"They arrest people who've broken the law."

"I have not broken any of *your* laws," Yann insisted.

"You'll be fine then. But no adult is going to let you gallop off. They'll want to know what you are and where you came from."

"That is no one's business but my own. Can you sew?"

"Yes, and knit and weave and crochet and I can sing all fifteen verses of ..."

"If you can sew, you can stitch me up. I would be very obliged if you would do so."

"Don't you have centaur doctors, where you come from?' Helen asked. 'Couldn't you get them to fix you?"

"I can't tell ... It's none of your business. I have asked for your help, and by all the laws of hospitality you should give me that help."

"You're being far too rude to expect any hospitality."

"I shall make a bargain with you, healer's child. If you heal me, I promise to grant you a wish."

"Okay. I wish you would tell me what's going on ..."

"Oh no, I mean a tooth fairy type wish: a vision of your future husband, or a puppy for your birthday or something."

Helen laughed. "I don't want a husband, and we get far too many puppies here as it is. Let me do what I can with your leg, and then we'll see."

She reached up to the shelves to find the suturing equipment: a sterile needle, strong dissolving suturing thread, forceps and finally, right at the back, the metal needle holders shaped like skinny scissors.

When she had first shown an interest in making clothes for her toys, her Mum had let her practise not just with ordinary needles and thread, but also with fancy, curved suturing needles. Helen remembered that she had used the forceps to hold the edges of the material together, and the needle holder to push the needle through, so that her fingers didn't actually touch the needle. But suturing needles hadn't been much use for making teddy bears' pyjamas, so she hadn't used them for years.

Sewing up the wound in Yann's leg was nothing like stitching felt or cotton. It was more like sewing leather or plastic. She had to force the needle through with all her strength, then tug the thread after it to hold the skin together.

Yann didn't move, but she could hear his breathing. He took a deep breath as she picked up the edges of the skin with the forceps, held his breath as she forced

the needle through, and didn't let it out until she had finished tugging. She glanced up after she had tied off the seventh stitch. He had one hand over his eyes.

"I'm nearly done. I'm sorry it hurts."

He didn't answer. He just kept breathing. Helen kept sewing.

Finally, she knotted the last stitch and checked along the length of the wound. The stitches were uneven, but the wound met all the way round, which she thought was the important thing.

"That's me done. Here, wipe the sweat off your forehead."

She handed him a hanky and turned her back for a moment, placing the used needle carefully in the yellow bin with the orange lid.

When she turned back, there were no tears on his face. It wasn't her business if there ever had been.

Helen said gently, "Please get someone older to look at it when you get home. The way I've done it, there might be a scar."

"If so, it will be a scar honourably won. Your stitches will be all I need. Thank you. I will leave now."

"Hold on. I have to cover it up. And you have to tell me your story of the high wall and the distraction and why you can't tell your own doctors."

"There is nothing to tell. Just a foolish accident."

"And the teeth?"

"What teeth?"

She bent down and took a couple of small white objects from the heap of bloody swabs on the floor.

"These teeth. They were stuck in the wound."

His eyes brightened.

"May I have those? It is always useful to have a tooth of the creature that bit you."

"Not yet." She slipped the sharp teeth into her jeans pocket, and picked up the horse bandages.

She held a sterile pad over the wound and wrapped a soft white bandage round it, winding upwards from his hoof. Then, she fastened everything neatly and securely with wide sticky tape. She stood up and looked at her handiwork. She was fairly sure it wouldn't unravel or slip off.

"How does that feel?"

"It feels strong. I thank you. May I have those teeth?"

"May I have your story? Just for my records." She picked up her notebook. "All vets keep records."

Yann shied away from the small lined book, his horse's hooves clattering backwards on the floor and his boy's fists clenching.

"You must not write any record of my visit! Written words are very powerful. What have you written in there?"

"Keep your voice down!"

He repeated, more quietly but just as urgently, "What have you written, healer's child?"

"Just your name, Yann, and your injury – cut to back right leg. Nothing else."

"Destroy the page."

"Why?"

"Tear it out and burn it. There could be such trouble if anyone knows."

"If anyone knows what?"

"That I have been here. Why I have been here."

"Okay. You want me to destroy this page, and you

want me to give you these teeth. And I want your story. Which I will not write down, I promise."

Yann shook his head. "It is not my story. It is a secret and it is not my secret. I have promised not to tell."

"You promised to grant my wish."

"Are you sure you don't want a puppy, or a kitten, or a sparkly dress, or a pumpkin coach to a handsome prince's palace?" Yann grinned, and so did Helen.

"No, I just want an answer to my question."

"That's all? An answer. So easy to ask for."

He scowled again, but not at her. Perhaps he was thinking.

"I cannot break my promise. But I can ask to be freed from it. If you will destroy that page now, before my eyes, I will come back tomorrow, to tell you what I can. And tomorrow you can give me the teeth."

So Helen ripped out the page, lit a match from her Mum's odds and ends drawer and burnt it to ash. Then she hauled on the big sliding door to let Yann out. He didn't move.

"Take the teeth out of your pocket, healer's child. It is not a safe place to keep them, so near to your skin."

She moved her hand to her pocket, then hesitated, wondering if it was a trick. Was he going to grab the teeth, and break his promise?

Yann snorted. "Wait until I have gone, if you don't trust me. But keep them hidden at least an arm's length from you or any other breathing creature. Not in a pocket, nor a bed, nor anywhere you keep food."

"Are the teeth poisonous? Have you been poisoned? Your leg isn't swollen."

"No, but they are the teeth of a creature controlled

by evil, and it is not wise to keep evil close. I will take them to a safe place tomorrow. Look for me when the sun goes down."

He was hardly limping as he left the surgery. He trotted across the garden, jumped smoothly over the fence and cantered into the darkness of the field and the hills beyond.

Helen didn't hear the rustling in the bushes as the creature hidden there wriggled, trying to decide whether to follow the boy or watch the girl.

She turned back into the surgery, and took the teeth out of her pocket. She put them on the work surface. Not too near her.

She cleared all the rubbish away, sprayed disinfectant and tidied the shelves so there were no gaps where she'd removed supplies. Then she dropped the teeth into an empty swab packet, folded the top over, and left the surgery.

She pulled the door gently behind her, and let herself quietly back into the house. She looked around the hall for a hiding place, and decided to slip the packet into the toe of a black welly that was too small for her and too big for her sister. Then she washed her hands thoroughly.

She said goodnight to her Dad in the study and to her Mum in the bath, and blew a kiss to her little sister in the nursery. Then she went to bed.

Just before she fell asleep, she realized that the boy had never even asked her name. And she didn't think he'd said "please" once either. If he didn't come back, she wouldn't mind one bit.