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Opening extract from

The Secret Throne

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1

A HOLIDAY WITH DAD

'Just go away,' Taggie Paganuzzi whispered fiercely at the grey rain clouds that were drawing together across the bright summer sky. She and her sister were returning from a holiday with their mum to spend a fortnight with their dad. The drive had taken hours and Taggie was seriously bored.

'It's going to rain,' Jemima announced crossly. 'That's not fair. We've had lovely weather in Cornwall.'

Taggie, who was twelve, had lost count years ago of how many times every day her eleven-year-old sister said 'not fair'. It was Jemima's favourite phrase, which she gleefully applied to everything from school dinners to clothes to losing on the Wii. This time, however, Taggie was in complete agreement. Summer holidays were meant to be sunny; that was the whole reason for having them. In fact, she couldn't remember one that hadn't been warm and sunny.

The clouds were swirling and knotting together, thicker than tangles in hair. She gave them a determined stare. 'Go away,' she repeated hotly.

Sure enough, the clouds began to thin out as sharp,

unexpected flurries of wind tore at them like invisible claws. Within a minute the last wispy remnants were fleeing back to the seas where they'd come from.

'That was you,' Jemima said; her pretty heart-shaped face was tilted to one side as she regarded Taggie with a suspicious expression.

'Don't know what you mean,' Taggie replied smoothly.

'Mum!' Jemima called. 'Taggie's been cloudbusting again.'

In the driver's seat Nicola, their mother, grinned patiently. 'Has she? Well that's not a bad thing, is it?'

Jemima crossed her arms in exasperation and slumped down in her seat, which sent her sandy hair falling over her face.

Taggie glanced back out of the car, watching playful sunbeams soak into the rolling fields. She knew that what really bugged Jem was that she couldn't do it, no matter how hard she screwed up her face and yelled 'Abracadabra!' at the sky. Not that Taggie could do it every time; in fact she was mostly convinced it was all her heated imagination. But over the last few years her wistful wishes for rain to end and the sun to come out seemed to be answered favourably more often than not – which was why she used such wishes sparingly, in case anyone other than Jem noticed and realized how odd it was.

The ability had started to appear as the wonderful dreams had diminished. Taggie had never told anybody, but for every night of her first eight years she'd dreamed of a

palace. It was a huge and fabulous building with tall, gold-tipped spires and grand halls and elegant apartments; and at the very heart was a huge silver and blue throne room where a Queen sat on a shell-like throne under an arching crystal roof. The Queen was a stately, graceful old lady that Taggie found imposing; with long silver hair arranged in thick waves of curls, and a wise, kind face tinged with sorrow.

Whatever suffering befell Taggie during the day – those endless squabbles with Jemima, getting woeful marks in her French exams, her hockey team being beaten 9–0, tearing a favourite dress, breaking her arm aged seven when she fell off her bicycle, Mum and Dad splitting up, Floofs the cat dying – it didn't matter how big or small the hurt, the Queen smiled sympathetically in welcome when Taggie dreamed of her. Taggie felt an overwhelming relief that someone recognized and cared about everything she was going through. It was that caring which drained away the misery, leaving her happy and full of bounce when she woke up the next morning.

But around her eighth birthday the dreams stopped coming every night, and appeared less and less often – until they were no more. Taggie really missed the quiet comfort they brought. Most nights she still fell asleep hoping the Queen would appear again. Cloudbusting seemed such a poor substitute.

They were just in time for tea when they arrived at Melham village, a few miles north of Grantham. Dad's fruit farm sat

on the edge of the village, it had been in the family for generations, he told them. Once it had covered hundreds of acres, but over the centuries their land had slowly been sold off to pay debts and taxes until all that was left was Orchard Cottage, with its long paddock and ancient orchard bordering the remaining few fields.

Taggie and Jemima came hurtling out of the car. Dino Paganuzzi was waiting for them on the gravel at the end of the drive, his arms open wide.

'Daddeeeee!' they both yelled as they flung themselves on him.

He hugged his daughters. 'Hello, my darlings.'

Taggie gave him an extra squeeze. She was so pleased to see him she didn't want to let go, though she was dying to get into the cottage and start this part of the holiday. Dad grinned and went to get the cases from the car. Taggie didn't say what she was thinking, that he looked older somehow, with his hair thinning and a few more lines on his cheeks.

'Crikey, how long are you planning on staying?' he asked as he sweated and struggled with the bags and backpacks and eco-forever carriers and wicker baskets and gadget cases. 'A year?'

'Just the fortnight,' Mum said pointedly.

Taggie caught Dad giving her a sad smile as he said, 'I remember. Would you like to stay tonight? You've had a long drive.'

'No thank you,' Mum said.

Taggie sighed to herself. She never stopped hoping they'd get back together, even though she knew in her heart they never would. At least they were still friends.

The village of Melham was made up of dainty stone cottages and large imperious houses concealed behind high, trim hedges of yews and beech. Then there was Orchard Cottage. Its stone walls sagged and bent in odd places. And the roof was a strange combination of slate and quietly rotting thatch, mottled with bits of frayed tarpaulin Dad had tied on whenever the rain dribbled in through a new hole. Its apex bowed and curved more than a camel's back, almost as badly as the precarious chimneys.

But Taggie loved its warren of rooms and poky back stairs and beams that jutted out of walls and ceilings in unexpected places. There was no central heating and it got water from its own spring, which tasted so much better than mains water – that is, when it did eventually splutter out of the creaky brass taps. Only four rooms had electricity and they were all on the ground floor, the iron kitchen range burned coal, and there certainly wasn't any satellite TV or broadband. All of which made staying such an adventure, like camping indoors. Taggie was fully geared up for the fortnight. She'd brought her wind-up torch and lantern; her smartphone was fully charged, as was her iPad.

Once her bags were piled up on the floor of her bedroom, Taggie went downstairs to say goodbye to Mum. She got a kiss and a big hug, as did Jemima.

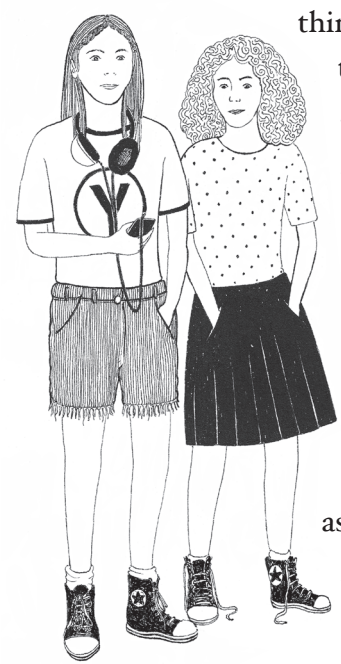
'Remember to phone,' Mum said as she got back into the car.

'We will,' the sisters promised.

The car wove round the overgrown rose bushes that had toppled across the gravel, and drove out past the broken gate. Taggie waved until it vanished from sight, then noticed the strange look Dad was giving her.

'You've changed your hair,' he said.

Taggie was surprised. Hairstyles weren't the kind of thing he normally noticed. Mum had treated her and Jen with a visit to an expensive hairdresser yesterday. Jen had got her hair fluffed up and frizzed, while Taggie's natural curls were finally straightened out, with two slim braids woven in to hold it off her face. She hadn't realized how long her hair actually was, though the hairdresser had warned her it would curl up again as soon as it got damp.



'Yes,' she said, delighted. 'Do you like it?'

He was looking quite puzzled now. 'You look just like . . . Sorry, that's silly of me.'

'Like who?' Taggie persisted.

'Someone I met a long time ago.'

'Mum? Everyone says I look just like her.'

'Well yes,' Dad said with an enigmatic smile. 'But the girl I'm thinking of wasn't your mother. Now come on, I've saved some strawberries from this morning's picking. Who wants some?'

'Me!' both sisters yelled excitedly.



2

STRANGE THINGS IN THE ORCHARD

After two helpings of strawberries, Taggie and Jemima went out into the garden to find Lightning, Dad's tortoise. Supposedly it had lived at Orchard Cottage for a hundred and eighty years, ever since a sailor ancestor brought it back from some adventurous voyage across the ocean, or so Dad claimed. They wandered round the shaggy bushes and peony trees, skirting the pond which was now mostly marsh and reeds.

'He's not here,' Jemima proclaimed as they criss-crossed the lawn for the third time. 'Let's try the orchard – he might prefer the shade.'

So they went through the kissing gate in the fuchsia hedge and into the orchard beyond. Dad always called it the fruit and nut orchard because of the amazing variety of trees planted there. The apple and pear trees were old and huge, but once upon a time they had been pruned and shaped properly, so their branches formed broad umbrellas just above the girls' heads. This year's crop was now almost ripe. Red and green apples hung like clusters of oversize grapes from the branches. Big bees were buzzing about, trying to find the last blossoms.

'Do you think we'll get to pick some?' Jemima asked as they walked through the dappled shade. The wildflowers that carpeted the ground had passed their best, with just a few flowers remaining amid the dry stalks and long grass.

'Probably,' Taggie said.

Jemima could just hear the pickers in the polytunnels on the other side of the tall hawthorn hedge, talking and laughing as they moved along the long troughs of strawberries. She was looking forward to helping with the harvest tomorrow – and earning some much needed money. Cornwall had been expensive.

There was no sign of Lightning underneath the apple trees. Then a quick flash of movement caught Jemima's eye. She moved towards it, and saw white fur, up amid the branches of the plum tree. Jemima liked cats. She hurried over and looked up, only to be surprised at the speed with which the creature zipped through the dense tangle of branches. Then her jaw dropped open in amazement as she saw it was actually a big squirrel. A white squirrel! It jumped effortlessly from one tree to the next.

'Hey!' Jemima exclaimed. One corner of the orchard had a line of hazelnut trees, and right at the end was a huge old sweet chestnut. 'You stay away from our nuts,' she scolded the squirrel. Even as she said it, she couldn't help but admire its tail; the snow-white fur was soft and fluffy enough to feature in a shampoo advert.

The squirrel turned and looked at her. That was when Jemima got the biggest shock of all. It was wearing glasses,

neat little steel frames with purple lenses.

'Nobody owns nuts,' it said.

Jemima gasped. It couldn't possibly be the squirrel that had spoken. A squirrel that wore glasses! 'Hey,' she said, and started running towards it. 'Hey, was that you?'

The squirrel skipped lightly along the branch and jumped again, flying through the air with the grace of an eagle. Jemima pounded along after it, her face screwing up that way it did when she was *really* determined.

Then they were at the end of the trees and the squirrel jumped to the ground. It performed a neat forward somersault as it hit the grass, and shot off towards the hawthorn hedge.

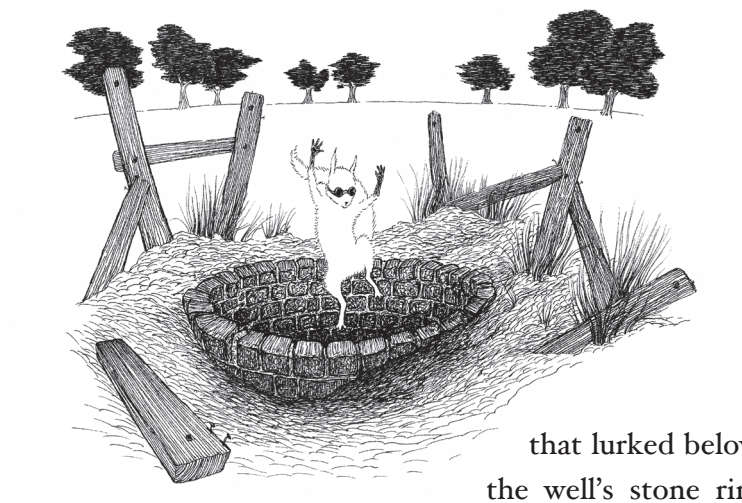
'No way!' Jemima grunted. Just then she realized where the squirrel was heading. At the far end of the orchard was an old stone well. There was no prim little roof above, nor a chain-winding mechanism for lowering pails down to the water. This well was just a big black hole in the ground with the remnants of a fence around it. Jemima had always stayed away from it – something about that deep black hole spooked her.

The squirrel shot between the rotten posts of wood.

'Stop,' Jemima shouted. 'Be careful, that's . . .'

It was too late: the squirrel leaped on to the low rim of stone, and dived straight down the well.

Jemima squealed in horror, her hands coming up to cover her mouth. Somehow she overcame her reluctance and scrambled over the moss-covered fence. The darkness



that lurked below the well's stone rim was so intense it was frightening. She squirmed her way back a bit, and listened for any sound of a struggling squirrel.

Taggie arrived beside her, breathless and anxious. She gave the well a nervous look and kept a couple of paces back from the empty shaft of darkness. 'What is it? What happened?'

'A squirrel,' Jemima cried. 'I saw a squirrel fall down the well.' At this point she wasn't prepared to mention the glasses. Nor the talking bit. Actually, Jemima thought it best not to say it was white, either.

'I can't see anything . . .' Very slowly, Taggie edged forward and squinted down the stone-lined hole.

'It's down there, I swear,' Jemima said.

'We should drop a pebble in. See how far down the water is.'

'Hey! You two – come away from there *right* now.' It

was Dad's very cross voice. 'Come on, I mean it!'

They both turned round guiltily to see him marching through the orchard trees. He looked furious.

The sheepish sisters clambered back over the fence. One of the poles cracked sharply when Taggie put all her weight on it.

'Sorry, Daddy,' Jemima said, hanging her head. She hated it when he was cross with her. And they were only a couple of hours into the holiday.

Dad put an arm round each girl's shoulder, and steered them away from the fence. 'It's all right. It's partly my fault. I should never have let the fence get so dilapidated. I'll fix it properly tomorrow.' He glanced back over his shoulder with a worried expression.

'Maybe close it permanently . . .' he muttered to himself. 'I still have the entitlement to do that. Yes I do. That cannot be taken from me.'

'But . . . Daddy, I saw a squirrel fall down it,' Jemima insisted.

Dad stopped. 'What sort of squirrel?'

Which Jemima thought was a strange kind of question for him to ask. 'Just a squirrel,' she said, trying not to sound too guilty.

'It'll be fine,' Dad assured them. 'Squirrels are the best climbers. It was probably scared of you two waiting at the top.'

'How deep is the well?' Jemima asked. 'It's very dark.'

'Deep enough to need a fence round it,' Dad said. 'It's

very dangerous. So I want both of you to promise me you'll stay away.'

'Yes, Dad,' they mumbled.

'Oh the enthusiasm, it's overwhelming. Will you please stay away?'

'YES, DAD.'

'Better.' He hugged them both. 'Much better. Now come on, let's see if we can find Lightning. He's been eating my lettuces this year, the rotten thing. We'll start in the vegetable patch.'