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opening extract from

The Secret History of Tom Trueheart

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Part One
The Beginning



Chapter 1

SOMEWHERE IN THE DARK EASTERN WOODS

Once upon a time, long ago, near the Land of Stories, lived young Tom Trueheart. He was the youngest of the famous Trueheart family of adventurers. He lived far away from here, and even further from now, in a carved and painted wooden house near a busy crossroads, on the edge of a deep dark forest, in the time of fables. He lived with his kindly mother, and with his six older brothers.

Tom's six older brothers were all named Jack: *Simple Jack, Jack-a-Napes, Jack the Giant Killer, Jack Sprat, or Jack-a-Dandy?*

These Jacks were well known and celebrated throughout the land. Jack, Jacquot, Jacques, Jackie, Jackson, and Jake were very tall, very beefy, very brave,

and very noisy young men. On the occasions when they were all at home together, the little wooden house was so noisy, and so crowded with Jacks, that it almost burst at the seams. All of these six brothers were famous for a very good reason.

It was these brave brothers, these same six, fabled, heroic Jacks who had carried out all of the toughest, scariest, and most romantic and exciting adventures so far to have happened in the Land of Stories.

All of the great stories had happened to a Jack.



Over the years, the youngest son Tom Trueheart had grown into an imaginative, kind, and helpful boy. He was not tall or broad for his age, as all his brothers had been, he was slight and wiry. His hair was dark and curled naturally, while all his brothers had hair which was straight and worn long like a Viking warrior.

Tom's hair was hard to tame, and, on the rare occasions when he would let her, his mother had a devil of a time trying to brush it at all. His hair curled round his head in such wild and springy locks that he looked permanently windswept. His eyes were

dark, like his mother's, not the clear blue of his father and brothers.

From the earliest age he had suffered from bad dreams after listening to all the scary adventure stories of his older brothers. Dreams of wolves waiting in the darkest parts of the forest with big teeth and dripping jaws. Dreams of Ogres and Giants and dark dungeons and black-cloaked, smiling villains. Even when there was just Tom and his mother, and they had a rare quiet evening on their own together, she would insist that they huddled cosily side by side in the inglenook fireplace (the kind you can actually sit inside) and she couldn't resist telling him one or two of the old and really scary stories. Stories, after all, were the family trade . . .

There was just one thing: Tom carried in his heart a worrying secret. A secret he kept locked up very tight inside. He was not like his bigger brothers in one other very important way. *He was not at all brave.*



Chapter 2

SOMEWHERE ELSE IN THE DARK EASTERN WOODS
THE SAME NIGHT

Little Jollity Brownfield, an apprentice sprite, flitted through the night forest like a ghost, wrapped in his dark cloak. He moved quietly and fast. His feet crackled and danced over the mounds of frosted leaves. Cousin Cicero had trusted him with his first solo mission, and Jollity certainly didn't want to let him down. He was very nervous of making a mistake. He felt for the bag slung across his shoulder; he could feel the shape of the envelope inside. Phew, he thought, still there, still safe. From somewhere near him a fox barked its unearthly bark, and Jollity nearly jumped out of his skin it sounded so close. There was a real chill in the air and it would not be long

before the forest would be knee deep with the first snows of winter.



Jollity soon found the house. It was just as Cicero had described. It was nestled among the trees at the edge of the forest, and close to the crossroads that led to the Four Gates and the roads always taken by adventurers. The house was dark and appeared to be fast asleep, except for a thin ribbon of smoke which drifted from the chimney, and the faint light of a night lantern, which hung from the eaves of the little porch and seemed to say 'Welcome, traveller'.

Jollity studied the house from the tree line; it was very important that he should on no account be seen. There were three dormer windows along the front and three along the back which overlooked the little fenced-off vegetable plot. There was a smaller attic window in the roof.

'That'll be Tom's room,' Jollity said to himself as he skipped across the road and up to the side door. 'Very carefully now,' he whispered. 'Remember your training.'

He opened the door, and like a wraith he melted

into the dim kitchen. He stood in the shadows and cupped his ear to the inner door. He could hear the faint crackling of a good cosy fire and a deep voice telling an exciting-sounding story (Jacquot back from a recent adventure). He almost tripped over a gaping seven-league boot (the boot of choice for all adventurers) which had been left on the floor just inside the porch. It took him just a moment after that to carry out his first mission. When he was finished he studied the result from many different positions in the room. He was pleased. He had carried out Cicero's instructions to the letter and as faithfully as he could—mission accomplished.

He heard a sudden shout and a roar of laughter from behind the closed door, which set his little heart beating faster. 'That's enough for now, young Jollity,' he whispered and he quietly let himself back out into the cold forest, and was soon gone like a shadow through the trees.



On the way up to his bed in his tiny attic bedroom, that night, as on so many other similar nights, Tom's brothers taunted and teased him. They made howling

noises as Tom climbed the stairs. They poked their great hairy heads through the gaps in the banisters and stuck their tongues out at him.

'They're only teasing you,' his mother said, when she hugged him goodnight. 'They mean you no harm. They are wild, and big, and brave, and they're just toughening you up to be the same. And do you know something, Tom Trueheart, you will be the toughest of them all one day, and in your own special way too. Your turn will come, never fear. Why, you're still far too young to worry about adventuring out in that other big world yet.' And she laughed kindly, kissed him on the forehead, and ruffled his hair.



When she had shut the door Tom looked out at the dark forest and the big wide world beyond the garden fence. The trees with their hidden mysteries seemed to press so close to his bedroom window. I'll be twelve in a month, he thought. I can't wait. There was, deep down inside Tom, a secret part that felt ready to tackle an adventure, face a villain, whether animal or human. His mother and his great gaggle of unruly brothers had always treated him teasingly, but fondly, as the youngest of the family. What excited him was the thought that one day he would show them that he could do something daring and brave too.

