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opening extract from

The Beasts of Clawstone Castle

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CHAPTER ONE

There are children whose best friends have two legs, and there are children whose best friends have four – or a thousand, or none at all.

Madlyn was very fond of *people*. Ordinary, two-legged people. She liked the girls at her school and in her dancing class, and she liked the people she met at the swimming pool and in the supermarket and the library. When you like people they usually like you back, and Madlyn had so many invitations to parties and sleep-overs that if she had accepted them all she would never have had a night at home. She was very pretty, with silky fair hair and clear blue eyes and a deep laugh – the kind that infects other people and

makes them think that being alive is a thoroughly good idea.

Rollo, her brother, who was two years younger, was quite different. He did not mind people, but his truest friends lived under stones or in the rafters of the local church or in heaps of earth in the park, and if he was writing a birthday card it was more likely to be addressed to his stump-tailed skink than to a boy in his class.

The skink didn't exactly belong to him – it lived in London Zoo – but he had adopted it. The zoo runs a very good scheme whereby children can choose an animal to adopt and when he was six years old his parents had taken him to the zoo to choose something he liked.

The cuddly animals like the wombats and bush-babies and fluffy possums all had waiting lists of children wanting to adopt them, but Rollo had always liked lizards and as soon as he met Stumpy's eyes and saw his berry-blue tongue flicker out he knew the creature was for him.

The children lived in a ground-floor flat in a pleasant part of south London. Their parents were funny and clever and nice, but they were apt to be a little bit frantic because of their jobs. Mrs Hamilton ran an experimental theatre which put on interesting plays but kept on running out of money, and Mr Hamilton

was a designer and had to have good ideas about what people should do with their houses.

Both of them worked long hours and never knew when they were going to be home and, when Rollo was a baby and Madlyn had just started school, life had been rather a muddle. But as Madlyn grew older everything became easier. Though she loved parties and clothes and going out with her friends, she was a sensible and practical girl and soon she began to take a hand in the running of her home. She left notes for her mother, reminding her to pick up Rollo's coat from the cleaners and make an appointment with the dentist; she rang her father at the office and told his secretary that a man from Hong Kong had come to see him and was eating doughnuts in the kitchen. And almost every morning she found the car keys, which her parents had lost.

Most of all, she saw to it that Rollo had what he needed, which was not always the same as what other boys needed. She soothed him when stupid people asked after his skunk instead of his skink; she stopped the cleaning lady from throwing away the snails he kept in a jar under his bed, and when he had a nightmare she was beside him almost as soon as he woke. It wasn't that she loved him – she did, of course – but it was more than that. It was as though she was able to get right inside his skin. As for Rollo, when he came in through the front door he looked first of all for

Madlyn and if she was there he gave a little sigh of content and went off to his room to get on with his life.

When everything is going along normally it is hard to imagine why there should be a change. But at the beginning of the summer term when Madlyn was eleven an offer came from an American college inviting Mr Hamilton to spend two months in New York setting up a course for people who wanted to start their own design business. There was a room in the college for him and his wife, but nothing at all was said about the children.

'We can't possibly leave them,' said Mr Hamilton.

'And we can't possibly take them along,' said Mrs Hamilton.

'So we'll have to refuse.'

'Yes.'

But the Americans had offered a lot of money and the car was making terrible noises and bills were dropping through the letter box in droves.

'Unless we send them to the country. They ought to be in the country,' said Mrs Hamilton. 'It's where children ought to be.'

'But where?' asked her husband. 'Where in the country? Where would we send them for two whole months?'

'Up to the Scottish border. To Clawstone. To Uncle

George at Clawstone Castle. I've always meant to take them there but . . .'

By 'but' she meant that Uncle George lived in the bleakest and coldest part of England and was a thoroughly grumpy old man.

'We'll see what Madlyn thinks,' said her father.

Madlyn, when they put it to her, knew exactly what she thought. She thought, *no.* She had four parties to go to, the school was planning a visit to the ballet and she had been chosen to play Alice in the end-of-term production of *Alice in Wonderland.* What's more, from what she had overheard, she was sure that Uncle George's castle was not the kind that appeared in cartoon films, with gleaming towers and princes, but the other kind – the kind one learned about in History lessons, with things like mottes and baileys and probably rats.

'It would mean wearing wellington boots all day,' she said, 'and I haven't got any.'

Rollo was lying on the floor, drawing a picture of a Malayan tapir which lived near his skink in the zoo. Now he looked up and said, 'I have. I've got wellington boots.'

Mr and Mrs Hamilton said nothing. The Americans were offering enough money to enable them to fix the car and pay every single bill in the house when they got back. All the same, they stayed silent.

The silence was a long one.

But Madlyn was a good person, the kind that wanted other people to be happy. Being good like that is bad luck, but there is nothing to be done.

'Oh, all right,' said Madlyn at last. 'But I want proper boots, green ones, and a real oilskin and sou'wester, and an Aran knit sweater, and an electric torch with three different colours . . .'

She was a person who could always be cheered up by a serious bout of shopping.

Chapter Two

Sir George always woke early on Saturday morning because that was when the castle was open to the public and there was a lot to do.

He lifted his creaking legs out of the four-poster bed, which was propped up at one end with a wooden fish crate to stop it falling down, and padded off to the bathroom. There was no hot water but he was used to that; the boiler was almost as old as Sir George himself and Clawstone was not a place for people who wanted to be comfortable.

It did not take him long to get ready. His hair was so sparse that brushing it was dangerous, so he only passed a comb lightly through what was left of it and

put on his long woollen underpants and the mustard-coloured tweed suit he wore summer and winter. But today, because it was Open Day, he also put on a tie. It was a regimental tie because he had served all through the war in the army and got a leg wound which still made him limp.

'Right! Time to get going,' he said to himself – and went over to the mantelpiece to fetch the bunch of keys which lived in a box underneath a painting of a large white bull. Once Sir George's bedroom walls had been covered in valuable paintings, but they had all been sold and only the bull was left. Then he went downstairs to unlock the door of the museum and the dungeon and the armoury, so that the visitors tramping through the castle got their money's worth.

Sir George's sister, Miss Emily, also woke early on Open Day, and wound her thin grey plait of hair more carefully round her head than usual. Then she put on the long brown woollen skirt which she had knitted herself. During the many years she had worn it, it had taken on the outlines of her behind, but not at all unpleasantly because she was a thin lady and her behind was small. Today, though, because it was Open Day, she also knotted a scarf round her throat. It was one of those weak-looking chiffon scarves which look as though they need feeding up, but Emily was fond of it. She had found it under a sofa cushion when she went to move a nest of field mice who had decided to

breed there, and the slightly mousy smell which clung to it did not trouble her in the least.

Then she fetched her keys, which also lived on the mantelpiece, but not under a painting of a bull – under a painting of a cow. Like her brother George, Emily had once slept in a room full of costly paintings, but now only the cow was left.

The third member of the family never came out of his room on Open Day. This was Howard Percival, a cousin of Sir George's and Miss Emily's. He was a middle-aged man with a grey moustache and so shy that if he saw a human being he had not known for at least twenty years he hurried away down the corridors and shut himself up in his room.

Emily always hoped that Howard would decide to help; there were so many things he could have done to interest the visitors, but she knew it was no good asking him. When shyness gets really bad it is like an illness, so she just knocked on his door to tell him that the day had begun and went downstairs to the kitchen where she found Mrs Grove, who came in from the village to help, preparing breakfast.

'Nothing doing with Mr Howard, then?' she asked, and Emily sighed and shook her head.

'His door's bolted.'

A frown spread over Mrs Grove's kind, round face. It was her opinion that Sir George and Miss Emily should have been stricter with their cousin. With

everyone working so hard for Open Day he could have pulled his weight. But all she said was, 'I'll put the coffee on.'

Emily nodded and went through to the storeroom to look at the treasures she had made for the gift shop.

People who pay to look round castles and stately homes usually like to have something to buy, and Emily had done her best. She had made three lavender bags, which she had sewn out of muslin – the kind that is used for bandages – and filled with flower heads from the bushes in the garden. One of them leaked a little but the other two were intact, and since so far no one had actually bought any bags there would probably be enough for today. She had prepared two bowls of dried rose petals, which were meant to scent people's rooms: pot-pourri, it was called. The trouble was that it was difficult to dry anything properly in the castle, which was always damp, both inside and out, so the petals had gone mouldy underneath. Now she packed the scones she had baked into plastic bags and stuck little labels on them saying 'Baked in the Clawstone Bakery', which was perfectly true. She had baked them herself the day before on the ancient stove in the kitchen and they were not really burnt. A little dark round the edges perhaps but not actually *burnt.*

It was important not to lose heart; Emily knew that, but just for a moment she felt very sad and discouraged. She worked so hard, but she knew that

never in a hundred years would her gift shop catch up with the gift shop at Trembellow Towers. The gift shop at Trembellow was larger. It had table mats stamped with the Trembellow coat of arms. It had furry animals bought in from Harrods and books of poems about Nature and embroidered tea towels. And leading out of the gift shop at Trembellow was a tea room with proper waitresses and soft music playing.

No wonder people turned left at the Brampeth Crossroads and made their way to Trembellow instead of Clawstone. And it seemed so unfair, because the people who owned Trembellow did not *need* money; they only *wanted* it, which is not the same at all.

But she would catch up, Emily told herself; she would not give in to despair. She was always having good ideas. Only yesterday she had found some old balls of wool left in a disused linen bag which would knit up into mittens and gloves. The moths had been at some of them but there were plenty left.

Sir George, meanwhile, was opening up the rooms he had prepared to make things interesting for the visitors. He was a private sort of person and found it difficult to have people tramping through his house and making loud remarks, which were often rather rude, but once he had decided it had to be done, he worked hard to see that the people who came got value for their money.

So he had filled the billiard room with all sorts of

things – his grandmother's old sewing machine and a rocking horse with a broken leg and a box of stones he had found on the beach when he was a boy, and he had put a big notice on the door saying 'Museum'.

Down in the cellar he had collected ancient contraptions which might well have been used as torture instruments – rusty mangles which pulled at the laundry maids' arms as they turned the handle, and huge washtubs which they might have drowned in, and dangerous boilers which had to be heated with fires underneath that could easily have burned them to death. He had labelled the door 'Dungeon', and he had made an armoury too, into which he had put his rifle from the war and the bow and arrow he had had as a little boy and various pikes and halberds and axes he had found lying about.

But he too, as he tidied the exhibits and straightened the signs saying 'Danger' on those floorboards which had gone rotten, had to be careful not to feel discouraged and sad. For he knew that for every car which made its way to Clawstone, there would be ten cars at least going to Trembellow. And really he couldn't wonder at it. Trembellow had a proper dungeon with throat manacles and racks on which people had been stretched and died in agony. Trembellow's museum housed priceless rings; the weapons in the armoury had belonged to Charles the First. And the man who owned Trembellow was as rich as Sir George was poor.

At ten o'clock Mrs Grove's sister Sheila came to take the tickets, bringing with her a duffel bag filled with things that people in the village had sent for the museum and the shop. The postmistress had had a clear-out in her attic and found the old cardboard gas-mask case which had held her grandfather's gas mask in the war. And Mr Jones had made a new puzzle for the shop.

Mr Jones was the retired sexton and had taken up fretwork. He made jigsaw puzzles by sticking pictures on to plywood and sawing them into wiggly shapes, and he was very kind about letting Miss Emily have them to sell in the gift shop. The one he had sent this morning was a picture of two vegetable marrows and a pumpkin which he had managed to saw into no less than twenty-seven pieces.

Then Mrs Grove and her sister set up the folding table and brought out the roll of tickets and the saucer for the change and laid out the pamphlets Sir George had written giving the history of the castle, and Open Day began.

It did not go well. By lunchtime only ten people had come and there had been some unpleasantness because Emily had left her bedroom door open and a family with two small boys had gone in and peered at her nightdress, which they thought had been worn by Queen Victoria and was part of the tour. Nobody

bought a lavender bag and a man with a red face brought back the jigsaw puzzle he had bought the week before and asked for his money to be returned because the pieces did not fit properly. It was not until the visitors had made their way out of the castle and were wandering about in the gardens that Sir George and his sister could relax.

But today their quiet time did not last for long because the postman brought a most distressing letter. It was from Sir George's niece, Patricia Hamilton, asking if they could have Madlyn and Rollo to stay for two months in the summer.

The parents apologized; they hated to ask favours, but if it was possible it would be a wonderful thing for the children.

'Children!' said Sir George, leaning back in his chair. His voice was grim. He might as well have been saying 'Smallpox!' or 'Shipwreck!'

'Oh dear, children,' repeated Emily. 'I do find children a little alarming. Especially if they are small.'

'Children are generally small,' said Sir George crabbily. 'Otherwise they would not be children.'

Emily was about to say that actually some children were quite large these days because they ate the wrong things – she had read about it in the paper – but she didn't.

'Do you think they will shout and scream and . . . play practical jokes?' she asked nervously. 'You

know . . . string across the stairs and apple-pie beds?'

Sir George was frowning, staring out of the window at the park.

'If they let off fireworks and frighten the animals I shall have to beat them,' he said.

But the thought of beating children was seriously alarming. You had to catch them first, and then up-end them . . . and his joints were a trouble to him even when he had to get up from his chair. What if they were the kind of children who *squirmed*?

'They have been brought up in town,' he went on disapprovingly. 'The boy will probably pretend to be a motor car and make those vroom-vroom noises all the time.'

'And the girl will wear thin shoes and carry a hand-bag.'

A gloomy silence fell. Then:

'Cousin Howard won't like it,' said Emily.

'No,' said her brother, 'Cousin Howard won't like it at all. But the children are "family". Patricia is my niece. They have Percival blood.'

Emily nodded. Blood is blood and cannot be argued with – and the next day they wrote to say that of course Madlyn and Rollo would be welcome to spend the summer at Clawstone.