Keeper of Secrets
Sarah J. Dodd

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Sarah J. Dodd grew up in the north of England and spent her weekends and holidays walking all over the country with her family. The rest of the time she spent exploring unknown worlds between the pages of a book or dreaming about horses. She studied Environmental Science at the University of Nottingham and gained a PhD in plant ecology from the University of Lancaster before becoming a primary school teacher.

After living in Australia for a while, she returned to the UK and settled in Lancashire, where she still lives. A lover of animals, mountains and mysterious paths, she will try anything once and loves to get her hands and clothes dirty in the name of fun and adventure.

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For the lonely reader: you are not alone.

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Click!

A light came on, waking Emily with a start. A faint glow shone through the thin curtains. At first, she couldn't remember where she was. Her blanket was draped over her as usual. Everything *seemed* all right, but she felt higher than normal, as though she'd fallen asleep in a tree.

Bit by bit, last night's memories came back. The journey through the forest to Badger Cottage. Arriving late because she'd been sick in the car. The tiniest house she'd ever seen, attached to a much bigger one, like a cub clinging to its mother. A small, shabby living room with a fireplace full of cold, dead sticks. The wooden staircase with gaps between the treads, waiting to swallow her feet.

And now here she was in this bed, high up on top of a giant wooden box with a ladder at the end. The

box had sliding doors so you could store things in there. A good place to hide.

A good place for anything to hide.

Her breathing sped up and she pulled the blanket over her head – the fleecy one with black and white patches like a giant, snuggly panda that Mum had bought for her when she'd had chickenpox. It needed a wash, really, but she liked its musty smell. It was comforting, even though she had a sneaky feeling that eleven-year-old girls should have grown out of that kind of thing.

But what was that *light*? It hadn't been on when she went to sleep. She lay still on the lumpy mattress, chewing the skin beside her fingernail. Should she stay under the covers, or should she look? She could shout for Dad, of course, but he was so grumpy if he was disturbed at night.

Peeling back the panda blanket, she sat up. She reached out to touch the curtain and hesitated. The light must be the one in the porch. It came on whenever anyone came to the front door – she remembered that from last night, when Dad had been fumbling with the key. But who would come to their door in the middle of the night? No one knew them in this village except… *Oh*! Perhaps it was Nana Godwin, come early to surprise them!

Nana Godwin. When she hugged Emily, it felt like Mum's arms in a different body; when she spoke, it was Mum's tenderness in a different voice. Tears pricked Emily's eyes. Everything would be all right if Nana were here.

Well, not all right, exactly. But even all wrong was better when Nana Godwin was around.

Emily flung back the curtain.

And froze.

Outside, padding along the lane in front of the cottage, was a beast. It was the size of a massive dog, but its face was the wrong shape – more catlike, only it had weird tufts on its ears and a stump of a tail. Its golden fur was spotted, some of the spots stretching out into black streaks. A rabbit swung from its mouth. Limp.

Dead.

The beast stopped and looked up. It must have seen her.

With a frightened squeak, Emily let the curtain fall back and pressed herself against the wall.

What if it came into the garden? What if it managed to get *in the house*? She imagined it padding through the living room and up the staircase, silent and stealthy on those massive paws. On the landing and outside her door, and … *what was that noise*?

A wailing groan, like an animal in pain. It sounded nearby. It seemed to be coming from the wall between their cottage and the big house next door.

'DAD!' she yelled.

The groaning stopped.

She heard a creak and a shuffling sound from across the narrow landing. A shape appeared at the door.

'What's the matter?'

'There's something out there.' Emily could hardly get the words out. 'Or inside. It's in the house. I think it's a tiger.'

'Give me a break, Em.' Dad's voice was croaky and cranky all at once. 'There's nothing to worry about.'

'There *is*. Look. But don't let it see you.'

He climbed up the ladder and lifted the curtain with one finger. 'I can't see anything. It's just your imagination, as usual.'

'I saw it, I swear. And I heard it, right *there*.' She pointed at the wall. 'Call the police.'

'How could it be out there and in here at the same time? Go back to sleep, Em.' He climbed down and went back to his room.

But Emily knew what she'd seen, what she'd heard. She'd have to stay awake. Keep guard.

After the funeral, she'd been sent every week to see

a woman with purple plaits and glasses that made her eyes look bigger than they really were. She was kind and spoke in a soft, inviting voice, asking Emily to talk about how she felt.

'Scared,' Emily had said.

Of what?

She couldn't say. Of everything.

Since Mum had died, she had felt as though something was following her – a huge, faceless monster that wanted to catch her and make her cry. It knew where she was because the emptiness inside her called to it. But every time she opened her mouth to talk about it, she felt like she was in a lift that was dropping too fast.

She had that feeling now. She had to hide.

Listening carefully to make sure Dad was settled in his room again, she crept down the ladder, dragging her panda blanket with her. *There are no monsters in here*, she told herself firmly as she pushed back the door beneath the bed. *Only the one outside.*

The door slid open jerkily, revealing a dark space just the right size for hiding in. She tucked herself in and tried to stay awake. But soon her eyes began to close, and for the first time in six months, it wasn't Mum's face she saw as she drifted into sleep.

It was a much wilder one.