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opening extract from

Beyond the Hedge

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The extraordinary events that took place on Sandy Henderson's 11th birthday began to unfold with no hint of what was to come. It had all started uneventfully enough as she played with her Abyssinian cat Leo in the back garden of 'Woodburn', Bank Street. But then the inexplicable happened.

'Woodburn' is a sprawling Victorian house in the town of Irvine on the south-west coast of Scotland. In those days Irvine was a quieter place with a gentler pace of life. At the time that concerns us, the house had a vast, overgrown garden with a neglected apple orchard. Old rambling tracks led to forgotten secret places. A twisting, narrow path stopped abruptly at a bricked-up old doorway that had once led who knows where. It was an intriguing garden, a strange, mysterious place that appealed to a dreamy child like Sandy.

This jumble of a jungle was her favourite place. It seemed there was always something new and diverting to investigate, be it a flash of tiger stripes through the waving grass, or the flicker of flamingo wings in the reeds and bulrushes of the sunken lily pond.

Leo leapt through dense shrubbery at the farthest edge of the orchard intent on some cat pursuit or other. Sandy, dark

ponytail flying out behind her, scrambled through ancient rhododendrons and brambles trying to keep up with him. Fierce, spiky tendrils caught at her bare legs as she ran along brushing aside dewy spiders' webs with a grimace and a shiver.

The cat was heading for an arch in the hedge which separated the orchard from the wilderness that made up the rest of the garden. Sandy was sure she'd never seen the structure before but she rarely ventured this far as the vegetation was virtually impenetrable.

She stopped a few yards short of the wooden construction. The arch was heavy with swags of late summer roses and intricate spirals of honeysuckle and looked inoffensive enough, but there was something distinctly unsettling about it and she experienced a stab of unease. She called out to Leo but in true cat fashion he didn't react so she shouted his name again more insistently. He glanced at her disdainfully and strolled through the arch.

It was a genuine case of now you see him, now you don't. The cat-shaped space where he'd been filled with a running, swirling kaleidoscope that rushed in like the tide to cover his tracks. The garden swam back into focus through the arch and the orchard echoed with a hushed, conspiratorial whisper, "Cat? What cat?"

Leo had vanished into thin air.

The strong, heady scent of old-fashioned roses was intense and overpowering, and the late morning sunlight darkened to the bruised purple hue of winter twilight. For a second or two the air was filled with the tinkling of tiny bells.



The crow had seen the whole thing from his precarious perch on the highest branch of a huge sycamore. The branch was barely more than a twig and the crow could not be described as insubstantial.


A.MILNE.

The Hendersons knew how to look after their feathered chums. They were fed regularly with kitchen scraps and left-overs, and we're not talking small portions. Life for the wild birds was good, in fact it was a piece of cake, the odd stale bun or two and the occasional slice or three of fusty bread. A particular favourite was cold, dance-on thick porridge which Sandy had valiantly struggled to eat. She was Scottish after all but, try as she might, she never quite made it to the other side of a bowl. That was just fine with the birds. They were delighted to help out.

The crow realised what he'd witnessed would take some sorting out, and the sooner he made a start the better. He shook out his feathers, gave them a quick appraisal and flew effortlessly up into the warm autumn air. Turning smoothly down Bank Street, he flapped off in the direction of the harbour past the imposing yet graceful architecture of Trinity Church which sits on high ground overlooking the River Irvine. He was unable to resist the urge to fly under the station bridge at the bottom of Montgomery Street and, when he came out the other side, performed a nifty 360 degree victory roll. Even in an emergency the crow couldn't help showing off.

It may be apparent by now that this is no run-of-the-mill crow. He's fully conversant with the language of humans and likes to introduce himself in the same flamboyant way. "The name's Craw, Jock Craw, Special Secret Agent, Double-O-One, the-one-and-only."

In some quarters the big guy is affectionately known as 'not-so-secret agent' for reasons that aren't hard to deduce.

The crow was approaching the Harbour Office when he found himself in the slipstream of his chum, Peg Leg, another regular diner at 'Woodburn'. He called out as he drew level with the seagull. "I've got to find the Captain urgently. I haven't time to explain. Just tell him Jock says he

should come home right away. He'll understand. I'm going back to keep an eye on things."

"Leave it to me, pal; he's with Captain Robertson on 'The Garnock'. They're just about to dock."

With a "catch you later" Peg flew arrow-straight towards the tug.

Yes, I know you've noticed, the seagull can talk too, but Irvine, in spite of its apparent normality, is a very unusual place where just about anything can happen.

It was a working port then and Sandy's father, Captain Ralph Henderson, was the harbourmaster. He had just stepped onto the bridge of 'The Garnock' when he spotted the seabird heading his way. The gull landed on the guard rail beside him which was a tricky manoeuvre with just the one leg.

The harbourmaster looked at him quizzically as the tug rolled towards the wharf and its usual mooring behind the dredger. "What's up, Peg Leg? It's not like you to be so familiar when we're in company. Is something wrong?"

The seagull leant forward gingerly and in a loud whisper relayed the message from Jock.



Jim, as Peg Leg was formerly known, lost a limb during a short but violent storm off the coast of Northern Ireland. The gull was forced to take refuge on an Irish fishing boat carrying a cargo of Dublin Bay prawn, lobster and crab. Sadly for Jim, he chose the wrong creel to land on, the one occupied by a large, angry lobster. This was the absolute limit for the trapped creature who was already beside himself with distress and panic. That upstart gull was going to regret his impudence BIGTIME.

With a single lightning-fast movement the lobster thrust a gigantic claw up through one of the gaps in the lobster pot. There was a sickening crunch as the desperate beast, in a fit

of spite, snapped Jim's left leg clean off just below the knee. The gull screeched in pain and flew out to sea leaving a trail of blood behind him.

"That'll teach you," muttered the crabbit crustacean. "Now it's not just me who's had a thoroughly ghastly day."

The lobster was immediately ashamed of his uncharacteristic behaviour. He could hardly blame his predicament on the unfortunate gull: he'd managed to get into this mess all by himself.

Jim was a seasoned campaigner who'd had more than one brush with death, so the partial loss of a limb was not about to burst his bubble. He was used to life being extremely harsh but he'd always managed to keep his head above water. Seagulls have guts, and I don't mean fish guts, although on a good day this is also true.

Jim's generous and forgiving nature is the only reason the lobster didn't end up as 'Speciality of the House' in some posh restaurant. Faced with a similar fate, any one of us might be less than rational.

The seagull managed to staunch the bleeding with a skilful tourniquet of seaweed which was the perfect remedy, stuffed as it is with healing minerals and nutrients. Jim rested on the stern of the boat until he felt better then flew towards the creel where the subdued lobster was contemplating his imminent demise. The trapped beast was feeling remorseful. Why had he been so vicious? He was undoubtedly going to die and, as if that wasn't bad enough, he now had the burden of this dreadful last act on his conscience.

"Psst!"

The lobster looked up dolefully. His heart was heavy and he was consumed with shame.

"I'd like to help you if I can. Is it safe to come closer?"

The crustacean was amazed to see the very same seagull hobbling towards his rope prison. "*You* want to help *me* after what I've just done? No way, why would you? I must be

hallucinating. It's the shock, of course. I've gone bonkers; the stress has tipped me over the edge and left me three barnacles short of a rock."

The lobster was more than a little distracted and Jim was beginning to lose patience. "I'm as real as you are and, if anyone should be in a state, it ought to be yours truly. I've just had my name changed to Peg Leg, thanks to you, and I think I've taken it pretty well under the circumstances, don't you?"

"You really have come back! Why on earth would you do that? You're having me on, toying with me... pulling my leg." He hesitated before adding, "I'm so sorry, I can't believe I said that. How tactless. I'm afraid I haven't had much use for diplomacy being a lobster."

Jim's good nature was being sorely tested. "Look here, Crusty, do you want to stay in that creel? I can leave you to it, if you'd rather, but if I am going to help you, there's no time to lose, so what say we get stuck in? Do you have a name?"

"Forgive me for not introducing myself. I'm Lorimer and I'm much obliged to you."

Jim pecked furiously at the ropes from the outside while the lobster worked relentlessly at the unforgiving bonds with his over-developed claw. They took turns at keeping watch while they worked.

A matter of minutes that seemed more like hours later, a grateful, grovelling lobster scuttled joyfully from his erstwhile prison towards the seagull. Lorimer had his claws outstretched and would have heaped the equivalent of lobster kisses on his saviour had it been feasible. Their different anatomy put paid to that idea which, all things considered, was probably for the best. Instead he gestured to Peg to jump on his back. "Take the weight off your feet... Yikes, I've done it again, I'm really sorry. I keep putting my foot in it. Did I just say "foot in it"? On balance, no perhaps balance

isn't a good choice of word either." He fell into a perplexed silence.

"No problem, Lorimer. I'm not in the least offended. You had very pressing reasons, I seem to recall."

The embarrassed lobster was turning a fetching shade of pink. "You're right, I was in an awful state, but it's still no excuse; it's unforgivable."

The seagull took to the air; it was definitely time to skedaddle. "Head for the port-side scupper," he shouted. "It's your only chance."

Lorimer clattered across the deck and squashed himself through the relevant hole. He made a satisfying splash when he hit the water.

Peg Leg was bobbing about at a safe distance waiting for his unlikely new friend.

The gull thought it was only right that the lobster underwent a name change as well and decided 'Thermidor' had a good ring to it. It was a bit obvious but Lorimer readily agreed. Thermidor was more than OK with him. The lobster would always be indebted to the seagull; he owed him his life.

A reminder of what might have been helped focus the mind. It was also time to make provision for his failing eyesight. A pair of glasses modified for use underwater, goggles with special lenses would do the trick. He might receive a few odd looks but so what. At least he wouldn't end up in another creel because he was too vain to admit that he couldn't see properly.

Peg Leg and Thermidor never looked back after their fateful meeting.

The seagull was a bit tottery on his one leg but as he spent a considerable amount of time in the air or breasting the waves it wasn't too inconvenient. For formal occasions when he had to stand around for ages, he would strap on a short wooden leg, fashioned from driftwood in the style of

Long John Silver. As for Lorimer, he was one very lucky lobster who was overjoyed to be alive.

That afternoon an unusual and indestructible friendship was forged, but they had no inkling then of what lay ahead.



When the crow came to rest again at the top of the sycamore, he found Sandy very much as he'd left her. She stood with her hands firmly planted on her hips, pale legs with scratched knees showing beneath scarlet shorts. The turquoise and red striped tee-shirt, fresh on that morning, was already stained with blackberry juice.

Whatever had taken place was way out of the ordinary, unnerving but nonetheless intriguing. Sandy wanted to inspect the archway up close, but still felt unsettled by its very presence. She was sure she'd never seen it before because it simply hadn't been there before, and yet it did look very old. The arch held the key to Leo's sudden disappearance but instinct suggested she would be wise to remain this side of it. She needed time to think and decided not to involve an adult for the time being.

Jock was relieved that he could stay put. The shock of being approached by a talking crow might well prove too much for her after the other bizarre goings-on.

The bird heard the distant but familiar sound of the harbourmaster's car as it turned into the drive and he flew up to the garage to fill Ralph in on the morning's developments. Jock didn't see Sandy's Mum, Tina, or anyone else around so he landed on the Captain's shoulder. If someone happened to find them like this, Ralph could say the crow had become extremely tame. Moreover, Jock was able to whisper in his ear which was less noticeable than talking directly to him.

Ralph walked calmly down the long garden towards the old orchard with Jock sitting comfortably on his shoulder.

He nodded thoughtfully while the crow told him what had taken place.

The harbourmaster ducked down and pushed his way through the fretwork of shrubs that led to the far end of the orchard with the crow clinging tightly to his Harris tweed jacket. The unlikely pair struggled out from the maze of bushes into the autumn sunshine.

Ralph Henderson, a tall, slightly stooped figure, stepped carefully over the uneven ground towards his daughter, trying to put his thoughts in order. This was a very delicate situation that had to be approached with the utmost care. The next hour or so was going to be very tricky.



Leo was unwittingly causing pandemonium on the other side of the arch.

Sylvanian residents in the shire of Crawdonia quickly realised something unprecedented had taken place. The first indication was the unmistakeable sound of three loud blasts from the leader of the boundary patrol. Someone or something had managed to come through without an invitation.

Wee Alfie Elf, dressed in his best Lincoln green tunic, hose and boots, and his wife Pogo Pixie heard the alarm from the kitchen of their cottage while they were tucking into steaming bowls of Pogo's homemade sweetcorn and banana soup. The elf put down his spoon and looked across at his wife who had fallen silent. Her eyebrows were arched in surprise.

"What do you suppose that's about? I can't remember when I last heard the alarm."

Before Alfie could utter a sound there were three even louder blasts.

"Good grief, Pogo, something momentous must have happened. The Boundary Warden sounds very upset. Let's find out what's going on. Perhaps we can help."

Alfie rushed out into the hall, making a grab for his jaunty green hat with its bold plume of raven feathers which he plonked unceremoniously on his head.

Pogo Pixie is no shrinking violet and her husband knew better than to suggest she stay at home while he went off to investigate alone. Their daughter Estella was still at school, so she was in safe hands.

Pogo placed the saucepan on the pot-bellied stove next to the kitchen range. "I might as well keep the soup warm."

Ever the practical one, thought Alfie affectionately as he dashed out of the front door. He sprang over the gate onto the path that wound through the wood in the direction the alarm had come from.

As he sped along, he heard his wife call after him. "I'll catch up with you on my pogo stick."

She turned to look at her dog who was sitting in a basket by the stove, his ears pricked up in hopeful anticipation. She smiled fondly at the tousled little beast. "Come on, Pongo, but you'll have to be really quiet and well-behaved."

"I promise I won't bark too much," he yelled in a frenzy of excitement and charcoal curls.

The dog leapt from his basket and bundled out of the door behind Pogo who was bouncing along at a cracking pace having cleared the gate in one athletic manoeuvre.

"You won't bark at all, boy," she said firmly when he caught up with her.

"Only kidding, PP," said the dog cheekily.

He tore along beside her with his tail wagging frantically. This was the sort of day when anything might happen and Pongo loved an unexpected adventure; it gave him something to get his teeth into, possibly literally if he was really lucky.

The little figures were quickly swallowed up by the dark canopy of trees.



Pogo Pixie was originally called Priscilla, a name she came to detest when she was old enough to give the matter serious thought. The sniggers of the other elves and pixies when she started nursery school were the final indignity.

She was an energetic, enthusiastic child with not a smidge of Priscilla-ness about her. Positively exhausting was how her Mum would have put it.

The day Priscilla discovered her first pogo stick was an unforgettable occasion for all concerned. It took her a while to get to grips with it but she has never been one for giving up easily. Priscilla was a determined young pixie. A pogo stick was certainly not going to get the better of her.

Boing! She back-flipped over the garden fence right into the middle of a group of her Mum's toffee-nosed friends, scattering them to the sound of "Goodness, whatever next", "Would you look at the state of that?" and "It's her poor mother I feel sorry for".

By then she was completely out of control, narrowly missing her mortified Mum. Poink! She landed on her head. Boing! She was briefly the right way up. Poink! Boing! Poink! She executed a spectacular but none-too-graceful arc and landed smack in the middle of her father's cherished vegetable plot. Whoosh! Splunk! Splat! Her Dad's prized marrow turned to squash. Cripes! He was not going to take that at all well.

All the months of hard work and devotion, the midnight feeds with his secret, homemade tonic had been for nothing. Her father was going to explode in a manner not too dissimilar to the marrow if the Norgan boys took 'Best Marrow in Show' for the third year running which had just become the inescapable outcome, thanks to her little escapade.

When Priscilla looked up from the middle of the chaotic mush she had just created, she found Big Tam standing over her with a face like fizz. He was spluttering with rage and disbelief, unable to utter a single coherent word.

From that day forth she was known as Pogo, a nickname none too affectionately given to start with. Big Tam did eventually see the funny side of his daughter's impromptu display, but only just, and quite some considerable time later.

Pogo never managed to shake off the name as she grew up, but anything was better than the dreaded 'Priscilla'. She didn't go in for pretty, impractical clothes like many of her peers. If your preferred mode of transport is a pogo stick, skirts are out of the question. A brightly coloured plaid tunic and knee-high boots were more Pogo's style.

She only put her pogo stick aside when she was expecting her first child many years later. Shortly after Estella was born out came the pogo stick again and off she bounced with the infant strapped securely to her back. Estella would chuckle and gurgle with obvious delight. She was undoubtedly her mother's daughter.



Alfie ran through Old Rook Wood as if pursued by malevolent demons which is not as unlikely as it might seem. Lately some pretty unsavoury types have infiltrated the dark, forgotten corners of the ancient wood.

On this occasion, Alfie was desperate to avoid the Banshee who frequented the path he had to take. This creature needed no excuse to play to the gallery. At the drop of a hat she would screech and wail, howl and caterwaul, scream and yowl until the cows came home, which of course they never did when she was around. She just had to get things off her chest. She was that kind of girl.

Alfie knew he was bound to bump into her, worse luck, and it was sooner than he feared. When he sprinted round the very next bend she leapt out in front of him dressed in a grubby white nightie. Marta waved her thin, pale arms in the air and her haggard features were twisted in dismay. She looked a veritable fright which, come to think of it, was exactly the effect she was striving after.

"For goodness sake!" cried the elf with a start. "You gave me an awful scare, you daft gowk." The situation called for decisive authority. "Now, be a good Banshee and get out of my way."

Fat chance of that. Marta wasn't going to let him out of her clutches without putting up a fight. She took an enormous lungful of air and launched into her all-time favourite rant, right in Alfie's face. "Nobody loves me, nobody cares, as I topple head first down the stairs. Woe is me! Woe is me!"

They were practically nose-to-nose. "Right, that's enough of that nonsense," Alfie said, taking a hasty step backwards. "You don't even have proper stairs in that hollow tree of yours."

"Oh, you're no fun," she said in a dejected tone. "I'm so fed up and nobody ever stops for a chat. Everyone's in a rush when they see me."

"Why do you think that might be?" asked the elf with undisguised amusement.

Marta shrugged. She genuinely didn't have a clue.

"I can't hang around all day, dearie. Didn't you hear the alarm?" She shook her head glumly. "Too busy wailing and howling, I'll warrant." Seizing the moment, he broke into a trot. "Sorry, gotta go!"

With a wave of his hand he belted off in a blur of bright green, leaving the Banshee open-mouthed, her pathetic, scrawny arms outstretched beseechingly.

"Don't leave me! I haven't even warmed up yet."

Alfie felt a pang of guilt as he ran through the trees. Marta really was her own worst enemy. Maybe if she got a new frock and had her hair done, that might be a start.

Perhaps if she could cheer up a bit, too. All that moaning and whining doesn't half put people off. But then she's supposed to be a wet blanket, poor soul; it's in her job description.



When Alfie emerged from the shadow of Old Rook Wood the first thing he noticed was the odd behaviour of the pedigree flock of strunties that were out to pasture in the lush meadow at the north end of the wood.

Strunties are a cross between fairy sheep and elven pigs and they are cute with a capital 'C'. Their fleeces are as smooth as the most expensive silk and their gloriously soft wool is highly prized.

By nature strunties are docile, amiable creatures but if they are threatened in any way they become over-excited and extremely silly. They snort and bleat as loud as they can in an attempt to scare off potential predators.

The elf realised something was causing them major stress, judging by the racket, but there was no clue as to what it might be. He reacted to a sound behind him and discovered Grimpen, the dignified leader of the royal wolf pack, at his side. He was certainly not the cause of their distress, strunties and wolves are the firmest of friends. The wolves take care of the flock and strunties are not on their menu.

Life is never perfect, sadly, and the wee beasts do have some pretty unpleasant enemies. Struntie steaks are highly prized by some of the more disagreeable elements of Sylvanian society and there is a sizeable reward for information leading to the arrest of anyone who harms, never mind eats, a struntie.

Grimpen and his pack take their responsibilities seriously and operate a round-the-clock patrol. Nothing can ever be left to chance for the flock belongs to the Sylvanian Fairy Queen. They are one of Her Majesty's 'Special Projects'.

Grimpen had a grave expression on his wise face. "I've no idea what's happened, but the Boundary Warden is very concerned. Our security has been breached and your Uncle Angus was spotted rushing off from the scene with a mighty peculiar look on his face."

"I might have known. He always seems to invite trouble. I wonder what he's been up to this time; it doesn't bear thinking about. Another magic spell that's gone wrong, most likely. I've tried to persuade him to put his wand out of harm's way, but you know Angus, he's a stubborn, carnaptious old devil."

The wolf laid a reassuring paw on Alfie's arm. "Everybody knows what he's like. We don't call him 'Steam and Whistles' for nothing."

The elf laughed in spite of himself. "Maybe Angus is not to blame for this, but perhaps I'd better not get my hopes up."

"That's probably wise," said the wolf.

Pogo and her little dog had just come out of the wood and were making good progress across the field. They too had fallen victim to Marta the Banshee.

Grimpen raised his noble head and let out a long, plaintive howl. Wolves appeared from every direction and in a twinkling encircled the flock. The pack leader nodded his satisfaction at their speed and efficiency. He knew his wolves were the best but there was never room for complacency. They were living in dangerous times.



Hosepipe Snout the Hairy Hedgehorn was very upset. As Boundary Warden he had raised the alarm twice with three loud blasts. In the whole of Sylvania there is no one who can outblast him. His snout is a finely tuned instrument which is why he holds one of

the most prestigious jobs in a land where security is paramount.

Sylvania is protected by massive, constantly changing, impassable hedges which are the ideal habitat for hairy hedgehorns, the only creatures who can penetrate their restless, thorny interiors.

Hedgehorns are equipped with sharp spines like a garden hedgehog. They also have copious amounts of long, coarse hair which proves very useful if they're attacked by some nasty piece of work who thinks they'd make a quick, tasty snack. The hapless creature is likely to receive a mouthful of barbed spines for its trouble, with a blood-curdling fanfare of snout-blasts thrown in at no extra cost. Hairy hedgehorns have the ultimate body armour, with that built-in element of surprise.

Hosepipe Snout was used to sleeping peacefully in his cosy bed of twigs and leaves, but he was in for some sleepless nights if he didn't get to the bottom of this breach of security, pronto. He was relieved to see the familiar little trio coming towards him.

Pongo enjoyed the company of his friend the hedgehorn and made as if to chase him. They liked nothing better than a bit of play fighting when Hosepipe Snout was off duty.

Pogo Pixie was quick to intervene. "Not just now, boy," she said, gently restraining him. "He's very busy. Some other time, eh?"

The dog was disappointed but he could tell the hedgehorn was engaged in matters serious.

Wee Alfie Elf is well regarded for his sound common sense. He holds the strictly unofficial post of adviser to the Fairy Queen who firmly believes the royal household must never lose touch with the needs of the people. Alfie provides a valuable link between Queen Celestina and her subjects and he's not afraid to speak his mind.

Hosepipe Snout scuffled towards the group with his brows



knitted together in a deep frown.

"It's an awful carry-on, WAE. I haven't known anything like this since that mix-up years back when the rat came through at his original size. One minute the rehearsal for Sandy's visit's going beautifully and the next everything's gone pear-shaped. It's an absolute disgrace and we so rarely have visitors from 'Woodburn'." He stopped to catch his breath. "Did I say pear-shaped? Cat-shaped would have been a more accurate description but it all happened so quickly, so unexpectedly."

Pongo reacted eagerly to the word cat. Maybe things were looking up after all.

Alfie paced backwards and forwards with his hands clasped behind his back. "Are you telling me a cat accidentally came through from 'Woodburn' and wasn't even miniaturised?"

The hedgehorn fell in step with him. "I only caught a brief glimpse but I'm pretty sure it was Leo. He was definitely Sylvanian sized, thank goodness. We've had enough problems with the Giant Rat."

Alfie abruptly came to a halt. "Uncle Angus must have had a hand in this. It bears all the hallmarks of his recent, unpredictable magic."

The hedgehorn sighed. "I'm afraid he was here. He shouldn't have been as it was a restricted area, but the old buzzard won't be told. I'm sorry, that was rude of me. He is your uncle, after all, and a highly respected spell weaver in his day."

"Don't trouble yourself, I've heard Angus called worse. He's impossible these days. Maybe something on this scale will make him stop and think. We can only live in hope. In the meantime I must find out what he's been up to."

"You really have no idea where the cat is?" Pogo said, cutting to the chase. "He must be very confused and frightened."

"I don't have a clue and, to make matters worse, I caught a brief glimpse of Sandy who saw the whole thing. As if that wasn't bad enough, the cat was understandably traumatised. To be met by me raising the alarm at the top of my snout was too much for him. He was so shocked, he bolted. There are patrols searching for him as we speak. What a trying business, it's nothing short of a catastrophe."

"A 'cat'astrophe indeed," said Alfie with the ghost of a smile.



Sandy was startled by the sound of snapping twigs and whirled round to see what was going on. She was surprised to find her Dad coming towards her and her eyebrows shot up even further when she noticed the crow sitting on his shoulder.

Ralph saw the look on her face and in a hasty whisper suggested Jock ought to refrain from speaking. The crow readily agreed. The morning had been strange enough already for her.

Sandy spoke first. "I'm so glad you're here, Dad, but shouldn't you be at the Harbour Office and what on earth's Jock doing on your shoulder?" She recognised the bird by the distinctive patch of white feathers on his chest. He'd always been a cheeky bird, but never *that* cheeky.

Ralph waited to see what else she'd say before he was forced to answer her questions.

She didn't even hesitate. "Something really odd happened a wee while ago and I swear I'm not making this up. Leo disappeared when he walked through that arch over there and I'm dreadfully worried about him. I don't know where he is now or how to begin to search for him."

Ralph sat down on an old tree stump and beckoned his daughter over. "As it happens, I do know what's going on and I'm pretty sure we'll be able to find Leo, but there are a

few things I need to explain first. You remember I promised you'd meet Wee Alfie Elf and Pogo Pixie one day?"

"Yes," she replied with a bewildered smile, "but that was years ago and I've known for ages you were pulling my leg." Jock leant forward on Ralph's shoulder, his bright, beady eyes fixed on her face. She glanced at the crow then back at her father. "Has Jock got anything to do with this?"

"Yes, he has, but I'll get to that later. Those bedtime stories I told you about the fairy folk who lived in our garden were exactly that, stories. But, and this is a very big 'but', I didn't invent the characters and when I said you'd meet them all one day, I wasn't kidding. They're as real as we are, although they're an awful lot smaller, with the exception of the Giant Rat who's...em, rat sized." Ralph paused to let what he'd said sink in. "It looks like you're going to get to know them sooner than I'd thought. I was expecting to have more time to prepare you for your visit which was arranged for half term, but after the shenanigans here this morning, you'll have to leave early. Jock came to fetch me when he saw what happened to Leo."

His daughter's open-mouthed expression was nothing short of comical.

The crow was fit to burst and couldn't contain himself any longer. "I flew down to the harbour as soon as I..."

A broad grin spread across Sandy's face. "Whatever next, a talking crow! What a birthday this is turning out to be."

"Thank heavens for that," said Jock with a satisfied chuckle. "It's been an awful strain keeping my beak zipped."

"I'm sure it has," said Ralph with a knowing smile. "You'll have to go after Leo straight away. I wish I could come with you, Sandy, but I can't. Only children are allowed to visit Sylvania. I was lucky enough to go there myself a long time ago to search for the Craw Cauldron. It was stolen

and Alfie and Pogo helped me get it back. It's not just an old heirloom; it has some very special powers and was a gift from the Sylvanian Royal Family to our ancestor Rory Craw who helped rid them of a terrible evil."

Jock chimed in. "My cousin Crawford will have to bring forward all the arrangements. I'll introduce you to him myself and naturally you'll be staying with Alfie and Pogo while you're away. You have some dear friends in Sylvania who, frankly, can't wait to meet you."

Sandy was as still as a statue but her emotions were in turmoil.

The family's chocolate and cream Siamese cat had turned up and was rubbing himself against her legs. Ralph leant forward and tickled him behind the ear. "Perhaps Jamie could go with you. What do you think, Jock? He's devoted to Leo and if anyone stands a chance of finding him, he might just be the one."

"We'll need special clearance. Sandy is expected but after the carry-on with Leo, who knows? I'd better go right away and see how the land lies. I'll be back before you know it."

The crow flew towards the old archway and vanished as he passed under the roses and honeysuckle.



Crawford was waiting for his cousin on the Sylvanian side of the arch. "Thank goodness you've come. What a to-do! We were running through the procedure for Sandy's visit when that silly old fool stuck his wand in where it wasn't wanted. It really is too bad and the whole thing's a total mess. And, can we find him or the cat? Absolutely not. Mark my words, Angus has gone too far this time. Queen Celestina is very forgiving but I hope she'll put her dainty little foot down this time. He really does need squashing."