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opening extract from

Pinhoe Egg

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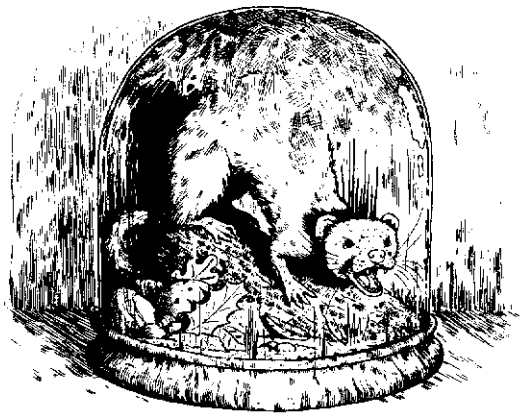
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published by

HarperCollins

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Chapter One

At the beginning of the summer holidays, while Chrestomanci and his family were still in the south of France, Marianne Pinhoe and her brother Joe walked reluctantly up the steep main street of Ulverscote. They had been summoned by Gammer Pinhoe. Gammer was head of Pinhoe witchcraft in Ulverscote and wherever Pinhoes were, from Bowbridge to Hopton, and from Uphelm to Helm St Mary. You did not disobey Gammer's commands.

"I wonder what the old bat wants this time," Joe said gloomily as they passed the church. "Some new stupid thing, I bet."

"Hush," said Marianne. Uphill from the church, the Reverend Pinhoe was in the vicarage garden spraying his roses. She could smell the acid odour of the spell and hear the *hoosh* of the vicar's spray. It was true that Gammer's commands had lately become more and more exacting and peculiar, but no adult Pinhoe liked to hear you say so.

Joe bent his head and put on his most sulky look. "But it doesn't make sense," he grumbled as they passed the vicarage gate. "Why does she want me too?"

Marianne grinned. Joe was considered "a disappointment" by the Pinhoes. Only Marianne knew how hard Joe worked at being disappointing – though she thought Mum suspected it. Joe's heart was in machines. He had no patience with the traditional sort of witchcraft or the way magic was done by the Pinhoes – or by the Farleighs over in Helm St Mary, or for that matter the Cleeves in Underhelm on the other side of Ulverscote. As far as that kind of magic went, Joe wanted to be a failure. They left him in peace then.

"It makes sense she wants *you*," Joe continued as they climbed the last stretch of hill up to Woods House, where Gammer lived. "You being the next Gammer and all."

Marianne sighed and made a face. The fact was that no girls except Marianne had been born to Gammer's branch of the Pinhoes for two generations now. Everyone knew that Marianne would have to follow in

Gammer's footsteps. Marianne had two great uncles and six uncles, ten boy cousins, and weekly instructions from Gammer on the witchcraft that was expected of her. It weighed on her rather. "I'll live," she said. "I expect we both will."

They turned up the weedy drive of Woods House. The gates had been broken ever since Old Gaffer died when Marianne was quite small. Their father, Harry Pinhoe, was Gaffer now, being Gammer's eldest son. But it said something about their father's personality, Marianne always thought, that everyone called him Dad and never Gaffer.

They took two steps up the drive and sniffed. There was a powerful smell of wild animal there.

"Fox?" Joe said doubtfully. "Tom cat?"

Marianne shook her head. The smell was strong, but it was much pleasanter than either of those. A powdery, herby scent, a bit like Mum's famous foot-powder.

Joe laughed. "It's not Nutcase anyway. He's been done."

They went up the three worn steps and pushed on the peeling front door. There was no one to open it to them. Gammer insisted on living quite alone in the huge old house, with only old Miss Callow to come and clean for her twice a week. And Miss Callow didn't do much of a job, Marianne thought as they came into the wide

entrance hall. Sunlight from the window halfway up the dusty oak staircase made slices of light filled thick with dust motes, and shone murkily off the glass cases of stuffed animals that stood on tables round the walls. Marianne hated these. The animals had all been stuffed with savage snarls on their faces. Even through the dust, you saw red open mouths, sharp white teeth and glaring glass eyes. She tried not to look at them as she and Joe crossed the hall over the wall-to-wall spread of grubby coconut matting and knocked on the door of the front room.

"Oh, come in, do," Gammer said. "I've been waiting half the morning for you."

"No, you haven't," Joe muttered. Marianne hoped this was too quiet for Gammer to hear, true though it was. She and Joe had set off the moment Aunt Joy brought the message down from the Post Office.

Gammer was sitting in her tattered armchair, wearing the layers of black clothing she always wore, with her black cat Nutcase on her bony knees and her stick propped up by the chair. She did not seem to have heard Joe. "It's holidays now, isn't it?" she said. "How long have you got? Six weeks?"

"Nearly seven," Marianne admitted. She looked down into the ruins of Gammer's big, square, handsome face and wondered if she would look like this when she was

this old herself. Everyone said that Gammer had once had thick chestnutty hair, like Marianne had, and Gammer's eyes were the same wide brown ones that Marianne saw in the mirror when she stared at herself and worried about her looks. The only square thing about Marianne was her unusually broad forehead. This was always a great relief to Marianne.

"Good," said Gammer. "Well, here's my plans for you both. Can't have the pair of you doing nothing for seven weeks. Joe first, you're the eldest. We've got you a job, a live-in job. You're going to go and be boot boy to the Big Man in You-Know-Where."

Joe stared at her, horrified. "In Chrestomanci Castle, you mean?"

"Be quiet," his grandmother said sharply. "You don't say that name here. Do you want to have them notice us? They're only ten miles away in Helm St Mary."

"But," said Joe, "I'd got plans of my own for these holidays."

"Too bad," said Gammer. "Idle plans, stupid plans. You know you're a disappointment to us all, Joseph Pinhoe, so here's your chance to be useful for once. You can go and be our inside eyes and ears in That Castle, and send me word back by Joss Callow if they show the slightest signs of knowing us Pinhoes exist – or Farleighs or Cleeves for that matter."

"Of course they know we exist," Joe said scornfully. "They can't think there's no one living in Ulverscote or—"

Gammer stopped him with a skinny pointing finger. "Joe Pinhoe, you know what I mean. They don't know and can't know that we're all of us witches. They'd step in and make rules and laws for us as soon as they knew and stop us from working at our craft. For two hundred years now – ever since they put a Big Man in That Castle – we've stopped them finding out about us and I intend for us to go *on* stopping them. And you are going to help me do that, Joe."

"No, I'm not," Joe said. "What's wrong with Joss Callow? *He's* there."

"But he's an outside man," Gammer said. "We want you *inside*. That's where all the secrets are."

"I'm not—" Joe began.

"Yes, you *are*!" Gammer snapped. "Joss has you all fixed up and recommended to that harpy Bessemer that they call Housekeeper there, and go there you will, until you start school again." She snatched up her stick and pointed it at Joe's chest. "I so order it," she said.

Marianne felt the jolt of magic and heard Joe gasp at whatever the stick did to him. He looked from his chest to the end of the stick, dazed and sulky. "You'd no call to do that," he said.

"It won't kill you," Gammer said. "Now, Marianne, I want you with me from breakfast to supper every day. I

want help in the house and errands run, but we'll give out that you're my apprentice. I don't want people thinking I need looking after."

Marianne, seeing her holidays being swallowed up and taken away, just like Joe's, cast around for something – anything! – that might let her off. "I promised Mum to help with the herbs," she said. "There's been a bumper crop—"

"Then Cecily can just do her own stewing and distilling alone, like she always does," Gammer said. "I want you *here*, Marianne. Or do I have to point my stick at you?"

"Oh, no. Don't—" Marianne began.

She was interrupted by the crunch of wheels and hoofbeats on the drive outside. Without waiting for Gammer's sharp command to "See who's there!" Marianne and Joe raced to the window. Nutcase jumped off Gammer's knee and beat them to it. He took one look through the grimy glass and fled, with his tail all bushed out. Marianne looked out to see a smart wickerwork pony carriage with a well-groomed piebald pony in its shafts just drawing up by the front steps. Its driver was Gaffer Farleigh, whom Marianne had always disliked, in his best tweed suit and cloth cap, and looking grim even for him. Behind him in the wicker carriage seat sat Gammer Norah Farleigh. Gammer Norah had long thin eyes and a short thin mouth, which made her look grim at the best of times. Today she looked even grimmer.

"Who is it?" Gammer demanded urgently.

"Gaffer Farleigh. In his best," Joe said. "And Gammer Norah. State visit, Gammer. She's got that horrible hat on, with the poppies."

"And they all look horribly angry," Marianne added. She watched a Farleigh cousin jump out of the carriage and go to the pony's head. He was in a suit too. She watched Gaffer Farleigh hand the whip and the reins to the cousin and climb stiffly down, where he stood smoothing his peppery whiskers and waiting for Gammer Norah, who was making the carriage dip and creak as she stood up and got down too. Gammer Norah was a large lady. Poor pony, Marianne thought, even with a light carriage like that.

"Go and let them in. Show them in here and then wait in the hall," Gammer commanded. "I want *some* Pinhoes on call while I speak to them." Marianne thought Gammer was quite as much surprised by this visit as they were.

She and Joe scurried out past the stuffed animals, Joe with his sulkiest, most head-down, mulish look. The cracked old doorbell jangled and Gaffer Farleigh pushed the front door open as they reached it.

"Come all the way from Helm St Mary," he said, glowering at them, "and I find two children who can't even be bothered to come to the door. She in, your Gammer? Or pretending she's out?"

"She's in the front room," Marianne said politely. "Shall I show—?"

But Gaffer Farleigh pushed rudely past and tramped towards the front room, followed by Gammer Norah who practically shoved Joe against the nearest stuffed animal case getting her bulk indoors. She was followed by her acid-faced daughter Dorothea, who said to Marianne, "Show some manners, child. They'll need a cup of tea and biscuits at *once*. Hurry it up."

"Well, I like that!" Joe said, and made a face at Dorothea's back as Dorothea shut the front room door with a slam. "Let's just go home."

Raised voices were already coming from behind the slammed door. "No, stay," Marianne said. "I want to know what they're so angry about."

"Me too," Joe admitted. He grinned at Marianne and quietly directed a small, sly spell at the front room door, with the result that the door shortly came open an inch or so. Gaffer Farleigh's voice boomed through the gap. "Don't deny it, woman! You let it out!"

"I did *not*!" Gammer more or less screamed, and was then drowned out by the voices of Norah and Dorothea, both yelling.

Marianne went to the kitchen to put the kettle on, leaving Joe to listen. Nutcase was there, sitting in the middle of the enormous old table, staring ardently at a tin

of cat food someone had left there. Marianne sighed. Gammer always said Nutcase had only two braincells, both of them devoted to food, but it did rather look as if Gammer had forgotten to feed him again. She opened the tin for him and put the food in his dish. Nutcase was so ecstatically grateful that Marianne wondered how long it was since Gammer had remembered that cats need to eat. There were no biscuits in any of the cupboards. Marianne began to wonder if Gammer had forgotten to feed herself too.

As the kettle was still only singing, Marianne went into the hall again. The screaming in the front room had died down. Dorothea's voice said, "And I nearly walked into it. I was lucky not to be hurt."

"Pity it didn't eat you," Gammer said.

This caused more screaming and made Joe giggle. He was standing over the glass case that held the twisted, snarling ferret, looking at it much as Nutcase had looked at the tin of cat food. "Have you found out what it's about yet?" Marianne whispered.

Joe shrugged. "Not really. They say Gammer did something and she says she didn't."

At this moment the noise in the front room died down enough for them to hear Gaffer Farleigh saying, "...our sacred trust, Pinhoes and Farleighs both, not to speak of Cleeves. And you, Edith Pinhoe, have failed in that trust."

"Nonsense," came Gammer's voice. "You're a pompous fool, Jed Farleigh."

"And the very fact that you deny it," Gaffer Farleigh continued, "shows that you have lost all sense of duty, all sense of truth and untruth, in your work and in your life."

"I never heard anything so absurd," Gammer began.

Norah's voice cut across Gammer's. "Yes, you have, Edith. That's what we're here to say. You've lost it. You're past it. You make mistakes."

"We think you should retire," Dorothea joined in priggishly.

"Before you do any more harm," Gaffer Farleigh said.

He sounded as if he was going to say more, but whatever this was it was lost in the immense scream Gammer gave. "What nonsense, what cheek, what an *insult*!" she screamed. "Get out of here, all of you! *Get out of my house, this instant!*" She backed this up with such a huge gust of magic that Joe and Marianne reeled where they stood, even though it was not aimed at them. The Farleighs must have got it right in their faces. They came staggering backwards out of the front room and across the hall. At the front door, they managed to turn themselves around. Gaffer Farleigh, more furiously angry than either Joe or Marianne had ever seen him, shook his fist and roared out, "I tell you you've *lost* it, Edith!" Marianne could have sworn that, mixed in with

Gammer's gust of magic, was the sharp stab of a spell from Gaffer Farleigh too.

Before she could be sure, all three Farleighs bolted for their carriage, jumped into it and drove off, helter-skelter, as if Chrestomanci himself was after them.

In the front room, Gammer was still screaming. Marianne rushed in to find her rocking back and forth in her chair and screaming, screaming. Her hair was coming down and dribble was running off her chin. "Joe! Help me stop her!" Marianne shouted.

Joe came close to Gammer and bawled at her, "I'm *not going* to Chrestomanci Castle! Whatever you say!" He said afterwards that it was the only thing he could think of that Gammer might attend to.

It certainly stopped Gammer screaming. She stared at Joe, all wild and shaky and panting. "Filberts of halibuts is twisted out of all porringers," she said.

"Gammer!" Marianne implored her. "Talk *sense*!"

"Henbane," said Gammer. "Beauticians' holiday. Makes a crumbfest."

Marianne turned to Joe. "Run and get Mum," she said. "Quickly. I think her mind's gone."

By nightfall, Marianne's verdict was the official one.

Well before Joe actually reached Furze Cottage to fetch Mum, word seemed to get round that something had happened to Gammer. Dad and Uncle Richard were

already rushing up the street from the shed behind the cottage where they worked making furniture; Uncle Arthur was racing uphill from the Pinhoe Arms; Uncle Charles arrived on his bicycle and Uncle Cedric rattled in soon after on his farm cart; Uncle Simeon's builder's van stormed up next; and Uncle Isaac pelted over the fields from his smallholding, followed by his wife Aunt Dinah and an accidental herd of goats. Soon after that came the two great-uncles. Uncle Edgar, who was an estate agent, spanked up the drive in his carriage and pair; and Uncle Lester, who was a lawyer, came in his smart car all the way from Hopton, leaving his office to take care of itself.

The aunts and great-aunts were not far behind. They paused only to make sandwiches first – except for Aunt Dinah, who went back to the Dell to pen the goats before she too made sandwiches. This, it seemed to Marianne, was an unchanging Pinhoe custom. Show them a crisis and Pinhoe aunts made sandwiches. Even her own mother arrived with a basket smelling of bread, egg and cress. The great table in the Woods House kitchen was shortly piled with sandwiches of all sizes and flavours. Marianne and Joe were kept busy carrying pots of tea and sandwiches to the solemn meeting in the front room, where they had to tell each new arrival exactly what happened.

Marianne got sick of telling it. Every time she got to the part where Gaffer Farleigh shook his fist and shouted,

she explained, "Gaffer Farleigh cast a spell on Gammer then. I felt it."

And every time, the uncle or aunt would say, "I can't see Jed Farleigh doing a thing like that!" and they would turn to Joe and ask if Joe had felt a spell too. And Joe was forced to shake his head and say he hadn't. "But there was such a lot of stuff coming from Gammer," he said, "I could have missed it."

But the aunts and uncles attended to Joe no more than they attended to Marianne. They turned to Gammer then. Mum had arrived first, being the only Pinhoe lady to think of throwing sandwiches together by witchcraft, and she had found Gammer in such a state that her first act had been to send Gammer to sleep. Gammer was most of the time lying on the shabby sofa, snoring. "She was screaming the place down," Mum explained to each newcomer. "It seemed the best thing to do."

"Better wake her up then, Cecily," said the uncle or aunt. "She'll be calmer by this time."

So Mum would take the spell off and Gammer would sit up with a shriek. "Pheasant pie, I tell you!" she would shout. "Tell me something I don't know. Get the fire brigade. There's balloons coming." And all manner of such strange things. After a bit, the uncle or aunt would say, "On second thoughts, I think she'll be better for a bit

of a sleep. Pretty upset, isn't she?" So Mum would put the sleep spell back on again and solemn peace would descend until the next Pinhoe arrived.

The only one who did not go through this routine was Uncle Charles. Marianne *liked* Uncle Charles. For one thing – apart from silent Uncle Simeon – he was her only thin uncle. Most of the Pinhoe uncles ran to a sort of wideness, even if most of them were not actually fat. And Uncle Charles had a humorous twitch to his thin face, quite unlike the rest. He was held to be "a disappointment", just like Joe. Knowing Joe, Marianne suspected that Uncle Charles had worked at being disappointing, just as hard as Joe did – although she did think that Uncle Charles had gone a bit far when he married Aunt Joy at the Post Office. Uncle Charles arrived in his paint-blotched old overalls, being a house-painter by trade, and he looked at Gammer, snoring gently on the sofa with her mouth open. "No need to disturb her for me," he said. "Lost her marbles at last, has she? What happened?"

When Marianne had explained once more, Uncle Charles stroked his raspy chin with his paint-streaked hand and said, "I don't see Jed Farleigh doing *that* to her, little as I like the man. What was the row about?"

Marianne and Joe had to confess that they had not the least idea, not really. "They said she'd let a sacred trust get

out and it ran into their Dorothea. I *think*," Marianne said. "But Gammer said she never did."

Uncle Charles raised his eyebrows and opened his eyes wide. "Eh?"

"Let it be, Charles. It's not important," Uncle Arthur told him impatiently. "The important thing is that poor Gammer isn't making sense any more."

"Overtaxed herself, poor thing," Marianne's father said. "It was that Dorothea making trouble again, I'll bet. I could throttle the woman, frankly."

"Should have been strangled at birth," Uncle Isaac agreed. "But what do we do now?"

Uncle Charles looked across at Marianne, joking and sympathetic at the same time. "Did she ever get round to naming you Gammer after her, Marianne? Should *you* be in charge now?"

"I hope *not*!" Marianne said.

"Oh, do talk *sense*, Charles!" all the others said. To which Dad added, "I'm not having my little girl stuck with that, even for a joke. We'll wait for Edgar and Lester to get here. See what they say. They're Gammer's brothers, after all."

But when first Great Uncle Edgar and then Great Uncle Lester arrived, and Marianne had gone through the tale twice more, and Gammer had been woken up to scream, "We're infested with porcupines!" at Uncle Edgar

and "I *told* everyone it was twisted cheese!" at Uncle Lester, neither great uncle seemed at all sure what to do. Both pulled at their whiskers uncertainly and finally sent Joe and Marianne out to the kitchen so that the adults could have a serious talk.

"I don't like Edgar," Joe said, moodily eating left over sandwiches. "He's bossy. What does he wear that tweed hat for?"

Marianne was occupied with Nutcase. Nutcase rushed out from under the great table demanding food. "It's what estate agents wear, I suppose," she said. "Like Lester wears a black coat and striped trousers because he's a lawyer. Joe, I can't find any more cat food."

Joe looked a little guiltily at the last of Great Aunt Sue's sandwiches. They had been fat and moist and tasty and he had eaten all but one. "This one's sardine," he said. "Give him that. Or—" He lifted the cloth over the one untouched plateful. These were thin and dry and almost certainly Aunt Joy's. "Or there's these. Do cats eat meat paste?"

"They sometimes have to," Marianne said. She dismantled sandwiches into Nutcase's dish and Nutcase fell on them as if he had not been fed for a week. And perhaps he hadn't, Marianne thought. Gammer had neglected almost everything lately.

"You know," Joe said, watching Nutcase guzzle, "I'm not saying you *didn't* feel Gaffer Farleigh cast a spell –

you're better at magic than I am – but it wouldn't have taken much. I think Gammer's mind was going anyway." Then, while Marianne was thinking Joe was probably right, Joe said coaxingly, "Can you do us a favour while we're here?"

"What's that?" Marianne asked as Nutcase backed away from the last of Aunt Joy's sandwiches and pretended to bury it. She was very used to Joe buttering her up and then asking a favour. But I think her mind *was* going, all the same, she thought.

"I need that stuffed ferret out there," Joe said. "If I take it, can you make it look as if it's still there?"

Marianne knew better than to ask what Joe wanted with a horrid thing like that ferret. Boys! She said, "Joe! It's Gammer's!"

"*She's* not going to want it," Joe said. "And you're much better at illusion than me. Be a sport, Marianne. While they're all still in there talking."

Marianne sighed, but she went out into the hall with Joe, where they could hear the hushed, serious voices from the front room. Very quietly, they inspected the ferret under its glass dome. It had always struck Marianne as like a furry yellow snake with legs. All *squirmy*. Yuk. But the important thing, if you were going to do an illusion, was that this was probably just what everyone saw. Then you noticed the wide open fanged mouth too,

and the ferocious beady eyes. The dome was so dusty that you really hardly saw anything else. You just had to get the shape right.

"Can you do it?" Joe asked eagerly.

She nodded. "I think so." She carefully lifted off the glass dome and stood it beside the stuffed badger. The ferret felt like a hard furry log when she picked it up. Yuk again. She passed the thing to Joe with a shudder. She put the glass dome back over the empty patch of false grass that was left and held both hands out towards it in as near ferret shape as she could. Bent and yellow and furry-squirmy, she thought at it. Glaring eyes, horrid little ears, pink mouth snarling and full of sharp white teeth. Further yuk.

She took her hands away and there it was, exactly as she had thought it up, blurrily through the dust on the glass, a dim yellow snarling shape.

"Lush!" said Joe. "Apex! Thanks." He raced back into the kitchen with the real ferret cradled in his arms.

Marianne saw the print of her hands on the dust of the dome, four of them. She blew on them furiously, willing them to go away. They were slowly clearing when the door to the front room banged importantly open and Great Uncle Edgar strode out. Marianne stopped doing magic at once, because he was bound to notice. She made herself gaze innocently instead at Edgar's tweed hat, like a little tweed flowerpot on his head. It turned towards her.

"We've decided your grandmother must have professional care," Great Uncle Edgar said. "I'm off to see to it."

Someone must have woken Gammer up again. Her voice echoed forth from inside the front room. "There's nothing so good as a stewed ferret, I always say."

Did Gammer read other people's minds now? Marianne held her breath and nodded and smiled at Great Uncle Edgar. And Joe came back from the kitchen at that moment, carrying Aunt Helen's sandwich basket – which he must have thought was Mum's – with a cloth over it to hide the ferret. Great Uncle Edgar said to him, "Where are you off to?"

Joe went hunched and sulky. "Home," he said. "Got to take the cat. Marianne's going to look after him now."

Unfortunately Nutcase spoilt this explanation by rushing out of the kitchen to rub himself against Marianne's legs.

"But he keeps getting out," Joe added without a blink.

Marianne took in a big breath, which made her quite dizzy after holding it for so long. "I'll bring him, Joe," she said, "when I come. You go on home and take Mum's basket back."

"Yes," said Great Uncle Edgar. "You'll need to pack, Joseph. You have to be working in That Castle tomorrow, don't you?"

Joe's mouth opened and he stared at Edgar. Marianne stared too. They had both assumed that Gammer's plans for Joe had gone the way of Gammer's wits. "Who told you that?" Joe said.

"Gammer did, yesterday," Great Uncle Edgar said. "They'll be expecting you. Off you go." And he strode out of the house, pushing Joe in front of him.