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The Secret of Wickham Wood

Chapter One

A Very Curious Summer Holiday.

Mrs Dawson was getting very impatient with her children. For the last ten minutes the oldest two, Jenny and Simon had been arguing constantly about the merits of mint choc chip ice cream as opposed to raspberry ripple, which had driven the children's mother to distraction and left their younger sibling Philippa, (Philly to all the family) feeling rather bemused by it all. As far as she was concerned, everybody in his or her right mind knew strawberry was best. Philly had spent most of the car journey to their Aunt Agatha's wondering if there would be lots of ice cream when they got there, there usually was, which was why Philly liked her aunt so much. The family were visiting their aunt to learn about the countryside and assist her with various jobs about the house and garden. Mrs Dawson's suffering patience finally snapped. "Enough," she snapped at the bickering pair. "There will be no ice cream for you both, for a week if you do not shut up now! Your Aunt Agatha might be soft with you but you know better with me!" Which was true when Mum put her foot down, the children knew from experience they had pushed her far enough.

A gloomy silence descended upon the car's occupants for the rest of the journey, which fortunately didn't last too long. Within a few minutes, they had arrived at the rambling farmhouse in the village of Willow Brook in North Yorkshire, named for the meandering river that flowed right through the settlement from end to end. Numerous Weeping Willows grew along its banks, their hanging branches gently caressing the surface of the water. Aunt Agatha's home was called Mill House because of the dilapidated farmhouse being situated on the water's edge, with the remains of an old watermill in the back garden. The mill had seen better days, now it was an old ruin slowly crumbling away. Mill House was in a condition little better than its adjacent building. A fact that didn't seem to bother its sole occupant, she was rumoured in the neighbourhood to be a little odd to put it mildly. Aunt Agatha had claimed on numerous occasions to be able to commune with spirits, which she maintained regularly visited her in her ramshackle abode by the river. At least that was how she interpreted the strange noises coming from the walls and attic area. Eccentric only began to describe Aunt Agatha. As the Dawson's car pulled into the front yard at Mill House, she rushed out of the front door and greeted her visitors enthusiastically.

"Welcome my dears to Mill House. I'm delighted to see you! Did you have a good journey?" She had a striking appearance. Tall, with long white hair that had a black streak running through it and piercing green eyes.

"Yes, it was fine," replied Mrs Dawson, overlooking the heated ice cream quarrel, "it's lovely to see again Agatha, how are you?"

"I'm good, although I wish I could say the same about the house. The roof leaks, the chimney smokes and I'm sure that bad spirits are haunting the place!"

"Bad spirits, what on earth are you talking about?" Mrs Dawson had always believed her older sister to be rather outlandish. When they were children, Agatha had held a séance with the rest of the family, as she was firmly convinced the ghost of a monk was frequenting their house. The outcome of which, was nothing happened and Agatha got a reputation for being "weird."

"l will explain later, she said, "now do come in and make yourselves at home!"

The Dawson family collected their luggage and followed her into the farmhouse. In the ploughed field across the road from Mill House, a lonely, embittered figure stood gazing maliciously at the house, noting the arrival of the newcomers. This was Barley Batslime. He was the resident scarecrow of the Wickham Wood farm estate that had given its name to the big wood situated on its south-eastern boundary. Barley didn't like the Oomans, as people were known to the local wildlife. He was deeply suspicious of them, as were all the animals, especially the wisest of them all, Balthazar the badger, Old Balty as he was referred to by all the other beasts there, (behind his back by most of them). He was the leader of the large Sett in Wickham Wood and disagreed with Barley on most matters, except of course on the subject of Oomans. Their last argument had been a trivial matter, concerning which was the best season of the year. Barley believed it was the summer, with its better weather and no sowing with planted seed to have to protect from the birds. Old Balty and all his Sett members

firmly held that it was autumn, with its rich array of fruits to harvest. The dispute had ended in an impasse, and they had not spoken again until the last Animals Council meeting. Strictly speaking, the scarecrow was not a member of the animal community, but the Woodland folk grudgingly accepted him as one of them.

"Just we need," grumbled the ragged scarecrow. "More Oomans here in the parish to bother us respectable folk, they should stay out of the fields and woods. Stop in their towns and cities where they belonged, even though he grudgingly admitted that the farms need a few of them as workers. After all, if there were no crops and seed to protect Barley would be out of a job, but for all that, he still didn't care for them. There are enough of them here already, he thought, carrying on as if they owned everything, and being cruel to the wildlife, and even each other. They were strange creatures, incomprehensible to Barley. The Scarecrows were an archaic people, forged from the stuff and produce of the earth, and imbued with life by the force of Mother Nature herself. They had walked this land since the time of the first farmers. Thus, their folklore decreed, and Barley held it to be so. Barley's attire had not changed for several years; the farmer had last dressed him in a torn check shirt, ragged jeans, and an old straw hat. These were now quite ragged and torn. As he turned his gaze away an east wind suddenly gusted in, an ill omen to the man of straw.

Which, of course the Dawson family were oblivious to, not being from these parts, and of course being Oomans. As soon as they entered Aunt Agatha's house the children ran riot, running through all the rooms and looking into every nook and cranny, delighted to be there. This thoroughly bemused their aunt but upset their mother.

"You lot, enough! I know you're glad to be here but have some respect for your aunt's house!"

At which they all meekly calmed down and went into the living room, looking through the numerous collections of books stacked on dusty shelves around the walls. The oldest of the children, Jenny, acted as a surrogate parent as their father worked abroad and they didn't see much of him. Right now, her services were required as Simon and Philly were wrestling over the possession of a weighty tome on the subject of dinosaurs.

"Pack it in you two!" You can share the book together," she yelled at them.

They glared at her and Philly poked her tongue out at her big sister in defiance, but before Jenny could respond her mother and aunt came into the room. Mrs Dawson shook her head at the sight of Simon and Philly sitting in a dishevelled state on the floor, but Aunt Agatha merely looked at them in wry amusement.

"That's enough of that for now," she said. "It's lunchtime, ham sandwiches and milk for you lot, into the kitchen with you all now and around the table!"

Simon wanted to object but as his stomach was rumbling, he obeyed. It had been a long time since breakfast. The children trooped into the kitchen and assembled at the big table that sat centrally placed in the room. Aunt Agatha served up their lunch and they all hungrily tucked in. Presently, a large black cat with white paws entered the room and walking up to Philly, began rubbing against her ankles, purring contentedly.

"Well, that's strange," said Aunt Agatha. "You are honoured Philly! Mr Softpaw is usually wary of strangers; it takes a while for him to get used to them."

"What happened to that old grey one you used to have aunt," asked Philly, "Rumpelstiltskin wasn't he called, and why do you call this one Mr Softpaw?"

"Oh, that's a funny thing you know," replied Aunt Agatha. "He just disappeared one day. I looked everywhere but couldn't find him. The funny thing though was that Mr Softpaw appeared the next day, pawing at the front door and desperate to get in. Well, I didn't have the heart to turn him away after losing Rumpelstiltskin, so I just sort of adopted him. He's a very nice cat, house-trained but usually wary of outsiders. Therefore, as I said Philly, you are lucky!" I call him Mr Softpaw because he's so light on his feet; he just creeps up on you unawares."

"I think he's a wonderful cat," said Philly, who proceeded to stroke Mr Softpaw whole-heartedly. The cat showed his appreciation by jumping up at her.

"I think he's just weird," Simon stated bluntly, "to just ignore us like that, daft animal!"

"You're just jealous because he likes me, retorted Philly. "So there!"

Simon went into a deep sulk, which he was prone to, and said no more. Mr Softpaw went to his basket in the corner.

Aunt Agatha looked at Simon shaking her head in disapproval. "Well, that's enough of that then, she said. "I think when you've finished your lunches, we will all go for a nice walk in Wickham Wood. There's a lot to see there, although it's a peculiar place. It's a very ancient forest, parts of it date back from before the Norman Conquest, and there's a Standing Stone right in the middle of it that's been there since the late Neolithic. I guess the trees grew up around it after the Stone Age people abandoned it long ago. Local people think it's haunted and some of them will not go anywhere near it after dark. A most interesting place," she concluded.

Simon glanced nervously at the others. “If it’s haunted, do you think it’s a good idea to go there? Why cannot we just watch television instead?” He said whilst shuffling his feet in an agitated manner.

“We didn’t come here to just watch television, we are going to enjoy the countryside and everything it has to offer,” Mrs Dawson pointed out to him.

“You’re just scared,” Philly mocked her brother. “I’ll go with Aunt Agatha to visit it, and I bet I’m not frightened by anything,” she stated defiantly.

“That’s it settled then,” laughed Aunt Agatha. “Put your coats and boots on, and let’s get out there!”

The family hurriedly obeyed her and they set off to explore Wickham Wood. After they had locked the front door, Mr Softpaw jumped up onto the windowsill and watched them depart. He basked in the warmth of the summer sun as it came through the grimy glass. As the creaking sound of the front gate died away, it was replaced by another sound, that of the cat laughing gently to himself.

These Oomans are so foolish, he thought. They had no idea of what was going on right under their noses; it was no coincidence he had appeared when the previous cat had gone missing, Rumpelstiltskin had been conveniently removed. What the Dawson family didn’t know was that Aunt Agatha was a member of the Guild of Witches, and was being investigated by them for some irregularities. This was where Mr Softpaw came into the proceedings. His function as ordered by the Guild was to report on what she was up to, given the alarming reports they had received. It was their policy to speak to senior members of the animal communities to monitor goings on in the natural world. Balthazar, the leader of the Wickham Wood badger society had informed them about the quarrel between Aunt Agatha and Barley Batslime.

At the last meeting of the Animal’s Assembly, always held on the first night of the full moon, Barley had complained vociferously about the conduct of Aunt Agatha. He was convinced that the witch had cast a spell on him, causing the straw stuffing in his chest to become mildewed and rotten. Such was the eloquence of his claim against her; many of those present were convinced that he had a genuine case. Even the birds who were Barley’s enemies agreed, including some members of the notorious Black Wing gang, although the fact it had been the wettest autumn for many years, and Barley out in all weathers which was probably responsible, the animals had overlooked. Everything was the fault of the Oomans as far as the Council were concerned.

The feud between the two antagonists had begun with a chance encounter by moonlight in the forest. Barley of course believed that Oomans should stay out of Wickham Wood; it was a sacred place where they did not belong, especially the grove of the standing stone. One cold night Barley had been surprised and not a little annoyed to meet Aunt Agatha in that very place. When Barley had accosted her about trespassing in that hallowed site, a fierce altercation had begun that caused uproar in the wood, and with many animals including the normally placid, wisest of owls Professor Wisefeather, and especially an infuriated Old Balty telling them to both stay away and resolve their conflict elsewhere. This had not been the case and Barley was convinced that the witch had taken revenge on him with her mildewing spell.

Thus, upon learning of this the Guild of Witches decided it was time for Aunt Agatha to have a new familiar, one who would ensure that their society knew of her activities. Mr Softpaw had been a very good agent for his bosses and was enjoying his present assignment. He had easily duped Aunt Agatha into accepting him; his feline wiles easily manipulated this particular Ooman. The black cat had little time for most of them, but he had seen something in that littlest one that had just arrived. Yes, Philly the other Oomans had called her; he could tell that the latent power of magic lay within her. A future witch in the making, which would be significant later, Mr Softpaw decided he had earned a comfortable nap in front of the fireplace; he had matters well in paw, as cats of all persuasions are apt to say and do.

Meanwhile, Aunt Agatha and her guests were approaching the edge of Wickham Wood. Some of them more eagerly than others, Simon had convinced himself that there were legions of monsters in there lurking in the greenwood just waiting to ambush, and acres of nettles ready to engulf them. He had always had a nervous disposition and Philly liked to exploit the fact.

He glanced nervously at the ivy-covered twisted line of trees in front of them. “Do you think it’s safe to go in there then,” he asked cautiously.

Philly looked at him scornfully and jeered at her brother. “You’re just scared as usual, why don’t you stay at home with a blanket over your head all the time!”

“You can shut up,” he said before taking a menacing step towards her, Philly stepped backwards into a patch of thistles. She yelped as the barbed leaves scratched her legs and glared at her brother. “I’ll get you for this, you bully,” she snapped at him.

Mrs Dawson reined them both in. “Pack it in, you two! Showing us up in front of your aunt, behave yourselves or you can go home!” She glared at Simon, “you will be grounded if you do that again.”

Aunt Agatha intervened to calm things down, “you are getting excitable my dears, I suggest that we go into the forest, there’s so much to see in there it will make you all feel much better!”

Jenny, who had been leading the group onwards, was hesitant to advance further. “It feels spooky as we approach, like there’s something watching us from in there! Maybe Simon’s on to something,” she said tentatively.

“Nonsense,” said Aunt Agatha who promptly took control of the situation. “You lot have very vivid imaginations, let me lead us in there and you’ll see there’s nothing to worry about.” She walked confidently forward up to the treeline and disappeared into the greenery. Almost immediately, she re-emerged and beckoned them to follow her inside. As they slowly entered the trees, it suddenly grew very dull overhead, with the sun disappearing behind a dense cloudbank as if in disapproval.

Inside the greenery, the family had to strain their eyes to see the path clearly, given the gloom and undergrowth that were both crowding in on it. All around them, a mixture of oak, ash, and beech trees soared upwards forming an opaque, compact canopy, which let limited light through. In certain places, it was gloomier than elsewhere. The lower growth was composed of a tangled mass of hawthorn and holly forming the understorey, punctuated by occasional wild cherry trees. Upon the gnarled, twisted trunks grew thick fibres of ivy, clinging robustly. The eerie silence just added to the oppressive atmosphere.

“Isn’t it wonderful,” exclaimed Aunt Agatha, “I come here a lot for peaceful walks and to think about my work.”

“What is your work then?” Philly asked inquisitively. “Mum told us you were retired.”

“Eh, it’s just a little part-time job I have, I’ll tell you about it later,” and said no more on the subject. Aunt Agatha was as cagey as ever. The group walked in single file along the path following her; presently she stopped where a beam of light shone down through the trees illuminating them.

“They are called Devil’s Staircases in some parts, they are,” said Aunt Agatha. “Now look at the different herbs that grow here, you can use some of them in medicine you know. She pointed at several plants growing alongside the trail, “Alliaria, and plantain are good examples, they can flourish in the shaded areas here, where the light is poor.”

“Very interesting,” said Mrs Dawson. “You did botany at school, Jenny, didn’t you?”

“Yes, mum,” she replied. “I think you can eat some of these, in salads and such like. Do you use them, aunt?”

“Yes, my dear,” said Aunt Agatha. “In my work, that is, in some of my recipes at home, I like to experiment you know. I think we should split up to look for different plants, and if anybody thinks they have found something interesting call me, and I’ll try to identify it for you.”

This idea appealed to the others except Simon, they spread out through the immediate area, Mrs Dawson, and Jenny went off at a tangent to the path and Philly boldly strode off along the path deeper into the forest, followed by a still nervous Simon.

“Come on then,” Philly called out to her brother, “let’s go and look over here!” Philly had noticed a particularly big oak tree growing about ten yards off the path. It had a twisted trunk coated in a mixture of moss, lichen, and ivy all but obscuring the bark. In its branches many cobwebs hung, adding to the eerie appearance of the tree. Between the thick roots were clusters of flowers that Philly didn’t recognise. She took a closer look and motioned Simon to join her. “What’s the matter, now,” she demanded of him.

Simon was standing on the path gazing around anxiously. “I don’t think it’s a good idea wondering off alone, there might be dangerous animals about, he stammered. His upbringing in a large town had left him with little knowledge of the greenwood, and his fertile imagination did the rest.

“Don’t be silly,” Philly, said. “This is an English wood, not the jungle. Why don’t you go and look further back towards Mum and Jenny, maybe you’ll be safer there!” She laughed at him as he retraced his steps back to them. “I’m sure that the animals here are very nice,” she said, and with that, she turned back to the flora that interested her.

“Well, that was very kind of you to say so,” said a voice from above her. “You sound most enlightened for an Ooman, which is very unusual!”

Philly jumped back in alarm from the tree base, and stared fixedly upwards into the mass of twisted branches. She couldn’t see anything at all, who had spoken to her?

“I suppose you are wondering who I am, then?” The voice continued in a measured tone, “I am sorry if I startled you. Well, allow me to introduce myself then!” There was a rustling sound overhead and a face suddenly peered through the leaves down at her. A most strange face with tufted ears, big bright eyes, brownish feathers, and a sharply pointed beak, that was now perusing Philly with intense interest.

Philly was as amazed as she was frightened. “Who or what are you,” she stammered nervously. Maybe Simon had a point about the animals here.

“Well, I’m definitely not a what,” said the strange figure, “so I suppose I must be a who, logically speaking. Your question was mildly impertinent but I’m doubtless quite curious to you, so I will overlook it. My formal title is Aloysius Wisefeather, Professor of Raptor Studies at the University of Aves, but you may address me as Professor Wisefeather. Honoured to make your acquaintance, with whom do I have the privilege of speaking to?”

Philly was too astonished to respond immediately. She recalled what Aunt Agatha had said about Wickham Wood being peculiar but this was so far out there, she was very unsettled. Nevertheless, with the vivid imagination she possessed Philly was open to the suggestion; perhaps this was all a dream. “Mmm, I’m called Philippa Dawson,” she managed to blurt out. “Philly for short, I’m pleased to make your acquaintance, do you live here?”

“Yes,” replied the Professor. “I have a splendid nest further up in the tree, it’s very comfortable. Are you a visitor here? I haven’t seen you before, we get only a few Oomans in the forest, most of the animals like it that way.”

“Yes,” said Philly. “I’m visiting my Aunt Agatha for some of my summer holidays; my family are staying with her for a couple of weeks. We are exploring the forest looking for edible plants. My brother Simon isn’t really interested, he is nasty to me a lot”

“Oh so, you are a relative of Agatha’s then? I am also acquainted with her; we have had a number of interesting conversations on a wide range of subjects. Now I can see where you get your wisdom from, and the latent power I sense in you. The same gift your aunt has. You don’t know about that of course but you will shortly, the real reason you are here. Perhaps I can help you with your brother.”

This intrigued Philly; Aunt Agatha of course had always had a reputation for being odd. However, what was the power the Professor had mentioned? “What do you mean then?” She asked him.

“Your aunt will tell you in the fullness of time about that matter. I only mentioned it because there is an understanding between the Oomans who have the skill and the animals. You will be a member of an illustrious group, Philly, have patience and you will learn. Now, let me give you some advice about the wood and its inhabitants, things you should know. There are some individuals you had best avoid, the Black Wing gang for instance. They are notorious in the district, to both Oomans and natural fauna, which they both steal from, taking all the food from the bird tables and many objects from you Oomans. Jewellery, glasses, even the food off your plate, and a most despicable character called Monty Magpie, known as Slippery Beak to his criminal associates, leads them. He is wanted in three counties for larceny and fraudulent representation in the natural world,” he said. “One more thing, there is a character called Barley Batslime you will meet soon I expect, beware of him, he is un-friendly to pretty much all Oomans even though his very existence depends on you. Be guided by your aunt, she is prudent in these matters.”

Philly looked astonished, was this all-possible then?

The Professor chuckled gently at her obvious discomfort; such things were usually above the understanding of Oomans, even those who had the gift. “Yes, Philippa, even the animal community has its laws and enforcement of them. Most of us are law abiding apart from the Black Wing Gang and one or two others. When you eventually acquire your power, you will gain an insight into the natural world far beyond that of ordinary Oomans. Now, that is a lot for you to take in for now. I must be off to work, I work nights you know, I arose early to meet you as your presence here was expected, I will be in touch shortly. We will have much more to talk about in future, see you soon,” and with that he flapped his wings several times in the manner that signifies respect in the avian community, and disappeared back into the dense greenery above him.

Philly gulped in astonishment at all that had just happened. To say she was taken aback would of course be a most significant understatement, her summer holiday had only just begun, and all this had happened already. If she told the others about what had just occurred, they would think she was just being silly and making it all up, after all, whoever had heard of owls that could speak and work in universities? Perhaps she imagined it all, a daydream, and nothing more. Well, Jenny was always accusing her of having them, but this time Philly was convinced that she had not imagined any of it. She was so deep in thought about it all that at first, she did not hear her mother calling in the distance.

“Philly, where are you,” Mrs Dawson was shouting at the top of her voice, “Aunt Agatha wants to show us some more things further into the forest, we need to go now if we are to see them and get back in time for tea!”

"I'm coming Mum," Philly hollered back and set off to find the rest of her family. As she hurried through the trees, it seemed that the gloom of the forest had deepened even more whilst she had been speaking with Professor Wisefeather. Within a minute, she spotted them in a huddled group standing on the path next to a weathered old tree stump. Simon was agitatedly shuffling his feet, still convinced that something terrible was lurking in the greenery waiting to ambush him.

"Oh, there you are," said Mrs Dawson crossly. "Where did you get to, we've been waiting for nearly fifteen minutes, did you find any interesting plants?"

"Not really," replied Philly," but I did see an interesting bird in an old oak tree, she said truthfully. Well, it was certainly true up to a point.

"Yes, interrupted Aunt Agatha. "We do have some interesting fauna here as well, which we may see as we go on. I want to show you the Standing Stone; it's about another two hundred yards further along this path. Follow me then and I will lead you there."

They eagerly followed her down the trail, Philly bringing up the rear, still trying to make sense of her earlier encounter. She stayed silent as the others chatted excitably among themselves. Around them, the woodland appeared lifeless, but Philly knew that many eyes were watching them, as the trees began to thin out. Presently, they came to a clearing and the ground before them rose up into a low-lying mound with the occasional stunted bush growing on it, dwarfed by the huge stone obelisk rising almost as high as the surrounding foliage. It clearly showed the ravages of so many centuries of exposure to the elements, stained greenish-yellow by lichens and eroded by the passing of millennia. The group crowded around the monument examining it closely, rubbing hands over the ancient stone surface, and gazing upwards at its summit, which pointed like an arrow into the centre of the circular patch of sky above them.

"Impressive isn't it," said Aunt Agatha cheerfully, "It was here long before us and it will be here long after we have gone. Erected by people we know very little about for reasons we know very little about. A mystical place where strange rites once took place," she hesitated before continuing. "Perhaps they still do," her voice trailing away as she appeared to be lost in, thought. "There are rumours in the village of black magic being practised here, but I don't think there's anything to it, you get a lot of superstition and folklore in these country villages," she told them, mindful of their status as townies.

"There is something puzzling me," said Mrs Dawson. "I remember watching a documentary about stone circles and such like a while back. They were built in open areas like Salisbury Plain, not inside dense woodland like this."

"That is true," replied Aunt Agatha. "I was told by an archaeologist who came here to study the stone pillar several years ago that the area where Wickham Wood now stands was once open ground in the Stone Age, having been cleared by the Neolithic farmers to create fields. Then it appears that after the Romans invaded the district was de-populated and the forest grew back."

"How far does the forest extend beyond here?" Jenny asked curiously.

"As far as the centre of the next parish, it covers an area of nearly a thousand acres, which is of course only a small part of what it once was. I saw a medieval map last year that showed it stretching to the outskirts of Eastwick, which is over three miles away," Aunt Agatha stated.

"Is there anything else of interest out here, enquired a still curious Jenny, whose interest on the walk had been aroused by the Standing Stone.

"Well, her aunt said, pausing to think carefully before replying. "There is an old burial mound on the other side of the forest but that is too far away to visit today." She looked upwards at the western sky, which was beginning to darken, with thickening cloud bubbling up and the wind rising quickly. "I think we should go home now; it gets dark quickly here, and the wood is no place to be then. Besides, I have prepared a lovely Shepherd's Pie for our supper tonight, so let's head home and enjoy it! It's another day tomorrow!" Whereupon Aunt Agatha pointed back down the path, "this way family, off we go then, follow me!"

The Dawson family looked at each other in a bemused manner before tailing after her hurriedly. Simon kept glancing from side to side nervously as they left the clearing and entered the trees, expecting at any moment to see a plethora of hideous monsters lunging at them from all directions. Whatever else the other kids in school said about him, it was definitely the case that he had a lurid imagination. Philly wondered if she was still dreaming after her strange encounter.

Their departure from the forest did not go un-observed; high above them in one of the tallest beeches a pair of blackbirds were perched, watching the departing people with great interest before turning to each other. They were members of the infamous Black Wing gang, whom Professor Wisefeather had warned Philly about

with good reason, as we will see. “We’ll have to report this to Slippery Beak, these are Oomans we have not seen here before, there could be good pickings,” said one of them eagerly.

“Yeah, but best be careful,” replied the other warily, shaking his head. “They were with that one called Agatha, you know, the Ooman with the special powers. That’s what Old Balty reckons, she’s been to at least one of the Animal Assembly meetings. A few of the gathering didn’t take kindly to her presence, especially Barley Batslime. He really lost it when she turned up.”

“A lot of them don’t take kindly to our presence, chiefly because we have pinched loads of stuff from them, so they are never pleased to see us, even though we are entitled to attend. Lurking in the shadows outside the main moonlight, very dignified I don’t think. I don’t know why Slippery Beak insists we go along to these meetings,” answered the first one. He was known as Scratch on because of a prominent scar on his upper beak, the result of a fight with an angry dog who had taken exception to him drinking from his bowl.

His companion, known as Swift Wing, as he could outfly any other bird known in the district, looked contemptuously at his acquaintance. “You know full well Slippery Beak makes us go there because of the information we can get to plan our next jobs. The animals are always gossiping among themselves, even when Old Balty tries to keep order. We always get plenty of swag after those meetings, and some of those other creatures there are not exactly so innocent themselves. Well, enough of this, we must find Slippery Beak to see what he thinks and what we are going to do about the arrival of these Oomans. Let’s go!”

With that, both birds took to the air to look for their gang boss. Slippery Beak was an elusive character at the best of times; he could be in any number of places. They suspected that he would be loitering in the Eastwick recreation ground or its high street, carefully watching the Oomans going about their business there, just waiting for an opportunity to swoop down and steal something from them. He left the pilfering of foodstuffs from bird tables and elsewhere, to the detriment of all the other birds in the district, to his gang members. It did not stop there; many of the avian population had suffered both the indignity of comfortable linings from their nests stolen, and even some of these being squatted by them. Slippery Beak himself took his share of the food but he had his eyes on other prizes, the shiny things the Oomans coveted. In an attempt to curb the criminality of the band, Old Balty had enlisted the assistance of Professor Wisefeather, who being the most judicious of all the animals suggested a means to deal with the problem, albeit temporarily. He had called in the services of some Sparrowhawks, whom he knew from his University, they sometimes worked there as guest lecturers in his department of Raptor Studies. Unlike other birds of prey, they were not restricted to open ground, as it was customary for them to nest in woodland and they thrived there.

Curiously, they didn’t hunt any birds, just made their presence known, which was later to arouse much suspicion. The Black Wing gang took flight in great fright when they appeared in Wickham Wood, and hovering overhead above the recreation ground, whilst pursuing their nefarious activities. Even Slippery Beak knew when it was unwise to hang about, he had lost a tail feather in the forest when they ambushed him and flew away faster than he believed possible, strenuous exercise not being his thing. An infuriated Slippery suspected that Professor Wisefeather was involved in his humiliation, that owl was too clever for his own good, too honest by far for respectable criminals like the Black Wing gang. Eventually, they had returned to the woodland after the raptors had left, and Slippery had sworn revenge on the Professor. It was just a matter of time, he thought.

As the two blackbirds soared high overhead away to the east, the Dawson family were making their way home. Philly traipsed along behind the others, wondering when she would next meet the talking owl; after all, she had not imagined him had she? Should she try to ask Aunt Agatha about it, and find out more, or would that make her look very silly? Best to keep quiet for now and see what happens, maybe her aunt would let something slip. Within a few minutes, the family had reached the edge of the wood, with Simon being visibly relieved. He thought he would be having nightmares for weeks after visiting the forest, and as if to enforce his views, the weather suddenly deteriorated, the wind picked up and the sky darkened markedly.

“It looks like a summer storm my dears,” shouted Aunt Agatha. “Funny thing is I didn’t see anything about it on the weather forecast, well, let’s hurry home now!”

She increased her pace and the rest of the family followed suit, eager to reach the comfort of Willow Brook as the clouds menacing closed in above them. A light drizzle began to fall as they arrived on the path leading to Aunt Agatha’s house, the children pointing gleefully at a rainbow they could see behind it, one end disappearing into the wood.

“Oh, does this mean that there is a pot of gold buried in the forest then?” Philly asked inquisitively.

“Sadly, not my dear, replied Aunt Agatha smiling at her youngest niece, “but I do have some strawberry Ice cream buried somewhere in the freezer at home.”

"Hurray! Let's get home quickly." Philly yelled out and set off hurriedly. The others exchanged bemused looks with the exception of Aunt Agatha, who chuckled gently at her enthusiasm and ushered the rest of the family onward. When Philly arrived at the garden gate, she pulled it wide open, the hinges creaking loudly in protest.

The noise alerted Mr Softpaw who was pacing up and down up in front of the fireplace, his ears pricked up at the sound and he jumped up onto the windowsill. Being a conscientious agent of the Guild of Witches, he had reported the arrival of the Dawson's and their trip to Wickham Wood to them. The Guild trained its familiars well; it had selected Mr Softpaw as a kitten because of his lineage, many of his forbears had followed the profession. Among the much dexterity developed by the familiars was telepathy, which Mr Softpaw used to contact the Guild, he had been amused by the storm conjured up by the witches to discourage the Dawson's presence in the forest. They did not mind Aunt Agatha going there, but liked to restrict the numbers of other people doing so.

Philly allowed the others to pass through the gate first, and then followed on. Simon was the first to reach the front door, glad to be back at the farmhouse after their foray into the trees. As Aunt Agatha opened the front door the light rain began to fall much harder so the family were relieved to get inside; no sooner had they hung their coats up, then the children rushed into the living room and picked out the big book on dinosaurs they had fought over earlier. As the three of them pored over it their aunt prepared supper, producing the Shepherd's Pie she had promised earlier. The youngsters were hungry enough after the trip and eagerly took their places at the big kitchen table, tucking into the plates of steaming hot food. When the group had all finished their meals, Aunt Agatha beamed at Philly and asked her if she would now like some strawberry ice cream, which of course was unnecessary, as she knew her niece so well. It was just Aunt Agatha's little joke.

"Yes please! Strawberry ice cream is the best in the world," Philly exclaimed loudly.

"No, it isn't," Simon interrupted grumpily. "Everybody knows it's mint choc chip, strawberry is so boring."

Philly poked her tongue out at him in defiance and turned to her aunt, "he's silly you know auntie, doesn't know anything at all.

"If the wind changes your face will stay like that forever," Simon jeered back at her.

"You are both being silly," Jenny said. "Pack it in!"

"Yes," barked their mother. "I had enough of your ice cream quarrelling earlier on the way here; you can all have strawberry flavour or go without!"

"Well, that settles that then," Aunt Agatha, said, "strawberry all round. After you've finished, we can play a board game in the living room before bedtime."

Simon glared at his siblings balefully but did not speak. He grudgingly ate the ice cream and decided that when he was grown up, he would have strawberry flavoured banned, that would really annoy Philly and teach her a lesson. Their aunt bought it especially for her, there never seemed to be any other flavour. After enjoying the ice cream to varying degrees, the family assisted in the washing up and then descended upon the lounge to play together. As they began with Mrs Dawson not taking part, Mr Softpaw strolled into the room and took up position in the corner, next to a large rubber plant. He curled up contentedly and kept careful watch on the Oomans, just when he thought they couldn't get any more foolish, they did something to surprise him. Perhaps this evening would be interesting. The family were in the middle of a bad-tempered game of Ludo, in which Simon still sulking from earlier, had managed to convince himself that Philly had cheated, when something spooky happened.

Just after nightfall, there was a sudden loud scratching sound from somewhere above them. They all gazed upward at the ceiling in alarm with the exception of Aunt Agatha, who sat back and smiled with resignation.

"Oh, that will be the Spirits visiting," she stated blithely, "They like to make their presence felt. They mean no harm, don't be alarmed."

Mrs Dawson gave her older sister a baffled look. "What do you mean Spirits? It's probably just a bird or something that's got trapped and is looking for a way out, besides you are frightening the children."

That much was true; Simon was cowering behind his mother, and Philly was as pale as a sheet. Jenny was intrigued and suggested they go upstairs to investigate, but Aunt Agatha said not to worry, the noise had only lasted about a minute.

"They watch over the house and its occupants, keeping us safe. Just an old country belief you know," she said to ease their anxieties.

"Well, in that case," replied Mrs Dawson, humouring her eccentric sibling, we should be o.k. Anyway, I think it is time for the children to go to bed; they have had a long day. I'll turn in myself, I'm very tired."

"As you wish my dear, I'll show you the sleeping arrangements, follow me upstairs, said Aunt Agatha. "The kids can wash and clean their teeth; they know where the bathroom is."

"Right then you lot, you heard your aunt, grab your toiletry bags/pyjamas and get upstairs, from an orderly queue outside the bathroom, Mrs Dawson directed the three kids. They meekly trooped out to their luggage in the hallway, collected their bags, and went up the stairs. Surprisingly, they managed to use the bathroom without bickering, and as each finished, went to join their aunt. She was waiting in one of the house's three bedrooms, which had a bunk bed against the outside wall, and a single bed the other side of the room. A battered wardrobe lay up against the far wall, behind it the wallpaper was peeling away from the plaster. In the corner between the wardrobe and the single bed was an equally dilapidated chest of drawers, above it on the ceiling a large cobweb had clearly been there a long time, given the thick dust covering it.

"You kids will be sleeping in here; you can choose between yourselves who sleeps in the bunk bed and who gets the single, soon Jenny will be old enough to need her own room," said Aunt Agatha.

"I'll go on the top," shouted Philly excitedly.

"Fine by me," said Jenny, who knew she would have to exert some kind of authority as she was sharing the bedroom. "I'll take the single bed, Simon you go in the lower bunk."

Simon, still sulking after the ice cream incident, merely grunted in acknowledgement, at least he would not have to keep climbing up and down every time.

Aunt Agatha was satisfied with the arrangements and told the children to get to bed. Switching the light out she followed Mrs Dawson into the next bedroom, which was to be her room. After a short conversation, Aunt Agatha retired for the night and silence descended upon the ramshackle farmhouse. Philly was too excited to sleep after the events of the day, her experience in the wood had been so amazing she knew that if she told the others they would think she was mad. It had not been a dream or a figment of her imagination, that much she was certain of, when would she get to meet Professor Wisefeather again? As she lay there in the darkness the only sound was, Simon's snoring. Philly decided to visit the bathroom and have a drink of water, which sometimes helped her to sleep. She carefully climbed down from the bunk as quietly as possible to avoid causing a disturbance, and tiptoed out of the bedroom. As she made her way along the corridor to the bathroom, she could just see out of her peripheral vision a light downstairs, shining out from the kitchen door, which was very slightly ajar. She wondered if her aunt had left a light on, and decided to have a look, turning it out before going back to bed.

Creeping down the stairs avoiding the riser she had noticed creaked earlier, she sidled up to the door and peered through the narrow gap between door and frame. She could just make out Aunt Agatha sitting at the big table reading aloud in a low voice from a big book. Philly could not understand what she was saying, a strange language she didn't recognise, but what really grabbed her attention was the sight of Mr Softpaw standing on the table by the side of the tome. He was pointing with his right front paw at particular passages in the text, which Aunt Agatha then directed her attention to. Philly recoiled in astonishment, narrowly avoiding a collision with the old grandfather clock across the hallway, in trepidation she scuttled back upstairs noiselessly and clambered back into bed. Her heart was pounding almost as loudly as Simon's snoring, which continued unabated.

Oh, crumbs she thought, what did it all mean and what else was going to happen on this summer holiday?