

A long time ago, when the Kings of England were always named George, and any light at night that wasn't the moon or stars came from candles or magic, there lived four silver-tongued siblings called the Belles…





To my family

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PETER BUNZL

GLASSBORN



USBORNE


The Fairy Queen
Tempest
Otto Glass
Robert Glass
Anna
Eliza
Kisi Fremah
Cora
Bram
The Family Tree


Marino
Prosper
Adopted
Thomas
Maria
Patrick Bell
Elle
Acton

"Can you keep a secret? I wonder if you can.
Once an evil curse was set by the Queen of Fairyland.
Now six lost souls must remember their true names.
A five pointed crown must be won in riddling games.
Four wooden soldiers must help cast magic spells.
Three Glassborn children must sing like ringing bells.
Two Fairy twins must hide a magic key,
and the child who is the chosen one must set their
family free."

Traditional Fairy Nursery Rhyme





Prologue

20th December, 1799

Once upon a time, five days before Christmas, at the thirteenth stroke of midnight, on the night before the Winter Solstice, a wolf named Thomas leaped across the moonlit sky, springing from cloud to cloud in great, long leaps.

The wolf wore a stone with a hole in it, called a hag stone, and a yellow tooth on a string around his scraggy neck. His long snout sniffed the snowy air. His eyes – one green, one blue – twinkled in the silvery moonlight, searching for a Fairy Tree that grew in an old churchyard, beside the walled garden of a crumbling cottage.

A Storm Sorceress named Tempest rode on the wolf's

back. Her eyes – one green, one blue – were full of wisdom and cunning, and her determined, wrinkled face was as rugged as a cliffside. Her leaf-green cloak and her loose white hair streamed behind her like the banners of a marching army. She was not afraid of the wolf, for though he was known to be wild he was also her brother.

A red robin named Coriel flew beside the Storm Sorceress and the wolf, gliding on the midnight winds to keep pace with them. Her coal-black eyes glanced ahead in the dark, as she chirruped out the occasional direction. She was the first to spot the Fairy Tree, and she landed in the tree's branches as the wolf and the Storm Sorceress touched down in the frozen grounds of the churchyard, beside the tree's great trunk.

The Storm Sorceress climbed from the wolf's back and brushed snowflakes from her hair. The wolf crouched among the gravestones and began to dig among the tree's roots. The snowy earth squelched between his scrabbling paws.

The Storm Sorceress put a wizened hand in the pocket of her cloak and took out a carefully folded handkerchief. From it she unwrapped a little sparkling key with wards like gold teeth. She placed the key carefully in the hole and the wolf pushed the earth back over it.

The robin flew around gathering moss and twigs to drop over the bare ground.

When they were done, the Storm Sorceress grasped the cloud-shaped piece of bone and a carved wooden boat that hung round her neck, and spoke a spell.

"**Tree that's wise, earth that knows, keep this secret down below.**"

Tufted grass and spiked branches sprouted over the patch of freshly turned earth, and each new blade and twig that grew crackled with frost. Soon the spot where the key was buried looked no different from the rest of the clearing around it.

The Storm Sorceress smiled. Her work here was done. There was no more reason to remain. The magic would take care of the rest. She felt the heaviness of her eighty-seven years. Life would be lighter soon, of that she was sure. She pressed her palm to her necklace once more and spoke another spell.

"**Fairy Tree, tall and grand, open a path to Fairyland.**"

A sparkling, silver web grew from the tree's branches. Its threads twined together to become a doorway, which floated in the air a few inches off the ground. On the far side of the doorway was a separate shimmering world, ever so slightly different to our own. It was daytime over there and rather than the glow of the full moon everything was bathed in sunlight.

"Remember what I told you," the Storm Sorceress

advised the wolf and robin. "The Chosen One is coming for the key. I'll see you again when you bring them to me. Whatever you do, don't let the Fairy Queen get to them first, or else doom will befall us all."

She stepped through the magical doorway. "**Close!**" she commanded, and it shut behind her. One moment she was there, the next she was gone, as if she'd never existed.

Then all that was left was the red robin sitting in the Fairy Tree, the wolf pacing around its trunk, and the magical key buried deep underground.

1



Acton Belle

20th December, 1826

A long time ago, when the Kings of England were always named George, and any light at night that wasn't the moon or stars came from candles or magic, there lived four silver-tongued siblings called the Belles. Their surname was Belle like their papa, but people sometimes called them the Glass-Belles, because their mama's family, who'd been glassmakers, had the surname Glass, and because each of the children's voices was pure and true, like the chime of a glass bell.

The four children were storytellers. When one of them lost the thread of a story, another would take it up and complete it for them. That's how close they were. So close

they stood on each other's toes, shared each other's hopes and dreams, laughed at each other's jokes, cried each other's tears, or accidentally poked each other in the ribs after an especially egregious argument.

It was five days before Christmas, one day before the Winter Solstice, at around four in the afternoon, and the four Belle children were shivering in blankets in a horse-drawn carriage hurrying through the frosty Greenwood Forest. Black clouds threw large snowflakes across the sky, and in the wide-open spaces and long shadows a chilly grey twilight was falling.

One Sunday last winter, almost a year ago, the children's mama had become suddenly and violently ill. A few days later, she had died of influenza at their home in Miles Cross. Today they were taking a long and winding road with their papa to their new home in Tambling village: a house called Fairykeep Cottage.

Acton was the youngest Belle. The last to get the hand-me-downs, and to be told what was going on. Eleven years old, with eyes as blue as a summer's day, delicate features and auburn hair that rippled like the ocean. Acton loved games, adventures, magic, and stories – especially the old fairy tales Mama used to tell. His brother said those weren't true, but Acton knew better. In his heart he was certain he would always believe in Fairies.

Elle was the next youngest. Twelve, with a round face, green eyes bright as spring, long scruffy yellow hair and slim earth-stained fingers. Elle adored nature, and could name every insect, plant, tree and animal. Acton loved it when she took him out on expeditions in search of undiscovered organisms. When they found one they'd always name it. Usually something like: the "Ellesian Moth" or the "Ellestoa Tree". Never, Acton noticed, the "Acton Bush", or the "Acton Flower", which was a pity.

Bram was Acton's older brother. The one who didn't believe in Fairies. Bram's full name was Bramble, which he hated. He was thirteen going on thirty, with eyes grey as winter and ginger hair that was scruffy and tangled. Bram loved battles. The uniforms, the muskets, the medals and the cannons. Whenever he could, he read military history, in case he got caught in a skirmish and had to kill in cold blood. That meant with gore, guts and bone-curdling screams, he explained to Acton with a chilling *ha! Ha! HA!* and a punch to the arm. Bram was also very good at riddles. He collected them like most people collect conkers. He'd recently thought up a new one, which he told to the others now.

"Today, as I went down to the Dead Lands, I met an old troubadour with a lute in his hands. Dancing behind him were sixteen brown bears, twelve moles and one vole, and a brace of grey

hares. Prancing with them were thirteen black cats, and fifty white mice in the tallest tall hats. Waltzing about them were eighteen young brides and eighteen young bridegrooms with tears in their eyes. Each traveller waved, with a paw or a hand, but how many were going down to the Dead Lands?"

Acton had no idea. "All of them," he guessed.

"Wrong!" Bram crowed.

Elle bit her lip, thinking. "Ten?" she suggested.

"The answer's one," interrupted Cora, the oldest of the four, looking up from her book. "Just you, Bramble. Isn't that so?"

"How did you know?" Bram asked.

"You're the sole soul heading towards the Dead Lands," Cora explained. "Everyone else is heading away from them, in the opposite direction."

She'd worked it out and guessed correctly. Acton was impressed.

Cora was his favourite sibling. Fourteen, with a resolute chin and matted brown hair. She had small hazel eyes the colour of autumn, that were glazed with the far-off expression of a dreamer, and over her dress she wore a long red hooded cloak – a family heirloom.

Cora was the best at telling Mama's fairy tales, but she also fashioned stories of her own, about a magical place called Glasstown. She wanted to be a writer when she grew

up and write epic novels like Mary Shelley, whose book *Frankenstein* she was halfway through reading. When Acton had asked her what it was about, Cora had said it concerned a monster and a man, and nobody was entirely sure which was which. She'd said this with a wry smile as thoughtful and clever as Mama's. The smile made Acton miss Mama even more.

Acton glanced at Papa, slumped in his seat. Papa's name was Patrick; Pat for short. He liked poems, tricks and riddles. Long ago, he'd taught his four children how to write their names backwards. He did the same for Mama when they were courting, to make her laugh. Papa's name backwards was *Tap*. Acton's was *Notca*. Cora's was *Aroc*. Mama's was *Airam*. Bram's was *Marb*. Elle's was *Elle,* a palindrome that read the same both ways. Elle's whole name *ElleBelle* was a palindrome too, which was the reason Mama and Papa, who both loved word-games, had chosen it.

Papa's stubble looked grey this afternoon, and his mourning suit was patched and ruffled. His once-red hair had turned white overnight after Mama's death. His shoulders were hunched in his high-collared shirt, and his eyes were scrunched shut. His head bounced lightly against the headrest and Acton realized he'd fallen asleep.

Since Mama had died Papa was always tired. He'd lost his job as a vicar, when his sadness became so intense he

was barely able to function. Soon he was staying in bed all day. And when he did get up, he didn't wash, shave, or dress, instead he'd sit in Mama's old rocking chair in his nightshirt and dressing gown and stare out of the window. Acton wondered if he was imagining the summer walks he used to take with Mama, or the day trips they'd made as a family.

Mama was buried in Tambling Churchyard. Acton, Elle, Bram and Cora had not gone to her funeral. Papa said it would be too much for them. They hadn't even visited Fairykeep Cottage – Mama's childhood home, and the new house where they were going to live, since they'd lost their old home in Miles Cross from Papa's neglect.

Fairykeep Cottage was owned by Mama's sister, Aunt Eliza. Over the years, Mama had told her children many tales about her family and the house. Cora was the one who remembered most of them. Acton decided he would like to hear one now. It would pass the time on the long journey. "Tell us one of Mama's old stories, Cor," he said.

"All right," Cora agreed. "I'll tell you one you've not heard before, that Mama told me when the rest of you weren't around."

Acton felt a pang of jealousy that he had no similar stories Mama had told only to him. He was desperate to hear this one. He leaned forward and listened carefully. He

didn't want to miss any detail that might be drowned out by the rattle of the carriage.

"Once upon a time," Cora began, "a hundred years ago, two ferrymen, named Prosper and Marino, lived in a house called Ferrykeep Cottage, which sat beside the Tambling River.

"Prosper kept a boat called *Nixie* that had a scratch down her starboard side, where she'd once scraped a hidden river rock. Marino carved wooden toys from fallen branches and driftwood. The two ferrymen shared their home with their adopted children, a Storm Girl called Tempest and a Wild Boy called Thomas."

"Our great-grandma and great-grand-uncle!" Acton exclaimed.

"Precisely!" Cora said. "Tempest and Thomas had magic powers…"

"What kind of magic powers?" Elle interrupted.

"Thomas could turn himself into any animal he liked," Cora said, "and Tempest was a Storm Sorceress who could control the weather." She paused, thinking a bit. "Plus, they could both talk to birds and cast spells.

"The village children nicknamed their home Fairykeep Cottage because of their powers, and because they had come to England from Fairyland, and were the son and daughter of the Fairy Queen…"

"Does that mean *we're* related to the Fairy Queen too?" Acton asked, astonished.

"She was our great-great-grandmother," Cora explained. "She was also a tyrant, who inflicted terrible harm on her family. Even saw to it that her own sister was killed, but that's a tale for another day."

Acton hated the idea that his great-great-grandmother had been so evil she'd murdered her own sister. It's only a story, he told himself, and stories aren't always true.

"When Tempest and Thomas came to England to live with Prosper and Marino," Cora continued, "the Fairy Queen tried to keep in contact with them. After all, the only reason she had let them go in the first place was that they'd promised to stay in touch.

"But Tempest and Thomas couldn't bear to see her any more, because of the many evil things she'd done. They wrote her a letter to tell her to stay away. When the Fairy Queen received their letter, she was so angry she vowed to get her revenge.

"For weeks, she tried to think of a punishment evil enough to satisfy her furious anger, but she couldn't, and so she sent bad luck spells instead. Meanwhile, she stewed for months and years about the glorious retribution she would dish out to her children one day, when the time was right…"

Acton shivered. What a horrible way to live, stewing on revenge all the time.

"Back in England," Cora continued, "an enchanted Fairy Tree grew in the churchyard beside Fairykeep Cottage." "Anyone who ate its apples would dream of Fairyland. Marino carved gifts for Tempest and Thomas from the fallen branches of the tree: four colourful hand-carved wooden soldiers – guardians and lucky charms to protect the children from their mother's growing wrath."

"You mean these soldiers?" Elle asked, taking a Green Soldier from her pocket. "Passed down to us?"

Cora nodded and took a wooden Red Soldier from her own pocket.

Acton put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a Blue Soldier. Bram didn't get out his soldier, but it was the yellow one. Acton knew he always kept it in his pocket too, just like the others. The toy soldiers were a gift from Mama. Each was the size of thumb and each carried a musket and sword, just as real soldiers did. The feel of the little Blue Soldier in Acton's palm gave him comfort when he was scared, like today.

Cora put her Red Soldier away and Elle and Acton followed suit, then she continued the story.

"Prosper altered Fairykeep Cottage to add four upstairs rooms, painting them in the same colours as the toy soldiers.

There was the Red Room, the Green Room, the Yellow Room and the Blue Room. Tempest filled each room with Weather Magic, as a reminder of her and Thomas's old home in Fairyland, where the weather was always wild, indoors and out.

"In the Red Room there were glorious sunsets. In the Green Room rain dripped through the ceiling, as if Fairykeep Cottage was crying. The Yellow Room was warmed by a sirocco wind. The Blue Room was dingy in the daytime, but at night a thousand stars shone bright on its walls.

"Years passed and Tempest and Thomas grew up, but the Fairy Queen never forgot her vow to get revenge on them. One day, she finally came up with a plan that was suitably horrible and would punish them for ever."

Acton gasped, but didn't interrupt. He needed to know more.

"The Queen cast a cruel and venomous curse over Tempest and Thomas," Cora explained. "It said that when they died, their souls were doomed to spend eternity in an afterlife called the Dead Lands, serving a ruler known as the Dead King. They would work for the King for ever in his dark tower that overlooks an underworld beneath Fairyland, stretching further than the eye can see or the mind comprehend."

"How awful!" Elle exclaimed, her eyes wide with horror. "No one deserves such punishment!"

"There's worse," Cora said. "The Fairy Queen had miscalculated… Because of their magic and because they were immortal Fairies, who could never die of natural causes, Tempest and Thomas were not affected by their mother's curse. When the Fairy Queen realized her mistake she tried to overcome it by vowing to capture and kill them herself.

"But Tempest and Thomas used their powers to keep her at bay, and, finally, when they grew weak with age, they went into hiding. And thus, they were kept safe from the Queen." Cora paused for a long time and bit her lip. "But there was one more thing…the Fairy Queen's curse remained unfulfilled, and, as a result, it was passed down to Tempest and Thomas's family instead which is…"

"Us!" Elle whispered, anxiously. "We're all cursed!"

Bram gave a snort of derision. "This story makes no sense. Why didn't Tempest and Thomas use their magic to end their mother's curse for good?"

"Because the Fairy Queen wove a condition into her spell that her children could not cancel the curse themselves," Cora explained, "All they could do was avoid its consequences. But that avoidance caused the curse to fester and linger and so its septic remains were passed down

like an infectious disease, spreading down the branches of their family tree, affecting their children, and their children's children, and everyone born since, and yet to come for ever after."

"Poppycock!" Bram scoffed.

"It's true, Bramble," Cora said. "It's why Tempest and Thomas left behind the magic soldier charms for their family, to protect us. But those don't always work," she added, tearfully. "Which was why the curse aggravated Mama's illness, and helped hasten her death."

"Mama died unexpectedly because she was grievously unwell," Bram snapped. "You know that as well as I do, Cor."

"It was the curse," Cora insisted. "The bad luck from it passed to her, as it will to us in time."

Acton felt sick. He hated it when Bram and Cora argued, but even more than that, he hated the thought that the curse was sewn so deeply into his family line that it had caused all their misfortune.

The journey was getting bumpier. The road grew rutted and the trees crept in. Frosted branches scraped the windows as the carriage slowed.

Finally, they left the Greenwood Forest and crossed a white stone bridge that spanned the gurgling Tambling River.

"Did Tempest and Thomas know that because they'd

avoided the curse, and because it remained unfulfilled, it would cling to their family for all time?" Acton asked.

"They must've suspected," Cora said. "Even while they lived at Fairykeep Cottage, the curse on them affected other people in unexpected ways."

"How?" Elle asked.

"Well," Cora replied, "as Tempest's and Thomas's adopted fathers grew older, Prosper lost his sight. Whenever he went out on the River Tambling in his boat, his children had to go with him as navigators. Then Marino started to lose his memory.

"The pair of old ferry keepers died on the same day – the summer solstice. The very next morning their boat *Nixie* sank, and the toys they'd made vanished, never to be seen again."

"Except for the soldiers," Elle interrupted. "The curse never got those."

"Except the soldiers," Cora agreed. It had got darker since she'd started speaking and Acton had to squint to see her. "Tempest and Thomas saved those magic charms as protection, and they were passed down the generations of the Glass Family, until, finally, they ended up in our possession as Tempest's great-grandchildren…"

"Eventually Thomas left Fairykeep Cottage and went wandering. Tempest became a herbalist. She married a clockmaker called Otto Glass and took his surname. For

their wedding Otto gave Tempest a pocket watch and a grandmother clock he'd made from a broken branch of the Fairy Tree in the churchyard."

"I'd love to see those!" Elle exclaimed.

"The grandmother clock is still at Fairykeep Cottage," Cora said. "The watch, unfortunately, is missing. When Otto died, Tempest disappeared. Then her enchanted Weather Rooms vanished, the Fairy Tree grew weak and the grandmother clock stopped ticking."

"So sad," Elle whispered.

The carriage passed a rusted sign that said:



Acton's heart skipped a beat. They were almost there. The dirt track running alongside the fields became straw and wood, and then cobbled stone that shook the carriage wheels and his teeth and bones.

"Otto and Tempest had one son, called Robert Glass," Cora continued.

"Our Grandpa Bob," Acton announced.

Cora nodded. "Grandpa Bob married Grandma Anna. They had two children, Mama and Aunt Eliza. But this new Glass family suffered in the same way as the old one had, from the bad luck of the curse."

"I'm tired of this story!" Bram muttered. "It's such nonsense!"

Cora ignored this outburst. "As you know, Bram, our grandparents died on the winter solstice the year Elle was born." The carriage trundled past a row of low stone houses, thatched roofs spotted with snow. "By now, many years had passed since Tempest and Thomas had left Fairykeep Cottage." They turned off the main road and up a steep hill lined with little shops. "But everyone in the village whispered that the curse still lay strong over their family, and would for evermore." With each shop they passed, the excitement of seeing their new home built like a head of steam in Acton's chest.

"Unless, one day," Cora continued, as they turned off the top of the hillside road, "a special Chosen One comes along who can end it…" She bit her lip. "And that's the end of the story."

"Thank goodness for that," Bram said. Acton only wished there was more. "By the way," his brother added, "there's no such things as curses, or Fairies, or the Dead King, or the Dead Lands, or the Fairy Queen. Sometimes I think, if all the childish fairy tales went away then…"

But Acton never got to hear the rest of that thought, because the carriage pulled to a stop on a narrow, frozen lane, beside an old stone church with a short square steeple

and the coachman shouted, "PASSENGERS, DISMOUNT FOR FAIRYKEEP!"

His announcement woke Papa, who yawned, rubbed his haggard face and stared at his children as if in a dream.

"So," he said, in the flat way he'd fallen into since Mama's death. "We've arrived at Fairykeep Cottage." And Acton was too scared to ask whether he thought that was a good or bad thing.

2



Fairykeep Cottage

Acton wiped the condensation from the carriage window and peered out. Fairykeep Cottage loomed above him, a large, grey, miserable-looking, double-fronted house, peering over a high, snow-capped, drystone wall. The dark sash windows that poked through its front were covered in spindly frosted branches.

"Wisteria!" Elle exclaimed. "A climber. That'll bloom with pale purple flowers in the summer."

Acton thought the wisteria looked rather dead. So did the house. But he didn't say so. Not out loud. Mama had always talked lovingly of the place, so he had hoped it would feel more homely, but that didn't seem to be the case.

Perhaps it was the curse at work again.

CLUNK!

The carriage roof juddered loudly.

"W-what was that?" he asked.

"Angry Fairies," said Cora.

"Or nothing," said Bram.

"Or fifty Goblins!" Elle shouted. "Watch out, Acton, they're coming to get you! *By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes*!"

"Don't listen to them, son," Papa said. "There are no such creatures. It's the coachman fetching our trunks."

Acton gritted his teeth. He felt embarrassed to have believed his siblings' lies in front of Papa. Especially when Bram had said there was no such thing as Fairies.

As they climbed down from the coach, the Tambling River gabbled in the distance, behind a line of frost-sparkled trees. It sounded like Fairy voices speaking in tongues.

"Need a hand?" Bram called up to the coachman.

"Oh, aye," the coachman muttered, peering over the side of the roof. His face was red from the cold and he had snowflakes in his beard. "I suppose it'll get done quicker that way. Don't want to hang around long at this old accursed place! Not so close to solstice!"

Acton wondered if the coachman knew about the curse. He shifted nervously from foot to foot, trying to shake the

cold from his legs, the ice from his toes and the fear from his belly. The brown coach horses fidgeted in their tack, exhaling heavy clouds of breath like nervous dragons. They too seemed scared of the house.

"Mind your heads!" The coachman passed down the first trunk, and Bram and Papa helped lower it. They took it in turns to grab each of the next ones, Papa dealing with the heavier loads.

"Christmas roses!" Elle exclaimed, crouching by a ring of white flowers at the snowy roadside. "I've never seen them growing in a Fairy Ring before. Maybe it's because we're at Fairykeep Cottage?"

"I suppose so." Cora bit anxiously at her nails. When Papa, Bram and the coachman had finally finished unloading, she opened the rusted iron gate in the wall. Everyone followed her through it, along a snow-spattered path that led across a large front garden and up three stone steps to Fairykeep Cottage's green front door.

The others climbed the steps, but Acton wasn't ready to go inside just yet. He felt like he needed to do something brave first. To take a little detour by himself to assuage his fear. Besides, there was something else he wanted to see. Something next door.

He stepped away from everyone, and snuck off through another gate, woven with green copper leaves, that he'd

seen on the far side of the garden. Nobody noticed him go.

Beyond that second gate was the dark churchyard, full of gravestones and the grey stone church, where Mama and Papa had married, Cora had been baptized as a baby, and Mama's funeral had taken place.

Acton glanced around the churchyard, looking for Mama's headstone. But everything was so dark and covered in snow, he couldn't see properly. He'd barely gone a few paces when he lost sight of the house behind the high wall and the line of trees. Now he felt truly alone.

"Where are you, Mama?" he whispered, his heartbeat flooding his chest. His body tingled with nerves and cold, and his feet crunched on the snowy gravel around the graves. The Tambling River rumbled in the distance, and Acton glimpsed out of the corner of his eye something watching him from behind one of the gravestones.

For a second he thought it was a grey wolf, but that couldn't be, because there were no wolves in England – not any more. He blinked in shock, and when he opened his eyes again the wolf was gone. Disappearing so suddenly, he wondered if it had been a figment of his imagination. Or perhaps it had vanished by magic?

A stone figure, like an angel with butterfly wings, lay face down before him in the deep drifts. Acton stepped carefully over it, heading towards a gnarled, bare tree growing on the

churchyard's far side. The tree was covered in buds, despite the cold weather. Acton felt sure it was the Fairy Tree from Mama's stories. He wished he had Elle or Cora with him to confirm his suspicions, or Bram for his bravery.

He placed his hand carefully on the tree trunk. At once, the air seemed to shimmer, and falling snow swirled excitedly around him. He felt a sudden hum of energy under his palm, and pulled his hand away in shock. When he looked up, a red robin was watching him from a branch above.

The robin angled its head, as if it was from one of Mama's stories and, with a soft rustle of feathers, swept down and landed on his shoulder. It trilled softly, as if it was trying to tell him a secret.

"I know," Acton said. But he wasn't very satisfied with that answer. He didn't know, not really.

The robin didn't seem satisfied either. It spread its wings and, with a sharp little chirrup, glided further off.

With trepidation, Acton trailed after it, into a great thicket of frozen thorns further round the tree. He brushed aside the prickly stems and saw that the tree's branches were clumped in a pattern that spelled out the word:

SECRET

Beneath this, three twigs made the shape of an arrow that pointed at the ground. 

The robin hopped beneath the arrow and pecked at something poking up through the snow between the roots: a tarnished metal ring. The robin snapped at the ring, as if it was a worm. It swooped to Acton's shoulder and dipped its head. Acton could barely believe what he was seeing. It was all very odd… and yet, at the same time, he felt sure the bird wanted him to take the ring.

He crouched down and tugged hard. He'd expected the ring to come away easily, but it was stuck in the soft ground between the tree roots. He felt around it.

The ring was not a ring at all, but something else entirely. There was a thin metal shaft attached to it, buried deep in the snow. Acton dug round it as best he could, making enough space to loosen the object. The cold earth pinched his fingers as he curled them round the shaft and pulled.

The object came out of the ground with a sound almost like a…

POP!

Acton was shocked to discover it was a key.