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Opening extract from

The Secret Country

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CHAPTER ONE

Mr Dodds' Pet Emporium

Ben Arnold was not a remarkable-looking boy. Not unless you looked closely. He had unruly straw-blond hair, thin legs and quite large feet. But his eyes had a faraway expression; and when you got close enough to notice, you could see that while one was a sensible hazel brown, the other shone a wild and vivid green. Ben believed this oddness to be the result of a childhood accident. One day, his mother had told him, while being pushed up the High Street in his pram he had stuck his head out unexpectedly and banged it hard on a lamppost. He had been rushed to hospital and when he came out one brown eye had gone green. It was as simple as that. Ben couldn't actually remember the

accident, but he had long since stopped wondering about it. He had other things on his mind, after all.

Which was why, this Saturday morning, he found himself walking briskly along Quinx Lane, his heart thumping with excitement. It had taken him weeks to save up for this. One day on his way home from school, when pressing his nose up against the glass of Mr Dodds' Pet Emporium, he had seen something so special he had been obsessed ever since. Amongst all the colourful paraphernalia of the Pet Emporium, looking as wicked and shiny as jewels, switching back and forth in their brightly-lit tank, their fins fluttering like the pennants on a medieval knight's lance were two Rare Mongolian Fighting Fish, as a neon-orange cardboard sign announced. Did they live up to their name, he wondered; and if so, how did fish fight? He had taken a deep breath and gone into the shop there and then to ask how much they cost. He had nearly fainted on the spot when Mr Dodds told him, and so had headed home, grim and silent with determination, money-making schemes careering round his head.

Every day since, he had checked the fish were still there. He wanted to own them more than he had wanted anything in his life.

Mongolian Fighting Fish!

He desired them. He coveted them, a word for which he had had till then only the vaguest of Biblical associations. Before he went to sleep each night, he pictured them swimming around in a tank mysterious with soft light and fronds of weed. When he slept, they swam through his dreams.

He'd saved his birthday money (twelve at last!), his pocket

money and whatever he could make from extra errands and odd jobs. He'd cleaned his father's car (three times, though it was an ancient Morris, and polishing it just seemed to expose the rust patches); he'd mowed next door's lawn (and a flowerbed, when the mower got out of control, but luckily they hadn't seemed to notice); he'd peeled potatoes and washed windows; he'd hoovered and dusted and ironed, and even (and this had been *really* horrible) changed his youngest sister's nappy, which made his mother very happy indeed.

Before long, he'd gathered quite a tidy sum which he carried around with him, to keep his elder sister off it.

'I can tell it's burning a hole in your pocket!' his mother had teased him gently.

What would happen, he wondered, if it *did* burn a hole in his pocket? Once it had done that, would it stop at his leg? Or would it keep on burning, right through his leg, into the road, down through the sewers and into the core of the Earth? Goodness knows what might happen if he didn't buy his fish: failure to do so might bring about the end of the world!

He turned off the High Street and into Quinx Lane; and there it was, squeezed between Waitrose and Boots the Chemist. The great ornate gold letters above the shopfront announced it grandly: Mr Dodds' Pet Emporium. A throwback from a bygone age, his father called it, and Ben sort of knew what he meant without being able to put it into words. It was a shop full of clutter and oddities. It was a shop full of wonders and weirdness. You never knew what you might step on next: in amongst the shiny silver cages, the collars and leads and squeaky toys, the dog

baskets and cat hammocks, the sawdust and sunflower seeds, the hamsters and talking birds, the lizards and Labrador puppies, you had a vague feeling you might just stumble upon a tangle of tarantulas, a nest of scorpions, a sleeping gryphon or a giant sloth. (He'd never yet done so; but he lived in hope.)

Holding his breath, Ben gazed in through the murky window. They were still there, at the back of the shop: his Mongolian Fighting Fish – swimming around without a care in the world, little realising that today their lives would change forever: for today they would be leaving Mr Dodds' Pet Emporium and travelling – in the finest plastic bag money could buy – all the way to Ben's bedroom, First Door on the Right on the Upstairs Landing, Grey Havens, 27 Underhill Road, just past the Number 17 bus stop. And that afternoon Awful Uncle Aleister was coming over to drop off an old fishtank for which they no longer had a use. ('Awful' had become an automatic part of his name as far as Ben was concerned, for very many reasons not unrelated to his braying laugh, loud voice and complete insensitivity; and the fact that he and Aunt Sybil had spawned his loathed cousin, Cynthia.)

Feeling the weight of destiny in his hands, Ben pushed open the heavy brass-bound door. At once he was assailed by noise: cheeps and squawks and scratchings; rustlings and snores and barks. It was really quite alarming. Thank goodness, he thought suddenly, that fish were quiet. Surely even Mongolian Fighting Fish couldn't make much noise? A badly-behaved pet would be a terrible trial to his poor mother, as Aunt Sybil had reminded him. Frequently. And she did have a point; for

Cynthia's piranhas had not been the best-behaved of creature companions. But that was another story.

Ben's mother had not been well for some time now. She had complained of tiredness and headaches, and the skin below her eyes was always thin and dark. No one knew what was the matter with her, and she just seemed to get worse and worse. She had, as Ben's father said, always been 'delicate'; but in the last few weeks she had declined suddenly, and now she found it easier to use a wheelchair to get around than to walk. It made Ben very sad to see how tenderly his father picked her up at night to carry her to their room.

Sometimes, Ben would find his father sitting quietly at the kitchen table with his head in his hands. 'It's as if she's allergic to the whole world,' he had once said helplessly.

But she wasn't allergic to animals. Ben's mother loved animals. She had, as people say, a way with them. Stray cats came to her as if from nowhere. Dogs walked up to her in the street and laid their heads in her hands. Birds would settle on the ground in front of her. Ben had even seen a pigeon land upon her shoulder, as if it had something to tell her. She had encouraged him to save for the fish. 'Looking after other creatures teaches us responsibility,' she had said. 'It's good to care about someone other than yourself.'

A man pushed in front of Ben, and for a moment he was terribly afraid that he would stride up to the counter and demand that Mr Dodds' assistant pack up Ben's fish; but instead he grabbed a sack of dried dogfood, slapped a ten-pound note on to the counter and left without even waiting for his change. Outside

the shop, its thick leash tied very thoroughly to the brass rail, a huge black dog glared at the man, its red jaws dripping saliva on to the pavement. Anxiously, Ben stepped over a heap of spilled straw, avoided a collection of oddly-shaped and buckled tartan coats, threaded his way between a narrow row of cages, one of which contained a noisy black bird with orange eyes and—

Stopped.

He tried to step forward a pace, but something – someone? – was holding him back. He stared around, but there was no sign of anyone behind him. Shaking his head, he started off again. But again he was pulled back. He must have snagged his jacket on one of the cages.

He turned around carefully so as not to make the snag any worse. It would not do to return home with a pair of Mongolian Fighting Fish and a ripped coat. He fiddled with the area that seemed to be caught, and found – not a spike of wire or a sharp catch – but something warm and furry and yet hard as iron. Skewing his head around until his neck hurt, he stared down. It was a cat. A small black-and-brown cat with shiny gold eyes and a remarkably determined arm. It appeared to have reached out of its cage and snagged its sharp little claws in his jacket. He smiled. How sweet! He made an attempt to pry it loose, but it clamped its fist together even harder. The fabric of Ben's jacket became rucked and furrowed. Ben's smile became a frown.

'Let go!' he said under his breath, picking at its powerful claws.

The cat looked at him, unblinking. Then it said very distinctly, in a voice as harsh and gravelly as any American private

investigator with a bad smoking habit, 'There's no way you're leaving this shop without me, Sonny Jim.'

Ben was shocked. He stared at the cat. Then he stared around the shop. Had anyone else heard this exchange, or was he daydreaming? But the other customers all appeared to be getting on with their business – inspecting piles of hamsters sleeping thoughtlessly on each others' heads; poking sticks at the parrot to try to make it say something outrageous; buying a dozen live mice to feed to their python . . .

He turned back to the cat. It was still watching him in its disconcerting way. He began to wonder whether it actually had eyelids, or was just saving energy. Perhaps he was going mad. To test the theory he said: 'My name is Ben, not Sonny Jim.'

'I know,' said the cat.