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opening extract from

The Dragons of Ordinary Farm

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Prologue



A Handful of Small Bones

Colin tested the parlour door. It was, as he expected, firmly closed and locked, but he hadn't planned on going in anyway. He got down on his knees and looked through the keyhole.

His mother, Gideon, and Mr. Walkwell were meeting in the parlour, where the old stained-glass window showed Eve in the Garden of Eden with the apple and the tree and the snake. Gideon had once said that whoever made the window obviously cared little for anything but the snake, and he was right: the creature travelled along the top, down the left-hand side, and then all the way along the bottom, and compared to Eve and the tree, it glowed and sparkled like the showroom window of a fancy

jewellery store. The room was hardly ever used – the last time he'd been in there the dust had made Colin's nose itch something fierce. He immediately wished he had not thought about that, because now his nose was tickling as if the dust was all around him. If he sneezed – well, he didn't want to think about that. He could not afford even one more mistake. His mother was many things. *Forgiving* was not one of them.

Colin clamped his nose in his fingers and held his breath, killing the sneeze by sheer force of will. His mother's punishments were meant to 'teach him to behave properly,' as she always reminded him. He had never understood what that meant. The only thing they taught him was how terrible it was to get caught.

He stifled the sneeze at last – no small victory. He let go of his nose and placed his ear against the keyhole.

'. . . I've invited two people to come to the farm for the summer,' Gideon was saying. 'They're distant relatives – a niece and nephew, two or three times removed, or however these things are calculated. Children, too, so perhaps that will be good for Colin.'

'Outsiders,' said Mr. Walkwell gruffly. 'That is never good, Gideon.'

'Interlopers.' Colin's mother said it calmly, but her voice was harder than usual.

'Not interlopers,' snapped Gideon with his usual high impatience. 'Relatives of mine, if you please.'

Mr. Walkwell, the farm's chief overseer, spoke quietly as ever, his up-and-down accent as enigmatic as windblown patterns in dust. Colin had to strain to pick out his next words. 'But why these outsiders, Gideon, even if they are family? Why now?'

'It is my decision,' said Gideon crossly. 'Are you going to fight me?'

'Of course not!' Colin heard his mother push back her chair and cross the room. Her approaching steps made him flinch – he almost turned and ran – but she stopped long before she reached the door. She had only got up to rub Gideon's shoulders, something she often did when the master of the farm was upset about something.

'We know you must have thought long and hard about this, Gideon,' she told him kindly. 'But the rest of us don't understand, that's all, and we all care about this place almost as much as you do.'

'I'm out of options.' Gideon's voice sounded raw. 'I'm running out of money. I've been getting . . . letters from a lawyer. Threatening me. There are pressures you do not know about.'

'Then tell us,' Colin's mother said. 'We are more than simply your employees, Gideon. You know that.'

'No, I can't. And stop prying into my business!'

Which seemed to be all the explanation Gideon was going to give. That was how things usually went with the old man, Colin knew. Yes, that's what he was – an old man

full of stupid, selfish secrets.

But his secrets control our lives! the boy thought angrily. *It's not just his farm – we live here too!*

The great front door of the house rattled and swung open. Colin jumped away from the keyhole and scuttled over to the grand staircase, praying that whoever was coming in would not see him in the shadows there. His heart hammered so hard inside his chest he thought it might break a rib. Then he heard the voice singing softly in German, and he stopped trembling quite so hard. It was only Sarah, the cook, carrying something through the lobby on her way to the kitchen. Another door opened and closed, then all was quiet again.

Colin got back to the keyhole in time to hear Gideon talking again. '. . . Are children. I'm glad of it! It will make them easier to control.'

Mr. Walkwell said, 'Or put them in greater danger.'

'None of you understand,' said Gideon. 'I am being *hounded*, and it is not for the first time, either. But I will protect this farm with my life– my life!'

Silence returned. Colin watched the motes dance in the beams of light spilling across the lobby.

It was his mother who spoke at last. 'Are you fearful that someone will take the farm away from you? It is difficult, I know, but perhaps . . .' Even Colin's mother, brave as a lioness, was clearly worried about saying anything more. 'Perhaps you should think – just think, mind you – of

marrying again . . . ?'

'Are you mad?' Gideon roared. 'You forget your place, madam!' Suddenly there was a great scraping of chair legs and Colin, caught by surprise, had to throw himself back from the door and dive toward the shadows beside the staircase again.

The parlour door swung open and Gideon burst out barefoot, robe flapping, his face red with anger. Mr. Walkwell followed, his emotions as hidden as Gideon's were obvious. A few moments after they had both left the parlour, Gideon stomping through the door that led to his rooms and Mr. Walkwell out the front, returning to the farm, Colin's mother appeared, shutting the parlour door behind her as carefully as if she was leaving an invalid's bedchamber. She walked past Colin without looking at the shadows where he stood, then stopped just in front of the door that led toward the kitchen.

'Colin,' she said without turning, 'don't you have better things to be doing than spying on your elders?'

For long moments after she had gone through the door he could do nothing but crouch, breathing hard, feeling as though she had just punched him in the belly. At last he got to his feet and ran after her, despising himself as he did so but quite unable to stop himself. He would explain, he would tell her it was only an accident. Surely she wouldn't punish him for an accident?

But of course she would. He knew that. And she would

know it wasn't an accident no matter how well he lied. She always did.

He would tell her he had just been trying to find her. That was mostly true, after all. He had hardly spoken to her or even seen her for several days. Sometimes it seemed like she didn't even remember she had a child.

The kitchen was empty – not even Sarah was there. Colin ran out the door that led to the vegetable garden. The light outside nearly blinded him and the heat was ferocious. Spring had not even ended, but the California weather had turned perversely, sickeningly hot. He spotted his mother on the far side of the garden, gliding swiftly and gracefully across it despite the blazing sun. Her strength amazed him, as always, and the longing for her suddenly overwhelmed everything else.

'Mother!' he cried. 'Please, Mother!'

She had to be able to hear him – she was only a few yards away. Tears came into his eyes and the chasm of nothingness opened inside Colin's chest, an old and all-too-familiar acquaintance. She hurried on ahead of him across the open yard between the buildings, a mirage in the dust. Where was she going? Into the oak woods that began back there? She was always going off there by herself, or into the ancient greenhouse, or Grace's old sewing room. Why couldn't she just stop for once and talk to him instead?

'Mother!'

His strangled cry, it seemed, disturbed some of the animals in the Sick Barn just around the corner. Hoots and cries and screams rose into the gritty air, filling Colin's skull so painfully that everything echoed and throbbed. Something made an unearthly fluting, some other creature chattered and howled, and something else made a wet, barking sound, like a dog underwater. Colin gasped and covered his ears, trying to protect his poor pounding brain. 'Stop it,' he moaned. *'Stop it!'* But it did not stop – not for long moments more. Alarmed birds rose from nearby trees, shooting up into the sky.

The noises faded at last. His mother had come to a halt a short way into the oak grove, her back to him. As he stumbled up, she turned and silenced him with one look from her grey eyes. Then she turned back to the oak tree she seemed to have chosen, its pale, dry branches as shocked and contorted as bolts of lightning. Most of the green leaves had already withered in the unseasonable heat, which made it harder to see the bird's nest in the crook of one of the high branches.

Staring up at the nest, his mother began to sing, a swoop of wordless melody. Colin fell under the spell of it instantly, just as he always did, as he had since infancy. Her voice was as sweet and slow as warm honey. Colin's legs grew weak. Sometimes when he heard his beautiful, terrible mother sing, he thought he might be hearing the sounds the very first women in all the human race had

used to lull their babies and soothe the sick. Her voice was so powerful, so loving, that when she raised it in song like this he could forgive her anything.

The melody went on, sparkling like sound made gold. A bird with black and white shoulders and a lovely red head crept out of the nest and moved cautiously down the bark of the oak tree, her tail flicking this way and that. For a moment she huddled in her own feathers like someone warming herself in a thick coat, then she fluttered down onto his mother's outstretched finger and squatted, as if making a curtsey, presenting her glorious wings and neck feathers to be ruffled, bobbing and wobbling comically on the slender finger like a puppy begging to be petted.

'Let me hold the bird,' said Colin, charmed by the power of his beautiful mother. 'Please . . .'

The singing stopped. His mother's fingers snapped closed like a trap. In the abrupt silence the handful of small bones breaking seemed loud as a drumroll. His mother opened her fingers and let the crushed bundle drop to the ground, one wing still fluttering feebly.

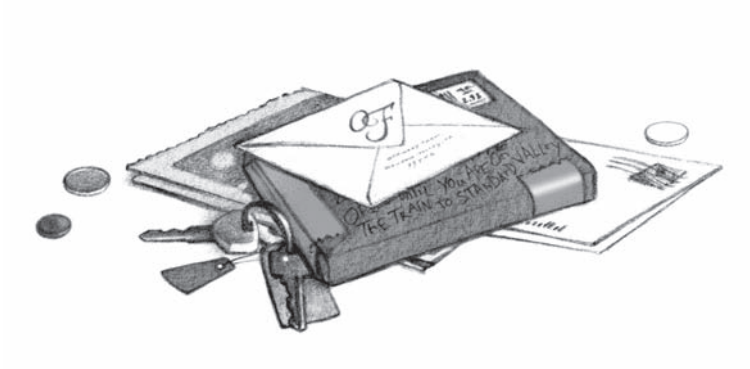
Colin clamped his hands over his mouth. He should have known. He should have known!

'Do you feel better now?' he shouted at her. He wanted to run but he couldn't. He looked from her to the dying bird. 'Does that make you feel better?' He actually wanted to know, that was the terrible thing. As if maybe there actually was a reason for these things, and when he knew

it he could forgive her again.

Patience Needle turned her clear grey eyes on her son. 'Better?' she said. 'A little, I suppose.' She turned and began to walk briskly back towards the house. 'Come along, Colin, and don't dawdle. We still have to decide on an appropriate punishment for a sneaking little spy, don't we?'

Chapter 1



An Invitation for the King and Queen of Romania

'You really want to ruin my life, don't you?' said Mum.

Tyler was playing his GameBoss and so far had managed to stay out of the fight, but his big sister never had the sense to keep her mouth shut. She jumped for any argument like a trout going after a baited hook.

'Oh, right, Mum,' Lucinda said. 'Ruin your life – as if! Just because we don't want you to go away all summer and leave us with some lady who smells like fish and whose kids eat their own bogies?'

'See, that's what you always do, sweetie,' their mother replied. 'You always exaggerate. First off, it's not going away all summer, it's a four-week singles retreat. Second,

Mrs. Peirho doesn't smell like fish all the time. That one day she was cooking something, that's all – some Portuguese thing.' Mum waved her hand, trying to get her nails to dry. 'And I don't know what you have against those kids. They both do really well in school. Martin goes to computer camp and everything. You could learn something from them.'

Lucinda rolled her eyes. 'Martin Peirho needs to go to camp for the rest his life – that's the one place you're allowed to have your name written on your underpants.'

Tyler turned *SkullKill* up louder, but he knew it wouldn't do any good. When Mum and Lucinda argued and he tried to drown them out by cranking the volume, they just got louder too. It was hard enough to deal with fast-moving vampire gnomes and flying batbots without all that yelling in the background.

'Good Lord, Tyler, turn that thing down!' Mum shouted. 'No, turn it off. We're going to have a family talk. Right now.'

Tyler groaned. 'Can't you just beat us instead?'

For a moment Mum got really angry. 'Like I *ever* hit you. You better not say things like that in front of Mrs. Peirho and her family – they'll think I'm some kind of negligent mother.' She stomped to the door. 'I'm going to get the mail. When I come back, I want you both sitting on the couch and ready to listen.'

Tyler sighed. He considered leaving – just walking out

and going to Todd's house. What was there to stop him? Mum *didn't* hit, and Tyler figured he could live through just about any yelling she could come up with. After all, he was pretty sure he'd already heard every kind there was.

He glanced at his older sister. She was sitting on the edge of the sofa, her arms wrapped around herself, leaning forward like her stomach hurt. Her expression was despairing. '*You* don't want to go stay with the Peirhos any more than I do, Tyler,' she said to him. 'Why don't you say something?'

'Because it never does any good.'

Mum came back in wearing her 'I'm calm now' face, her hands full of catalogues and bills. She sat down in her chair with the mail in her lap. 'Now, let's start over, shall we? Instead of yelling about what you don't want to do, maybe we can talk about the good things that could come from this situation.'

'Since when,' said Lucinda, 'have there been any good things for this family coming out of any situation?'

Mum's face clouded, her eyes shut tight. Tyler braced himself, wondering if she was going to yell, wondering if he was going to regret sticking around. But, to his surprise, Mum opened her eyes and even tried to smile. 'Look, I know it's been tough for you since your father and I got divorced. Of course it has. . . .'

Tyler blew out air. What was the use of talking about

it? Talking wasn't going to bring Dad back or make Mum happier, whatever she thought. Talking wasn't going to turn Lucinda back into the older sister who used to make him dinner when Dad first left, who would cook macaroni and cheese and eat it with him on the nights when Mum couldn't do anything but watch television and cry.

'. . . and of course it's difficult for kids when their mother wants a little time on her own,' their mother said.

All the way across the room, Tyler could feel Lucinda struggling not to start yelling again.

'It's a singles retreat,' their mother continued. 'It isn't anything sleazy. It's safe and it's a perfectly nice place to meet people.'

Lucinda lost the battle with herself. 'God, don't be so desperate, Mum, it's pathetic.'

Tyler watched Mum's face go all loose and miserable and his stomach clenched. Sometimes these days he felt like he hated his sister. Lucinda saw Mum's expression, too, and her face filled with shame, but it was too late – the words had been spoken.

Mum picked up the mail and began shuffling through it, but it was like she had suddenly gotten old and exhausted. Tyler felt sick. She might not be the greatest parent in the world but she did her best – she just sort of lost focus sometimes.

'Bills,' said Mum, sighing. 'That's all we get.'

'Why can't we stay with Dad?' Tyler asked suddenly.

'Because your father is in a very important place right now with his new family – or at least that's what he says.' She frowned. 'Personally I think it's because that woman has him completely wrapped around her finger.'

'He doesn't want us and you don't want us,' said Lucinda miserably. 'Two parents alive but we're still orphans.'

Tyler watched, almost impressed, as Mum calmed herself once more – she must have started reading those parenting magazines again. 'Of course I want you,' she said. 'And I understand that you guys are angry. But since your father left it's been hard. I can't be both parents all by myself. How can I find someone else if I spend all my time sitting home in my bathrobe, doing nothing but arguing with my kids?'

'But why do you *have* to find someone?' asked Lucinda. 'Why?'

'Because it's a tough world out there. And because I get lonely, you know?' Mum gave them both her most sincere, brave-but-about-to-cry look. 'Can't you two just help me out for once?'

'By disappearing?' demanded Lucinda, losing it all over again. 'By moving into Castle Stinkfoot and spending the whole summer watching Martin and Anthony play *Star Wars* and take turns bubbling milk out their noses?'

'Jeez!' Mum rolled her eyes. 'Who are you two, the king and queen of Romania? Can't you ever do anything that isn't exactly what your highnesses want?' She paused, star-

ing at the open letter in her lap. 'Gideon? I don't remember any Uncle Gideon.'

Lucinda had picked up the family cat and was holding him on her lap, even though he didn't really seem to want to be there. When Lucinda was upset she petted the cat so much that Tyler figured someday she'd just rub the fur right off him. 'Isn't there anyone else we can stay with?' she asked. 'Why can't I stay with Caitlin? Her family said it's okay.'

'Because they don't have room to take Tyler, too, and I'm not going to have him go stay at the neighbours' by himself,' said Mum, but she was reading the letter and not paying much attention. She lifted the envelope and looked at it, then went back to the letter again.

Tyler scowled. 'I'd rather watch Martin Peirho eat bogies than have to sit around listening to you and Caitlin talk about boys all summer.' His sister and her friends spent all their time talking about the guys on television, musicians and actors, as if they knew them personally, and about boys in school as if they were the guys on television – *Oh, I think Barton isn't ready to have a real relationship yet, he's still getting over Marlee.'* Tyler hated it. He wished there was a game where you could chase stupid, fakey celebrity boys like that and shoot them all into little pieces. That would *rock*.

'Well, maybe you won't have to do either.' Mum was looking strange, the way she looked when someone was giving

her good news she didn't quite believe, like the time Tyler's teacher had told her how much she liked having Tyler in her class, how hard he worked in maths and how good he was on the computer. Tyler had been proud, but at the same time his mum's surprise made him wonder if she'd actually thought he was stupid or something. 'Apparently you have a great-uncle Gideon. Gideon Goldring. Some relative of my dad's, I guess. I sort of remember him and Aunt Grace, now that I think about it. But he's dead, isn't he?' She obviously realized this sounded pretty silly. 'I mean, I thought he was dead. It's been years . . . He's a farmer, it says here, and he has a big place out in the middle of the state and he wants you to come visit. Standard Valley, it's called. I'm not sure where that is, exactly. . . .' She trailed off.

'What valley?' his sister asked. 'Who's this Gideon? Some crazy old family member, and you're going to send us to stay with him now?'

'No, he's not crazy.'

'But you don't know that – '

'*Stop it*, Lucinda – just give me a moment to read this carefully! You obviously learned how to be patient from your father.' Mum squinted at the letter. 'It says that he's been meaning for a while to get in touch with me since we're almost the last of the family. He says he's sorry he hasn't contacted me sooner. And he says he understands that I have two lovely children. Ha!' Mum did her best sarcastic laugh. 'That's what it says here – I wonder who told

him *that* whopper? And he wants to know if they – that's you two – could come and spend some time with him on his farm this summer.' She looked up. 'Well? That solves all our problems, doesn't it?'

Lucinda looked at her in horror. 'A *farm*? We'll be slaves, Mum! You don't even know this man, you said so – he might not really be your uncle. Maybe he just wants kids so he can work them to death milking cows and pigs and everything.'

'I'm pretty sure he's related to your grandfather. And you can't milk pigs.' Mum returned her attention to the letter. 'I don't think so, anyway.'

'So now you're going to send us away to some . . . death ranch,' Lucinda said, almost to herself, and then she dropped her hair over her face and clutched her arms around her middle again.

Tyler didn't like arguing, but he wasn't any happier about this idea than his sister. 'Not a ranch. A farm.' He had a sudden memory of a picture he'd seen in his American history book, a decaying shack in the middle of a huge field of dust, a place as empty as the moon's surface. 'Uh-uh. No way.' He didn't think they had the internet on farms. He was even more sure they didn't have GameBoss and *SkullKill*. 'I'm *definitely* not going to any boring farm all summer.' He crossed his arms over his chest.

'Don't be so closed-minded,' said Mum, as though they were talking about whether or not he should try a bite

of something gross like fried squid instead of ruining an entire summer that they'd never get back for the rest of their lives. 'Who knows, you might really enjoy yourselves. You could . . . go on hayrides. You might even *learn* something.'

'Yeah,' said Lucinda. 'Learn how to be pecked to death by chickens. Learn how people break child labour laws.'

Tyler leaned forward and snatched the envelope from Mum's hand and examined the strange, squinchy handwriting. On the back of the envelope was a little drawing of two old-fashioned letters tangled together – they looked like an *O* and an *F* – and a return address that explained those two letters and confirmed all his worst fears.

'Mum, look at this!' he said, holding it out. 'Oh my God, look at the name of this place! *Ordinary Farm!*'

'Yes, it does sound nice, doesn't it?' she said.