Helping your children choose books they will love

I ♥ reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

# The Serpent House

Written by

**Bea Davenport**

Published by

**Curious Fox**

**All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator**

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

First published in 2014 by Curious Fox,
an imprint of Capstone Global Library Limited,
7 Pilgrim Street, London, EC4V 6LB
Registered company number: 6695582

www.curious-fox.com

Copyright © Barbara Henderson 2014

The author's moral rights are hereby asserted.

Cover designed by Richard Parker
Illustrations by Orinthia Tyrell (Beehive Illustration)

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

ISBN 978 1 78202 085 1

SAMPLE

18 17 16 15 14
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

A CIP catalogue for this book is available from the British Library.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means (including photocopying or storing it in any medium by electronic means and whether or not transiently or incidentally to some other use of this publication) without the written permission of the copyright owner.

Typeset in Palatino

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd,
Croydon, CR0 4YY

# Chapter One

SAMPLE

***From the private diary of Lady Eugenia Hexer***
***Hexer Hall***
***27th November, 1898 (Advent Sunday)***

*This morning at church, the fresh scents from the wreaths and bundles of greenery decking the building masked its usual musty smell; they did nothing to help the chill in the air. The ladies nodded at me politely because they must. I own so much of the land around here. But my family's name is not a good one, even after all these centuries. Bad reputations can last down many generations. Mr Pocklaw, the minister, wore purple robes. He spoke of deliverance and the coming of the one who ends the dark times. For once, I paid attention. No! It is not that I have seen the light all of a*

*sudden – it's more that, at long last, revelations seem to be happening in my own life.*

*Afterwards, the coach rattled back to the Hall. It was as we drove into the courtyard that I saw him. The winter sun was dazzling and I could make him out only in silhouette. His lean body, a young man not quite fully grown. That wild hair. My new young gardener, reputed to have a magic touch with plants. When I approached him, he jumped to his feet and made a clumsy sort of bow. He is completely untrained in how to address his betters, but this is of scant importance. In his hands, he was twisting plants and stalks into some kind of ball shape. I asked him what he was doing and he told me he was making a tussie-mussie for his younger sister, who is ill. He held it out for me to try its scent. It was eye-wateringly strong. Rosemary, mint and thyme, he said.*

SAMPLE

*Something compelled me to ask him more about this sister. It seems they are orphans and since the mother's death the child has been unwell. He truly dotes on the girl and is heartbroken to have left her behind. The picture he painted of her, with her cropped hair and her penchant for boy's clothes, is so like the prophesy that I almost gasped aloud.*

*"The lost and sorrowful child, the sometimes-boy and sometimes-girl, will make your journey and bring you knowledge." For a number of years I have lived with this unfathomable prediction.*

*I was filled with a wild impulse and told the lad*

*that he must bring his sister to live with him. I have offered him the use of an old outhouse on the edge of the grounds. I told him I'd heard of his reputation, that he could grow plants that no one else can bring from the soil. He actually blushed, which made me smile. The reason I brought him here is because I need his help in creating a healing garden in my grounds. It will take his special talent to make it happen. When I talked more to him about this, he smiled so wide, his face a picture of such hope and gratitude, that I had to pull my cape around my shoulders to stop myself reaching out to him.*

*"We have many more plans to make," I told him. "As it is winter, you have less to do in the gardens than usual. If you keep up your duties, you may work on preparing the cottage for you and your sister to live in. She may join you at Christmas, one month from now, and I will find work for her in the Hall. Ask my housekeeper if there is anything you need." I made my way across the courtyard and into the house. I was shivering, my eyes full of tears, although it may have been the cold.*

*So at last, my journey feels as if it is truly beginning. Perhaps now is the time to record it all, as one day students may wish to know every step of it. Unless I write it all down, I fear it will never be believed.*

SAMPLE

I was not expecting Christmas to be a happy one. It is hard to feel peace and goodwill when your mother is just two months dead. When she passed away, I was sent to live with my Aunt Catherine and my cousins, James and Hannah. The cottage was cold and they were colder. My aunt was not cruel. But nor was she kind. All the time, I missed my Mam and most of the time I missed Tom, my older brother and my best friend.

Tom was sixteen years old and becoming a man. He had a special talent for growing things – our vegetable patch back home was fit for the queen. Soon after we came to live at my aunt's, a very rich lady hired Tom to turn his skills to her new gardens. The trouble was, it was too far away for him to visit me very often. Writing is not his talent, although our mother taught us both, so I didn't get letters from him. I was left behind here with no one to talk to. It was a hard eight weeks.

SAMPLE

Late on Christmas Eve, I sat shivering at the kitchen table, scraping at some spuds for the Christmas Day dinner. The knife was newly sharpened and I cut my fingers twice. Each time, Hannah spotted it and screamed at the pinkish cloud that stained the cold water, and each time Aunt Catherine cuffed me across the ear. She couldn't understand why I was so clumsy, she said.

"Your mother had fingers so deft they could do anything," she told me. It sounds stupid, but I hated the way she said "your mother", through her pinched mouth. "Your *mither*." As if she could hardly bear to squeeze out the words. I never called her "my mother". Tom and I

called her "me Mam". It rolled off our tongues as if it was one word: Me-Mam.

I put up with "your mither" for weeks and suddenly – perhaps because I was tired and my fingers were sore – something burst out of me. "She's not my *mither*," I found myself shouting. "She's Me-Mam. Me-Mam!" I beat my fists on the table as the words drummed out of my mouth. "Me-*Mam*, Me-*Mam*, Me-*Mam*!" Hot tears burned the back of my eyes and I fought as best I could to keep them in. Aunt Catherine picked up a wooden spoon and rapped my fingers, hard. She caught me twice – oh, the pain in my cold, wet fingers! I snatched my hand away but I stopped talking. Aunt Catherine turned her back on me. Hannah and James were supposed to be placing the wooden figures in the crib in the corner, but they kept watching me and grinning.

SAMPLE

"That's you," said James, waving one of the shepherd figures at me, one with his smooth round head bent, the better to look at the carved baby Jesus. "You're a wooden-top."

I was about to say something back and I would surely have got into more trouble, but then I heard footsteps coming up our path towards the door. I jumped up, hoping, hoping ... and it was, it was my Tom, come back to see me for Christmas. His face and hands were pink and shiny with the cold. He seemed so much taller and broader than I remembered, even though it was just a few weeks since I'd seen him. His soft hair had grown down past his ears and it made him look like a big, shaggy puppy dog.

He laughed and hugged me. Now I felt those tears starting to come and this time I couldn't stop them.

My aunt stood up and greeted him, stiff and stern as usual. She's never cared for Tom, and since Mam's death he's talked back to her far too often. But it was Christmas, so she tried to smile, a small crack that caused other tiny, angry lines around the edge of her mouth and her stony face.

"See what I have," Tom grinned and plunged his hands into his bulging coat pockets.

"Oranges!" yelled James and Hannah, lunging towards him. They made me think of the pigs running for their swill. Tom handed them one orange each. "From Lady Hexer's own storeroom."

My aunt gave a tiny grunt. "I hope you had permission to take them, Tom Cotterill. I don't want any stolen fruit in this house, Christmas or no."

SAMPLE

"Of course I was allowed," Tom replied, raising his eyebrows. I sighed to myself. They were squaring up like fighters already. "Lady Hexer told me to take some home for the children. In fact, she made a point of saying I had to give the biggest one to you, Annie."

He held out the last bright fruit, which seemed to light up the whole dull, cabbage-smelling kitchen. I took it and pressed it to my face, breathing in its wonderful smell. And what a smell; a feast on its own. I held the globe-shape, warm from Tom's pocket, towards the candlelight and watched how it made my fingers glow like flames around the fruit.

Hannah looked put out. "Why should she get the biggest one?" she whined. "*I'm* the oldest."

Tom added: "I would never steal, Aunt. You ought to know that. Why would I need to? Lady Hexer's the most generous employer I have ever known."

My aunt gave another grunt. "So you say. Of course, I don't know much about this employer of yours, but I have heard worrying stories about her, for all her great wealth. I don't know what kind of habits you have taken up since you went to work over there, but you will find we still go to the church service every Sunday. Tomorrow, too, with it being Christmas Day. If you want any dinner, you'll come to church with us."

Tom looked at me for a moment, then back at his aunt. "Of course I'll come, Aunt. I never said I wouldn't. I want to walk with Annie and hold her hand. After the service we will visit our mother's grave."

SAMPLE

I smiled up at him. If only Tom was here all the time. He always stood up for himself so well. I could never think of clever or brave things to say to my aunt and cousins, not until it was too late.

Aunt Catherine served up some ham broth for supper and afterwards we were allowed to eat the oranges. Tom used his sharp knife to cut mine into quarters. The smell made me blink. It made my mouth feel suddenly parched, as if I would choke if I didn't get a taste of that sunlit juice. I sucked the first chunk so happily it made a loud slurping noise. Tom and I giggled and Aunt told us not to be so disgusting.

Oh, the sweet and sour taste of it. You could close your eyes and imagine yourself in some faraway, picture-book country where there might be trees laden down with fruit and brightly-coloured birds flapping around them. I used my teeth to wring out every last drop of juice, sucked my sticky fingers and ran my tongue around my mouth to enjoy it all as long as I could.

Later, Tom and I sat together on my small bed.

"I got your letter," he told me. "I like you sending me your news. I'm sorry I don't write back."

Tom is proud of how clever I am. Mam always said it was because my father was a man of letters. I never really understood that, though. He never wrote any letters to me. Or to her.

Tom looked at me. He had worry in his eyes.

SAMPLE

"How have you been?" he asked. His voice was more gentle than any I'd heard lately. His eyes flicked up to my headscarf and back to my face. "I think about you all the time, left here with no one to care about you. It's so miserable here. I don't know how you put up with that woman."

"Aunt Catherine? She's worse with you, Tom. Because you argue with her. I don't argue, I just do what she says," I said with a shrug.

Then I added: "Usually," and Tom gave me a wink. "But I know she doesn't care much for men. If I wasn't her sister's child ... well. But I do miss you. And Mam."

Tom squeezed my fingers and winced. "You and your cold hands. Is there no blood in them, my boggle?"

He's always called me names like that. Everyone says that when I was born I was an ugly little thing, a cross, red-faced bairn with a nose like the cap of a mushroom. But Tom looked after me, from the start, Mam said. There'd been other babies – after Tom, before me – but none had lived very long. Tom, at around six years old, had told our mother that I would be all right, because I was no human child; I was some sort of boggle or goblin. I'm no prettier now. Especially now.

"Anyway," Tom went on, "I have a kind of Christmas present for you, but it's something to tell, not something to give. You must wait till tomorrow."

"Tell me now," I demanded. "Please."

Tom laughed. "No. All I will say is this: it will cheer up your Christmas Day. I know it. I'll tell all tomorrow after church." I couldn't imagine what could cheer up a Christmas Day without Mam. But I trusted Tom more than anything.

SAMPLE

The Christmas morning mass seemed to go on for ever and ever. It was a cold walk of almost two miles to the church and we shivered our way joylessly through the carols, bobbing between the unforgiving wooden benches and the damp-smelling kneelers. The priest droned like a fly woken up mid-winter. When it ended, at last, Aunt Catherine, James and Hannah went on ahead of us, while Tom and I stood by our mother's small headstone. It was the newest and cleanest in the churchyard. We

hadn't been able to buy it ourselves, of course, but the stonemason had a soft spot for Tom and everyone had loved our gentle Mam. So he carved the headstone out of kindness and Tom paid him in what he called bagies, or turnips, and bags of spuds.

Aunt Catherine told us to say a prayer for our mother, but when we got to the grave, neither of us knew what to say. The silence felt heavy, broken only by the birds cawing through the chilly air. It was so still, the air seemed stopped and weighed down with cold. I didn't really care. The sad, grey weather felt right. On the day Mam died, there was the brightest blue October sky I had ever seen and it felt like an insult.

Tom looked at me. "Do you want to say a prayer?" he asked me, blowing on his fingers and shifting from foot to foot.

SAMPLE

I shrugged. "I know I should, though if I'm being honest, I ran out of prayers after Mam died. I know I shouldn't say that, right here in a churchyard and just after mass on Christmas Day and all that.

"I prayed so hard that she'd get better, Tom, because that's what everyone told me to do. But she died after all, didn't she. I don't see what's left for me to say to that God."

Tom gave a small smile. "I know what you mean. So instead of a prayer, I'm going to tell you my news now. If Mam can hear us, I think it's something she'd like to know."

I felt my heart starting to beat harder.

"I've told you how good Lady Hexer is to me," Tom started.

I nodded.

"I've been so lucky," he said. "She's made me quite a favourite. She says I'm the only one who can help set out her new gardens. I sat with her at her own grand table – you should see it, it's this long," and he waved his arm into the distance. "She asked for my advice about it all. The plants, what should go where and whether some of the rarer ones will grow. And we've talked. She asked me about my family and I told her all about you and your..." he stopped and I could see him trying to find the right words. "Your health."

I frowned and put my hand up to my head, wrapped up in its grubby woolly scarf. I did not like the thought of strangers knowing that since our mother's death, my hair had fallen out in clumps, leaving me uglier and more odd-looking than ever. Tom was beside himself with worry about it. Aunt Catherine said she didn't have the money to spend on quacks and medicines, so I would just have to put up with it, shameful though it was. Shameful to her, she meant.

"Just listen to this. Her Ladyship has given me an old cottage in the grounds. It hadn't been lived in for a while and there were holes in the roof and all sorts of places where the rain and wind came in. But she sent one of her men to help me fix it up and now I have my own home to live in. She's said that I can bring you to live with me, Annie. To live with me!"

SAMPLE

His words came out faster and faster, as if they were running down a hill.

"When I told Lady Hexer how much I missed you and worried about you, she said it simply wouldn't do. That's how she said it: *it simply will not do*. She said she would like to help. She seemed so interested in you. So I'm to bring you to stay with me, where I'll be able to look after you and make sure you're healthy.

"You can do some work in the kitchens and some cleaning to earn your keep. But we'll be together and you'll be away from this miserable place. We'll be right beside the sea. The air smells so clean. When you take a deep breath, I swear it seems to wash out your insides. I will make sure you eat the best food we can grow. You will get better and those curls will grow back again faster than we know it."

SAMPLE

I couldn't remember when I had last seen him grin so widely. "What do you say, hobgoblin? Will you come?"

I jumped up and threw my arms around his neck. I would have squealed if we hadn't been in a churchyard. I squeezed Tom as hard as I could.

"Oh, Tom," I yelped. I could hardly speak at all because I found myself laughing and crying both at once. "You were right. This has been my best ever Christmas present."

We knelt down and each gave the frosted headstone a quick kiss. "When we next come back to visit, we'll bring a bunch of spring flowers," Tom promised, to the stone and the earth. Out of nowhere, a bitter breeze made us shudder. Then we began our walk back to the house, faster

and faster, giggling to think what our aunt and cousins would say when we told them our plans.

Aunt Catherine was awkward about it, as we'd guessed. "I promised my sister I'd look after Annie," she said. She looked as if she was searching around in her mind to find a reason to stop me from going. "I can hardly let her go off to somewhere I know nothing about, with a brother hardly more than a child himself."

Tom hated that, of course. "I'm a working man now," he said. "I have a home for my sister and a way she can earn her keep. You know I can take care of her, Aunt."

"She's too young to be working," said Aunt Catherine. "Your mother would be furious. She wanted better for Annie. That's why she took the time to teach her her letters. You want to pull her down into the scullery again. Think how your mother would feel, her Annie skivvying–"

SAMPLE

Our cousins sat watching, their mouths open.

"She skivvies for you," Tom replied and my aunt's face went red-purple. "She'd do better to get paid for it. She'll be in the house of a fine lady and yes, she can read and write. So she'll do very well, I promise you that. What can you offer her that's better?"

Aunt Catherine narrowed her eyes at Tom. They are blue like Mam's but they are the wrong blue. "You think far too much of yourself," she hissed. "Will you make sure she goes to church? Will you make sure she says her prayers? Or will this grand lady take care of that?"

Tom stood up tall like a hero from a storybook. "Perhaps we will go to church again some day," he said. "When we

both forgive God for taking our Mam away."

Our aunt and cousins drew in their breath and my aunt crossed herself in prayer, as if to rid the air of Tom's wicked words.

"But for now, Aunt," Tom went on, "I want to give Annie a chance of being happy. You're welcome to come and visit us, to make sure I'm looking after her as our Mam would want. But you won't stop Annie from coming with me."

My aunt turned away and instead of more angry words she slammed pots and plates about, as loud as she could. James and Hannah kept out of her way. I was shaking. But when I caught Tom's eye I gave him the widest grin I dared.

SAMPLE

Later, James pulled my ears and told me that I'd spoiled Christmas Day. Everyone was now so angry with us that we wanted to leave as soon as we could. We planned to go the very next morning. It would be a long walk and the weather was bleak. I found I had a churning brew of feelings inside me. I was both excited and scared. I knew that if Tom said things would be well, then surely they would. Yet there was a small part of me, somewhere deep down, that was fearful, although I was unable to say exactly what made me afraid.