

Forbidden Fruit

'I dare you.' Carys nudged me out of the way so she could look through the spy hole. I didn't mind. I knew what was there, just next door. I watched her glossy dark curls, where a few strands of hair moved in the breeze. I'd been studying the fruit in Miss Jessica Walker's garden for weeks. After she put up that big wooden fence.

'Not yet,' I said.

In one smooth movement Carys flipped back to stretch out on the lawn. She could do cartwheels, the splits, all sorts, so easily. But she could be mean. Like now.

'Why? Because you're scared or because you can't run fast?'

We heard the latch on the garden gate and the squeaking sound of Miss Walker's shopping trolley going up the path.

'See! That's why. We've got to get the right time. When she's away.'

It was towards the end of August, a couple of weeks later, that Miss Walker called round and asked my father if he would 'do the honours' and take the measurements from the rain gauge.

'Not that we've had rain for weeks, have we?' she tittered. She was going away on holiday. Dad usually asked me to help him and I loved it. We'd lift the inner glass measuring jug out of its copper casing and check the contents, then record the result on a special card that was posted back to the meteorological office.

Perfect timing. The greengages glistened plump and juicy on the tree. Miss Jessica Walker's mother used to tell us to pick the fruit; and we always made pots and pots of jam; and given some to the old lady. It was a shame to leave the fruit this year,

as a feast for the wasps.

I called round for Carys.

'We'll take the record card for the rain gauge so I can do the measuring at the same time.'

It was good to have something to show off to her about for a change.

'But it's been dry for ages.'

'That's the point. You've got to measure anyway and record your findings.'

The rain gauge was at the edge of the lawn in an open part of the garden, away from the fruit trees.

I recorded the zero rainfall and then we went over, picked our fill of greengages and sat eating them in the long grass. You have to check carefully for wasps, but most of the fruit was delicious, sweet and juicy.

'I'm going to look into that window over there,' Carys said.

I didn't like the sound of that. Carys could go too far. 'No. Let's go. We've had the greengages.'

But Carys was already on her way, casually throwing her fruit stones, as she ran, into the raspberry canes lining the edge of the lawn. I followed her reluctantly.

As we got to the window, she gasped, 'There's someone there. Quick. Run.'

Through the dusty pane I caught sight of a dressing table and a bed and... the door to the room was opening.

Carys had already nearly reached the garden gate.

I careered down the path.

Once safe on our side, still gasping for breath, we crept back up to the peep hole. Miss Walker was standing by her back door. And she was looking straight at us. On the lawn, glistening in the sun, was the glass cylinder of the rain gauge, with the measuring card next to it.

'What are you going to do?' Carys said.

'Anyway, it wasn't my idea.'

And she went, leaving me to it.

I waited, but nothing happened for a week and I began to think nothing would happen.



Then one day dad called up the stairs. 'Annie, come down. Miss Walker's here.'

In our hall, Miss Walker seemed larger, yet less frightening. I stood on one leg and then the other, waiting for the storm to break. But, surprisingly, she smiled at me.

'Miss Walker wants to thank you for doing the rain gauge measurements.'

I couldn't help letting out a small gasp of surprise.

'Yes, indeed. I am most grateful to you, Annie. You've done a good job. It's vital to keep accurate records. This is for you.' I caught a whiff of peppermint and lavender as Miss Walker gave me a brown envelope in which I later found three coins sellotaped to the white, oblong reverse of a card cut out from a cereal packet.

Miss Walker left, after telling dad we could help ourselves to any of the fruit. She didn't need it.

'Being paid for doing the rain gauge, that's good going, Annie,' Dad laughed.

'But,' it burst out of me, *'we took some greengages and Carys was sick and she got into trouble at home afterwards.'*

Dad looked down at me. There was a pause.

'Ah? Well, I think we can say Miss Walker understands.'

Out of the window, I saw how the sun lit up the branches of the old fruit tree next door, where there were even more plump greengages, high up and out of reach.

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