



The Secret Lake

Chapter 5 The Children in the Garden

(pages 19 to 24)

The boat slid easily back down the bank and Stella held it steady as Tom clambered in. “One oar each!” she commanded, climbing in after him. Tom took the left and Stella the right. Their recent family trip to the boating lake in Hyde Park quickly paid off, and they soon worked up a rhythm.

“Where do you think we are, Stella?” Tom was marvelling at the deep crimson reflections in the water which chattered into pieces as the oars smashed down into them.

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” she said, “but we’ll soon find out! This is the best fun I’ve had since our first day in Hong Kong! Hannah’ll *never* believe it!” All the time Stella was looking over her shoulder watching the distant bank draw closer. “Nearly there!” The oars were starting to feel heavy. At two metres from the bank they stopped rowing and let the boat drift slowly in. Stella’s heart raced as they clambered out and pulled the boat clear of the water. Whatever lay beyond was blocked from view by a small wood, but she had already caught the sound of children’s voices on the breeze. A narrow path had been cut through the trees, but she decided it was safer not to use it.

“Follow me! Stella struck into the woods like a Sergeant Major. Tom pursued, his trowel clutched at his chest, ready for combat. The cool of the woods brought welcome relief, they had both worked up a sweat and Tom’s mouth was parched. Crack, crackle, snap – they continued walking for several minutes. Finally, a curtain of lights ahead indicate a clearing.

“I’m thirsty!” said Tom.

“Shhhh!” Stella stopped suddenly as the sound of children’s chatter floated towards them from somewhere beyond the clearing ahead. She frowned, they nodded them on. The chatter continued as they crept out through the edge of the wood and into the sunlight.

There are the children – through there! She whispered, pointing through a rhododendron bush. Tom knelt beside Stella and peered through. Beyond a cluster of tree trunks he spotted two young girls sitting on the lawn with a lady

wearing a hat tied under her chin. Judging by how strangely they were dressed, the children looked as though they might be going to a fancy dress part.

“LOOK! THERE’S HARRY!” shouted Tom, jumping up. Harry was streaking across the lawn towards the children and the lady.

“There you are, Harry!” called the smaller girl.

“Who was that?” demanded the older one, looking round.

“You stupid idiot! They’ve heard us!” Stella snapped in a whisper.

Harry, on hearing Tom’s voice, sped past the children and came hurtling through the trees yapping loudly.

“Harry, boy!” Tom tried to catch the tip of the dog’s wagging tail, one of Harry’s favourite games and began having so much fun trying to outwit him, he didn’t notice Stella’s sudden silence. “Hey, Stell, now we know where he goes to!” Tom looked up, but Stella wasn’t listening. Instead she was standing face to face with two girls dressed in bright purple party dresses, complete with embroidered patterns around the neckline and a white lace trim at the knee. The girls, who both had beautifully groomed hair – one blonde and one dark – falling in ringlets to their shoulders and decorated with matching purple ribbons, couldn’t take their eyes off Stella who, by contrast, looked quite a sight in her sky blue T-shirt, cropped skinny jeans and bright blue plimsolls.

Tom picked up a stick and threw it. Harry ran off again.

“Who are you?” demanded the taller girl, in a grand voice. She was clearly the older of the two and her blonde ringlets glistened importantly in the afternoon sun. “And, what’s more, how do you know Harry?” Stella didn’t answer. Instead she fixed her stare on the girls’ black woolen tights and shiny black shoes. How strange that they should be wearing clothes like that on a day like this in a park! Perhaps they were royalty – maybe lost princesses or something?

Suddenly a woman’s voice was calling.

“Sophie, Emma, come back now, there’s good girls! We must finish your lesson before tea.”

“Lesson?” said Tom, indignantly. “Why are you having a lesson in the school holidays?”

“What are you talking about, stupid boy!” snapped the blonde-haired girl.

“The dark-haired girl, who looked friendlier, and was obviously her sister, edged forward and smiled. Her large brown eyes sparkled with enthusiasm. “Mama says the more we learn when we’re young, the better off we’ll be in society.”

At that moment the rhododendron bush trembled violently and the woman with the hat burst into the clearing. Stella and Tom’s eyes drew like magnets onto her long-sleeve dark green dress that swept across the ground like a curtain, and which squeezed her waist so tightly, it looked as if it must hold her breath in permanently.

“My goodness! *Who* have we hear?” she asked gently. “A girl in trousers! Well I thought I’d seen it all!” Tom frowned and clutched tightly onto his trowel.

“What’s your name?” blurted out the dark-haired younger girl, smiling at Stella.

“Emma, dear, it’s rude to ask someone’s name without introducing yourself first,” said the lady.

“Sorry, Miss Walker.” She turned to Stella again with a friendly smile. How do you do? My name is Emma Gladstone. I’m ten. And that’s my sister, Sophie – she’s twelve. What’s your name please?”

Stella shook her bedraggled blonde hair off her face. She was determined not to appear nervous. “Stella. I’m eleven. This is my brother Tom. He’s eight.”

“I’ll be eleven quite soon!” said Emma.

“Not for another month actually!” sneered Sophie.

“That’s quite enough, Sophie!” said Miss Walker. She crouched down in front of Tom and Stella. “But, dears, where are you from? Is your mama or papa here with you?” Stella felt her cheeks start to burn and began to get a sick feeling in her tummy. She grabbed her right wrist, feeling with her thumb for her friendship bracelet. But it wasn’t there.

“Why are you wearing those funny clothes?” demanded Sophie. “And what’s *that* thing? She was pointing at Stella’s iPhone which was poking out of her jeans pocket. Miss Walker stood up and rounded on her.

“Sophie, this is your last warning for rudeness! I really don’t want to have to tell your mama!”

“I know!” shrieked Emma, suddenly jumping with delight.

“You’re my best friend Lucy Cuthbertson’s cousins from Australia – aren’t you? Your father was the Governor, wasn’t he? She *told* me you were moving back!”

She eyed them hopefully as everyone paused for thought. Tom started to open his mouth, but something stirred in Stella.

“That’s right!” she cut in. Then she delivered Tom such a piercing glare that he swallowed his words on the spot.

End of Chapter 5