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Opening extract from

The Secret Lake

Written by

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The Secret Lake

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This story is dedicated to my mother and father – and to all children who love to dream

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Come and play in the garden of imagination
Let the seeds of your dreams
Grow and blossom
In distant lands and times forgotten

1 - The Gardener

Tom's face felt so hot he was sure it was about to explode. The midday sun beat down mercilessly on his back, and the beads of sweat that had long since formed on his forehead began to itch and tickle. But still he dug on. Surely if he kept going there would be a sign. A tuft of silky fur perhaps? A distant squeak? Or (and this really would be the best!) a pair of tiny eyes squinting blindly up towards the daylight.

He paused to wipe the trickling sweat with the back of his wrist, then lifted his spade for what felt like the one hundredth time - just as a dark shadow loomed up from behind. A familiar chill travelled down his spine as, with heart pounding, he swivelled round to meet the piercing stare of the gardener, Charlie Green.

'Now look 'ere, Tom Hawken, I've told you before, I've enough trouble chasing up these darn molehills without 'avin' you goin' round diggin' 'em up.'

Tom felt his cheeks burning which was odd because his body was suddenly freezing. Charlie Green had had it in for him since the day they had moved to the

gardens, of that he was sure. He was always giving him funny looks.

Tom tried to speak, but his throat, which suddenly felt drier than the Sahara at noon, stuck tight. He never had been brilliant at getting out of trouble - just expert at getting into it.

Charlie Green squinted darkly. 'Next time, I'll 'ave to tell yer mum!' he growled. 'Now, take that rag o' yours and be off.'

Tom fumbled as he gathered up the corners of his Treasure Rag. To his relief, Charlie Green hadn't noticed the array of plant bulbs he had dug up, which now lay scattered in amongst his 'earth treasure' - three handsome stones, a piece of broken green bottle and a tatty old purse that had probably belonged to a child's doll. The stones he would keep and place in his box marked 'Tom's Earth Treasure', which sat in the grate of his enormous bedroom fireplace. Everything else he would throw back.

By the time he nudged open the small gate separating his parents' small patio garden from the main communal gardens Charlie Green had already re-filled the mole hole and was now stomping angrily across the lawns towards his shed. Clusters of tiny earth mounds lay scattered all around; it had been a bad week for moles in West London.

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Tom's heart still took off every time he entered his first floor bedroom: after his tiny room in their tenth floor Hong Kong apartment it really was a dream come true! His ceiling reached high, like a private indoor sky; the narrow French doors, opening onto the tiny sun-filled balcony, stood tall as skyscrapers, and on the far wall a magnificent marble fireplace stood even taller than he was. But, more important than all of these things, was the view. Tom's new room looked out onto a vast rambling garden that stretched as far as the eye could see. The garden, which was shared by all of the houses in the square, was filled with clusters of rhododendron bushes and sprawling oak trees whose branches seemed to brush the passing clouds.

Tom pressed his nose hard against the French door window and breathed in deeply, still wondering about Charlie Green. Then, through his clouds of warm breath on the glass, he saw a small dog shoot out from a cluster of trees and race across the lawn towards the houses. Slowly, Tom's mouth widened into a grin. 'I DON'T BELIEVE IT, STELL!' he yelled at the top of his voice. 'HARRY'S BACK!'

Stella, who was lying on her bed in her room next door studying her friendship bracelet, didn't answer. With her iPhone music on full volume, she was busy hoping that her friends back in Hong Kong, who would all be asleep now, had thought about her today. She also

happened to be crunching her fifth fruit polo of the day – lime-green flavour to be precise - the one that always made her ears tingle. 'Tom thinks he's in heaven,' she had just written on her best friend, Hannah's, Facebook wall. 'But it's so deathly dull here – all molehills and boys!'

Stella didn't budge. Nor, for that matter, did Tom who was now leaning out so far over his balcony he was in danger of falling off. He was determined to see if old Mrs Moon would be at her gate to welcome her disappearing dog. Of course she wasn't. After all, she would have to be psychic to know exactly *when* Harry would choose to come home. Never mind psychic, all the garden residents thought Mrs Moon was batty. Her 'Lost Dog' notices were pinned up everywhere and she drove them all mad phoning them up each time Harry went off, which was often for days at a time.

Tom had found himself wondering about Harry when he was out digging. The little long-haired terrier's comings and goings seemed to be part of garden life - as did the snarling Charlie Green and the molehills and, of course, the dotty old Mrs Moon. But why did the dog keep disappearing? And exactly where did he go? As thoughts of Charlie Green quickly evaporated, Tom resolved to solve Harry's mystery by summer's end.

2 - Beneath the Mound

'I wonder where Harry's gone this time,' Stella murmured as the sound of their mother's piano playing wafted through the morning breeze. Harry had been missing for almost a week and Mrs Moon was beside herself. (As a result, so were most of the garden residents.)

Tom and Stella were sitting on their favourite mound of grass on 'The Island'. The Island was a cluster of four oak trees in the centre of the garden skirted by rhododendron bushes. Stella twirled her friendship bracelet – a present from Hannah when they had left. 'Neither time nor distance will break our bond,' Hannah had said dramatically when she'd given it to her. How much those words meant now!

'I wonder where Harry goes *every* time,' Tom said with a frown as he picked at the mound of grass with his trowel.

'Don't do that!' snapped Stella. 'If Charlie Green catches you you'll be–'

'*HEY! What's this?'* Tom's eyes locked open as he sat

staring between his legs at the ground.

'What's *what?*' Stella leaned forward as Tom continued scraping grass off the top of the mound beneath him.

'I think it's real treasure!' he shrieked. Sure enough, as Tom carried on digging, and his eyes continued to widen, underneath they could see what looked like the rounded lid of a wooden container - a real treasure chest.

Suddenly Stella clutched Tom's arm.

'Ouch! Let go, will you!' he squealed.

'Shh..!' hissed Stella, sitting bolt up and staring straight ahead. The bushes opposite rustled. Stella and Tom sat still as statues. If Charlie Green appeared now they were done for.

'Must have been a bird,' whispered Tom, finally letting out a breath. The bush was still again. He looked down and carried on digging. 'It's a box, and it's got grooves on the lid!' he gasped. The rounded lid of the treasure chest seemed to go on forever as the patch Tom dug grew wider and wider.

And then Stella's pale blue eyes widened.

'Tom!' she whispered in disbelief. 'It's not a box! It's a *boat!*'

'A boat!' said Tom. 'It can't be a boat, stupid, there's no water around here!'

At that moment the bush opposite trembled violently. They really had had it this time; they knew Charlie Green's breathless snort anywhere. He was probably crawling through the undergrowth to take them by surprise.

Then, with a final sharp rustle, the leaves ahead parted and out into the clearing appeared… Harry.

'Harry!' they cried.

'He's *soaking*!' exclaimed Stella.

Harry took one look at Tom and Stella, then turned towards home and fled.

'Wait, Harry!' Tom began to take chase. But it was too late. Harry streaked like lightening out past the rhododendron bushes and across the sun-drenched lawn. Mrs Moon didn't know it yet, but she was in for a very pleasant surprise.

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'Tom, *come back!*'

Tom gave up his chase about half way across the lawn, just as their mother's voice echoed across the garden. 'Tom, Stella! Come on! We're leaving!'

'Help me with this.' Stella was dragging a log across the lawn towards the mound. 'If Charlie Green finds this mess we'll be grounded indoors for a week!'

Tom looked despondent. He had just unearthed the greatest treasure of his digging career and here he was being told he had to cover it up again.

'But I want to get the boat out!' he protested.

'We haven't got time! We're going to grandma's!' said Stella breathlessly. 'Quick, take that end.' They shuffled three or four steps sideways and lowered the log down

on top of the mound.

Tom stepped back and kicked the log in frustration.

'Look,' said Stella firmly, 'it's no use making a fuss now. We'll come back tomorrow and see if we can find out where Harry came from.'

Tom's face twisted into a puzzled frown. 'What do you mean by that?'

'Well,' said Stella, tearing at the wrapping of her sweet packet, 'where there's a boat there must be water.' She popped an orange polo into her mouth and raised her eyebrows in excitement. '*I* think Harry knows where that water is - and it's *somewhere around here!*'

3 - Dawn Escape

Funnily enough it was Stella who had trouble sleeping that night. Tom, in his room next door, was out like a light the moment his head touched the pillow.

'A boat!' Stella whispered repeatedly. 'How on earth could it have got there? And why was Harry soaked to the skin?' She was thinking how first thing tomorrow they would have a good scout around in the bushes when a hollow clank from somewhere outside made her sit up. The clock at her bedside read 5 a.m. She must have fallen asleep. Still thinking about Harry she crept from her bed to her window. The sun hadn't risen and the garden was bathed in a grey early morning mist. Nothing. It must have been a dream. But then, as she was about to drop back the curtains, the clanking echoed again. Stella peered to the right, in the direction it seemed to have come from. A high-pitched squeak, followed by another clank. Then, through the dim half-light she spotted Harry - trotting across the lawn in the direction of The Island. The clanking must have been him trying to

nudge open Mrs Moon's patio garden gate.

'Tom, quick! Wake up!' Stella tugged violently at Tom's pyjamas.

'What? Where's the mole? *Get it off me!*'

'Oh, wake up will you!' Stella snapped in a whisper. Tom sat up in a damp sweat. He had been dreaming that a friendly mole had just started to attack him.

'What's going on?' he mumbled, as his sister's face loomed in front of him in the dark.

'It's Harry! He's gone off again - I've just seen him!'

Tom immediately woke right up then fell on the floor as he tried to jump out of bed in a hurry. 'Let's get after him!' he squealed, diving for his dressing gown. Moments later, they stood at the top of the hallway stairs.

'Quietly!' mouthed Stella, glaring like a schoolteacher. Slowly they crept down, then put on their trainers and slipped outside into the grey morning air. 'Come on, we haven't got much time!' she whispered. Stella grabbed Tom's hand and together they raced across the damp grass towards The Island wearing only their pyjamas, dressing gowns and trainers.

'Drat! We've missed him!' said Stella. They had hunted around The Island for a good five minutes. All was still and there was no sign of Harry. But at least the log was still in place, which meant Charlie Green hadn't noticed their digging. 'We'll just have to come back and have a good look when it's light,' she said with a sigh. They then

squelched back across the lawn, their trainers soaked with early morning dew.

It was about half way back that something caught the corner of Tom's eye. He glanced to his right and, through the fading dawn mist, for a moment thought he saw a group of three or four moles scampering in a circle on the grass. But when he blinked they had gone. The half-light was playing tricks on him. Cold and shivering they returned to their beds and slept soundly.

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The ring of the telephone shattered the early morning calm.

'Hello… Oh, no, Mrs Moon, not again. I *am* sorry. Yes, of course we'll let you know if we see him. Of course. We'll call you right away. Goodbye, Mrs Moon.'

As they lay in their separate bedrooms, Tom and Stella listened to their mother's conversation, each thinking how their earlier jaunt really hadn't been a dream after all, and how, after breakfast, they must continue their search for Harry.