

Chapter 13

'Pardon', said Freddy, looking round the group. They all looked at each other. No-one said anything. In the distance they could hear the smooth whirring sound of a scooter's engine.

'Vive la revolution!' came the sound again, from the far distance. The time it was accompanied by a shrill Gallic cackle.

They jumped on their bikes and headed for the secret garden as instructed on the tape.

Clara was in front, her purple and gold BMX leading the way. She got a few metres ahead of them, then, without warning, she fell flat on her left side. No toppling, no wobbling, just fell. Straight down. Luckily onto soft, long grass.

'Wait!', cried Helga as they set off, 'it said we have to go at snail's pace. Go slowly.'

She was right, the message on the tape had instructed them to proceed, on their bikes, but at 'snail's pace'. They jumped down off their bikes and went over to where Clara was now sitting, stunned but apparently unhurt, next to her bike.

'What was that?', she said groggily. 'I just felt this thud on the side of my head, and then I was down'.

'Urghh, look...!', exclaimed Helga suddenly.

She was pointing, transfixed, at something dripping down the side of Clara's neck. A thick green and white liquid was slowly oozing down over her jacket.

They all looked at it for a moment, then Freddy stepped forward to help his sister. He grabbed a handful of some of the longer grass and started wiping. Helga helpfully passed him a box of tissues from her basket. She smiled in a self-satisfied kind of way.

Whatever it was that had hit Clara washed off quite quickly and easily, although it had a foul smell which lingered around them even though Freddy sealed the tissues in the black bin bag which Helga had helpfully provided.

They got back on the bikes.

'Remember what the tape said. Go slowly. We have to follow the instructions'. Helga was enjoying this now.

The secret of riding slowly was to keep riding, but as soon as you felt like you were going to have to put a foot down, to put a little more pressure on the pedals. Wil was the best at this, and Hardy had a natural advantage because with his fat little tyres (which were hardly ever inflated properly) he was able to bobble along quite happily at slow speeds.

They made their way slowly up the gravel path which led to the secret garden. There were no more incidents along the way.

The Secret Garden was not really secret at all. When they were younger, Freddy and Clara had spent long hours there. It felt secure, surrounded as it was by a high wall, with only one way in and out. In former times it had been used as a place to grow vegetables, but these days it was overgrown and disorganised, although they did try to keep the large grassy area in the middle free cut so that they could play games of football and cricket there.

But today the garden did not appear any different. Still the rough grassy patch in the middle, the overgrown flower borders, the greenhouse in one corner, with almost all its glass shattered.

Because of the high wall and single entrance, the garden was home to all sorts of different animals and birds, some of which they would bump into during the day, as they searched for the clue that the tape had promised them.

Freddy and Wil, working at the far end of the garden near the most overgrown section of undergrowth, were surprised by a black bird with a bright orange patch on its face, nonchalantly sipping from an old but very useful pot, labelled 'Hunny'.

Clara and Helga, were busy looking around by the greenhouse.

'What was that?'

'What?'

'A rustling'

'Oh that's bound to be one of the boys messing', said Clara in an effort to reassure her friend.

'Oh jeepers creepers', Helga exclaimed suddenly, as a large furry creature flung itself towards her. It had jumped from a distance of about a metre, and was now on top of Helga, enthusiastically licking her nose and cheeks.

'The were-rabbit, the were-rabbit', she wailed.

'Don't worry H', said Clara calmly, 'it's not a were-rabbit, it is just a very large bunny. It seems very friendly too'.

The rabbit turned its attention to Clara., gently pushed her to the ground, and started licking off the remnants of the sticky stuff that had assaulted her earlier.

'*Herman*'.

'Sorry', said Clara.

'*Herman the German*', said the rabbit, in a jaunty, rabbity voice. And with that, he scampered off, back into the undergrowth.

‘Look!’. The voice was high-pitched and urgent. Little Chris, who had been searching at the base of the wall, was now standing in the middle of the grass, pointing at the long high wall. They stared as he read out the word that was written there.

‘*Minuit*’

‘What does *minuit* mean?’

Helga produced a large bundle from her basket. Placing the instructions on the ground, she expertly manhandled the bundle, shook it a couple of times, walked a few paces to her left (to just where the lawn joined onto the area of longer grass), and, with a considerable flourish,, threw the bundle to the floor. It lay there inert for a moment until she gave it a little prod with her shiny black shoe. It almost jumped into life, inflating itself into a huge tented structure, orange on the outside, and with a series of white compartments on the inside.

‘Well, its not exactly camouflaged, but it will do for tonight’, Hardy commented admiringly.

‘Be prepared,, that’s my motto’, Helga added proudly.

She reached into her bag and pulled out a tablecloth, ready-laid with six place-settings. She sent the boys out to collect vegetables from the garden, and Clara to the greenhouse to pick up some of the fruits which continued to grow there, reproducing happily even though the glasshouse had not been planted for many years.

‘What does *minuit* mean’, Little Chris repeated once they had dined and settled into the sleeping bags Helga had provided.

‘It is the French word for *midnight*’, replied Helga, consulting the French dictionary she had brought with her.

‘I think it means we have to wait’. Freddy had some idea of how Nicholai’s mind worked, and as they hadn’t found any clues all day, he knew that this sign would lead them to the clue, probably at midnight.

As they were drifting off to sleep they were aware of a strange light through the thin nylon of the tent fabric. Freddy saw it first, and shook Wil awake. Without a word, he pointed to the direction from which it was coming. He thought it was probably away from the house, although, half-awake, he was a bit disorientated, so he couldn’t be sure.

It didn’t matter much, because Wil, who had kicked Hardy to wake him, was now pointing in the opposite direction, where there was a similar light, growing stronger. Not a single shining light (like a torch), more like a general brightness. Growing brighter by the minute.

Wil glanced at his watch.

‘Just before midnight’, he whispered quietly, calculating that they had had about three hours sleep.

‘That smell again’, said Clara suddenly. She and Helga had bedded down at the far end of the tent, so she spoke louder so the others could hear.

There was a crackling sound from outside.

Freddy stooped in the confines of the tent, and gently unzipped the front. He peered out.

Surrounding the tent were a series of white disks, each about the size of a small football. The light that had woken them was coming from a dozen flaming torches, hanging from the walls of the secret garden.

They all got out of the tent and stared at the scene around them. There was nobody to be seen.
