

The Children of Hare Hill

Sample Chapter

Chapter 7

Ben was the first to open his eyes. The world was different, and he went through the differences one by one.

The sky wasn't blue; it was black, and speckled with starlight. The air wasn't thick with the heat of a summer's afternoon; there was a slight chill that made the hairs on his arms and legs stand up. And his head wasn't resting on his mother's tummy any more; he could feel the hard ground beneath him.

He sat up. He was still in the walled garden, but he saw it in a way that he had never seen it before. Lit only by moonlight, pitch black shadows of trees snaked across the grass and the garden felt much larger than it ever did in sunlight. He looked down and saw his sister lying on the grass behind him, with their backpacks neatly placed next to where the picnic mat used to be. Their mother and the bags she had brought with her, including their father's urn, were nowhere to be seen. Ben felt a pang of fear.

"Charlotte, wake up!" he said as he shook his sister awake.

She rolled over, mumbling something incoherent that Ben took to mean, "Get lost," but he kept shaking her until she sat up and took in their surroundings.

"What's going on?" she said with a shiver as she rubbed her arms, adjusting to her sudden change in temperature.

"Mummy's gone," Ben said. Charlotte saw the empty space behind her where their mother had been lying.

"Don't worry," Charlotte said, regarding the concerned look on her brother's face. "She'll be around here somewhere. I guess we just overslept."

Her immediate thought was to ask, "What time is it?" but she realised they had no way of knowing. Neither she nor her brother wore a watch and they had nothing with them that had a clock on it; they always relied on their mother to tell them where they needed to be and what they needed to do at any given time. If they had been characters in one of the adventure books she liked to read, where kids a little bit older than she was thwart dastardly schemes by pirates and thieves on their summer holiday, they would have been able to look at the moon and stars to work out what time it was. Or was that how they worked out where they were? Either way, Charlotte and Ben weren't those kids—they were two regular school kids from Cheshire who, for some reason, were alone in Hare Hill's walled garden in the middle of the night.

"Come on," Charlotte said, getting to her feet in the knowledge that she would have to take the lead. "Mummy won't have gone far. Let's go and find her."

"Okay," Ben said as Charlotte pulled him to his feet. His confidence had grown in a matter of seconds. They made their way

across the lawn and through the metal gate, which seemed to squeak and clang louder in the darkness than it ever did in the daytime. The twelfth wooden hare stood outside the gate, but they paid it no attention as they made their way through the trees to the path that circled the walled garden.

They shouted for their mother all the way round, but the only reply they received was the occasional hoot of an owl in the trees.

"Let's head back to the car," Charlotte said as they walked along the path that led back to the car park. Ben nodded in agreement, but they were both shocked to hear a third voice. In a deep, booming tone, they heard the words, "The gates are locked!"

They both screamed and shouted, "Who's there?" as they spun around, searching for the source of their shocking interruption.

But there was no one around. All they could see were the trees and flowers bathed in moonlight, a grassy clearing with a couple of metal benches, and a large stone ornament, shaped like a jug with a man's head carved into the side. Charlotte and Ben had never paid the ornament much attention in the past, but now Ben was transfixed by it, staring at the stone face in the side.

"What is it, Ben?" Charlotte asked.

"It was the face in the jug," he whispered.

"What? Don't be crazy!" she said, but she found she couldn't stop looking at it too. Ben gripped her hand and they took small, tentative steps forward. They moved in front of the ornament and they couldn't believe what they saw.

The stone face in the ornament moved. Then it spoke to them. "Ah, there you are. I could hear you moving around but I couldn't see you. You are Charlotte and Ben, are you not?"

They said nothing. They stood with gaping mouths, dumbfounded at the strange scene they found themselves in.

"It's okay," the face said, "I won't hurt you. I mean, how could I? I can barely see you, being stuck in here like this. Come on, move round a bit further so I can see you."

Charlotte and Ben side-stepped to their right until they were looking directly into the stone eyes before them.

"That's better. Now, let's start again," the face said, turning to Charlotte. "Your name is Charlotte, is it not?"

Charlotte nodded. The face looked at Ben.

"And your name is Ben?"

Ben nodded.

"Good. So the introductions are out of the way—"

"Wait!" Charlotte heard herself say.

There was the dull sound of stone scraping against stone as the face frowned. "Yes?" he said.

"You know our names," Charlotte said. "But we don't know who you are. We're not supposed to talk to strangers."

"I don't have a name," the face said. "Or if I did, it was a long time ago and I've forgotten what it was. I am the Guardian of Hare Hill. I am here to help you on your quest."

"What quest?" Charlotte said.

"I know that which you seek, even if you do not know yourselves, and I will help you."

"We're looking for our mummy," Ben said.

"She is no longer here," the face said. "The gate to the park is locked and you are the only ones here." He paused for a moment, then with a sly smile said, "For now."

"So how can we find her?" Charlotte asked.

"You have a map, do you not?"

"It's just a silly map our daddy drew for us a long time ago. How is that going to help us?"

"Look again."

Charlotte opened her backpack and fished around inside, then pulled out a piece of paper. She opened it, expecting to see the old hand-drawn map, but it looked different. It was incomplete. The lines showing the paths and the outlines of the garden and other features of the park were there, but only one hare

was drawn on there—hare number one, near the entrance to the park.

"What do you see?" the face asked. Charlotte described the map to him.

"I suggest you visit the first hare," the face said. "He will help send you on your way."

"What are you talking about?" Charlotte said. "It's just a wooden hare!"

"Is it, indeed?" With that, the face stopped moving, its features seeming to set back into solid stone in an instant.

"What's going on?" Ben asked Charlotte, who offered him no explanation. He ran up to the stone face and shouted at it. "What's going on? Why is this happening?"

The stone face said nothing.

"Come on," Charlotte said, waving the map in the direction of the first wooden hare. "Let's follow the map."

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