

The  
GARDEN  
of LOST  
SECRETS





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USBORNE



## CHAPTER I



# New Home

Clara's secret weighed heavy in the pocket of her pinafore apron, as her boots crunched down the gravel path to Gardener's Cottage. Her nose crinkled. It was a house that didn't look like a house. One end of the cottage was built into a high red-brick wall which enclosed three sides of the kitchen gardens, separating them from the rest of the Earl's grand country estate. A brown door was fitted into the wall at an angle, like a picture which had been given a gentle push to the right and never been straightened. Above it, a diamond-paned window gazed like a watchful eye over the sloping patchwork of vegetable plots, tumbledown scarecrows and apple trees weighed with fruit.



Mrs Gilbert, the Earl's housekeeper, trudged up the path ahead of Clara. Her wavy speckled-with-grey hair was pinned neatly under her cloth hat. Clara patted at her own hair. Her auburn curls fell messily over her shoulders. Was that why Mrs Gilbert's forehead had puckered when she had arrived?

Clara turned and stared into the gardens. They were larger than the largest park in her home town, sloped this way and that as if the ground could not make up its mind which way to go. Along the southern perimeter of the gardens there was no walled boundary, but there was a small lake which shimmered in the early October sun. Four glass hothouses of varying sizes stood in the centre. Condensation steamed up the large windows, fat leaves pressing against them like they were trying to escape. A man with a stooped back was whistling loudly and out of tune as he pushed a barrow-load of burnt-orange pumpkins and green marrows along a path between the hothouses towards her. Two younger men were chatting in the orchard, the rise and fall of their voices chiming with the soft thud of apples as they dropped them into wicker baskets. To her left, another man was huffing and puffing as his fork turned over the soil in a planting bed.

Just then, the man pushing the barrow saw Clara looking and gave her a cheery wave.

She was about to wave in reply when Mrs Gilbert's voice, tight with irritation, rang across the gardens. "Come along, Clara."

The man with the barrow lowered his head and walked on.

Mrs Gilbert opened the brown door. It was unlocked. Clara's throat tightened, as did her grasp on her secret, as she followed Mrs Gilbert into a dingy hallway.

Clara swallowed and put her small case down on the tiled floor. At the end of the hall stood a man whose coal-black bushy hair tickled the low cottage ceiling. He pushed a notebook and stubby pencil into his trouser pocket and gave Mrs Gilbert a soft look filled with words which Clara didn't understand. He sighed. Sorrow? Disappointment? Something else entirely? Whichever it was, Clara was certain it was somehow connected with her arrival.

"You remember Mr Gilbert, my husband?" Mrs Gilbert said in a thin voice.

Clara nodded and did her best to force her lips into a smile. It had been 1913 when the Gilberts had last been to visit Clara and her family in Kent. That was

three years ago, and she had only a handful of memories of this man whose ruddy middle-aged cheeks told a story of a life spent outdoors working as the head gardener on the Earl's estate. A piggyback ride around the park on a blustery day. The telling-off from her mother when she and Mr Gilbert had dipped their fingers into a pan of still-warm blackcurrant jam. The deep grooves in his cheeks from his near-permanent smile. Clara swallowed. The grooves were still there but the smile wasn't. "Hello," she said. Her voice was dry and cracked after her two long train journeys.

Mr Gilbert nodded. He stood and looked at Clara for a few seconds. "Welcome," he said. His voice reminded Clara of her mother's coconut cake – slightly gritty but edged with softness. He opened his mouth as if to say something else, then, apparently thinking better of it, he turned, his hair gathering a drifting cobweb on the ceiling (and perhaps a dead fly or two) and disappeared through another door at the end of the hall. The sound of cupboard doors opening and shutting, a table being laid for tea, made Mrs Gilbert purse her lips and fiddle with the cuffs of her navy woollen jacket.

Clara glanced at the remains of the cobweb swaying in the breeze from the still-open front door behind her.

It wasn't the welcome her parents had said she would get or that she had been expecting. Her shoulders sagged.

“Keep away from the woods. The Earl is allowing the Suffolk Rifles Regiment to camp there. Do not distract the housemaids or gardeners with idle chit-chat. Under no circumstances are you to go near the Earl's hothouses or summer house – or speak or make eye contact with the Earl if you see him. The other cottage in the wall near the top of the gardens is The Bothy – where the under-gardeners and gamekeepers sleep. You can keep away from that too. While you are here, just... try and make yourself... useful.” Each barked instruction chimed in time with Mrs Gilbert's thick stockinged ankles as she stomped up the wooden stairs. At the top, she turned. Her wide face was puce, the same colour as her work-worn housekeeper's fingers.

Clara tried to remember the barrage of words which had just been flung at her, but they flitted from her ears like moths and flew out of the door behind her.

“Are you listening, Clara? Shut the door behind you! Just like your father, always leaving them open.”

“Yes, Aunt,” Clara replied meekly, closing the door. Chinks of spades in soil, the laughter and chatter and busyness of the gardeners – all this was replaced with

a silence which squeezed the air from Clara's lungs. The paper in her pocket pricked at her little finger, begging to be taken out and examined. Clara wondered if her aunt had truly gone, if she was finally alone, or if the woman was hovering there somewhere at the top of the stairs. "Later," she whispered under her breath to the paper. It didn't reply.

"You may call me Mrs Gilbert," Mrs Gilbert said in a voice so low it seemed to slither down the stairs and curl around Clara's feet like a snake.

Clara clenched her toes until they ached, wishing the snake would vanish.

"I'll show you your room," Mrs Gilbert said, her voice still sour, but less serpentine than before.

Pushing her secret deeper within the folds of her pocket, Clara gritted her teeth, picked up her small suitcase and followed Mrs Gilbert upstairs.