**Thrown**

Alice shivered, wrapped her dressing gown tightly around her and braved the short journey from her bed to the window. Outside, the heavily-frosted grounds were glistening in the weak, early morning sunshine. A faint smile twitched at the corners of her mouth. It looked like today would be the day: the grand finale of a drama that had begun nine months ago …

Heaving a sigh, Alice dumped the weeds into the barrow and wheeled it down the hill to the flower bed closest to the lake. There, beneath the pale pink haze of a blossoming apple tree, her sister, Isobel, and her two brothers, Max and William, were lounging around enjoying the last rays of a warm spring day.

‘Don’t look now,’ drawled William, ‘but it looks like old misery-guts is on the warpath again.’ They all turned towards the huge, old house to watch their father striding across the lawn. As he approached, Alice noticed the sadness in his eyes and asked him what was wrong.

‘I’ve just been speaking to Dr White. I’m afraid my test results don’t look very hopeful.’

Alice gasped and threw her arms around him. Max and Isobel glanced at each other and rolled their eyes while William muttered a rather half-hearted, ‘Oh, bad luck Pa.’

‘So,’ continued their father, ‘I have to start putting my affairs in order for after I’m gone. The biggest question is what to do with the house.’

‘Simple. Sell it off and share out the money between us,’ said William.

‘I was worried you’d say that,’ said Father. ‘As you surely know, I’ve always wanted to keep it in the family. After all, my father built up the business from nothing and I’ve made it even more successful. This house is

a monument to that hard work, so I want it to be our legacy. It will take some looking after, so I’ve decided …’ At this point he paused while he looked intently into his children’s eyes … to leave it to Alice. After all, she’s the only one that’s shown any interest in it.’

Alice’s siblings erupted into furious protests, claiming that, had they known, they would have done a little bit of work around the place too. Ultimately, William threatened to challenge the decision in court unless they were all given an equal chance, so Father conceded.

Max proposed a competition, so that one of them could win the house and grounds fair and square. Alice’s heart sank: what contest could she ever win? William was the cleverest; Max was the strongest and most athletic; Isobel was beautiful and extremely popular.

Devastated that his true wishes would not be respected, Father tried to think of a suitable challenge. Finally, after gazing at the lake, he announced his decision: he would award the house to whoever could throw a stone that reached the far bank. They would each be allowed one throw only. No catapults, sling shots, or any other devices could be used. And if no-one managed within a year, the house would be sold and the proceeds given to charity.

‘You ridiculous old man,’ snarled Isobel. ‘No one could ever do that, so what’s the point of trying?’ Tossing her silken hair defiantly, she picked up a small pebble in her perfectly manicured fingers and lobbed it a few metres out into the lake. ‘There,’ she snapped, ‘that’s my go. I can marry all the money I could ever need.’

One down, three to go.

Over the next couple of months, Alice noticed Max putting himself through an intensive training programme to build up his strength and throwing skills. He had even measured the diameter of the lake and marked out an equivalent distance on the lawns to help him find his range.

Eventually, he announced that he was ready to have his turn. The warm summer sun had shrunk the lake by a few metres and he reckoned he could make the distance on most throws. Alice, William and Father gathered on the bank to watch as Max went through a series of warm-ups and stretches. Then, he jogged up to the lakeside and launched the stone high into the air … a little too high in fact for, although it was a mighty throw, he had slightly misjudged the trajectory and the stone splashed into the water agonisingly close to the bank.

Two down ...

As the year grew old, Alice noticed William furtively sneaking out to the grounds alone, making sure nobody followed him. Then, one chilly November morning, he appeared in a thick coat and told his family that he was ready for the challenge. Intrigued that his weedy, bookworm of a brother thought he could out-throw him, Max joined Alice and Father by the lake while Isobel sulked in her room.

Rather like a stage magician, William let his family check that it was a ‘just an ordinary stone’, then proceeded to perform a mysterious sequence of crouching and stretching movements. Finally, he sprang forward and flung out his arm. The stone rocketed out of his hand and sailed right over the lake, thudding into the ground a good few metres beyond the far bank.

‘Oh well done William!’ said Father. Max walked over to his brother, offering his congratulations like a true sportsman. As William gleefully shook his hand, Max suddenly snatched his back sharply. There was a snap and a twang, followed by a triumphant ‘Aha!’ from Max, who was now holding aloft a length of strong elastic which had been concealed in the sleeve of William’s coat.

‘I said no catapults, sling shots, or any other devices,’ growled Father. ‘Your throw is disqualified.’ That left Alice. Just Alice.

And so it was that in the depths of winter, Alice knocked on her father’s bedroom door and told him that she was ready for her turn. Still

fastening his coat and scarf, with his other children grumbling behind him, he crunched across the brittle grass behind his daughter. Along with his late wife, he had tried to treat all his children equally, yet he couldn’t deny that he really wanted Alice to succeed. As they approached the lake, that hope began to crystallise into a solid belief that she had the wisdom and wherewithal, both to win the contest and take care of the house.

Meanwhile, Alice’s thoughts were swirling around her head like the clouds of condensing breath billowing from their small party. Had she really thought this through? Had she been right to trust her father’s judgement and foresight? With her head spinning, she produced a smooth pebble from her pocket. For a moment or two, she gazed at the stone, passing it through her fingers as if weighing the chances of success and failure. Finally she said, ‘Well, here goes!’ and swung her arm.

Her patience had paid off. With a strange, ringing noise, the stone zipped across the smooth ice that covered the lake. Five pairs of eyes followed its unfaltering course all the way across to the other side where it thumped into the far bank before rebounding a short distance for good measure.

‘Did I win?’ she asked, turning to her father with a knowing grin.

Father took both her hands. ‘I think we both did,’ he smiled.