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THE
**STRANGE
DISAPPEARANCE**
OF
*Imogen
Good*

Kirsty Applebaum



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THE
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CHAPTER 1

Saturday 22nd September

Imogen

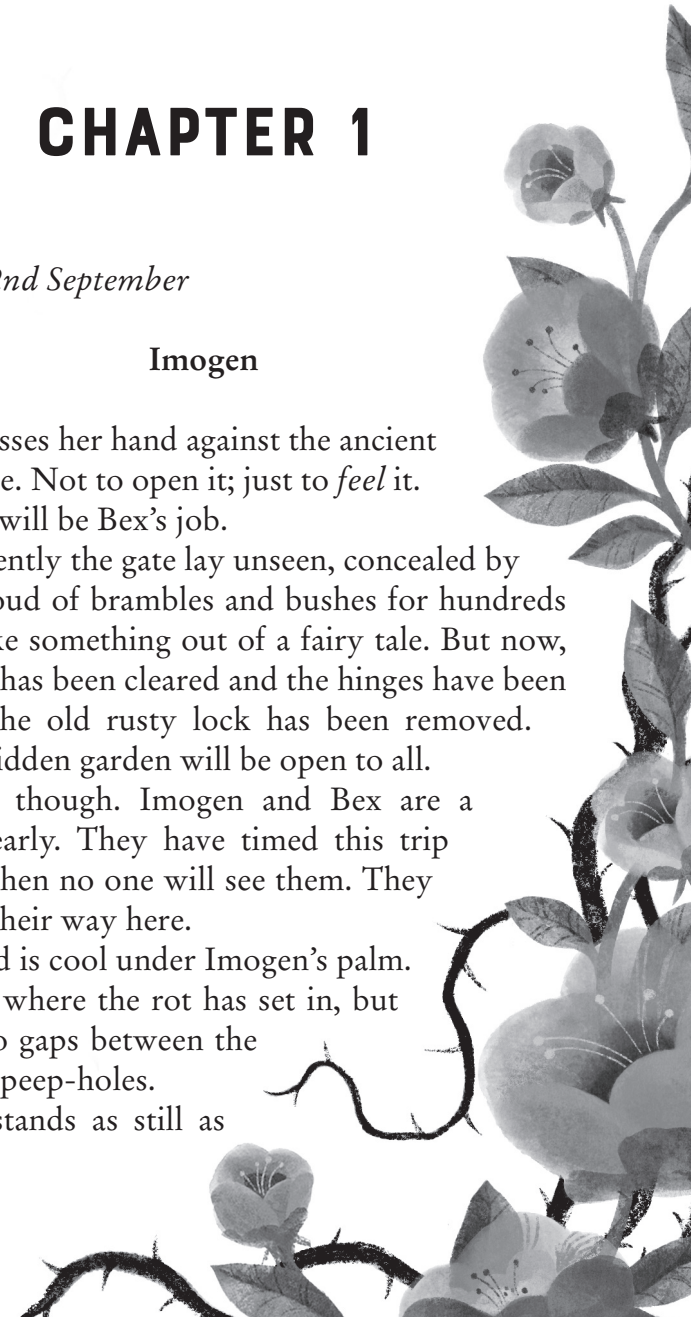
Imogen presses her hand against the ancient wooden gate. Not to open it; just to *feel* it. Opening it will be Bex's job.

Until recently the gate lay unseen, concealed by a thick shroud of brambles and bushes for hundreds of years, like something out of a fairy tale. But now, the ground has been cleared and the hinges have been oiled and the old rusty lock has been removed. Soon, the hidden garden will be open to all.

Not yet, though. Imogen and Bex are a full week early. They have timed this trip carefully, when no one will see them. They have crept their way here.

The wood is cool under Imogen's palm. It's uneven where the rot has set in, but there are no gaps between the planks. No peep-holes.

Imogen stands as still as



the gate itself; as still as the tall flint wall that runs either side of it. She wonders if her own ancestors might have been here when it was first built; centuries-old relatives who'd had no idea that Imogen would ever exist.

Then she tells herself to get a grip. She should focus on what she's supposed to be doing.

She turns back to Bex, who's been lagging behind the whole way. She'd be a lot quicker, thinks Imogen, if she didn't insist on wearing party dresses all the time. Or those sparkly ballet pumps that have more bare patches than sequins and keep flopping off the back of her heels.

She ought to get herself a neat pair of bright-white tennis shoes, just like Imogen's own.

"Hurry up," says Imogen. "It's *your* dare. I said I'd do it *with* you, not *for* you. All you have to do is go in."

Bex stops a good few metres away. The net skirt of her dress has got itself all scrunched up at the front. She stares at the old gate and the huge wall. She looks terrified.

"Maybe we could just *pretend* we went in?" she says.

"Don't be a chicken." Imogen crosses her arms. "If you can't even do a simple sneak-into-a-garden challenge I really don't think we can be friends any more. What are the others going to say?"

Imogen herself is unafraid. Not because she doesn't

believe the frightening tales they tell about the hidden garden – everyone does, on the Stillness Estate (or everyone who has grown up there, at least). No. The reason Imogen is unafraid is that she is one hundred per cent certain she will not have to set a single foot beyond the gate. Bex is way too scared to do it, so neither of them will go in. Then Bex will have failed the dare and Imogen will have the perfect excuse to dump her, once and for all. It's kinder than coming straight out with the truth, which is quite simply that Bex is embarrassing to have around these days, with her ridiculous clothes and the silly things she's still interested in. She's stuck in time, while Imogen is moving on.

Imogen's new friends (*Tanya and crew*, as Dad calls them) snigger every time they see Bex. They've given her this dare as a total wind-up.

Bex

Bex picks at a sequin on the shoulder of her dress. She doesn't much care what *Tanya and crew* will say. She knows they whisper behind her back already. Nothing new there. But the thought of losing Imogen – the girl from a few doors down who became her friend before either of them even knew what a friend was – makes her feel like all the happiness is being scooped right out of her. It makes her feel like she'll

do almost anything to stop it.

She smooths down her net skirt and heads for the gate.

CHAPTER 2

The following August

Fran

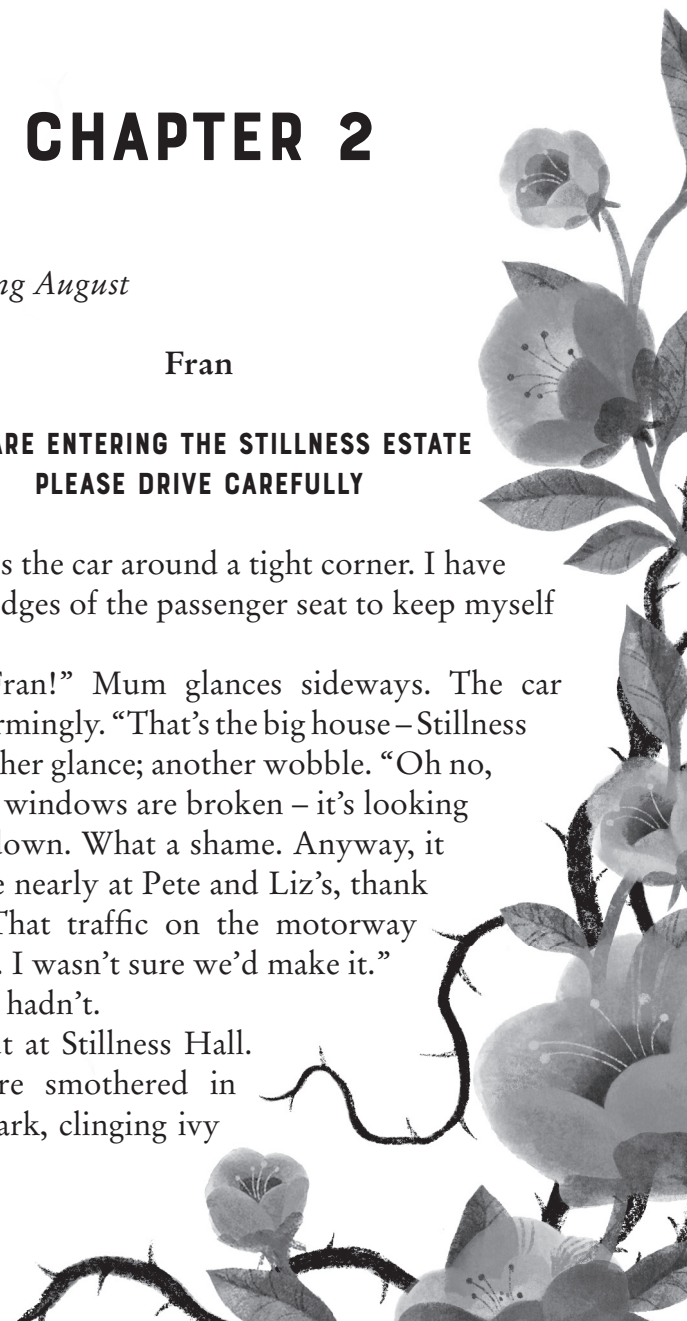
**YOU ARE ENTERING THE STILLNESS ESTATE
PLEASE DRIVE CAREFULLY**

Mum hurtles the car around a tight corner. I have to grip the edges of the passenger seat to keep myself upright.

“Look, Fran!” Mum glances sideways. The car wobbles alarmingly. “That’s the big house – Stillness Hall.” Another glance; another wobble. “Oh no, some of the windows are broken – it’s looking rather run down. What a shame. Anyway, it means we’re nearly at Pete and Liz’s, thank goodness. That traffic on the motorway was terrible. I wasn’t sure we’d make it.”

I wish we hadn’t.

I stare out at Stillness Hall. Its walls are smothered in masses of dark, clinging ivy



and its windows – broken or not – look like rows of watching eyes. It might be run down, but it's pretty grand all the same, with its long driveway and its wide steps and those pillars either side of the front door.

I won't be staying anywhere grand though. Oh no. I'll be staying with Uncle Pete, Auntie Liz and the dreaded cousin Imogen in their cottage that is apparently so teeny tiny we've never been invited before – they've always come to us.

"I'd rather be stuck on a motorway for the whole week than spend it cooped up with Awful Imogen," I say.

"Stop calling her that, Fran! You'll find yourself doing it in front of everyone."

The car lurches one way and then the other, curving with the road through the broad parkland: a vast area of shining grass speckled with different kinds of trees, all in their August best. It's like the whole place has been created to show off as many shades of green as possible.

"It's such a pity you two never hit it off." Mum pushes our little red car even faster as the road straightens out. "I know it can be difficult not having brothers and sisters, so I thought it was wonderful when you two were born so close together. Thought you'd end up being best buddies."

"She's really bossy." I fiddle with the knee of my jeans where the material's getting thin. "Always

trying to organise me and tidy me up and tell me what to do."

"Well," says Mum, "you'll both need to put your differences aside and learn to get along this week, I'm afraid."

"I was wishing," I say, "that the traffic would be so bad you'd miss your flight and we could just drive home again." Oops – my finger goes right through the denim to the skin on my knee. Excellent! I can get another patch. That'll make four on this pair.

"Your wish might still come true; I'm not on the plane yet." Mum screeches the car to a halt outside a terrace of old-fashioned red-brick cottages. "Here we are – *number one, Gardener's Row*. I'm just going to stick my head around the door then zoom off sharpish, or I really will miss my flight."

"I can't believe I have to stay here for a whole week."

"It's Sunday 'til Friday," says Mum. "That's not a whole week."

"It might as well be."

She switches off the engine and lets herself slow down for a rare moment. "Look, Fran, I know this whole arrangement is very last minute and in no way ideal, but I really do have to go and help Dad out at the conference. It's not how we planned it, but he's opened up this opportunity and now he needs me there."

"I wish I could've gone to Daisy's or Isla's."

“We’ve been through this a million times, Fran. It’s the summer holidays – they’re both away.” Mum gives my hand a gentle squeeze. “The business is on its last legs, love. We’re running out of options. This might be our only chance.”

I sigh. “I know.”

“And anyway,” says Mum, unclicking her seatbelt and ratcheting back up to her normal speed, “it’s been well over a year since you last saw Imogen. She’s probably changed. People do. I expect you’ll end up having a fantastic time. Now, grab your suitcase.”

The moment I open the car door I’m engulfed by hot air – it’s so warm today you can’t breathe properly. I’d forgotten, sitting in the aircon all that time. I head round to the back of the car, sunshine blazing on my bare arms.

Uncle Pete opens the front door before Mum’s even rung the bell. “Hello strangers!” He’s a bigger, bearded, more bear-like version of Dad. “It’s been so long.” He wraps Mum in a hug and peers over her shoulder. “And there’s my fabulous niece!”

I give him a wave and open up the boot. I twist the suitcase around so I can get to the handle. It weighs a tonne. Mum accused me of overpacking but it’s going to be six days in the middle of nowhere – six days! I need my stuff with me.

I try to lift it.

Nope. Not gonna work.

It’s amazing how much a few books and clothes

can end up weighing. OK, there are also some craft kits and some puzzle stuff and Old Fred Ted and my trusty dressing gown, of course. Plus a few other bits and bobs that I can’t remember now.

Not to worry. *Momentum* is the answer. I shuffle the case towards me and balance it on the lip of the boot. Nice. Then I get a firm hold of the handle, brace myself and – here goes – I swing the whole thing behind me and round towards the pavement.

“Watch out!” shouts Uncle Pete, but it’s too late. The bag smashes into something that feels very un-pavement-like.

I turn around to see a girl in a sparkly dress down on the ground.

“Fran!” says Mum. “You have to remember to look!”

“I’m so sorry!” I dive forward to help the girl up. “Are you OK?”

Thankfully, it’s not Imogen. That would have been a *very* bad start to the week. This is a different girl, around about the same age. It isn’t just her dress that’s sparkly. Her hairband, her shoes – she’s head-to-toe sequins.

“Um, yeah. I’m OK, thanks.” The girl straightens up her twinkling hairband. On the ground in front of her is an enormous glow-in-the-dark bag with newspapers spilling out of the top.

“Are you sure, Bex?” Uncle Pete picks up the bag and hands it to her.

“Yeah, really, I’m fine. Thank you.”

“Thank goodness for that,” says Mum. “Fran, honestly, please be more careful.”

“It was an accident!”

“Well, um, I’d better get on,” says sparkly dress girl. *Bex*. “Nice to, um, meet you.”

“Are you going to a party?” I ask.

“No,” says *Bex*. “I’m delivering newspapers. Oh, don’t forget yours, Mr Good.” She pulls a paper out of her bag and passes it to Uncle Pete, before heading to the house next door.

Well, they certainly are a strange lot around here. I wouldn’t be seen dead in a sequinned dress – or any kind of dress for that matter – even if the actual future of the universe depended on it, let alone while delivering newspapers.

CHAPTER 3

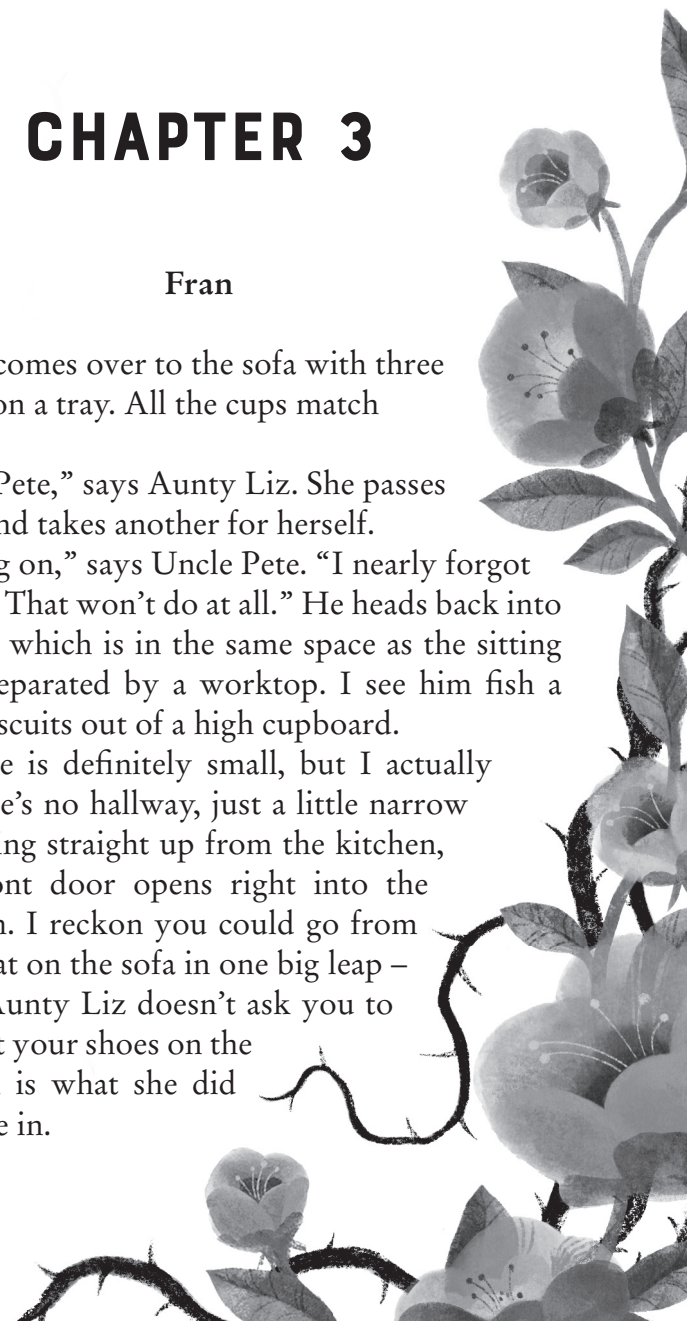
Fran

Uncle Pete comes over to the sofa with three cups of tea on a tray. All the cups match exactly.

“Thanks Pete,” says Auntie Liz. She passes one to me and takes another for herself.

“Oh, hang on,” says Uncle Pete. “I nearly forgot the biscuits. That won’t do at all.” He heads back into the kitchen, which is in the same space as the sitting room but separated by a worktop. I see him fish a packet of biscuits out of a high cupboard.

The house is definitely small, but I actually like it. There’s no hallway, just a little narrow staircase going straight up from the kitchen, and the front door opens right into the sitting room. I reckon you could go from outside to sit on the sofa in one big leap – as long as Auntie Liz doesn’t ask you to stop and put your shoes on the rack, which is what she did when I came in.



Uncle Pete offers the biscuits to me first. Chocolate Hobnobs – great! They’re prettily arranged on a plate that matches the cups. At home, we’d eat them straight from the packet.

“It’s such a shame your mum couldn’t come in for a cuppa,” says Auntie Liz. “We haven’t seen her in so long.” She’s dressed (as she always is, now I think about it) in a smart trouser suit, even though it’s Sunday. Maybe that’s where Imogen gets all her neat-and-tidiness from.

“She was worried about missing her flight.” I put my biscuit-holding hand over my knee to cover up the brand-new hole.

“I didn’t even speak to her about your visit.” Auntie Liz takes a sip of tea. “We missed each other’s calls and ended up organising it all by text.”

“And how’s my brother these days?” says Uncle Pete. “Haven’t spoken to him in ages either.”

“Dad? He’s OK. He’s been at the conference for a few days already. It was supposed to be only him going, but a big pitch opportunity has come up – a chance to present the business to someone really important – and apparently that always goes better when Mum and Dad do it together.”

“Well, the main thing is that *you’re* here, Fran,” says Auntie Liz. “We’ve been so looking forward to having a young person around the house for a week, haven’t we, Pete?”

“We certainly have,” agrees Uncle Pete.

Talking about young people, where’s Imogen? Out somewhere, I suppose. Uncle Pete only brought in three cups, so she probably isn’t coming back anytime soon, which means there’s time for me to set some expectations. There is literally no way I can hang around with Imogen for six days, so that needs to be said upfront. Along with some kind of excuse, of course.

Right, here goes.

“I, um, I’ve brought some homework with me actually.” I put on my serious face, as if I’m telling the whole truth and nothing but the truth. “It’s a project I have to do for school. I’ll be busy with that for a lot of the time, so I won’t give you any trouble.”

“That’s perfect,” says Auntie Liz. “We’ve both got lots of work to do too, so we’ll all be occupied during the daytime, and then in the evenings we can come together for dinner and games – sound like a plan?” She touches the corners of her mouth with the tip of her little finger, dabbing up biscuit crumbs. Should I do that, while I’m here? I prefer my usual shirt-sleeve method.

“A wonderful plan!” booms Uncle Pete.

I take a bite of Hobnob. The last thing I want to do with my evenings is play board games with Imogen, but it looks like I’m not going to get much choice.

“So, what’s this school project about then?” says Uncle Pete.

“What’s it about?” I glance around the room,

searching for school-project topic ideas. “Um ... it’s ... err...” Anything will do, *anything*. “It’s on ... er...” My eyes settle on a picture over the fireplace – the big house, Stillness Hall. “It’s on *houses*.”

“What sort of houses?” says Aunt Liz.

“Oh, you know, all sorts.” Why are they asking so many questions? “Houses through the ages. Old houses, new houses; all the houses. And I’ve barely even started it so I really am going to have to spend a lot of time focusing on—”

“Well, you’re certainly in the right place!” Uncle Pete sprays a few biscuit crumbs out in his excitement. “We can help you with that, can’t we, Liz? There are plenty of fascinating homes around here. There’s Stillness Hall, for a start. We call it the big house, as you know. Bits of it are almost four hundred years old. And the smaller houses like ours are part of its country estate – where the staff used to live, back in the old days. Oh, the things I could tell you about the buildings around here. This is going to be so much fun!”

I stuff the rest of my chocolate Hobnob into my mouth all in one go. I’m definitely going to need more biscuits.

Bing-bong.

“Door!” Uncle Pete jumps up from his chair and lopes to the front door.

Phew. Saved by the bell.

“Cecily!” he says. “Come on in. Cup of tea?”

“Thank you very much, Peter, that would be delightful. I’ll slip my wellingtons off.”

There’s a dull thud of boots falling on to the front step, then Uncle Pete ushers a tall woman into the house. She looks like she’s carrying half the contents of a fruit and veg aisle.

“How lovely to see you both.” The woman smiles over the top of her overflowing wooden crate. She’s wearing glasses that are perfectly round but they’re balanced all wonky on her face, and her hair is totally flat on one side but sticking right out on the other. She gives the distinct impression of being a person who never ever *ever* looks in a mirror. I have a feeling I might like this *Cecily*.

“I’ve brought you rhubarb,” she says, “and green beans and radishes and – oh.” Seeing me, she stops mid-sentence. “You have a guest.”

“Yes,” says Aunt Liz. “This is our niece, Francesca.”

“It’s just *Fran*,” I say.

“She’s staying with us all week,” adds Uncle Pete, proudly. “Fran, this is Cecily. She’s the big cheese up at the big house now. The new owner of Stillness Hall.” Uncle Pete gives her a playful pat on the back, but Cecily’s smile has well and truly gone.

She stares at me. “It’ll be Ms Quincey to you.”

Oh.

Right.

“OK ... Ms Quincey,” I say.

“Um...” Auntie Liz looks as surprised as me. She gives me a quick reassuring smile. “Fran’s doing a project, Cecily. On houses. We wondered if she might be able to have a little tour of Stillness Hall sometime. Not the whole house, of course, we know it’s a work-in-progress, but—”

“That won’t be possible,” says Ms Quincey.

“Right...” says Uncle Pete. “OK ... well ... that’s your prerogative, of course.” He pulls a *what’s-going-on* face at Auntie Liz, who does a *how-do-I-know* shrug in return. “How about that cup of tea, then?” he says.

“Actually, I don’t have time, thank you.” Ms Quincey shoves the crate into Uncle Pete’s arms. “Francesca,” – she looks me straight in the eye – “I want you to keep away from my house, and especially my garden. Do you understand?”

Is she for real?

Is this the same person who walked into the house a moment ago talking about rhubarb?

I nod. What else am I supposed to do?

“I don’t want to have to ask twice,” she says.

What on earth have I done wrong? I only met her two minutes ago. Her wonky glasses and uneven hair are looking less appealing by the second.

“I’m sure you won’t have to do that.” Auntie Liz scoots along the sofa to me and gives me a rub on the back. “You’ve made it very clear.”

Gosh, what a fun week this is shaping up to be.

Every day spent avoiding Ms Quincey; every evening spent playing games with Imogen. I check my watch. Is it still possible Mum might have missed her plane?

“I’d better go.” Ms Quincey gives us all a sharp nod. “Goodbye Peter, Liz. Goodbye Francesca.”

“Hang on, you’ll want your box back,” says Auntie Liz.

“I’ll get it another time.” Ms Quincey is already outside. She pulls the door shut behind her.

The three of us listen as she fumbles with her boots.

“Good heavens.” Uncle Pete puts the crate down on the worktop. “Sorry about that Fran, love. Cecily’s usually very pleasant, especially to us. Always bringing us garden produce. She’s been recreating the kitchen garden they had up at the big house in Victorian times. Grows all kinds of things.”

“Yes,” says Auntie Liz, “although I do wish she’d pay a little more attention to the house. It’s falling apart. Oh, d’you know, I just remembered – I *did* hear something about her not liking children much. Some people were talking about it at the shop. How strange.”

“You’ll want to stay away from that garden up there anyway, even if she hadn’t warned you off,” says Uncle Pete with a wink. “You know what they say about it.”

“Oh, don’t joke, Pete,” says Auntie Liz. “I’m so glad she abandoned those ridiculous plans to open it up. That place gives me the shivers.”

“What do they say about it?” I ask.

“Venture in and you’ll be turned to stone!” Uncle Pete puts on one of those voices you use when you tell spooky stories with a torch shining under your chin. “Or maybe you’ll be magicked off to an evil fairy land! Or eaten up by the very plants themselves! Or sucked into mysterious underground tunnels, never to return!”

“Oh, stop it, Pete,” says Auntie Liz. “You wouldn’t joke like that if you’d grown up here. Just keep your distance, Fran, and you’ll be fine. I’m sorry you had to put up with all that from Cecily – or should I say, *Ms Quincey*. She was rather rude to you, wasn’t she? Anyone want another cup of tea?”

“Yes please.” I pass over my empty cup. “What’s she like when Imogen’s here? Is she horrible to her too?”

“Imogen?” Auntie Liz carries the cups through to the kitchen. She puts them on the counter and picks up the kettle.

“Who’s Imogen?” says Uncle Pete.