THE STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE OF *Imogen Good*

Also by Kirsty Applebaum



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Kirsty Applebaum



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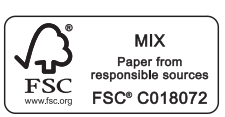
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THE STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE OF Imogen Good

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