



THE GARDEN OF STATUES



Once upon a time, there was a house at the edge of a town. It was a large house – far larger than the old couple who lived in it needed, but they had lived there since they were very young and saw no reason to leave.

As well as being large, the house was also surrounded on all sides by vast gardens – lawns and terraces, fountains and features, flowers and trees stretched out all around it. It was, the old couple knew, an ideal place for children to play, so they didn't mind the local children sneaking in through the gates or over the walls. In fact, they encouraged it. They loved to hear the sounds of youth, to see the children running and hiding and having fun.

The children had come to understand that the old man and woman who lived in the house were very happy for them to play there. The old couple never interfered with the children's games, but they would walk out on to the main terrace, which was close to the house, and leave there an

ornate silver tray laden with sweets. The children would help themselves to the sweets and, when they were all gone and the tray was empty, one of the children would carry it back to the house and rap loudly on the door with the heavy brass door knocker. The more nervous of the children would simply leave the silver tray by the door and run away; but the braver ones would wait to hand the tray to the old man or woman and say thank you. Then, all the children would wait and watch whoever had come to collect the tray return it to its place on a table in the drawing room; the table was close to one of the main windows, to the right of the front door.

But then, one day, there were no sweets.

One of the more courageous children, a boy called Tarmin, crept up to the house and peered through the drawing-room window. He could see the old woman sitting inside – she was all alone. She looked up and spotted Tarmin at the window. For a moment, she seemed surprised, then her expression slowly changed into a sad smile. She held Tarmin's gaze for several seconds before looking away again. Even from outside the window, Tarmin was sure she was crying.

A week later, the old woman was also gone.

In silence, the children watched a hearse drive slowly out through the gates in front of the house. Inside lay the old woman's body – the hearse was carrying her to be laid to rest with her husband.

Somehow it didn't seem right to play in the gardens without the old man and the old woman looking on. The children came to the gardens less and less, and the grounds of the house became overgrown and neglected.

A year after the old woman had died, some of the

children returned to the gates in front of the house. In the time since they had last played there, the house and its gardens had become a place to be avoided. Several children had gone to play in the gardens, and none of them had been seen since – it was as if they had vanished into the air.

'That's just stories,' one of the boys by the gate said.

His name was Hal. 'They probably moved away.'

Some of the others agreed, but many didn't.

'I wish we could play in there again,' a girl called Izmay said. 'Can't we sneak in and see if it's safe?'

'Do you want to go in there?' Hal asked. 'Alone?'

Izmay shivered at the thought.

'Didn't think so,' said Hal. 'You're scared.'

'Aren't you?' Izmay said.

'I'm too old to play in gardens,' Hal replied, dodging the question. In truth he was just as scared as any of them.

'Don't tease her,' Tarmin told Hal.

'I'll go,' Izmay said suddenly. 'Into the garden. Right up to the house. You may be scared, but I'm not.'

Tarmin looked at her. Izmay was one of his best friends. What if the stories were true? What if she never came back? He couldn't bear the thought of never seeing her again. So he said, 'I'll come with you.'

Hal sneered. 'I bet you won't. I bet you'll just climb over the wall, hide for a bit and then come back. You won't go up to the house at all.'

'Yes we will,' Izmay insisted. 'We'll prove it too.'

'How?' Hal demanded.

Izmay frowned. She had no idea – but Tarmin did. 'The silver tray the old man and woman used to put out

with sweets on it,' he said. 'It was always on the table in the drawing room, near the window.'

'What about it?' Hal asked.

'We'll go into the house and bring it back to show you,' Tarmin told him.

'That's right,' Izmay agreed. 'Then you'll know we've been right up to the house – right *inside* the house.'

'I suppose,' Hal said.

Hal said nothing more until Tarmin and Izmay were being helped by the other children to climb the wall. He watched them, biting his lip nervously even though he was not going over the wall himself. 'You're really going in there?' he asked at last.

Tarmin reached down from where he sat, perched on top of the high wall, and pulled Izmay up next to him. 'Of course we are.'

'You don't have to,' Hal said, speaking quickly. 'I was just teasing. It could be dangerous. What if something really did happen to the others in there? What if it happens to you?'

'Then I guess we won't be coming back,' Izmay told him.

'And if we don't come back,' Tarmin added, 'make sure no one else follows us – ever. All right?'

'All right,' Hal said. 'Good luck,' he added, as Tarmin grabbed hold of the branch of a tree and started to climb down into the garden. Like the children waiting on the other side of the wall, Tarmin thought that it would not be long before he and Izmay were clambering back over the wall, laughing with relief and brandishing the silver tray.

The gardens that they had once known so well were now barely recognisable. Just as they had done many times

in the past, Tarmin and Izmay climbed down the trees – but, instead of stepping down on to a clear patch of ground as they used to, they now found themselves standing in an overgrown tangle of grass and bracken.

They had climbed over the wall into a small wooded area that had once opened out on to a wide lawn of closely mown grass. Now, as they pushed their way through the damp vegetation, they discovered that the grass was up to their knees; it brushed against their legs as they walked, cold and wet. They could see the house in the distance. It rose up above them on the terrace but, while it used to look friendly and inviting, it now seemed dark and forbidding.

Beyond the overgrown lawn was a formal garden with a fountain at the centre. As they reached it, Tarmin and Izmay stared at the unruly flower beds, the weeds spilling out across the narrow stone pathways. The fountain – which had once gushed clear, fresh, gurgling water – was now silent and dry. Its plinth was weathered and chipped.

'It's so sad seeing it all like this,' Izmay said. 'I wish we hadn't come.'

Tarmin agreed. 'Do you want to go back?' he asked.

Izmay shook her head. 'No. We should finish what we started. Let's get to the house, find the tray and then get out of here.'

The two children followed the path through the formal garden. As they reached the end of the path they noticed something beneath the canopy of a willow tree. There, hidden under the branches which dipped low and cast deep shadows, stood a dark figure.

Izmay gasped and clutched at Tarmin's arm. Tentatively

they stepped closer . . . and saw it was just a statue.

‘I don’t remember that being here before,’ Tarmin said.

The statue was made of stone that was as weathered as the fountain had been; moss and lichen encrusted its lower half. The statue was an angel with her wings drawn up behind her. She held her face buried in her hands, as if she was weeping.

‘Perhaps she’s sad to see what’s happened to the gardens,’ Izmay said.

The two children continued on past the angel, and Tarmin turned to watch her as they went. *There is something unsettling about that angel*, he thought – but then he reminded himself that it was just a statue. He shook his head, trying to dismiss his own nervousness.

As they reached the end of the formal garden, Izmay took Tarmin’s hand. Together, they started up the steps to the main terrace. When they were near the top, Tarmin looked back one more time. He could still see the statue beneath the tree – from here, it was barely more than a silhouette – but, instead of crying into her hands, the angel had looked up. She was staring at Tarmin and Izmay.

Tarmin hesitated, his foot frozen between steps – but then Izmay tugged at his hand, and he turned away. *It’s just your imagination*, he told himself. *Imagination and fear. It’s nothing more than a statue.*

Tarmin and Izmay reached the top of the steps, and discovered several more of the stone angels on the terrace. The statues seemed to have been positioned haphazardly, without any thought for how they might look. One was weeping into her hands, and another stared through blank



eyes across the terrace at the children. A third was barely more than a shadow in an alcove, while a fourth reached out towards them.

‘This is strange,’ Izmay said. ‘Who put all these statues here?’

‘Not just here,’ Tarmin told her. He pointed out across the gardens. From where they stood on the raised terrace, they had a good view across the overgrown lawn and the formal garden – they could see right across to the wooded area in one direction and the lake in the other. Even from this distance, they could tell that the surface of the once-clear lake was a mass of algae and matted weeds. Dotted amongst the tall grass, in the shadows of the trees and around the edge of the lake, there were more of the angel statues.

‘There are so many of them,’ Izmay said. She shivered even though it was not an especially cold day. ‘Do you find them frightening?’

Tarmin nodded. ‘Let’s see if we can find a way inside. We need to get the silver tray and leave.’

They turned back towards the house.

The statues on the terrace behind them had moved. There was no doubt about it this time. The angel that had been weeping was now staring up at them; the one in the shadows of the alcove had moved forward into brilliant sunshine; and the angel that had been reaching out towards them had shifted from where it had stood on the other side of the terrace. Now, it was right in front of them.

Izmay gasped, and drew her hand to her mouth. Tarmin grabbed her other hand and pulled her after him. They skirted round the statues, keeping well clear of them, and ran

towards the main door to the house. Tarmin did not look back until they reached the door; when he did, the angels had turned again – all of them were now staring blankly at Tarmin and Izmay.

Izmay was already pushing open the door – by some miracle, it was not locked. The two children almost fell over the threshold and Tarmin slammed the door shut behind them.

‘Those statues –’ Izmay gasped.

‘If they are statues,’ Tarmin said.

‘They can *move*.’

Tarmin nodded. Izmay was right, but it was odd that they had not actually seen the statues move. ‘It’s like they only move when we’re not looking,’ he said.

‘I –’ Izmay bit her lip. ‘I don’t like it.’

‘Nor do I,’ Tarmin admitted. ‘We just need to find the tray, then we run back to the wall – as fast as we can.’

Izmay agreed. ‘Which way, do you think?’ she said.

Neither of them had ever been inside the house before. They were in an entrance hall which had several doors leading off it and ended in a wide flight of stairs that rose to the upper floor. Tarmin pointed to a door on the right. ‘That must be the drawing room,’ he said. ‘The table they always put the tray on was by the window on that side of the front door.’

They eased the door open. The room was lit only by the light that filtered through the grimy windows. Dust hung in the air like a thin mist, and rose in small clouds when they trod on the carpet. As they entered the room, a weak beam of sunlight gleamed on the tarnished silver of the tray – it was

lying on a table close to the nearest window.

‘There it is!’ Izmay dashed across to the table. She reached out for the tray – and screamed.

Tarmin was at her side in a moment, following her horrified gaze.

There, at the window, was a face. Pressed close against the glass, the face of an angel looked in at them. Its mouth was open wide, revealing long, sharp teeth, and the face itself was contorted in an expression that was a combination of anger, hunger and a snarl of triumph.

‘Come on,’ Tarmin urged. He grabbed the tray.

As one, the children backed away from the window, keeping their eyes fixed on the grotesque face staring back at them. Only when he finally turned did Tarmin see the danger – hidden behind the door through which they had entered the room was another statue. Another angel. Izmay, who was still backing away from the face at the window, had not seen it.

The statue behind the door had its hand stretched out, reaching for Izmay. Tarmin yelled a warning and Izmay began to turn.

Something cracked against the window, and Tarmin glanced away – just for a moment, the blink of an eye – but, when he turned back to the doorway, Izmay was gone.

The angel stared back at Tarmin, impassive, silent, still.

‘Where is she?’ Tarmin yelled at the statue. ‘What have you done with her?’

Of course, the statue did not reply.

When Tarmin called out to her, Izmay looked round in surprise – but Tarmin was gone. And that wasn’t the only

thing that had changed.

Izmay was still in the same place, standing close to the drawing-room door, but everything was different – the furniture looked newer, the carpet less threadbare. Where just moments ago there had been dust and grime, now everything was sparkling and clean. The sun shone bright and unhindered through the clear glass of the windows.

‘Tarmin!’ Izmay called. ‘Tarmin, where are you?’

A figure appeared in the doorway in front of her.

It was not Tarmin.

Tarmin pushed past the statue and out into the hall. He couldn’t fathom how Izmay could have made her way through the door and out of the room in the fleeting moment that he had looked away from her – but where else could she be?

A sound – the slightest scrape of stone on wood – made him look back. The statue that had been in the drawing-room doorway was now right behind him, reaching out, its face twisted into a ferocious snarl. Tarmin jumped backwards.

Just for an instant, he felt the stone-cold touch of something grasping his shoulder.

Then, the world changed.

The dust vanished from the floor and the dirt disappeared from the windows. In the blink of an eye, everything in the house was gleaming and well cared for.

And, in front of Tarmin, stood Izmay. Beside her was an elderly man, who nodded and smiled as if he understood everything.

‘Tarmin – you’re here!’ Izmay said, running over to

enfold him in a tight hug.

‘Where else would I be?’ he said, hugging her back. In truth, however, Tarmin was not entirely sure he knew where he was any more.

The old man led them back into the drawing room – it was so similar and yet so different to how it had been just moments ago. Through the windows, Tarmin and Izmay could see the gardens. They were no longer overgrown and neglected, but cared for and in good order. The grass was cut, the borders edged and there was no sign of any angel statues.

‘It will take you a while to adjust,’ the old man told them. ‘It did me.’

Living inside the large house and looking out, rather than playing outside and occasionally looking in, did indeed take some time to get used to – but, gradually, Tarmin and Izmay became accustomed to it. They enjoyed each other’s company, and they liked the old man, who so generously let them stay.

Though they never quite understood what had happened to the angels or how they had found themselves here, they were happy enough – which was fortunate because, not knowing how they had come to be in their present situation, they were not able to discover how to get back. There was nowhere else for them to go.

They would never learn how long the other children had waited for them on the other side of the garden wall. All they could do was hope that they had not been followed.

Slowly but surely the days became weeks, which in turn stretched into months and years. Tarmin grew into a handsome man, and Izmay a beautiful woman. When the

creeping years finally claimed the old man, it seemed the most natural thing for the two friends to stay in the house. They continued to look after it and to care for the gardens they had loved to play in when they were young.

As they grew old together, Tarmin and Izmay didn’t mind the local children sneaking in through the gates or over the walls to play in the gardens – in fact, they encouraged it. They loved to hear the sound of youth, to see the children running and hiding and having fun, just as they had once done.

It seemed to them there was only one thing missing. They hunted through the house, checking every cupboard and drawer, until one day Izmay found the ornate silver tray. She took it to Tarmin, and he agreed that it was perfect.

The next day, when the children came to play, Izmay and Tarmin covered the tray with sweets. Then, together, they walked out on to the terrace and, knowing the children were watching from behind the fountains and hidden among the trees, they left the tray on the ground.

They knew that once the children had eaten all the sweets there would be a knock at the front door. Then, when either Tarmin or Izmay answered it, one of the braver children might be waiting for them, ready to say thank you. Or there might just be the ornate silver tray, left on the ground close to the door.