

Garden Design

For the first time in many, many years, Olive had been able to spend Christmas without worrying about what Amelia was going to steal from her next. Now the year was drawing to a close, and it was her last day at Bramleys. She permitted herself a little smile as she teased the soft cotton gloves onto her arthritic fingers and unlatched the back door.

Weeks of incessant rain had given way to what the weatherman called “a ridge of high pressure”. The nights had become ice-bound, the days lost in ethereal fogs. This morning Amelia’s garden looked like another world: brilliant white crystals hung from every arched stem, powdery frost clung to herbaceous skeletons in encrusted borders, and every path was rimed with ice. Olive gripped her stick and set off carefully down the path.

Amelia had always stolen from her; that was the way of things. It had begun one Christmas long ago with Belle, a beautiful doll with three freckles on each cheek and smiling lips; a present from their grandfather. Amelia had said nothing, but Olive knew she was watching. Then Belle went missing, and Olive, desolated, had searched and searched through the great house. Weeks went by, and when in the end she had given up, Amelia had appeared with an identical doll which she said was hers. They had argued and fought, but their mother had said, ‘Let your sister have it, dear. We’ll never hear the end of it otherwise.’

Olive stopped and breathed in deeply, feeling the cold air in her lungs. Close at hand were statuettes of nymphs and fairies, sad and grey, in cold metal glazed with ice. There on the left was a bower, and further away was the pond, its waters merging with the fog. Cobwebs still lingered in places, sagging under the weight of the frost. Once this had been a happy, sunny place; a big untidy lawn with scattered trees and patches of weeds, yet full of such promise. But Amelia had been a garden designer, and now it was all formal beds, straight paths and espaliers. ‘Structure, my dear,’ Amelia would say. ‘Structure’s what it’s all about.’ Structure, and stealing things, Olive could have added.

Perhaps it was because she was thinking of her that, as Olive stopped to examine the bird bath, she saw not her own face but Amelia’s, reflected in the ice. It looked out at her as of old, beautiful, half-mocking. She looked again, but now there was nothing there. Instead of showing faces, the ice appeared cloudy and fractured. With the hook of her stick she broke it, for the birds.

What else? Yes, there had been that lovely party dress. Olive had always been her father’s favourite, Amelia her mother’s. But her father lay with a white cross at Arromanches, and her Uncle James had tried to make amends by bringing Olive presents. He’d brought her the dress for a party – almost a “coming-out” party in the old fashioned sense, for Olive was seventeen. She’d loved its delicate pink colour, its silky feel against her calves, and the way it moved and swayed as she walked. But on the night of the party, Amelia had appeared wearing it, and another battle was lost. Her mother said, ‘Why can’t you two agree on anything? Let’s have no fighting. After all, we are family...’

She found she was gripping the head of her stick tightly, and tried to relax. Amelia's dead now, she told herself. There'll be no more stealing. It's over. Shivering, she continued down the path. The cold was making its way into her bones, as it must for somebody of her years. Then, she was startled to hear a soft footfall away to her right, amongst the rose beds. She turned – carefully, so as not to slip – but nobody was there. Lewis was indoors, Olive knew. 'Lewis? Are you there?' she called, but the garden remained silent, all of its sounds muffled in the fog.

It had been at another dance that Amelia had taken the fair-haired boy from her. She couldn't remember his name now, but they'd made friends in the few dances they'd had together. She loved his chuckle, and the crooked tooth in his smile. He danced well, too. But Amelia had moved in. He made to offer her a cigarette, and Olive had watched her sister as she made sure the boy's hand brushed against her breast. She saw him blush, and she knew he was caught. She'd lost him too.

He was to be the first of Amelia's many husbands. She'd been on her fourth by the time Olive had met Michael, loved him and married him. She and Michael had understood so much about each other; they'd known each other more deeply than Olive had ever thought possible. It had been the happiest time of her life. And then, inevitably, just as Olive was expecting Lewis, Amelia came for a visit. Michael had wanted the garden "sorting out" for so long that Olive overcame her misgivings and allowed Amelia to come. Perhaps if her pregnancy hadn't been so difficult, she could have kept a better eye on them. But as it was, all she could do was despise them, as she lay on her bed that long hot Summer and listened to their laughter among the flowers. They say that summer-houses have secrets; but it was no secret what had happened in this one. In the end Amelia had moved in, and Olive had left them, taking Lewis far away. At least she'd never let Amelia have her son. Michael had lived two years more, slowly dying of grief at what he'd done.

Before she'd stolen him away, Amelia had said, as they sat on the terrace one afternoon, 'You hate me, don't you?'

Olive had said nothing, trying to fix her gaze on the newly-dug borders before her.

'I know you do,' Amelia had continued. 'But you must try to live with it, Livvy dear. We'll always be together, you and I. We'll never be apart for long. You must make the best of it.'

Olive withdrew her gaze from the summer-house, now crippled by dry rot. Here was the pond, surrounded by a low wall, a foot high and broad enough to sit on; or to kneel. You could kneel on the edge, to clear out the blanket weed in the summer; or you could kneel and beg forgiveness. On the other side of the path was what Amelia had called "the Totem", a lopsided stone column eight feet high with heathen carvings of faces, of death and lovers. A Russian vine had all but covered it, and now it crouched in a tight network of twisted stems on three sides. On the side facing the path, someone had taken a hedge trimmer and brutally cleared the stems away. Olive looked at it towering over her, leering at her. 'You're gone now,' she said out loud. 'You can't touch me.'

What was that? Out of the corner of her eye she caught a movement. Was it just a thickening of the mist, or something else? Was that someone's shape she could see, a familiar

shape? No, it was gone. 'Who's there?' she called. In answer, an eddy of wind rose up beyond the herb garden, spinning dry leaves around and about. Olive frowned. Despite what she could see, she could feel no movement in the air, no breath on her face. She looked around, carefully. The house could no longer be seen, and only the drunken outline of the summer house remained, like a memory.

It had happened last Summer, when the sun beat down and Amelia stalked her garden in a wide-brimmed hat, wielding her secateurs like an avenging harpy. She'd always had more energy than Olive, and Olive had sat placidly on this very bench, by the Totem, looking at the pond-skaters and dragonflies dancing over the pond, like courting couples. Amelia had come with her net, to clear the blanket-weed, and had knelt on the wall.

'There now,' she'd said, 'that should let the lilies breathe better. Just need to get that bit out... By the way, Livvy dear, I thought I'd take Lewis with me to Paris when I go next month. Poor man, he doesn't get out much for a fellow who's nearly forty. I can show him the sights, get him out of his shell a bit...'

A kind of mist had enveloped Olive then. No, not Lewis! Not this time! She knew exactly what she was doing, but it was as if she was detached from the world, moving in her own cocoon. It wasn't just to save Lewis; it was for Michael, for the fair-haired boy, for Belle... Amelia had her back to her, her backside raised as she reached across the pond, and Olive had pushed. Amelia had given a choking cry as the net slipped from her hands, before Olive had gripped her ankles and lifted, so that her sister's head was held beneath the surface. The pond wasn't deep, but Amelia had no way of struggling free. The breath had been knocked out of her, and it hadn't taken long for her to stop writhing and become still. Her arms had floated wide, as if in supplication. 'Oh,' Olive had cried for the benefit of anyone within earshot, 'Oh, Amelia! Amelia!' and had dragged her out, scraping her once-beautiful face on the stone edging. Too late, of course. Then, people had whispered when they saw Olive. 'So tragic... Lost her sister just last Summer... Tried to save her... Must be heartbroken...'

She rose from the bench, a half-smile creasing her lips. Yes, Amelia was gone, gone for good. Then she turned. There was definitely someone behind the Totem, and she tried to circle behind it. The grass crackled under her feet, but again, she could see no-one. Gingerly, she returned to the path, and again she faced the pond. 'You're gone now,' she said, defiantly. 'You're gone, and you can't touch me any more.'

Then she heard a voice behind her. 'Livvy,' it said, quite clearly and unmistakably. Was there a note of amusement there?

Olive turned too quickly, and felt her feet sliding on the frost. Then, with a crack and a groan, the Totem leaned over her, propelled by the mass of creeper behind. It fell, knocking her back over the parapet of the pond. She felt the heavy stone abrading her face, crushing her nose and glasses; she felt the ice momentarily supporting her before it cracked. As she fell slowly into the freezing water, she thought she heard someone saying, 'We'll never be apart for long...'