



## THIRTY YEARS AGO

The yacht was as grand and as white as a wedding cake and it was named *Everlasting*. Every inch of it had been polished, from the great, gleaming hull down to the last brass button on the uniform of the three crewmen standing in line on deck. The anchor had been lifted and the vessel was ready for departure. But first there was a picture to be taken.

When you are as rich and as good-looking as the Fitzjohn family was, there is always someone who wants to take your picture.

The photographer from the society pages of the newspaper had arranged the Fitzjohns on the dock with their yacht in the

background. Or rather, he had *suggested* they pose that way, his smile ingratiating because after all, it was they who were doing him the favor.

There they stood under the bluest of all blue skies. Mrs. Fitzjohn, her lovely face smiling under a large-brimmed, fashionable hat, and Mr. Fitzjohn, tanned and gallant in his navy blazer, gazing fondly at his wife. In front of them, their children, Marcus and Caroline. At seventeen, Marcus was almost as tall as his father and just as handsome. Caroline was six. She was holding a doll. The doll was also called Caroline. It had been handmade in Switzerland especially for her. It had the same color hair and eyes as her and was wearing the same yellow cotton dress that Caroline herself was wearing.

“Wonderful . . . lovely . . . ” the photographer said automatically as he fiddled with his camera. “Won’t take a minute!” But then he looked—really *looked*—at them and the breath suddenly caught in his throat.

It seemed that the Fitzjohns were shining almost as brightly as the sunlight on the water of the bay. It wasn’t just their wealth, the fact that along with the fabulous yacht, they owned a fleet of cars and a beautiful mansion called Brightwood Hall. Nor was it merely their good looks and glamour. Plenty of celebrities had these qualities, as he well knew.

No, he thought. It was happiness they shone with. The photog-

rapher had witnessed too many fake smiles and phony jollity not to recognize the real thing when he saw it. In that moment—that perfect moment—he thought the Fitzjohns looked like the happiest people in the entire world.

He sighed. The camera clicked.

“All done, Mr. Fitzjohn! Hope you have a great day on the water!”

Caroline Fitzjohn trotted after the others as they went on board. Daddy and Marcus would go straight to the pilot’s deck like they always did, but Mummy had said there were cookies for her in the main cabin.

“We shall have tea!” she had said. “You and I and Dolly Caroline. Would you like that?”

Caroline thought she would like it very much, but now Mummy had disappeared somewhere. Perhaps she had gone to the pilot’s deck after all, or perhaps she was in the bathroom.

Caroline stood in the main cabin waiting for her mother to come back and feeling lonely. But of course she wasn’t really alone. She had Dolly Caroline with her. She stroked the doll’s hair and straightened her dress.

“Oh, *Caroline*,” she said out loud. “You lost your shoe!”

For a moment, she thought of calling out to her mother. Then she remembered that she was six years old. Six was old enough to look after her own things. Besides, she’d already

realized where the shoe must have fallen off. She had been playing on a little bench by the dock, making Dolly Caroline walk up and down the wooden seat while the others got ready for the trip. The bench wasn't far away. She could see it through the cabin window.

It took only a minute to slip off the boat and run down the gangplank. And then she was on her hands and knees looking under the bench for the shoe. She couldn't see it anywhere and then there it was, a scrap of yellow leather wedged between the wall and the back of the bench. Caroline climbed onto the seat and reached down as far as her arm would go. She could feel the shoe! She scissored her fingers and tried to snag it, fearful that she would wedge it down even more. But she had a grip on it now, one finger hooked in the tiny laces. She was pulling it to safety.

Something made her look up. A premonition.

For a second, she saw only the empty space where the *Everlasting* had been. Then her gaze lifted and she saw the yacht out in the bay. It was moving fast; there was white water behind it, and the flag on its topmost mast was flattened to a sheet. Caroline ran to the edge of the dock.

The yacht was flying away. Two hundred yards, now three. She held Dolly Caroline tight to her chest and watched it go.

They had left without her. They hadn't known.

The driver, Mr. Hadley, came to pick her up. Her grand-

mother, who had stayed behind at home, would look after her for the day. Her family would be back that afternoon. It was only a day trip, so she wouldn't have missed much. Someone would radio the yacht to tell them she was safe. Mr. Hadley explained all this in a kind voice as he drove the twenty or so miles back to Brightwood Hall.

Caroline sat in the back of the big car, gazing out the window. She had always loved the sea but now it suddenly seemed a featureless, unfriendly place. And there, far away, in the middle of the emptiness, looking no larger than a glittering brooch pinned to the very edge of the horizon, she saw the *Everlasting*. She pressed her hand to the window, staring desperately. There was a bend in the road and then the yacht was gone.

"You'll take plenty of other trips," Mr. Hadley said. His voice was kinder than ever. "It's still only the start of summer."

But there were no more trips.

Mummy and Daddy and Marcus didn't come back in the afternoon, and although Caroline sat at the top of the great staircase, waiting for them, they kept not coming back. The shadows on the marble floor of the hallway below stretched farther and farther away. The phone rang. She heard her grandmother's voice. "Hello?" and a long silence. Then there was a knock at the door, and suddenly the hallway was filled with people in dark blue uniforms. Caroline couldn't hear what they were talking

about. Her grandmother was clutching the front of her white ruffled shirt, pulling it tighter and tighter. Across the hallway, she saw Maggie, the housekeeper. Maggie was a stout, dignified woman who didn't look as if she had ever run in her life. Now she was running.

Somebody made a wailing sound and Caroline heard crying from the kitchen.

Her cousin, James, who was staying with them for the summer, like he always did, came down the corridor behind her. He had been in his room all day, feeling ill.

"I don't know what's happening," Caroline said, her voice trembling. "What's happening?"

But James walked straight past her.

Later, Caroline's grandmother sat with her on the sofa in the blue drawing room and told her that Mummy and Daddy and Marcus were never coming back. And the three crew members who had been working on the *Everlasting* weren't coming back either. There had been an accident, a terrible accident.

Caroline found it hard to make out exactly what her grandmother was saying. Her voice was so whispery and she kept breaking off to cry, and kiss Caroline, and press Caroline's face against her ruffled shirt.

It wasn't until the next day that she fully understood what had happened. Someone had left a copy of the newspaper lying

on the table by the front door. The photographer's picture had been made large and filled almost the whole of the front page. There were words above it, written in thick black letters almost as big as Caroline's hand:

## **TRAGEDY AT SEA—**

### *FITZJOHN FAMILY LOST!*

The massive explosion yesterday on board the Fitzjohn family yacht is believed to have been caused by engine failure. There are no survivors.

And there they all were: Mummy and Daddy and Marcus and herself. And there was the *Everlasting* with her crew on deck. And there too was Dolly Caroline—she could see clearly because the picture was so big—wearing only one little yellow shoe.

That afternoon, Caroline felt strangely restless. She left her grandmother's side and wandered around the house by herself, collecting things. She didn't know why she did it, only that she felt she must. On the floor in the blue drawing room, she found her grandmother's handkerchief. It was pale pink and covered with dark smudges that Caroline thought might be makeup. She picked it up and put it in her pocket. In the kitchen, she tore off the top from the box of cereal she'd had for breakfast and put that in her pocket as well. She added a pretty plastic bracelet that

she happened to be wearing. Then she went to her bedroom, fetched an empty shoe box from her closet, and placed all the items inside.

Last, she took Dolly Caroline off her bed and put her in the box, arranging her carefully so that her hair wouldn't get mussed. She put the lid on the box and slid it underneath her bed, where it was dark and safe.

Caroline Fitzjohn had decided that she was never going to lose anything ever again.

DAY ONE





## ONE

**I**t wasn't the screaming—it was the sound of the car in the driveway that woke her up.

Daisy was used to the screaming. It came from the peacocks that had gone wild years ago. They always made a lot of noise just before dawn.

She sat up, confused. Her mum hadn't told her she was going out. She always went to the bulk-buy store on Wednesday but today was Monday. Her mum had described the place to Daisy, the size of it and how it was crammed from floor to ceiling with provisions. Daisy thought it sounded a lot like their basement here at Brightwood Hall.

Daisy listened as the sound of the car grew fainter and fainter and then disappeared. She curled back under the covers and closed her eyes. Wherever she was going, her mum would be back by eleven o'clock. She was never late.

When Daisy woke up again, the sun was high in the sky. Daisy's bedroom was on the second floor, at the front west corner of the main house. One window gave her a view of the lake and the grounds on the western side. From the other, she could see a good part of the front of the house, including the stone balcony above the main entrance and the two urns—one that had fallen over, one still on its pedestal—to her left and right. Beyond the entrance was the long stretch of driveway. It was gravel, although the gravel was mottled with patches of weed and grass. From this distance, Daisy thought the driveway looked as if it were covered with fur. Like the speckled coat of a great snow leopard, wrapped around the house.

The driveway curved away across the lawn towards the entrance gates a quarter of a mile away. But *lawn* was the wrong word for it. Daisy and her mum could manage to keep the grass short only close to the house. The rest of it was more like a meadow, waist high in places and dense with wildflowers. It spread almost all the way to the perimeter wall, interrupted by huge trees—oak and cedar—their trunks hidden in green shadow. The trees grew thicker down near the front gates, so thick you couldn't see the

road beyond, only the distant hills and the tiny spike of a church tower. Behind the hills, hidden from view, lay the ocean.

Daisy put on a T-shirt and shorts and went to get some breakfast. Directly outside her room was the Portrait Gallery, with pictures hanging on the wall on one side and a wooden banister on the other, with a view of the Marble Hall below. You could see only the tops of some pictures, while others—such as the painting of the General and the one of the Lady on Horseback—were clearly visible. Most, however, were hidden behind tall piles of books stacked on the floor.

Daisy stood on her tiptoes and looked at Little Charles through a gap between two piles of books. He was a recent discovery. Up until now, the only person in the Portrait Gallery that Daisy had spoken with was the Lady on Horseback. But the Lady was far too fierce and full of herself to spend time in idle chat, and it was a relief when Daisy found Little Charles instead. Not that there was much of him to see, just the top half of his body. His dark hair was cut in the shape of a pudding bowl, and there was a frilly white collar around his neck.

“Hey,” she said softly.

“Good morning,” Little Charles said.

“You okay?”

“Certainly not!” Little Charles said. “It’s fearfully cramped in here.”

Daisy moved the books carefully, widening the gap. The rest of Little Charles's body came into view.

"Oh!" Daisy cried. "You're wearing a dress!"

"I am *not*! My mother wears dresses. This is a *tunic*." He sounded extremely cross. "I could have you whipped for saying that."

"Well, you might have been able to in the olden days, but you can't now," Daisy said, pushing the books some more. Little Charles's hand appeared, clutching a wooden hoop.

"So that's what I've been holding on to!" he exclaimed. "I thought it was the back of a chair. My hoop! Isn't it the most marvelous thing?"

"It's lovely," she said, not wanting to hurt his feelings.

"I *may* let you borrow it," Little Charles said, a cunning note entering his voice. "If you made more space, I would. For sure."

"I'll try later," Daisy said. "I have to get breakfast now."

She walked past the General. She had always been frightened of his long, curled mustache and pale eyes, and over time, her fear had grown until she couldn't even look at him. Partly it was because the General had The Crazy. Her mum had told her that The Crazy wasn't something you could catch, but even so, it was best to be on the safe side. Daisy hurried along, averting her eyes.

At the top of the stairs, she paused. The grand staircase at Brightwood Hall was made of white marble, and it fanned out

as it descended, like the train of an evening gown. A strip of blue-velvet carpet ran down the middle of the stairs, which were kept free of all obstruction. Below, in the Marble Hall, it was different. The vast space was crowded from wall to wall with shelving units, all placed close together, forming a kind of maze. The units were more than twenty feet tall and filled with thousands and thousands of boxes, and the paths between them were extremely narrow. Even Daisy's mum, who was slim, had to turn sideways to make her way through.

Daisy didn't need to do that because she could climb so well. Although she was frightened of a great many things—storms, the dark, the picture of the General, the groaning noise the water pipes made when the weather grew cold—she had never been afraid to climb. She climbed like a monkey. Not quite as well as a monkey, perhaps, because she didn't have a tail, but almost as well because she didn't have to think about it. She swung herself up the nearest shelving unit and scuttled on hands and knees across the top shelf. At eleven years old, she was getting bigger and heavier, but there wasn't any danger of the shelves collapsing. They were made of steel and bolted to the floor.

When she got to the edge of the shelf, she leaped across to the next one, her braid bouncing against her back. Daisy's hair was long and thick and black. Her mum had the same hair; only hers was a beautiful silver color. Apart from that, they didn't look

alike at all. Daisy's mum was tall and long limbed and graceful. She moved slowly, as if she were afraid she might break. But Daisy was quick, her body strong and compact.

In the evenings, she undid her braid and her hair hung shining down to her waist. "You must never cut it," her mum often said as she brushed it. "It would break my heart."

Daisy's mum didn't like things to change. When one of the old cedar trees fell down in a storm the previous winter, she had cried for a whole afternoon.

Daisy jumped to the next shelf. Below her, in the center of the hall, there was a clearing amidst the ranks of shelves, right beneath the chandelier. She half ran, half crawled until she was close enough to the chandelier to touch it. It was the size of her mum's four-poster bed, and it had been installed when Brightwood Hall had been built, over two hundred and fifty years ago. It hung from a thick chain that looped around the wheel of a pulley attached to the ceiling and then curved away in a long line to another pulley bolted to the wall on the far side. Somewhere behind one of the shelving units, there was a handle you could turn to lower the chandelier to the ground to make repairs or to clean it. But it hadn't been cleaned in a long while, and its light, once dazzlingly brilliant, had softened behind a veil of dust.

Daisy never passed the chandelier without marveling at its beauty. If the corridors were the arteries of the house and the

walls were its bones and the ivy on the outside was its skin, then the chandelier was the heart of Brightwood Hall. It was both terribly heavy and terribly fragile, and it was made of ten thousand crystal tears.

She jumped from shelf to shelf until she reached the far-left corner of the hall, then she slipped to the ground and went down the passage along one side of the ballroom, squeezing through the gap between piled-up boxes, until she reached the kitchen at the back of the house. It wasn't Brightwood Hall's main kitchen, which had become full a while ago. It was a much smaller room, which her mum called "the old servants' kitchen." Daisy had always wondered why old servants needed a special kitchen, although she never asked.

There were a lot of things she wondered about but didn't ask.

Daisy liked the kitchen because you could move around in it easily. Her mum didn't keep anything in there unless it was needed to make or eat food. She was strict about that. It was the same in the bathrooms, which her mum insisted on keeping perfectly clean and empty.

Daisy fetched a bowl of cereal, whistling for Tar. The minute she dipped her spoon, he scampered up the table leg to join her, staring at the bowl expectantly, his oily eyes shining. Daisy waved him away.

"Wait on the floor. Just because our house is cluttered, it

doesn't mean it's dirty," Daisy told him, repeating something her mum often said. "You shouldn't be on the table."

Tar blinked rapidly a few times. "There's six stages of dirty in the world," he began. He was fond of making lists.

"First there's *grimy*. Not much to grimy, just dust and skin cells and the like. Next up is *grubby*—stains and smudges, that sort of thing. One stage further, and now you're talking *greasy*, closely followed by *grotty*, which is a nice, rich stage, layers of filth one on top of the other . . ."

Daisy was only half listening. She was thinking that Tar was one of her better names, not only because Tar was completely black, but also because it was *rat* spelled backwards. He sat up on his hind legs with his paws clasped eagerly together.

"After *grotty* comes *gross*, a stage of dirty that's hard to come by. Takes years of development. True grossness is a thing of wonder."

"What's the sixth stage?" Daisy asked.

Tar's eyes closed for a second. His paws became still.

"*Gagging*," he said in a hushed voice. "Only experienced it once in my life. I was a young rat. My mum took me down to the sewers as part of my education." He paused and drew in his breath. "Who knew there were such things in the world?"

"If you liked it so much, why don't you go back there?"

"Something, something, something," Tar mumbled. He

always said that when he wouldn't—or couldn't—answer a question.

Daisy washed her spoon and bowl and wiped down the kitchen surfaces and put the box of cereal back in the cupboard. It was the last box there, so she went down to the basement and got another two boxes and noted in the log that there were now only nineteen left in the stores. It was nearly ten o'clock.

Daisy knew she should start her schoolwork, although she didn't want to. She decided to delay it by feeding the animals. She fetched some leftover lettuce, half a loaf of stale-ish bread, and a bag of birdseed, and slipped out of the kitchen into the sunshine. A lot of animals lived in the grounds of Brightwood Hall. Along with a multitude of birds, there were rabbits and hedgehogs and field mice and squirrels and a red fox that could be seen sometimes in the early morning, trotting down the overgrown pathways, its coat glistening with dew. Daisy loved them all and rarely went outside without a pair of binoculars around her neck to keep track of them.

She made her way to her favorite spot next to the glasshouse and spread the lettuce on the ground. It was early June and the animals could easily find their own food, but she never grew tired of seeing them. Sometimes the rabbits came so close they almost took the lettuce out of her hand.

Today, however, they didn't seem interested. Daisy scattered

the birdseed and bread, and was instantly surrounded by a flurry of wings and darting beaks. It was mostly sparrows and starlings this morning, although she noticed a couple of blackbirds among the throng. She flung the food in smaller and smaller handfuls until it was all gone.

“Don’t fly away,” she told the birds.

But they were off the instant the last crumb was eaten.

Her mum would be home soon. Daisy thought if she walked down the driveway to the front gates, she would probably meet her. She made her way back through the house to fetch the little wagon they used to pick up deliveries. When Daisy had been younger, too young to be left alone in the house, her mum had ordered everything using her phone, and there had been deliveries every single day. Now her mum went out to shop, but sometimes she bought too much to fit in the car and the rest had to be delivered. There was often a pile of boxes waiting by the gates.

Brightwood Hall was so large and it was so difficult—even for Daisy—to get around in it that it was almost a quarter to eleven before she got to the front entrance where the wagon was kept. She glanced up at the picture by the door. Her mum had painted it. She painted nearly every day, although she never seemed pleased by her work.

“It’s wrong,” she would say after finishing each painting. “I haven’t *caught* it.”

Daisy didn't know what her mum was trying to catch. She thought the paintings were wonderful. But her mum kept all of them in her bedroom, stacked up with their faces to the wall.

This was the only exception. It was a portrait of Daisy sitting in the meadow, with her lap full of flowers. Behind her was Brightwood Hall, with all its chimneys and decorative details outlined against the sky. The painting wasn't completely realistic, because her mum had painted the ocean in the distance even though you couldn't see it from the house in real life. A tiny glittering boat floated on the far horizon. If you peered hard enough, you could see something written on the side of it.

*The Everlasting.*

The word gave Daisy a strange, sad feeling. Her mum had lost almost her whole family in an accident on that boat.

But that was long ago. And her mum didn't think about it much, because she hardly ever mentioned it. Daisy turned her gaze to her mum's signature at the bottom of the painting:

*Caroline Fitzjohn.*

She would be home soon, Daisy thought as she went out the front door, pulling the wagon behind her. All the way down the drive, she expected to see her mum coming back, the big blue car loaded up with boxes of laundry soap and kitchen towels and tubs of coffee, with the little toy kitten that hung from the rearview mirror swaying to and fro. When Daisy was small,

that tiny plush kitten, with its gray fur and blue eyes, was her favorite toy. One day, in a fit of generosity, she'd wrapped it up in a bit of leftover Christmas wrapping paper and given it to her mum. Her mum hadn't asked her whether she was sure she wanted to part with it. But her mum knew the gift was a big deal. She had tied a blue ribbon around the kitten's waist and hung it from the mirror in her car. It always made Daisy smile to see the kitten as her mum's car came up the bumpy driveway towards the house.

There was no car today. Just the path and then the tall gates surrounded by trees. The gates were so finely wrought and so elaborately designed, they looked like sheets of lace. But they were made of iron and extremely strong. Tall pedestals stood on either side, with a stone lion on the top of each one. The lion on the left was called Regal and the one on the right was Royal. When they had been new, they had been identical, although time and the weather had changed their expressions. Now Regal appeared stern, almost angry. And there were dark markings on Royal's cheeks that looked like tears.

The lions always said the same thing.

"Beware!" Regal warned.

"Be careful!" Royal wept.

Daisy rested her hand on the padlock that held the gates shut and stared out into the road beyond. There was nothing to

see. She didn't open the gates and go outside because she wasn't allowed to. She was never allowed to.

She had been born in one of the dozens of bedrooms in Brightwood Hall. And in the whole of her life, she had never once set foot outside.



## TWO

There were two worlds in Daisy's life. There was the outside world and there was the world of Brightwood Hall. And only Brightwood Hall, with its labyrinth of rooms, its many animals, its ancient trees and secret corners, seemed quite real to her.

She could see the outside world. But it felt like a faraway place. Daisy knew there were towns and cities out there, rivers and mountains, millions of people living their lives, although she knew about them only from pictures in books and in stories she had read. She was curious, of course, and the older she got, the more questions she had. But the answers to the questions seemed as unreal as the outside world itself. Brightwood Hall was the

only place she had ever known or felt a part of. And now she stood at its gates, staring out like a fish in a pond might stare at the strange and distant bank.

She turned at last and started back towards the house.

*Maybe Mum forgot something at the store and had to go back.*

It was an obvious explanation. Her mum couldn't call the house and tell her because she didn't have a phone anymore. She had stopped using it about three years ago, around the same time that she got rid of the television. Daisy had been sorry when the television went. She had watched cartoons on it and shows about wild animals. Then her mum said they didn't need it any longer.

"It's easy to waste far too much time with things like that," her mum had said. "Television, phones, computers . . ."

"What are computers?" Daisy wanted to know.

Her mum didn't seem to hear the question. "People spend almost their whole lives looking at screens. They turn into strangers, like zombies."

Daisy thought this sounded frightening, although she still didn't know what it had to do with shows about wild animals. She didn't ask. Her mum looked away, her eyes distant, and Daisy could tell she didn't want to talk about it anymore.

She decided to get on with her schoolwork until her mum came back. Daisy wriggled and climbed her way across the Marble Hall and went into the ballroom. It was the second

largest room in Brightwood Hall, and it was crammed wall to wall with furniture that had been removed from the rest of the house to make space. Ornate plaster decorations covered the ceiling, and the sunlight fell in stripes through tall windows. You could see most of the eastern side of the grounds of Brightwood Hall from here: the walled gardens, the topiary, and a stretch of the Wilderness.

The furniture in the ballroom was covered with white dust-covers. Daisy thought the covers made everything look like a picture she had once seen of the Arctic. If she squinted, she could imagine that the tables and chairs were snowy peaks with long valleys, full of shadow.

The only thing not covered was a desk by the window. Daisy sat down and gathered up her books.

It was Monday, which meant she had history and then math, followed by English. Her mum taught her all the subjects and was very organized about it. They used books from the house's huge library. At the moment, they were learning about the Romans. Daisy liked the Romans. Their buildings reminded her of Brightwood Hall, with its four great columns at the entrance and the triangular pediment set high up on the front. She turned to the next chapter, which was all about gladiators, and spent half an hour reading and taking notes.

She wasn't nearly so interested in math. She opened the

textbook unwillingly and forced herself to concentrate. It was algebra. Her mum said most kids didn't study that until they were twelve or older, although that didn't mean much to Daisy. The whole idea of kids her age was a bit like algebra itself: hard to keep straight because there was nothing real attached to it. She sighed and tapped her pencil against the page.

Her mum usually helped her with the harder problems. Daisy glanced at her watch. It was nearly one o'clock.

*Maybe she got a flat tire and had to wait for it to be fixed.*

Daisy abandoned the last few problems and moved on to English. They were reading *Macbeth* by somebody named William Shakespeare. The words were hard and Daisy often felt confused. Normally, her mum spoke the lines out loud, explaining what the words meant as she went along. Sometimes she got up from her chair on the other side of the desk and paced slowly among the white shrouded furniture, her hands gesturing and her voice full of feeling.

But her mum wasn't here. Daisy stared hard at the page.

*"Confusion now hath made his . . . masterpiece,"* she ventured, her voice coming out in a whisper. *"Most sac . . . sac . . . sacrilegious . . ."*

The clock in the distant drawing room chimed. It was half past one already. She had heard the sound ten thousand times, but it had a different voice today. As if it were calling to remind her of the quietness of the house and how alone she was.

She considered going into the kitchen to see if Tar was around. He had been particularly talky that morning. That was because her mum wasn't there. Her mum didn't like it when she talked to animals and objects, although she had liked it when Daisy was small.

"What an imagination you have!" she used to say when Daisy gave the hedgehogs names or had a long conversation with a tree or with one of the many statues that dotted the grounds of Brightwood Hall. Daisy preferred talking to these things rather than to her dolls, all of whom were rather dull.

"All they do is drink tea and argue about who has the nicest hair," she complained. "And the biggest one, Janice, is so bossy. She thinks she's better than the others because she's the only one who's still got her knickers."

Her mum had laughed out loud. "It's amazing how you bring things to life!"

Daisy hadn't thought she brought things to life. She'd thought everything was already alive. Not just plants and animals, but also twigs and pebbles and stars and every last one of her toys.

A part of her still thought the same way. That everything had a secret life of its own, with its own thoughts and feelings. It was as if there were a gap—perhaps as narrow as a crack in the

path or as wide as the meadow itself—between what was real and what was not.

Her mum used to like her talking to things, but not any longer. Now it seemed to worry her.

Daisy turned her gaze to the many photographs and portraits that hung from the walls of the ballroom. They were mostly pictures of former Fitzjohns. Many had been great men and women in their time. There was Emily Fitzjohn, the famous campaigner for women's rights, and Talbot Fitzjohn, who had been ambassador to China, and Harry Herbert Fitzjohn, a champion swimmer. Daisy's favorite was the celebrated explorer Sir Clarence Fitzjohn, who had lived a hundred and fifty years ago. He had been knighted after his daring attempt to travel around the world in a hot-air balloon. The picture of Sir Clarence was in black and white. He was wearing a strangely shaped helmet and standing with one foot on the head of a tiger that he had just shot. Sir Clarence had mounted expeditions to the North Pole, Mount Everest, and Papua New Guinea, but he had spent most of his life searching the Amazon for the Lost City of Valcadia, which was said to be made entirely of silver. Nobody knew if Sir Clarence ever found the city, because he disappeared somewhere in the jungles of Brazil and was never heard from again.

Not all the Fitzjohns had been as admirable as Sir Clarence.

One had been hung for murder and another had been an infamous traitor. Several had been notorious for their cruelty. Like the General, they all had The Crazy.

“It runs through our family,” Daisy’s mum had explained.

“What is it?” Daisy wanted to know.

Her mum shook her head. “I don’t know for sure,” she said. “The people who have it are born different . . . wrong.”

“Don’t worry,” she’d added, seeing Daisy’s anxious face. “It hasn’t appeared for a long, long time.”

Daisy closed her book and placed it back on the desk. There was no point trying to go on with her schoolwork. She was far too distracted.

*Maybe Mum felt sleepy, so she stopped for a nap.*

But this explanation, like all the others, suddenly seemed thin and unconvincing. For the first time, Daisy wondered whether something else had happened to her mother.

Something bad.



## THREE

Daisy thought the best thing to do was to act as if nothing were wrong. If she treated the day as if it were perfectly normal, perhaps the day would realize it had made a mistake and go back to *being* normal.

In the afternoon, her mum usually set up her easel to paint, and Daisy played or worked on one of her animal projects. At the moment, she was studying the peacocks. When her mum had been a little girl, the peacocks of Brightwood Hall had been three pairs of standard Indian blues. Now there were more than a hundred birds and they were all different: blue blotched, black barred, mixtures of silver, bronze, and green. One was completely

white with an emerald crest, another brown and drab looking except for a cloak of gold over its shoulders. They lived in the Wilderness, a huge overgrown expanse on the northern side of the estate.

Daisy fetched her notebook and went down the path by the west wing, with the lake on her left and the statue of the Hunter directly ahead of her in a little circle where the path widened. She stopped when she got to him and reached up to touch his foot. The Hunter stared into the distance with one arm flung out and the other at his shoulder, reaching for his bow. He was leaning forward, one leg bent, the other lifted, as if he had just at that moment broken into a run. His face was smooth and beautiful.

“What do you see today?” Daisy asked him.

“Far horizons,” the Hunter said. “Strange shores.”

It was difficult getting any real information out of the Hunter because he was so poetic.

“When you say ‘strange,’” Daisy attempted, “do you mean strange as in weird, or do you just mean strange as in new to you? And where are you looking?”

“Forward, ever forward, beyond the mists of time . . .”

Daisy felt a bit sorry for the Hunter. He could never say anything directly. He could speak only in the grandest and most complicated language.

She carried on down the path and then through the bushes that fringed the Wilderness, retracing a route where the undergrowth had been pushed aside. There was a clearing where the peacocks liked to roost, high in the trees. Daisy sat down with her back against a tree trunk and made herself as still as she could.

In a little while, three of the birds made their way into the clearing: two females, pecking and peering, and a male with a greenish breast and white crest. Daisy made a note of the time and place in her book and then a description of their coloring.

For all their glory, they were lazy creatures. Their nests were just little holes they scraped in the earth, and they would rather run than fly. The fattest ones got eaten by the fox.

Daisy liked this area of the Wilderness because the Christmas tree was there. She glanced across at it now. The tree had grown faster than her. It was already twice her height. Last year, even her mum wasn't tall enough to fix the star on the top without a ladder. When the tree was decorated, it was a beautiful sight, all lit up among the dark trees. They scattered grain and dried fruit for the animals, and hung balls of seed so that birds would come and perch among the branches, as if they were Christmas decorations themselves.

“Are we the only people who have a Christmas tree?” Daisy had once asked.

“Oh no. Lots of people get them to put in the house.”

“The *house*? How do the animals get their treats?”

Her mum had smiled at that and squeezed her hand.

Back then, she could talk to her mum about anything. Her mum told her stories about when she was a little girl, when Brightwood Hall was full of people and laughter. The meadow was still a lawn then, the grass kept short by a dozen gardeners, and the Wilderness was a well-tended woodland, covered by bluebells in the spring.

In those days, her mum slept in a bedroom with a garden painted on the walls, and the rest of the house was equally beautiful. The Fitzjohn silver was always polished and the windows gleamed. There were parties, her mum said. Such parties! The women wore dresses all the way down to the ground and danced through the night in the ballroom.

“Where did they put all the covered-up furniture?”

“It wasn’t there. The ballroom was perfectly empty.”

“Did you wear a long dress? Did you dance too?”

“I wasn’t allowed to stay up so late . . . ”

But now that Daisy was older, her mum didn’t seem to like her asking so many questions. Sometimes when Daisy was talking, her mum’s face would change, and if Daisy didn’t stop, she would start to run the heel of her slender hand against her

forehead, over and over again. And whatever Daisy was talking about would lose all meaning, as if her mum were rubbing the words away.

It was much easier to keep quiet and talk instead to Little Charles or Tar or the peacocks.



## FOUR

It was long past lunchtime. But although Daisy was hungry, she walked back to the house as slowly as she could. The slower she walked, the longer she could hope that her mum had come back while Daisy had been in the Wilderness. On the way, she bargained.

*If she's back, I will never say anything that will make her rub her forehead. I will brush my teeth every day and not lie that I did it. I will stop picking the paint off the wall behind my bed . . .*

She went in by the front door, crossed the reception area—stacked high with unopened deliveries—and entered the Marble Hall.

“Mum?”

Daisy made her voice louder. *"Mum!"*

Nothing answered, not even an echo. She stood still for a second and then suddenly plunged into the maze of shelving, running as fast as she could up and down the narrow lanes, turning left and right, her eyes wide with searching, as if she could find her mum if only she looked hard enough. She stopped at last and pulled herself together.

She should make lunch. Lunch was normal.

Daisy went into the kitchen. She had been teaching herself to cook using recipe books from the library. Her mum never got into the habit of cooking because she had always had people to make her meals when she was growing up. Daisy, however, enjoyed it. The basement at Brightwood Hall was stocked with thousands and thousands of items, and she could always find the ingredients she needed. But today she wasn't in the mood. She made herself a cheese sandwich.

Tar was sitting on the table, waiting for her.

"You should be careful," Daisy told him. "Mum only lets me keep you because you're not a wild rat. You look like you used to be someone's pet. If she sees you on the table, she might change her mind. She told me rats shouldn't be in the house at all. People put down traps and poison for them."

Tar's gaze was nailed to the sandwich. "I'd never fall for that," he said.

Daisy waved the sandwich slowly to and fro in front of him.

“Are you sure?”

Tar didn't answer. He was too busy following the sandwich with his eyes, his expression glazed.

Daisy put the sandwich down abruptly. “You can eat it. I'm not hungry.”

“The whole thing?” Tar sniffed it. “It's fresh,” he muttered in a critical voice. “I suppose you can't have everything.” He began to eat steadily, commenting appreciatively to himself between mouthfuls.

“I wish we still had a TV,” Daisy said. It would have helped take her mind off the fact that her mum was now nearly five hours late.

“There were a lot of interesting things on TV,” Daisy told Tar. “There was this one show about a huge family that lived in a tiny house. Every time they said anything at all, invisible people laughed! It was very funny.”

Daisy had asked for a TV for her eleventh birthday. When the day came, however, she got a telescope instead. It was a magnificent telescope, powerful enough to see even quite distant stars. But she couldn't help feeling disappointed.

She left the kitchen and made her way upstairs to her mum's room. It comforted her a little to be surrounded by her mum's things. Her mum's long, flowery dress hanging over the chair, her

glasses on the bedside table, her dozens of paintings, all turned with their faces to the wall.

Daisy lay down on the bed and hugged her mum's pillow, staring at the photograph on the bedside table. It showed her mum's family on the tennis court, years ago. It was odd to see the court free of grass and bindweed. Daisy's grandparents had just finished a game of tennis and were standing side by side with their arms around each other. Her uncle Marcus was in the picture too and behind him, a group of other people. Daisy's mum had told her all their names.

There was Mr. Hadley, who drove the car and was very kind. And the housekeeper, Maggie, with a jug of lemonade in her hand, and one of the gardeners, who had volunteered to be the umpire. And there, towards the edge of the picture, stood a tall older boy with his face half turned away.

"That's James," Daisy's mum had said when Daisy asked about him. "He was some sort of cousin. He used to visit every summer. Then he stopped coming."

"Why?"

Her mum paused. "I don't know the details," she said. "I think he stole a watch. Or they thought he had . . . I don't remember what happened."

"Where is he now?"

"I don't know," Daisy's mum said. She was never cross with

Daisy, but her voice had sounded almost sharp. “I don’t know. It doesn’t matter.”

Now Daisy hugged her mum’s pillow tighter, trying to fight the urge to look at her own watch.

Had it been five hours, or closer to six?

Perhaps she was worrying for nothing. Perhaps at that very moment, her mum was turning into the driveway. Daisy hurried downstairs. She seated herself on the stone doorstep, her gaze fixed on the distant gates. She thought perhaps if she stared for five whole minutes without blinking, it would make the car appear. Then she tried closing her eyes and counting to a thousand, not gabbling the numbers but saying each one slowly and clearly.

Nothing worked. The shadows of the great trees grew long over the tangled meadow. It was evening now. Soon it would be dark. Daisy’s body flooded with panic.

*She has to come back! How will she do the Day Box if she doesn’t come back?*



## FIVE

**D**aisy's mum was right about the house being cluttered but not dirty. It wasn't dirty because they didn't keep any old clothes or leftover food or rubbish lying around. Instead, Brightwood Hall was filled with three kinds of things. The first was furniture and household items, most of it valuable, which had been stacked in the ballroom, the spare rooms, or against various walls. The second was stores of food and grocery items. These filled the whole of the basement, most of the reception area, and a great portion of the corridors.

The third was all the Day Boxes.

There were nearly ten thousand of them. They were about

the same size and shape as shoe boxes, except they opened from one end so that when they were stacked on top of each other, you could open one without disturbing the whole pile. At first they had all been kept in the Marble Hall. The shelving units had been specially built to hold them. But they had eventually filled up even that enormous space. They had spread into the Portrait Gallery and then into other rooms and empty corners, until you could hardly turn around without bumping into a pile of them.

Every evening, another box was added to the collection.

Daisy's mum made them. She put things inside that she wanted to remember about the day. Everything held a memory, she said. If she didn't put it into a box, the memory would fade and be lost. She would never be able to get it back again.

Daisy sometimes contributed to the Day Boxes, but mostly her mum did them on her own. After she closed the lid of each box, she wrote the date on the side. She always used the same black marker, and she would never run out of those markers because there were thirty-six packets of them down in the basement and each packet held two dozen pens.

Daisy's mum never missed a single day. Not even the time when she had a terrible fever and had lain a whole day and night moaning and shivering and saying strange things. Daisy had sat with her, cooling her face with wet towels, and in the evening, her mum had told her to fetch an empty box. Her hand crept out

from under the covers to point out the things she had chosen for that day. Or maybe they were what the fever had chosen, because the things themselves didn't make much sense.

"Your shoe, Mum?" Daisy had said, putting it into the box. "Are you *sure*?"

Her mum's hand gestured feebly towards the wall.

"That's just a shadow, Mum. From the chair, see? You can't put a shadow into a box."

Now Daisy leaped up from her perch on the doorstep and hurried back into the house. She crawled across the tops of the shelves in the Marble Hall. The tight passageways below were already plunged into darkness. But the chandelier still held a faint milky glitter as it caught the last of the waning light.

She glanced into the library as she went by. The empty Day Boxes were stored there. They were made of a kind of cardboard that was almost as strong as wood. Her mum ordered them from a special shop and they were delivered twice a month.

The library was another thing that Daisy was afraid of.

There were hundreds of dark gaps in the shelves where books had been removed. Daisy knew if she slid her hand into any one of them, her fingers would meet nothing more extraordinary than the back of the bookcase. But what if they didn't? What if her fingers just kept going, and then her hand and then her whole arm? What if there was nothing back there except *nothingness*?

Daisy hurried to her bedroom and dragged a chair over to block the door. She sat on her bed with her knees pulled up tight to her chin and her arms wrapped around her legs.

How could her mum do the Day Box if she wasn't here?

Her mum was very particular about the boxes and what was put inside them. On the day she turned five, for example, Daisy had wanted to put a slice of her birthday cake into the Day Box. It had been a beautiful cake. Her mum had decorated it with real flowers and tiny animals made of frosting. But her mum had explained that you couldn't put food into the Day Box or anything that would rot and start to smell bad.

"And nothing that will die," she had said gently when Daisy once suggested including a stag beetle, which was lurching down the path.

Daisy had always been interested in beetles and other insects. There were millions and millions of them, although you mostly never saw them. They lived in a secret world. It was huge yet invisible. There were doors to this world everywhere: in the cracks of the floorboards, on the underside of leaves, although the doors were too tiny for humans. Daisy squatted next to ant nests, magnifying glass in hand, watching where the marching lines went in and out of the earth. But magnifying glasses are good at making things bigger, not smaller, and Daisy would always be too enormous to ever escape into the insect world.

She lost a lot of interest in her mum's Day Boxes after she found out that you couldn't put bugs into them. Instead her mum usually chose rather ordinary things such as books she had read, items of clothing, and other bits and bobs.

Daisy lay down on her bed still fully clothed. Slowly she pulled the blanket over her head. She rested her cheek in her hand and tried to sleep.

*Mum will come back, she told herself. Sometime in the night, I will open my eyes and there she will be.*

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