

C H A P T E R 1

“““O nce upon a time there were twelve princesses...”

My voice surprises me. It's perfectly steady, the voice of a normal mother on a normal day—as though everything is just the same as it always was.

““Every night their door was locked, yet in the morning their shoes were all worn through, and they were pale and very tired, as though they had been awake all night...”

Millie is pressed up against me, sucking her thumb. I can feel the warmth of her body: it comforts me a little.

‘They’d been dancing, hadn’t they, Mummy?’

‘Yes, they’d been dancing,’ I say.

Blanche sprawls out on the sofa, pretending to read an old copy of *Vogue*, twisting her long blonde hair in her fingers to try and make it curl. I can tell that she’s listening. Ever since her father went to England with the army, she’s liked to listen to her sister’s bedtime story. Perhaps it gives her a sense of safety. Or perhaps there’s something in her that yearns to be a child again.

It’s so peaceful in my house tonight. The amber light of the setting sun falls on all the things in this room—all so friendly and familiar: my piano and heaps of sheet music, the Staffordshire dogs and silver eggcups, the many books on

their shelves, the flowered tea set in the glass-fronted cabinet. I look around and wonder if we will be here this time tomorrow—if after tomorrow I will ever see this room again. Millie's cat Alphonse is asleep in a circle of sun on the sill, and through the open window that looks out over our back garden you can hear only the blackbird's song and the many little voices of the streams: there is always a sound of water in these valleys. I'm so grateful for the quiet—you could almost imagine that this was the end of an ordinary sweet summer day. Last week, when the Germans were bombing Cherbourg, you could hear the sound of it even here in our hidden valley, like thunder out of a clear sky, and up at Angie le Brocq's farm, at Les Ruettes on the hill, when you touched your hand to the window pane, you could feel the faint vibration of it, just a tremor, so you weren't quite sure if it was the window shaking or your hand. But for the moment, it's tranquil here.

I turn back to the story. I read how there was a soldier coming home from the wars, who owned a magic cloak that could make him completely invisible. How he sought to discover the princesses' secret. How he was locked in their bedroom with them, and they gave him a cup of drugged wine, but he only pretended to drink.

'He was really clever, wasn't he? That's what I'd have done, if I'd been him,' says Millie.

I have a sudden vivid memory of myself as a child, when she says that. I loved fairytales just as she does—enthralled by the transformations, the impossible quests, the gorgeous significant objects—the magic cloaks, the satin dancing shoes; and, just like Millie, I'd fret about the people in the stories, their losses and reversals and all the dilemmas they faced. So sure that if I'd been in the story, it would all have been

clear to me: that I'd have been wise and brave and resolute. I'd have known what to do.

I read on:

“When the princesses thought he was safely asleep, they climbed through a trapdoor in the floor, and he pulled on his cloak and followed. They went down many winding stairways, and came at last to a grove of trees, with leaves of diamonds and gold...”

Briefly, I'm distracted by the charm of the story. I love this part especially, where the princesses follow the pathway down to another world, a secret world of their own, a place of enchantment—loving that sense of going deep, of being enclosed. Like the way it feels when you follow the Guernsey lanes down here to our home, in this wet wooded valley of St Pierre du Bois—a valley that seems so safe and cloistered, like a womb. Then, if you walk on, you will go up, up and out suddenly into the sunlight, where there are cornfields, kestrels, the shine of the sea. Like a birth.

Millie leans into me, wanting to see the pictures—the girls in their big, bright glimmery skirts, the gold and diamond leaves. I smell her familiar, comforting scent—of biscuits, soap and sunlight.

The ceiling creaks above us as Evelyn gets ready for bed. I have filled her hot-water bottle for her—she can feel a chill even on warm summer evenings. She will sit in bed for a while and read the Bible. She likes the Old Testament best—the stern injunctions, the battles: the Lord our God is a jealous God. Our Rector at St Peter's is altogether too gentle for her. When we go—if we go—she will stay with Angie le Brocq at Les Ruettes. Evelyn is far too old to travel—she's like an elderly plant, too frail to uproot.

'Mum,' says Blanche, out of nowhere, in a little shrill

voice. 'Celeste says all the soldiers have gone—the English soldiers in St Peter Port.' She speaks rapidly, as though the words are rising in her like steam. 'Celeste says that there's no one left to fight here.'

I take a breath: it hurts my chest. I can't pretend any more.

'Yes,' I say. 'I heard that. Mrs le Brocq told me.'

Now, suddenly, my voice seems strange—shaky, serrated with fear. It sounds like someone else's voice. I bite my lip.

'They're coming, aren't they, Mum?' says Blanche.

'Yes, I think so,' I say.

'What will happen to us if we stay here?' she says. There's a thrum of panic in her voice. Her eyes, blue as hyacinths, are urgent, fixed on my face. She's chewing the bits of skin at the sides of her nails. 'What will happen?'

'Sweetheart—it's a big decision. I've got to think it through...'

'I want to go,' she says. 'I want to go to London. I want to go on the boat.'

'Shut *up*, Blanche,' says Millie. 'I want to hear the story.'

'Blanche—London isn't safe.'

'It's safer than here,' she says.

'No, sweetheart. People are sending their children away to the country. The Germans could bomb London. Everyone has gas masks...'

'But we could stay in Auntie Iris's house. She said we'd be more than welcome in her letter, Mum. You *told* us. She *said* we could. I really want to go, Mum.'

'It could be a difficult journey,' I say. I don't mention the torpedoes.

Her hands are clenched into fists. The bright sun gilds all the little fair hairs on her arms.

‘I don’t care. I want to go.’

‘Blanche, I’m still thinking...’

‘Well, you need to get a move on, Mum. We haven’t got for ever.’

I don’t know what to say to her. In the quiet, I’m very aware of the tick of the clock, like a heartbeat, beating on to the moment when I have to decide. It sounds suddenly ominous to me.

I turn back to the story.

“‘The princesses came to an underground lake, where there were twelve little boats tied up, and each with a prince to row it...’” As I read on, my voice steadies, and my heart begins to slow. “‘The soldier stepped into the boat with the youngest princess. ‘Oh, oh, there is something wrong,’ she said. ‘The boat rides too low in the water.’ The soldier thought he would be discovered, and he was very afraid...’”

Blanche watches me, chewing her hand.

But Millie grins.

‘He doesn’t need to be frightened, does he?’ she says, triumphantly. ‘It’s going to be all right, isn’t it? He’s going to find out the secret and marry the youngest princess.’

‘Honestly, Millie,’ says Blanche, forgetting her fear for a moment, troubled by her little sister’s naivety. ‘He doesn’t realise that, does he? Anything could happen. The people in the story can’t tell how it’s going to end. You’re four, you ought to know that.’

C H A P T E R 2

When Millie is settled in bed, I go out to my garden.

The back of the house faces west, and the mellow light of evening falls on the long lawn striped with shadows and on the rose bed under the window, with all the roses I've planted there that have names like little poems: Belle de Crécy, Celsiana, Alba Semi-plena. It's so quiet you can hear the fall of a petal from a flower.

I remember how this sloping garden delighted me when first I came to this place, to Le Colombier. 'Vivienne, darling, I want you to love my island,' said Eugene when he brought me here, just married. I was pregnant with Blanche, life was rich with possibility, and I did love it then, as we sailed into the harbour, ahead of us St Peter Port, elegant on its green hill; and I was charmed too by Le Colombier itself—by its age and the deep cool shade of its rooms, by its whitewashed walls and grey slate roof, and the wide gravel yard across the front of the house. In summer, you can sit and drink your coffee there, in the leaf-speckled light. The house stands gable to the road, the hedgebanks give us seclusion, we're overlooked only by the window of Les Vinaires next door, where the wall of their kitchen forms one side of our yard. It was all a little untidy when first I came to

Guernsey, the gravel overgrown with raggedy yellow weed: with Eugene away in London, Evelyn wasn't quite managing. Now I keep the gravel raked and I have pots of herbs and geraniums, and a clematis that rambles up and over the door. And I loved the little orchard on the other side of the lane that is also part of our land, where now the small green apples are just beginning to swell; and beyond the orchard the woodland, where there are nightingales. People here call the woodland the Blancs Bois—the White Wood—which always seems strange to me, because it's so dark, so secret in there in summer, under the dense canopy of leaves. But my favourite part of it all is this garden, sloping down to the stream. This garden has been my solace.

I work through all my tasks carefully. I dead-head the roses, I water the mulberry and fig that grow in pots on my terrace. Even as I do these things, I think how strange this is—to tend my garden so diligently, when tomorrow we may be gone. My hands as I work are perfectly steady, which seems surprising to me. But I step on a twig, and it snaps, and I jump, let out a small scream; and then the fear comes at me. It's a physical thing, this dread, a shudder moving through me. There's a taste like acid in my throat.

I put down my secateurs and sit on the edge of the terrace. I rest my head in my hands, think through it all again. Plenty of people have gone already, like Connie and Norman from Les Vinaires, shutting up their houses, leaving their gardens to go to seed. Some like me are still unsure: when I last saw Gwen, my closest friend, she said they couldn't decide. And others are sending their children without them, with labels pinned to their coats. But I couldn't do that. I could never send my children to England without me. I know how it feels to be a motherless child: I will do everything I can to

protect my daughters from that. We go together, the three of us, or we stay. I try to look into the future, but it's all a dark blur to me: I can't imagine it, can't see down either path. The boat, the dangerous journey and going to London and sleeping on Iris's floor. Or staying here—everything fine and familiar to start with, everything just as it always was, sleeping in our own beds. Waiting for what must happen.

The shadows lengthen, the colours of my garden begin to recede; till the shadows seem more solid, more real, than the things that cast them. I can hear a nightingale singing in the Blancs Bois. There's a sadness to evenings on Guernsey sometimes, though Eugene could never feel it. When I first came here, he took me on a tour of the island, and we stopped on the north coast and watched the sun go down over L'Ancrese Bay—all colour suddenly gone from the sky, the rocks black, the sea white and crimped and glimmering, the fishing boats black and still in the water, so tiny against that immensity of sea—and I felt a surge of melancholy that I couldn't explain. I tried to tell him about it, but it didn't make any sense to him: he certainly didn't feel it. I had a sense of distance from him, which soon became habitual. A sense of how differently we saw the world, he and I. But I feel bad even thinking such things, of the many ways in which we were unhappy together, now that he's gone.

There's a sudden scatter of birds in the sky; I flinch, my heart leaping into my throat. Little things seem violent to me. And in that moment my decision is made. I am clear, certain. We will go tomorrow. Blanche is right. We cannot just stay here and wait. Terrified by the snap of a twig or a flight of startled birds. We *cannot*.

I go to the shed and take out my bicycle. I cycle up to the Rectory to put our names on the list.