

Chapter 6

The Fight in the Courtyard

There was a courtyard behind the palace where peacocks walked, fountains played, and statues of former kings and queens kept watch. As long as they didn't pull the peacocks' tails, jump in the fountains, or climb the statues, the children of the palace servants were allowed to play in the courtyard after school. Sometimes Lady Eslanda, who liked children, would come and make daisy chains with them, but the most exciting thing of all was when King Fred came out onto the balcony and waved, which made all the children cheer, bow, and curtsy as their parents had taught them.

The only time the children fell silent, ceased their games of hopscotch, and stopped pretending to fight the Ickabog, was when the lords Spittleworth and Flapoon passed through the courtyard. These two lords weren't fond of children at all. They thought the little brats made far too much noise in the late afternoon, which was precisely the time when Spittleworth and Flapoon liked to take a nap between hunting and dinner.

One day, shortly after Bert and Daisy's seventh birthdays, when everyone was playing as usual between the fountains and the peacocks, the daughter of the new Head Seamstress, who was wearing a beautiful dress of rose-pink brocade, said:

'Oh, I *do* hope the king waves at us today!'

'Well, I don't,' said Daisy, who couldn't help herself, and didn't realise how loudly she'd spoken.

The children all gasped and turned to look at her. Daisy felt hot and cold at once, seeing them all glaring.

'You shouldn't have said that,' whispered Bert. As he was standing right next to Daisy, the other children were staring at him too.

'I don't care,' said Daisy, colour rising in her face. She'd started now, so she might as well finish. 'If he hadn't worked my mother so hard, she'd still be alive.'

Daisy felt as though she'd been wanting to say that out loud for a very long time.

There was another gasp from all the surrounding children, and a maid's daughter actually squealed in terror.

‘He’s the best king of Cornucopia we’ve ever had,’ said Bert, who’d heard his mother say so many times.

‘No, he isn’t,’ said Daisy loudly. ‘He’s selfish, vain, and cruel!’

‘Daisy!’ whispered Bert, horrified. ‘Don’t be – don’t be *silly!*’

It was the word ‘silly’ that did it. ‘Silly’, when the new Head Seamstress’s daughter smirked and whispered behind her hand to her friends, while pointing at Daisy’s overalls? ‘Silly’, when her father wiped away his tears in the evenings, thinking Daisy wasn’t looking? ‘Silly’, when to talk to her mother she had to visit a cold white headstone?

Daisy drew back her hand, and smacked Bert right around the face.

Then the oldest Roach brother, whose name was Roderick and who now lived in Daisy’s old bedroom, shouted, ‘Don’t let her get away with it, Butterball!’ and led all the boys in shouts of ‘Fight! Fight! Fight!’

Terrified, Bert gave Daisy’s shoulder a half-hearted shove, and it seemed to Daisy that the only thing to do was to launch herself at Bert, and everything became dust and elbows until suddenly the two children were pulled apart by Bert’s father, Major Beamish, who’d come running out of the palace on hearing the commotion, to find out what was going on.

‘Dreadful behaviour,’ muttered Lord Spittleworth, walking past the major and the two sobbing, struggling children.

But as he turned away, a broad smirk spread over Lord Spittleworth’s face. He was a man who knew how to turn a situation to good use, and he thought he might have found a way to banish children – or some of them, anyway – from the palace courtyard.