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DAY GLOAMING



HIS LAIRDSHIP



NIGHT GLOAMING

For Vida Lev

Then, now, and always



CHAPTER 1

THE GIRL WHO WAS LATE

There is never enough time. For anything.

Particularly when your house explodes.

Ailsa Craig knew this all too well. She was the girl who was always running behind: skidding into classrooms, swimming lessons and birthday parties, always apologizing, explaining, promising that next time, cross her heart, things would be different. Born two weeks late, that girl, went the family joke, and she's made a habit of it ever since. It happened so often she even had a catchphrase:

“Sorry I’m late,” she’d say, “I didn’t get here on time.”

Time was a puzzle to Ailsa.

Some weeks moved like sludge. Others were all fizz and bubbles. There had been an entire year when the world felt like a steel trap, where hours felt like days and

months melted into for ever. In better, sunnier moments, her nose deep in a good book, a summer holiday might breeze past before she even knew it.

On the chilly Scottish night that we meet her, however, time wasn't moving at all. It was frozen, and so was she: rooted to the spot, staring up at wisps of acrid smoke.

This is Ailsa's story, so we'll cover the basics at speed: the quality of her character (loyal, kind, nostalgic, stubborn – and late, as you'll recall); her interests (science, books, and most things in between); the hour of her birth (midnight, stroke of); her general appearance (tall enough to reach the ground, with chaotic curly hair of which she was very proud); glasses (usually sliding down her nose); hat (yellow, knitted); eyes (green, curious); and the name of her two cats (both called Steve, for reasons that cannot be adequately explained here). As for the rest, you'll just have to pick it up along the way. Because, well, exploding houses, come on: that feels like something which deserves our attention.

Plus, as you probably know, there's actually no speed limit for books, so we can go as fast as we like.



CHAPTER 2

THE BIG BANG

So there was Ailsa, staring up at a rectangular box of air suspended several metres off the ground. It contained nitrogen, oxygen, argon, carbon dioxide, and a whole lot of smoke.

It was where her bedroom used to be.

Ailsa was eleven and a half years old, and for most of that time, until a few minutes ago in fact, there had been a modest dwelling house here at 47 Bothwell Gardens.

Ailsa lived here with her dad when she wasn't staying in the flat down the hill with her mum.¹

One thing you need to know about Ailsa is that her parents had split up a few years ago, and she still wasn't sure how she felt about it. Ailsa's older sister, Ada, who everyone called Lulu, had left home the previous winter

1 Both of Ailsa's cats lived at her mum's, so no need to worry about that from a houses-blowing-up feline perspective.

to see the world. She always sent Ailsa messages and photos of where she was, and what odd jobs she was doing to support herself (at the moment she was working in a café near a beach). Ailsa missed her sister a lot. She had been the glue that held their family together. The kind of glue that remembered your birthday.

“Keep back now, please!”

Ailsa pulled her yellow knitted hat tight over her ears and pushed her glasses back up her nose. The emergency crews were finishing their work. The force of the blast had scorched a dark circle in the snow surrounding the crater. The rowan tree by the front door was split in two like it had been struck by lightning – scarred, charred and barely alive. Burst pipes sprayed jets of water artfully into the centre of the wreckage. The meltwater ran to a drain on the street, where it made a merry tinkling sound.

As she gazed down at the tangled mess of cracked stone, burnt wood and melted plastic, it occurred to Ailsa that being late to your house exploding was a lot better than being early.



CHAPTER 3

THE STEAMER TRUNK

Wasn't kidding about that speed limit; we nearly started this bit without you. Where were we? Oh yes.

BOOM! Ailsa jumped as a series of rumbles, claps and bangs tore through the night air. Down the hill, people were shouting.

“Happy New Yeeeeeee-ar!”

It wasn't even midnight yet. She could see bright colours in the sky over the rooftops towards town. There was music coming from somewhere, an old song her parents had loved, “Auld Lang Syne”. Ailsa had forgotten the date. It was the night of December 31st. Which meant fireworks. Lots of them.

Great. More stuff exploding. Happy Hogmanay.²

2 Hogmanay is Scottish New Year, but you probably know that. In case you don't: it's like New Year everywhere else, only much bigger and quite a bit louder.

Another thing you need to know about Ailsa and her family is this: they hadn't always lived in Scotland.

Her first country, the island she was born on, had been a lot warmer. In the summer, it had the kind of heat that might cook an egg on a slab of stone. They moved away when she was three, or four. Or five. She could never remember which. What she did recall only too well was the cold, and the dark, of that first Scottish night, the wind moaning in the chimney, the odour of burnt dust from the bars of the electric fire. She had later discovered a Scottish author who had once made a similar kind of journey, albeit in reverse. His name was Robert Louis Stevenson, and it was no surprise to Ailsa that he had written a book called *Kidnapped*.

Ailsa cast her eye across the wreckage again. Most of her books were ash, but a few had endured. She found a yellowing copy of *Moominsummer Madness* in a hedge, the fractured spine of *The Graveyard Book* by Neil Gaiman half-buried in the earth (which she found rather apt) and, in a hole in the ground, *The Hobbit*.

There was, however, something else she couldn't find.

The missing item was a treasure chest: a thick, weathered wooden trunk known as a steamer. It had faded metal corner pieces, stout locks, leather straps, and scratches along its panels. It smelled of salt, engine oil

and the open road. Ailsa's Grandma Judith had kept her personal papers in it when she wasn't using it as a coffee table. Judith had been an astronomer for most of her life, and even in semi-retirement she'd kept a small office at the Observatory up on the hill. After she died, the trunk had become Ailsa's. It was Priya, Grandma's researcher, who had given it to her. She knew how much Ailsa loved her grandmother.

Ailsa also loved that steamer trunk. It was a trove of memories, notes, photos. It also, as Ailsa would soon discover, contained a secret. In any case, the very idea of losing it made Ailsa feel quite dizzy. But it had also been in her bedroom, and gazing down at the charred crater before her, she doubted it had survived.

Ailsa couldn't possibly know, but this missing trunk wasn't just bad news for her.

It was bad for the entire world.

She felt her father's gloved hand on her shoulder. "Time to go," he said. His eyes were misty and red. She couldn't tell if he was exhausted, had been crying, or both. But red eyes, in Ailsa's experience, rarely meant something good.

She took his hand. "Where are we going to sleep tonight?"

He went silent for a moment. It looked like a thousand thoughts were tumbling over themselves in his head.

“We’ll figure something out.”

Ailsa said: “Maybe we could stay at Mum’s?”

She knew her parents hadn’t been talking much lately. It wasn’t exactly common for divorced folks to leap at the chance to ask each other for favours. But Dad seemed to hear her. He nodded and took out his phone.

They walked down the hill together, away from the destruction. Ailsa could hear her mother’s voice on the other end of the call. “Wait, did you say exploded? How on earth...?”

... did that happen?

Ailsa vowed that she would find out.

She looked up at the night sky, for courage and answers. Stars blinked impassively back down at her and her tiny tragedy. Far away, hundreds of light years from here, she knew, a supermassive black hole was draining the last remnants of a neutron star towards its own abyss of infinite gravity, like so much cosmic snowmelt. The boiling mass of a million suns was stretched to a shining, shrieking filament of atoms that would last for ever. The remains of the kitchen, the warped garden gate, the carbonized roses, the cloud of vapour as she breathed, this lamp post, that silly tinkling drain, the tracks of drying tears on her face – it was all constructed from parts of a star just like that one, forged in the interstellar

explosion that began the universe and all we know inside it.

The Big Bang. The start of the universe.

The first beginning there ever was.

At least, that's how Grandma had always explained it, which – according to Grandpa Eric – was maybe why they never got invited out to dinner very much.

Yet, there in the cold, Ailsa couldn't help thinking: if the entire cosmos really began with an explosion, then maybe this particular blast wasn't an end either. Maybe it was her own personal Hogmanay, a new kind of beginning, a sign that sometime, very soon, a new chapter of her own story would start.

Then again, of course...

It already had.