



The  
Secret of  
Splint Hall

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PART ONE: A NEW START

SEPTEMBER 1945

## CHAPTER ONE

Mum said the War was over, but Isobel thought that it was not. She could see it in the tight lips of the women as they queued to buy sugar, butter and bacon. She could feel it in the dust from the rubble that used to be kitchens and bedrooms, but now were nothing at all. That was what had happened to their house. One evening it was there, the next morning it wasn't. It had become a pile of rocks, like something you walked over to get home in a storybook. But they didn't have a home to get to any more.

They were the lucky ones, Mum had said, holding Isobel's hand too tight. They'd been in the shelter when it happened. Not like Mrs Potts and her children, Sammy and Kit, from number forty-eight. Isobel knew that they were the lucky ones, but she hadn't felt very lucky, at the time.

Most of all, the War was in the eyes of the men that had come back. Or it was in what *wasn't* in them. Like a light had gone out. How they looked without seeing, like they were miles away. She'd said that to Flora but Flora said she didn't know what she was talking about, and she should be quiet and stop looking at people anyway. Nosy parker.

Isobel thought that maybe Daddy would have looked like

that if he'd come back from the War. She wanted to ask Flora about it, but she'd only get cross and tell her to stop talking about him. They'd known he wasn't going to come back ever since the boy came with the telegram that had made Mum bend right over like she was going to be sick. The boy, who hadn't looked much older than Flora, had patted Mum awkwardly on the back, then turned red, like he wasn't sure he should have done that. Then he'd left. And Flora had taken Isobel's hand and they'd gone upstairs and huddled under the covers and read *The Little Prince* until Mum knocked on the door.

Isobel thought that Daddy not coming back was the reason they were going to Aunty Bea's. It was either that or because their house wasn't there any more, and they were living with their neighbour Mrs Dooley, who sniffed loudly if you banged a door by mistake. Or maybe it was both. Mum called it a New Start. In the country. Isobel knew that some children had been sent to the country during the War. It was children in the city that were sent there, and Mum had said they didn't live in the city or the country, they lived in a town, so they could stay where they were all together and be safe. Which they were, Isobel supposed, until their house had got bombed.

Isobel pressed her face to the cold glass of the car window and looked out.

'Don't do that,' Flora said. 'You'll leave a mark.'

Isobel ignored her. It was only September but the day had been damp and dark, and now it was getting darker. They were travelling along a road with stone walls on either side that was winding up and down and sometimes around huge hills. Beyond the road, apart from the hills, all Isobel could see were fields with

white blobs of sheep on them. If this was the country, Isobel thought, then really the country was nowhere at all.

She settled back against the soft leather of the car. Aunty Bea's husband, Mr Godfrey, had sent it to pick them up from the station. It was bottle green with pale cream leather and a loud, honking horn, which the driver had already used twice – once when a cow stumbled on to the road, and the second time shortly afterwards, when the farmer had taken too long to get it off. Isobel had never been in a car before. There were lots of nevers that were becoming nows. Maybe that was what growing up was.

'Are we nearly there yet, Mum?' Flora said, her voice loud and plaintive.

Mum turned round. Her eyes were big and dark underneath her hat. She didn't normally wear hats – during the War she'd had her hair tied up under a grey scarf because she worked in the factory, sewing fabric on to the wings of planes. Everyone knew you had to keep your hair away from the machines, otherwise you'd come to a Bad End.

Today Mum's hair was hovering on her shoulders in soft, bouncy rolls, her small black hat balancing on top like a bird settled on its nest. She reached back and squeezed Flora's arm, then Isobel's leg.

'Not long now, girls,' she said, turning back to the front. She peered forwards through the windscreen. 'Look, we're just coming through the village.'

Isobel looked. It didn't look like much though. Not like home, where there were roads full of houses all pressed up together like best friends out for a walk. Here, there were only a few houses

scattered about. They were all white or yellow, wearing thatched roofs like low-brimmed hats. The bottle-green car drove past these houses and then they passed a larger, darker building, streaming yellow light from the windows, with a sign with a picture of a bird on it. As they drove by the door swung open, revealing a man in a tweed cap and overalls. He went to light his cigarette but saw the car and watched it go past instead.

‘That’s the public house,’ the driver said. ‘Though I don’t expect you’ll be frequenting that sort of establishment.’ He gave a little chuckle, as if the thought were preposterous.

‘Actually I’m quite fond of a gin and lemon,’ Mum remarked cheerfully. ‘It’s what got me through the War.’

The driver looked at her in surprise, then gave a small shake of his head. Mum didn’t seem to notice. She was peering through the windscreen again.

‘Oh, my goodness, look at the cottages,’ she said, her hand flying to her mouth.

Isobel and Flora turned their heads to look as they drove past. They had seen similar things at home: the fronts of houses blown clean off, so you could see inside them like dolls’ houses. Often there was still furniture left inside. These, though, were empty. All you could see were spaces where rooms used to be.

‘Bea said they had been bombed,’ Mum said. ‘I couldn’t believe it when she put it in her letter. It’s such a small village. What bad luck.’

‘Not if someone forgot to black one of their windows,’ the driver said, his tone surly.

‘Is that what happened?’

The driver sniffed. ‘Don’t see why else it would have. As you

said, we're only a small village. And the family who lived there, they'd be the sort.'

Mum didn't say anything, but Isobel saw her press her black gloved hands together tightly. 'Were there any casualties?'

'Everyone got to their air-raid shelter in time,' the driver replied, his tone making it sound like it was a pity.

Mum turned to look out of the window again. 'Look, Isobel, look, Flora,' she said, her voice brightening. 'There's the house!'

This time, the driver made a small, irritated *tsking* sound, then immediately tried to cover it up with a cough.

'What?' Mum said, sounding on the edge of cross.

He cleared his throat uncomfortably. 'It's just that round here, we now call it the Hall. Splint Hall.' He flicked a look at her from underneath his smart black hat, whose brim sat rather low on his forehead. 'That's how the Master likes it.'

Mum stared at him for a few seconds before peering out into the dark again. 'Well, when I grew up in it, we called it the house,' she said. 'Can you see it, girls? It's only a mile or so from the village.'

Isobel pressed her face to the window again. This time she was joined by Flora, who seemed to have forgotten that she had told Isobel off for doing the same thing only five minutes before. Flora *always* did that. They couldn't see much anyway, the trees were in the way.

'Why's it called Splint Hall?' Flora said, her forehead furrowing like it did when she didn't understand something. 'What's Splint?'

'No one knows,' Mum said, turning to look at the girls, her eyes sparkling with mischief. 'It's quite the mystery, actually. It should really be called Burlington Hall, after Lord Burlington.'

‘You mean Grandpa?’ Isobel said. She’d never met Mum’s father – he died before she was born – but Mum had told them about him.

‘No. Well, yes, Grandpa was Lord Burlington, but his father was Lord Burlington before him, and his father’s father was one before that. There’s been one for hundreds of years, as far as anyone can remember.’

‘There isn’t one now, though, is there?’ the driver said. Then he looked at Mum, like he thought he’d been rude.

‘No, there isn’t,’ she said. ‘My father never had a son. Girls, look, this is the best view you’ll get.’

The trees parted to show Splint Hall, which loomed over the fields like a general over his army. It was the biggest house Isobel had ever seen, built out of dark red brick with a huge chimney at the back. Three pointy roofs stuck up like witches’ hats, a flat stretch of roof in between them. At the front, a massive flight of steps reached up to a huge wooden door. At home, houses were tall and thin – there were only two rooms on each floor. But this house was different. In Isobel’s house there was a window in each room, so she thought that if she counted the number of windows at Splint Hall she’d know how many rooms there were. She started to count and had got to ten when her mother said, ‘Is Mr Godfrey home?’

She hadn’t looked at the driver when she’d said it; she’d been busy smoothing her skirt.

‘Yes, Ma’am,’ the driver replied. ‘The Master’s home most of the time, these days. Since the War ended.’

Isobel knew that Mr Godfrey was Auntie Bea’s husband. She didn’t know what a Master was though. She opened her mouth

to ask, but before she could, Flora said, 'Have you met him, Mum? Mr Godfrey, I mean?'

'Once,' her mother said, a little stiffly. 'You have too, actually. Both of you. But you were too young to remember. We visited once when Isobel was only a few months old, but—' Mum broke off. It looked to Isobel like she wasn't sure what to say. Isobel was going to say, 'But what?', but then Flora gasped suddenly.

'What's that?'

Isobel looked at where Flora was pointing. All she could see were the flat blue-green fields, with darker lines of hedges criss-crossing them into patchwork. The sky was darker now, giving everything that dark blue tinge that says night is coming, and quickly.

'What's what?' she said.

Suddenly, about 200 feet away, sparks shot up from the ground. It was like the top of a bonfire, but Isobel couldn't see the fire underneath. Also, these sparks were blue, not red, bright against the dark sky. As soon as she saw them, they'd disappeared.

'How odd,' Mum said.

The driver made the strange *tsking* sound again, but this time it was louder. He shook his head slowly from side to side. 'It'll be those wastrels again,' he said. 'Master won't like that.'

Mum's shoulders stiffened. 'Wastrels?'

'Thieves,' the driver said, as if to explain. 'We've had all sorts of trouble with them, and not just recently neither. All through the War too. People coming into the garden, thieving vegetables from their beds, even meat from the kitchen, can you believe?' He shook his head. 'Worst thing is, some of them used to work here.'

‘What do you mean?’ Mum said.

‘What I said, Ma’am. Some people have got nothing better to do than roam around the countryside, taking what’s not theirs. Even if they used to work at the house they’re stealing from.’

‘But who is it?’ Mum said, perplexed. ‘I know everyone who used to work here, they were all local. None of them were thieves. Perhaps they’re simply hungry. Rationing has been difficult. Do you know their names?’

The driver looked at her shiftily. ‘Not my place to say, Ma’am. Anyway, you can’t go taking what’s not yours, even if you are hungry. It’s not right.’

From her position in the back seat, Isobel could just see the top of her mother’s face. Her eyes looked dark and worried, the skin between them crinkled.

‘You don’t have to worry, Ma’am,’ the driver said, misunderstanding her distress. ‘About the kiddies, I mean. If the wastrels come knocking, we know how to deal with them.’

Mum was quiet for a few seconds. ‘I rather thought,’ she said eventually, her voice low, and as clipped as horses’ hooves, ‘that if this dreadful War had taught us anything, it was how to look after our fellow countrymen.’

The driver looked at her in surprise. Then something cold and hard crept over his face, and he shrugged.

As the driver swung the car onto the narrow, tree-lined road that led up to Splint Hall, Isobel kept her face pressed against the glass, until it turned warm under her breath. But she didn’t see the sparks again.

## CHAPTER TWO

At breakfast the next morning, Isobel met Mr Godfrey again. Afterwards, she was relieved she hadn't remembered him the first time, when she had been a baby. The housekeeper had set his toast down next to his plate smartly and said, 'Your breakfast, Master.' He hadn't said anything at all, hadn't even looked up from his newspaper, but she'd nodded once, curtly – maybe because someone had to nod, if he wasn't going to – and then left the room.

Not that Isobel felt that sorry for her. The housekeeper was called Miss Stewart. She had a face like a fishwife's and a temper to match. When they had finally arrived the night before, they had knocked on the huge, heavy wooden door and she had answered, saying with pursed lips that they were later than expected and everyone was already in bed. Mum had pointed out she had written to Aunty Bea to let her know the time of their train, so she wasn't sure why they had been expected earlier. The housekeeper hadn't said anything but pressed her lips together even tighter and led the girls to a small room outside the kitchen, where they had a glass of milk and a small (too small) slice of bread with marge. Then, after saying goodnight to Mum, they were bundled up two

flights of stairs to a small, cold white room with two beds and handed a plate with a stub of candle on it. 'There's still candle rationing you know,' the housekeeper said defensively, though they hadn't said anything. Then she had left.

As the girls got into their flannels Isobel had asked Flora what 'Master' meant. She had said it was someone who was in charge and told everyone else what to do. Isobel had asked her how she knew this and she said that at school there was a Headmaster and he was who you got sent to if you were naughty, to decide what to do with you. Isobel had never been to school. She'd only been four when the War had broken out and the school in their town had closed, so she'd had no idea if Flora was telling the truth. And anyway, after Flora had said that she had got into bed, pinched the candle out and turned over and gone to sleep, so Isobel couldn't ask her any more questions. But, looking at Mr Godfrey, sitting at the breakfast table, she thought it made sense.

He was thin, with watery blue eyes and a ginger moustache. His long neck stuck out from his stiff white collar, in which a paisley tie was nestling. Isobel supposed his hair was ginger like his moustache, but she couldn't tell. It was dark with oil and combed neatly to the side, showing pink stripes of scalp underneath. She watched as Mr Godfrey spread a piece of toast thickly with butter and jam. His movements were very slow and deliberate, like he had all the time in the world. When he was finished, he carefully brought the toast to his lips and bit into it. Little ginger moustache hairs drowned in the red jam as he chewed silently.

Isobel only realised she was staring when Mr Godfrey looked up and caught her eye. She looked quickly down at her plate and her own piece of toast. Like Flora's and Mum's, this had only a

tiny scraping of butter, and no jam at all. Even though the War had ended months ago, there still wasn't enough food to go round, so you had to be careful. Unless you were Mr Godfrey, apparently.

He finished swallowing and wiped his moustache with a napkin, leaving a red smear on it. Then he looked at a place on the wall just over Mum's head. 'I trust your room is comfortable?' he said. His voice was soft but cold, like a cloth Mum might put on Isobel's forehead if she were ill.

Mum smiled. 'Perfectly pleasant, thank you.'

Isobel wouldn't have described their small, cold room as pleasant, particularly. It was too plain for that. There were no books or toys at all, just a dark chest of drawers in one corner and a little table in between the beds. There wasn't even a rug on the floor, just cold floorboards. And there was only one window, high up on the wall the beds were pushed against, and strangely it was small and round, like the porthole of a ship. When Isobel was lying down she could just see the moon out of it. She had gazed at it for ages, trying to ignore the scratchiness of the blankets and the growling of her tummy.

'It's so wonderful to be home,' Mum said. 'I hadn't realised how much I'd missed the old place! But where's my sister? I thought I would see her last night. I was surprised that she had already gone up—'

'I'm sure she will appear when she has a mind to,' Mr Godfrey said curtly. 'My wife spends a great many hours in bed.'

'Oh,' Mum said. She looked like she was going to say something else but thought better of it.

Mr Godfrey took another piece of toast. 'What are your names?'

Isobel looked up. She thought he was asking her and Flora, but she couldn't be sure because he wasn't looking at them. He was buttering his toast and looking at his newspaper, like he'd never even asked the question. Flora was staring at her plate, like she didn't know who he was talking to either.

'Um . . . ' Isobel began.

Mr Godfrey's pale blue eyes flicked to hers instantly. 'Don't say "um",' he said. 'It shows dithering, which shows a lack of intelligence. One must always say what one means and mean what one says.'

He looked back down at his newspaper as Isobel's cheeks flared hot like a match. Mum squeezed her hand comfortingly. 'This is Isobel,' she said. 'And my eldest is Flora.'

Flora, perhaps unsettled by what had just happened, went to put her teacup back on its saucer but her hand trembled, and the cup slipped. It didn't break but landed with a clatter. Mr Godfrey's watery eyes flew up again and this time they stayed fixed on Flora's for a few, horrible seconds. 'Do be careful with the china,' he said, his voice even colder than normal. 'It's extremely valuable and I won't have it broken by foolish little girls.'

Isobel heard Mum breathe in sharply next to her. Flora sat on her hands and looked down at the table miserably. 'Sorry,' she whispered.

Mr Godfrey put his paper down. He clasped his hands gently in front of him, and looked from Flora to Isobel, then back to Flora. 'As you are Beatrice's family, I have no choice but to welcome you to this house. But you *will* obey some rules. You will not touch any of the ornaments, paintings or furniture without permission. You will not shriek or run along the corridors. You

will not speak until you are spoken to. You will play quietly and nicely in your room, which has been placed high in the attic so that I cannot hear you. In the garden, you will keep to the paths. You will not go into the summerhouse or the air-raid shelter.’ He looked slowly from Flora to Isobel, and then finally to Mum. ‘Do I make myself clear?’

‘Yes,’ Flora and Isobel mumbled. Mum’s cheeks had gone the colour of beetroot.

Mr Godfrey grunted, then went back to his paper. For a time, the only sounds were the rustling sort, of him turning the pages. Isobel wanted to finish her toast – her tummy was clenching with hunger – but she was too terrified of doing something wrong.

After a few minutes, Mr Godfrey folded his newspaper neatly, then got up out of his chair. That was when Isobel noticed that his right leg gave him trouble. He swung it out to the side, then used the edge of the table and the top of his chair to pull himself upwards. Collecting his walking stick from where it was resting against the table, he stiffly moved towards the door, careful not to put too much weight on his bad leg.

‘I’ll be in my study,’ he said.

As soon as he had closed the door softly behind him, the room seemed to breathe out a sigh of relief. The light from the tall windows seemed brighter. Isobel, whose attention had been gripped by Mr Godfrey since entering the room, looked around. They were sitting at a long, thin wooden table in a room that was also long and thin. It had windows on two sides, out of which Isobel could see a garden and what looked like an apple tree. Dark oak panelling rose up nearly to Isobel’s height and above that the walls were wallpapered in a sky-blue colour with twisting plants and pale red

berries. Isobel followed the vines up to the ceiling, which was so high above her she had to tilt her head to look at it.

Mum pushed Isobel's plate towards her.

'Come on,' she said. 'Stop staring and eat up.'

Isobel took a bite of her toast and chewed.

Next to her, Flora was still staring at the crumbs on her plate.

'I didn't mean to,' she whispered, looking at Mum with wide eyes. 'My hand just slipped . . .'

'I know, darling,' Mum said. 'You mustn't worry.'

There was a timid knock on the door and then it opened, slowly. A woman with the same colour hair as Mum was standing shyly in the doorway. Isobel knew immediately that it was Aunty Bea. She was a little smaller than Mum, not just in height but all over, and her eyes had dark circles underneath. But she had Mum's mouth, a mouth that widened into a smile when she saw them. 'I'm sorry I didn't come before,' she said, her eyes flicking to Mr Godfrey's empty chair. 'I was . . . I had some letters to write—'

'Bea!' Mum said. Actually, it was more like a sob. Her hand flew to her mouth as if she wanted to stuff the word back in, then she pushed her chair back clumsily and stood up. 'Why on earth did you knock, you silly goose? It's your house!'

Aunty Bea's face coloured. 'I . . .'

For a couple of seconds, the two sisters just stayed looking at each other. Then in the next moment, Mum had flown round the table, leaving her chair rocking in her wake, and they were hugging. Mum pushed Aunty Bea away again so she could look at her properly.

'Julia,' Aunty Bea said simply. Her hands were clinging to the

tops of Mum's arms a little too tightly and her eyes were searching, looking deeply into her sister's. Suddenly, she flung her arms around Mum again. 'Poor Peter,' she whispered fiercely into Mum's ear. 'Poor, poor Peter.'

Peter was their father's name, though Isobel wouldn't have called him that, of course. She would have called him Daddy. *Did* call him Daddy, though she hardly remembered him. She had been only four when he left. Sometimes, she thought she could remember a feeling, of his beard scratching her face as he tickled her, but she was never sure. When she tried to picture it more closely the feeling dissolved, like sugar in tea. But even though she didn't remember him she knew he had been nice. Everyone said so. And even if they didn't, she would still have known that he had been nice. It was just something that *was*, like how summer was hot and winter was cold and the War was bad.

From where Isobel was sitting, she couldn't see Mum's face after Aunty Bea spoke. But she saw how Mum's back tensed as she squeezed Aunty Bea even tighter than she had before. And she saw a single tear inch out of Aunty Bea's eye and roll down her cheek. She thought she would wipe it off but she didn't. She just stayed hugging Mum for ages, so hard it was like there was no one else in the room or even the world. Isobel looked away, feeling a little left out.

Eventually, Aunty Bea and Mum pulled apart. 'You're really here,' Aunty Bea said with a little laugh. She wiped her eyes. 'I can't believe it.'

'Of course I'm here,' Mum said. 'I said we were coming, didn't I? You look exhausted. Sit down and have something to eat.'

'I will,' Aunty Bea said. 'But first I want to say hello to my

beautiful nieces.’ She turned to them, her arms outstretched. ‘Who’s got a kiss for Auntie Bea, then?’

Flora was nearer so she was first. Then it was Isobel’s turn. She stood up awkwardly, wincing at the scrape of the chair against the wooden floor, but Auntie Bea didn’t seem to mind. ‘The last time I saw you, you were still sucking your thumb!’ she said after she’d let her go, smoothing Isobel’s hair where it had come loose from her plaits. ‘Now look at you, all grown-up. How old are you now?’

‘Ten,’ Isobel replied.

‘And Flora’s nearly thirteen,’ Mum said.

Auntie Bea smiled, but her eyes filled with tears again. ‘They’ve grown up so fast,’ she said. ‘This War went on too long. I should have come to see you—’

‘Don’t be silly,’ Mum said, ushering her sister into a seat. ‘I’m sure you had your hands full here. You didn’t mention it in your letters, but the house must have been requisitioned?’

Auntie Bea’s smile wobbled, then vanished completely. ‘Well—’ she began.

‘What’s requisitioned?’ Isobel asked, struggling over the funny word.

‘Don’t interrupt, darling,’ Mum said as she sat back down. ‘Requisitioned means when a house was needed by the government in the War. There are lots of big houses all over the country, just like this one, and they became training camps for the army, or hospitals, sometimes even schools.’ She turned to her sister. ‘What was the house used for, then? I’ve been trying to work it out but I can’t. We’ve been lucky, anyway. I’ve heard dreadful things . . . I read in the paper that in Cottlemore Manor they took all the

wooden fretwork and chopped it up for firewood, and in Waterford Abbey all the statues were blown to bits during training exercises. But there's no sign of what happened here at all, not even any marks on the walls or dirty footprints. Was it a hospital? That's my guess, given all the bedrooms we've got . . .' She trailed off as Auntie Bea stayed silent. She was sitting in the chair looking at her hands. 'What on earth's the matter, Bea?'

'It wasn't requisitioned,' Auntie Bea said quietly.

Mum's eyebrows shot up in surprise. 'It wasn't? But I'm sure the government could have used a house like this.'

'Charles didn't want it to be,' Auntie Bea continued, her voice so hushed that Isobel had to lean forward to hear her. 'They asked, but he was working for the Ministry of Defence during the War. Quite high up, I think, but he didn't tell me about it. He wasn't allowed, I suppose. Anyway, after we got the letter from the government, he spoke to someone, and then they left us alone. He said he needed peace and quiet at home to do his job.'

'Oh,' Mum said, like she wasn't sure what else to say.

'I know you must think that's selfish,' Auntie Bea said in a rush, her words tumbling over each other in her haste to get them out.

'I didn't say that,' Mum said. She went to hold her sister's hand, but Auntie Bea picked up her teacup instead, even though it didn't have any tea in it. She had two high spots of colour in her cheeks.

'Everyone thinks it's selfish,' she said. 'I know what people think. But they don't understand. Charles has suffered enough. More than enough.'

In the silence that followed, an image of Mr Godfrey pulling his bad leg behind him flashed through Isobel's mind. She supposed that was what Auntie Bea meant, about him suffering.

‘Well, it’s probably for the best, anyway,’ Mum said, folding her napkin and putting it on the table. ‘I would have been dreadfully upset if anything had happened to Splint Hall. I’m so looking forward to showing it to the girls. And I expect you’re excited to see it, aren’t you?’ She looked expectantly at her daughters.

‘Did Mr Godfrey hurt his leg in the War?’ Isobel asked.

Flora dug her elbow into Isobel’s side.

‘Ow!’ Isobel said.

‘Flora,’ Mum warned.

‘But she’s not meant to ask things like that,’ Flora hissed out of the corner of her mouth. ‘It’s rude.’

‘It’s all right,’ Aunty Bea said. ‘Charles’s injury happened in the war, but not this one. The First World War. He was only seventeen when he went to France and he took a bit of shrapnel in his thigh, only three months in. He says it’s never been the same since.’

‘Does it hurt him?’ Flora asked curiously.

‘Oh yes,’ Aunty Bea said. ‘Every day. The doctors say that the muscles grew back all twisted and that’s why it aches so much.’

Mum put her teacup down with a clatter nearly as big as Flora’s earlier. ‘Still,’ she said, ‘it could have been worse. He was lucky to come home alive. There’s many who didn’t.’

‘He knows that.’

Isobel supposed that she should feel sorry for Mr Godfrey. It must be awful to be in pain all the time, like when you had a headache, but forever. She tried, but the picture of him biting into the jam-covered toast filled her mind.

‘Was the other war like this one?’ she asked.

Aunty Bea and Mum shared the Look. Isobel had seen this

look before, many times. It was the sort of look that said she was asking too many questions, and the questions she was asking were about things adults didn't want to talk about or didn't think she should know about yet.

The seconds ticked by, slowly.

'Enough of this gloominess,' Mum said, clapping her hands the way she always did when a meal was finished. 'Let's talk about what we're going to do today, shall we? Girls, I'm sure you'd love to explore the house while Aunty Bea and I have a walk round the gardens.' She turned to Aunty Bea and smiled. 'I'm dying to see the lily pads again.'

Aunty Bea smiled too. 'They're even more glorious than when we were little.' She stood up, her green striped dress rustling against the smooth oak of the table. 'Come on, then.' Her voice deepened as she said the next bit. 'Time waits for no man . . .'

'Though it often waits for nosy children,' Mum joined in, and they both collapsed into giggles.

'What does that mean?' Flora asked.

'Nothing,' Mum said, when she'd stopped laughing. 'It's just something your grandpa used to say. Now come on, you two.'

'But Aunty Bea hasn't had any breakfast,' Isobel protested.

The atmosphere in the room darkened, ever so slightly. Flora shot Isobel the Look. Isobel quickly glanced at her mother to see if she was in trouble, but she wasn't. Mum was frowning but it wasn't at her. It was at Aunty Bea.

'She's right,' she said. 'You must eat something, Bea. Look, there's still some toast left, and a bit of butter.'

Aunty Bea hesitated, her fingers clutching the table, as Mum pushed the butter towards her. Quickly, she sat down again, then

took a piece of dry toast and bit into it. 'I prefer it this way,' she said quickly, looking at them all. 'I like saving the butter for . . . for special occasions.'

As Mum's face tightened, Isobel thought of Mr Godfrey and how much butter he'd spread on his toast. Perhaps breakfast in Splint Hall was a special occasion, for him at least. But it hadn't felt much like one.