

Admiral House, Southwold, Suffolk

June 1943

‘Remember, my darling, you are a fairy, floating silently across the grass on wings of gossamer, ready to trap your prey in your silken net. Look!’ he whispered into my ear. ‘There he is, just on the edge of the leaf. Now then, fly!’

As he’d taught me, I closed my eyes for a few seconds and stood on tiptoe, imagining my small feet leaving the ground. Then I felt the flat of Daddy’s palm give me a gentle push forwards. Opening my eyes, I focused on the pair of hyacinth-blue wings and flew the two short steps I needed to swoop my net around the fragile frond of buddleia bush on which the Large Blue was currently perched.

The waft of air as the net landed on target alerted the Blue, who opened its wings in preparation for flight. But it was too late, because I, Posy, Princess of the Fairies, had captured him. He wouldn’t be harmed, of course, merely taken off to be studied by Lawrence, King of the Magical

LUCINDA RILEY

People – who was also my father – before being released outside after enjoying a large bowl of the best nectar.

‘What a clever girl my Posy is!’ Daddy said as I made my way back through the foliage towards him and proudly handed over the net. He was crouching down on his haunches, so our eyes – which everyone told us were so similar – met in shared pride and delight.

I watched his head bend to study the butterfly, which remained stock-still, its tiny legs gripped to its white netting prison. Daddy’s hair was a dark mahogany colour, and the oil he put on it to flatten it down made it shine in the sun like the top of the long dining table after Daisy had polished it. It also smelt wonderful – of him, and comfort, because he was ‘home’ and I loved him more than anything else in my worlds, both human and fairy. I loved Maman too, of course, but even though she was at home most of the time, I didn’t feel I *knew* her as well as I knew Daddy. She spent a lot of time in her room with something called migraines, and when she was out of it, she always seemed too busy to spend any time with me.

‘He’s an absolute corker, darling girl!’ Daddy said, lifting his eyes to mine. ‘A true rarity on these shores, and no doubt, of noble lineage,’ he added.

‘Might he be a butterfly prince?’ I asked.

‘He might well be,’ Daddy agreed. ‘We shall have to treat him with the utmost respect, as his royal status demands.’

‘Lawrence, Posy . . . lunch!’ called a voice from beyond the foliage. Daddy stood up so he was taller than the buddleia bush and able to wave across the lawns up to the terrace of Admiral House.

The Butterfly Room

‘Coming, my love,’ he called, quite loudly as we were some distance away. I watched his eyes crinkle into a smile at the sight of his wife: my mother, and unknowing Queen of the Magical People. This was a game only Daddy and I shared.

Hand in hand we walked across the lawns, smelling the hint of newly mown grass that I associated with happy days in the garden: Maman and Daddy’s friends, champagne in one hand, croquet mallet in the other, the thwack of a ball hurtling across the cricket pitch Daddy mowed for such occasions . . .

These happy days had happened less since the war had begun, which made the memories of when they did seem even more precious. The war had also given Daddy a limp, so we had to walk quite slowly, which was fine with me because it meant it was longer that he was all mine. He was much better now than he had been when he had first come home from hospital. He had been in a wheelchair like an old person, and his eyes had looked grey too. But with Maman and Daisy nursing him, and me doing my best to read him storybooks, he had got better quickly. These days he didn’t even need a stick to walk, unless he was going further than the grounds.

‘Now Posy, run inside and wash your hands and face. Tell your mother I’m taking our new guest to settle him in,’ Daddy directed me with the net as we reached the steps that led up to the terrace.

‘Yes Daddy,’ I said as he turned to walk across the lawn and eventually disappeared through a high box hedge. He was heading for the Folly, which, with its turret made of yellow sandy brick, made the most perfect fairy-tale castle

LUCINDA RILEY

for fairy folk and their butterfly friends to live in. And Daddy certainly spent a lot of time in there. Alone. I was only allowed to peep into the small, round room that lay behind the front door of the Folly – which was very dark and smelt of mouldy socks – when Maman asked me to call Daddy in for lunch.

The downstairs room was where he kept his ‘outside equipment’, as he called it; tennis racquets jostled with cricket stumps and mud-splattered wellington boots. I had never been invited up the stairs that went round and round until they reached the top (I knew this because I’d secretly climbed them when Daddy had been called by Maman to take a telephone call up at the house.) It had been very disappointing to find he had already locked the big oak door that greeted me at the top of them. Even though I turned the knob as firmly as my small hands would allow me, it wouldn’t budge. I knew that, unlike the room below it, there were a lot of windows in the room, because you could see them from the outside. The Folly reminded me a bit of the lighthouse in Southwold, except that it had been given a golden crown to wear on its head instead of a very bright light.

As I walked up the terrace steps, I sighed happily as I looked up at the beautiful pale red-brick walls of the main house with its rows of long sash windows, framed by lime-green tendrils of wisteria. I noticed the old wrought-iron table, now more green than its original black, was being set up on the terrace for lunch. There were only three placemats and water glasses which meant that it was just us for lunch, which was very unusual. I thought how nice it would be to have both Maman and Daddy to myself.

The Butterfly Room

Stepping inside the house through the wide doors to the drawing room, I skirted between the silk damask sofas that sat around the enormous marble-encased fireplace – so big that last year, Father Christmas had managed to get a shiny red bicycle all the way down it – and skipped along the maze of corridors that led to the downstairs WC. Shutting the door behind me, I used both hands to turn on the big silver tap, then washed them thoroughly. I stood on tiptoe to look at my reflection in the mirror and check for smudges on my face. Maman was very fussy about appearances – Daddy said it was her French heritage – and woe betide either of us if we didn't arrive at the table spotless.

But even she could not control the wisps of wiry brown curls that continually escaped my tightly woven plaits, appearing at the nape of my neck and wriggling out of the slides that did their best to scrape the wisps back from my forehead. When he'd tucked me in one night, I'd asked Daddy if I could borrow some of his hair oil as I thought that might help, but he had only chuckled and twirled one of my ringlets around his finger.

'You will do no such thing. I love your curls, my darling girl, and if I were in charge, they would fly free about your shoulders every day.'

As I walked back down the corridor, I longed again to have Maman's sleek, poker-straight mane of blonde hair. It was the colour of the white chocolates she served with coffee after dinner. My hair was more like a café au lait, or at least that was what Maman called it; I called it mouse-brown.

'There you are, Posy,' Maman said as I stepped out onto the terrace. 'Where is your sunhat?'

LUCINDA RILEY

‘Oh, I must have left it in the garden when Daddy and I were catching butterflies.’

‘How many times have I told you that your face will get burnt and soon you will wrinkle up like an old prune,’ she admonished me as I sat down. ‘You will look sixty when you are forty.’

‘Yes Maman,’ I agreed, thinking that forty was so old anyway, that by then I wouldn’t really care.

‘How’s my other favourite girl this fine day?’

Daddy appeared on the terrace and swung my mother round into his arms, the jug of water she held slopping onto the grey stone paving.

‘Careful, Lawrence!’ Maman chastised him with a frown, before extricating herself from his grasp and placing the jug on the table.

‘Isn’t this a glorious day to be alive?’ He smiled as he sat down opposite me. ‘And the weather seems set fair for the weekend and our party too.’

‘We’re having a party?’ I asked as Maman sat down next to him.

‘Yes we are, darling girl. Your Pater has been deemed fit enough to return to duties, so Maman and I have decided to have a last blast while we can.’

My heart definitely missed a beat as Daisy, our maid of all things since the other servants had gone off to do war work, served the luncheon meat and radishes. I hated radishes, but it was all that was left over from the kitchen garden this week, as most things growing there had to go off to the war too.

‘How long are you going for, Daddy?’ I asked in a small strained voice, because a big hard lump had appeared in

The Butterfly Room

my throat. It felt just like a radish had already got stuck there and I knew it meant I might very soon cry.

‘Oh, shouldn’t be too long now. Everyone knows the Hun are doomed, but I have to help with the final push, you see. Can’t let my chums down, can I?’

‘No Daddy,’ I managed in a quavery voice. ‘You won’t get hurt again, will you?’

‘He won’t, *chérie*. Your Papa is indestructible, aren’t you, Lawrence?’

I watched as my mother gave him a small tight smile and I thought she must be as worried as I was because of it.

‘I am, my love,’ he replied, putting his hand on hers and squeezing it tightly. ‘I surely am.’

‘Daddy?’ I asked at breakfast the next day, dipping my toast soldiers carefully into my egg. ‘It’s so hot today, can we go to the beach? We haven’t been in such a long time.’

I saw Daddy give Maman a look, but she was reading her letters over her cup of *café au lait* and didn’t seem to notice. Maman always got lots of letters from France, all written on very thin paper, even thinner than a butterfly wing, which suited Maman, because everything about her was so delicate and slender.

‘Daddy? The beach,’ I prompted.

‘My darling, I’m afraid the beach isn’t suitable for playing at the moment. It’s covered in barbed wire and mines. Do you remember when I explained to you about what happened in Southwold last month?’

‘Yes, Daddy.’ I looked down at my egg and shuddered, remembering how Daisy had carried me to the Anderson

LUCINDA RILEY

shelter (which I'd thought was called that because it was our surname – it had confused me a great deal when Mabel had said her family had an Anderson shelter too, as her surname was Price). It had sounded as if the sky was alive with thunder and lightning, but rather than God sending it, Daddy said it was Hitler. Inside the shelter, we had all huddled close, and Daddy had said we should pretend to be a hedgehog family, and I should curl up like a little hoglet. Maman had got quite cross about him calling me a hoglet, but that's what I'd pretended to be, burrowed under the earth, with the humans warring above us. Eventually, the terrible sounds had stopped. Daddy had said we could all go back to bed, but I was sad to have to go to my human bed alone, rather than staying all together in our burrow.

The next morning, I had found Daisy crying in the kitchen, but she wouldn't say what was the matter. The milk cart didn't come that day, and then Maman had said I wouldn't be going to school because it wasn't there any more.

'But how can it not be there, Maman?'

'A bomb fell on it, *chérie*,' she'd said, blowing out cigarette smoke.

Maman was smoking now too, and I sometimes worried that she would set her letters on fire because she held them so close to her face when she was reading.

'But what about our beach hut?' I asked Daddy. I loved our little hut – it was painted a butter yellow, and stood at the very end of the row so if you looked the right way, you could pretend that you were the only people on the beach for miles, but if you turned the other way, you weren't too far from the nice ice cream man by the pier. Daddy and I always made the most elaborate sandcastles, with turrets

The Butterfly Room

and moats, big enough for all the little crabs to live in if they decided to come close enough. Maman never wanted to come to the beach; she said it was ‘too sandy’, which I thought was rather like saying the ocean was too wet.

Every time we went, there would be an old man with a broad-brimmed hat walking slowly along the beach, poking the sand with a long stick, but not like the one that Daddy used to walk with. The man would have a large sack in his hand and every now and then he would stop and begin to dig.

‘What is he doing, Daddy?’ I’d asked.

‘He’s a beachcomber, darling. He walks along the shore, looking in the sand for things that might have been washed up from the ships out at sea or carried here from distant shores.’

‘Oh, I see,’ I’d said, although the man didn’t have a comb of any kind, and certainly not like the one that Daisy dragged through my hair every morning. ‘Do you think he’ll find buried treasure?’

‘I’m sure if he spends enough time digging, he’s bound to find something one day.’

I had watched with growing excitement as the man had pulled something out of the hole and brushed the sand off it, only to see that it was an old enamel teapot.

‘How disappointing,’ I’d sighed.

‘Remember, my darling, one man’s rubbish might be another man’s gold. But perhaps we are all beachcombers in a way,’ Daddy had said, squinting in the sun. ‘We keep seeking, hoping to find that elusive buried treasure that will enrich our lives, and when we pull up a teapot rather than a gleaming jewel, we must continue to search.’

LUCINDA RILEY

‘Are you still searching for treasure, Daddy?’

‘No, my Princess of the Fairies, I’ve found it,’ he’d smiled down at me and kissed me on the top of my head.

After a lot of nagging, Daddy eventually gave in and decided to take me to a river to swim, so Daisy helped me put my swimsuit on and pushed a hat onto my curly hair, and I climbed into Daddy’s car. Maman had said she was too busy preparing for the party tomorrow, but that suited me fine, because then the King of Fairies and I could welcome all the creatures of the river to our court.

‘Are there otters?’ I asked, as he drove in the opposite direction of the sea and through the rolling green fields of the countryside.

‘You have to be very quiet to see otters,’ he said. ‘Could you manage that, Posy?’

‘Of course!’

We drove for a long time before I saw the blue snake of the river hiding behind the reeds. He parked the car, and together we hiked to the riverbank, Daddy carrying all of our scientific equipment: a camera, butterfly nets, glass jars, lemonade and corned beef sandwiches.

Dragonflies skimmed the surface of the water, disappearing quickly as I went splashing in. The water was deliciously cool but my head and face felt prickly and hot beneath my hat, so I threw it onto the riverbank where Daddy had now changed into his bathers too.

‘Any otters that were once here have surely scarppered at all this noise,’ Daddy said as he strode into the water. It barely reached his knees, he was so tall. ‘Now, look at all this bladderwort, shall we take some home for our collection?’

The Butterfly Room

Together we reached into the water and pulled out one of the yellow flowers to reveal its bulbous roots. Lots of little insects had been living in it, so we filled a jar with water and then put our specimen inside it for safekeeping.

‘Do you remember the Latin name, my darling?’

‘Utri-cu-la-ria!’ I replied proudly, getting out of the water and sitting down beside him on the grassy bank.

‘Clever girl. I want you to promise you will keep adding to our growing collection. If you see an interesting plant, press it like I showed you. After all, I’ll need help with my book while I’m away, Posy.’ He handed me a sandwich from the picnic basket and I accepted it, trying to look very serious and scientific. I wanted Daddy to know he could trust me with his work. He’d been something called a botanist before the war and had been writing his book for almost as long as I’d been alive. He would often lock himself in his Folly to do some ‘thinking and writing’. Sometimes, he’d bring the book back to the house and show me some of the drawings he’d made.

And they were wonderful. He explained how it was all about the habitat we lived in and there were beautiful illustrations of the butterflies and insects and plants. He’d told me once that if just one thing changes, it can throw everything out of balance.

‘Look at these midges, for example,’ Daddy had pointed to an annoying cloud of them one hot summer night, ‘They’re crucial for the ecosystem.’

‘But they bite us,’ I had said, slapping one away.

‘It’s in their nature, yes,’ he’d chuckled. ‘Without them though, lots of species of birds wouldn’t have a steady food source and their populations would plummet. And if the bird

LUCINDA RILEY

populations are affected, it has repercussions on the rest of the food chain. Without birds, other insects like grasshoppers would suddenly have fewer predators, and they would keep multiplying and eating all the plants away. And without the plants . . .’

‘It would take away food from all the herb-vores.’

‘Herbivores, yes. So you see, everything hangs in a delicate balance. And one small beat of a butterfly’s wings can make all the difference in the world.’

I thought about this now as I chewed on my sandwich.

‘I’ve got you something special,’ Daddy said, reaching into his rucksack. He pulled out a shiny tin and handed it to me.

I opened it up to see dozens of perfectly sharpened pencils in all the colours of the rainbow.

‘Whilst I’m away, you must continue with your drawings so that when I come back you can show me how much you’ve improved.’

I nodded, too happy with my present to speak.

‘When I was at Cambridge, we were taught to really look at the world,’ he continued. ‘So many people walk about blind to the beauty and magic around them. But not you, Posy, you already see things better than most. When we draw nature we begin to understand it – we can see all the various parts and how they are joined together. By drawing what you see and studying it, *you* can help other people understand the miracle of nature too.’

When we arrived home, Daisy scolded me for getting my hair wet and bundled me into the bath, which I thought didn’t make sense as she was making my hair wet all over

The Butterfly Room

again. Once Daisy had put me to bed and shut the door behind her, I slipped out again and got out my new coloured pencils, stroking the soft yet sharp tips of them. I thought that if I practised hard enough, by the time Daddy came back from the war, I could show him that I was good enough to go to Cambridge too – even if I was a girl.

The next morning, I watched from my bedroom window as cars began streaming along our drive. Each one was full to bursting with bodies; I'd heard Maman explain that all her friends had pooled their petrol coupons to make the journey from London. Actually, she called them '*émigrés*', which, because she had spoken French to me since I was a baby, I knew meant 'emigrants'. In the dictionary it said this was a person who moved from their original country to another. Maman said that it felt as though the whole of Paris had moved to England to escape the war. I knew this wasn't true of course, but there always seemed to be more of her French friends than Daddy's English ones at the parties. I didn't mind at all, because they were so colourful, the men with their bright scarves and jewel-coloured smoking jackets, and the ladies with their satin dresses and slashes of red lip paint. Best of all, they always brought me presents, so it was like Christmas.

Daddy called them 'Maman's bohemians', which the dictionary said meant creative people like artists and musicians and painters. Maman had once been a singer in a famous Paris nightclub, and I loved listening to her voice, which was deep and silky-smooth like melted chocolate. She didn't know I was listening of course, because I was meant to be asleep, but when there was a house party, that was impossible anyway, so I'd creep down the stairs and

LUCINDA RILEY

listen to the music and the chatter. It was as if Maman came to life on these nights, as if she was pretending to be an inanimate doll in between the parties. I loved hearing her laugh, because when we were by ourselves, she didn't do that very often.

Daddy's flying friends were nice too, although they all seemed to dress alike in navy and brown so it was hard to tell them apart. My godfather Ralph, who was Daddy's best friend, was my favourite; I thought he was very handsome, with his dark hair and big brown eyes. There was a picture in one of my storybooks of the prince who kisses Snow White and wakes her up. Ralph looked just like that. He also played the piano beautifully – before the war he had been a concert pianist (before the war, simply every grown-up I knew had been something else, except for Daisy, our maid). Uncle Ralph had some illness that meant he couldn't fight or fly planes in the war. He had what the grown-ups called a 'desk job', although I couldn't imagine what one did with desks except sit behind them, which is probably what he did. When Daddy was away flying his Spitfires, Uncle Ralph would come to visit Maman and I, which really cheered us both up. He would come to Sunday lunch and then play the piano for me and Maman afterwards. I had realised recently that Daddy had been away at the war for four of my seven years on this planet, which must have been miserable for Maman, with only me and Daisy for company.

I sat on my window seat and craned my neck through the window to watch Maman greet her guests on the sweeping steps that led up to the front door below me. She looked so beautiful today, in a midnight-blue dress that matched her lovely eyes and, as Daddy joined her, slipping an arm around

The Butterfly Room

her waist, I felt very happy indeed. Daisy arrived to put me into the new dress she had made for me out of a pair of old green curtains. As she brushed my hair, then tied just a little of it back with a green ribbon, I decided I wouldn't think about Daddy going away again tomorrow, when a silence like before a thunderstorm would settle back on Admiral House and us, its residents.

'Ready to go down, Posy?' Daisy asked me. I could see she was red-faced and sweating and looked very tired, probably because it was very hot indeed and she had to make food for all these people with no help. I gave her my sweetest smile.

'Yes, Daisy, I am.'

My real name wasn't actually Posy; I was named after my mother, Adriana. But as it would be far too complicated to have two of us answering to it, it had been decided to use my second name, Rose, after my English grandmother. Daisy had told me that Daddy had started calling me 'Rosy Posy' when I was a baby, and somewhere along the way, the second half of the name had stuck. Which was fine by me, because I thought it suited me far better than either of my real names.

Some of Daddy's older relatives still called me 'Rose', and I would answer of course, because I had been taught that I always answered adults politely, but at the party, everyone knew me as Posy. I was hugged and kissed and little net parcels of sweeties tied up with a ribbon were pressed on me. Maman's French friends favoured sugared almonds, which in truth I didn't like very much, but I knew how hard it was to find chocolate because of the war.

LUCINDA RILEY

As I sat at the long trestle table which had been placed on the terrace to seat us all, and felt the sun beat down on top of my sunhat (which only made me hotter), and listened to the chatter around me, I wished every day at Admiral House could be like this. Maman and Daddy sitting together in the centre, like a king and queen holding court, his arm draped around her white shoulder. They both looked so terribly happy, it made me want to cry.

‘Are you all right, Posy darling?’ Uncle Ralph, who was sitting next to me, asked. ‘Damned hot out here,’ he added, whisking a spotless white handkerchief out of his jacket pocket and mopping his brow.

‘Yes, Uncle Ralph. I was just thinking how happy Maman and Daddy look today. And how sad it is that he has to go back to the war.’

‘Yes.’

I watched as Ralph studied my parents and thought he suddenly looked sad too.

‘Well now, with a fair wind, it will be over soon,’ he said eventually. ‘And we can all start to get on with our lives.’

After lunch, I was allowed to play some croquet, which I did surprisingly well at, probably because most of the adults had drunk quite a lot of wine and wobbled the ball all over the place. I’d heard Daddy saying earlier that he was emptying the last of the wine cellar for the occasion, and it looked like most of it had been emptied into the guests already. I didn’t really understand why adults wanted to get drunk; to my mind they just became louder and sillier, but maybe when I was an adult, I would. As I walked across the lawn towards

The Butterfly Room

the tennis court, I saw a man with his arms draped around two women lying under a tree. All three of them were fast asleep. Someone was playing a saxophone alone up on the terrace and I thought what a good job it was that we didn't have close neighbours.

I knew I was lucky to live at Admiral House; when I had started at the local school and been invited round to tea by Mabel, a friend I had made, I had been amazed to find that her family lived in a house where the front door led straight into the sitting room. There was a tiny kitchen at the back, and an *outside* lavatory! She had four brothers and sisters who all shared the same tiny bedroom upstairs. It was the first time I had realised that I came from a rich family, that everyone did not live in a big house with a park for a garden and it was quite a shock. When Daisy collected me to walk me home I asked her why this was.

'It's the roll of the dice, Posy,' Daisy had said in her soft Suffolk accent. 'Some people get the luck and others don't.'

Daisy was very fond of her sayings; half the time I didn't understand what she meant, but I was very glad that the 'dice' seemed to have rolled me into the lucky pile and I decided that I needed to pray harder for everyone that didn't get in.

I wasn't sure that my teacher, Miss Dansart, liked me very much. Even though she encouraged all of us to put up our hands if we knew the answer to the questions, I always seemed to be the first to do it. She would roll her eyes a little and her lips would make a funny shape as she said, 'Yes, Posy,' in a tired voice. I'd once heard her talking to another teacher in the playground as I was turning one end of a long skipping rope nearby.

LUCINDA RILEY

‘Only child . . . brought up in the company of adults . . . precocious . . .’

I had looked up ‘precocious’ in the dictionary when I got home. And after that, I’d stopped putting up my hand, even if the answer burned in my throat as I held it inside.

At six o’clock, everyone woke up and drifted off to change for dinner. I went into the kitchen, where Daisy indicated my supper.

‘Bread and jam for you tonight, Miss Posy. I’ve got two salmon that Mr Ralph brought to deal with and I can’t make head nor tail of them.’

Daisy chuckled at her own joke, and I felt suddenly sorry for her because she had to work so hard all the time.

‘Would you like some help?’

‘I have Marjory’s two young ’uns coming in from the village to set the table and serve tonight, so I’ll be all right. Thanks for asking,’ she said as she threw me a smile. ‘You’re a good girl, you are.’

When I’d finished my tea, I slipped away from the kitchen before Daisy could tell me to go upstairs and get ready for bed. It was such a beautiful evening, I wanted to go back outside and enjoy it. As I stepped onto the terrace, I saw the sun was hovering just above the oak trees, sending slants of butter-coloured light onto the grass. The birds were still singing as though it was only noon and it was still warm enough to be comfortable without a cardigan. I sat down on the steps, smoothing my cotton dress over my knees and studying a Red Admiral that had settled on a plant in the sloping flower bed that led down to the garden. I’d always thought that our house was named after the butterflies that

The Butterfly Room

hovered so prettily in the bushes. I'd been terribly upset to find out from Maman that it had been named after my great-great-great (I think it was three 'greats', or maybe four) grandfather, who had been an admiral in the navy, which wasn't nearly so romantic.

Even though Daddy had said Red Admirals were 'common' round here (which was what Maman called some of the children in my class at school), I thought they were the most beautiful butterflies of all, with their vibrant red-and-black wings and the white spots on the end of them, which reminded me of the pattern on the Spitfires Daddy flew. But that thought made me sad because it *also* reminded me that he was going away again to fly them tomorrow.

'Hello darling girl, what are you doing out here all alone?'

The sound of his voice made me jump, because I'd just been thinking about him. I looked up and saw him walking towards me across the terrace, smoking a cigarette, which he threw to the ground and stamped on with his foot to put it out. He knew I hated the smell.

'Don't tell Daisy you've seen me, will you, Daddy? Or she'll send me straight to bed,' I said hurriedly as he sat down on the step next to me.

'Promise. Besides, no one should be in bed on a heaven-sent evening like this. I believe June is the best month that England has to offer; everything in nature has recovered from its long winter sleep, stretched and yawned and unfurled its leaves and flowers for us humans to enjoy. By August, its energy has burnt out in the heat, and it's all ready to go to sleep again.'

LUCINDA RILEY

‘Just like us, Daddy. I’m happy to get into bed in the winter,’ I said.

‘Exactly, darling. Never forget that we are inextricably entwined with nature.’

‘The bible says that God made everything on Earth,’ I said importantly, having learnt this from my scripture lessons.

‘Indeed, although I find it hard to believe he managed it in just seven days,’ he chuckled.

‘It’s magic, Daddy, isn’t it? Like Father Christmas being able to deliver presents to all the children in the world in one night.’

‘Yes it is, Posy, of course it is. The world is a magical place and we must all count ourselves lucky to live in it. Never forget that, will you?’

‘No, Daddy. Daddy?’

‘Yes, Posy?’

‘What time are you leaving tomorrow?’

‘I must catch the train after lunch.’

I studied my black patent shoes hard. ‘I’m worried you might get hurt again.’

‘No fear, darling. As your Maman says, I am indestructible,’ he smiled.

‘When will you come back home?’

‘The minute I get leave, which shouldn’t be too long. Look after your mother while I’m gone, won’t you? I know she gets miserable here by herself.’

‘I always try to, Daddy. She only gets sad because she misses you and loves you, doesn’t she?’

‘Yes, and golly, Posy, I love her. The thought of her – and you – is all that’s got me through when I’m flying. We

The Butterfly Room

hadn't been married for long when this blasted war began, you see.'

'After you'd heard her singing in the club in Paris and fallen in love with her that minute, then whisked her off to England to be your bride before she could change her mind,' I said dreamily. My parents' own love story was far better than any of the fairy tales in my storybooks.

'Yes. It's love that makes the magic happen in life, Posy. Even on the drabbest day in the depths of winter, love can make the world light up and look as beautiful as it does now.'

Daddy gave a deep sigh, then took my hand in his large one. 'Promise me that when you find love, you will grab hold of it and never let it go.'

'I promise, Daddy,' I said, looking at him earnestly.

'Good girl. Now, I must be off to change for dinner.'

He dropped a kiss on top of my curls, stood up and walked back into the house.

Of course, I didn't know at the time, but it was the last proper conversation I would ever have with my father.

Daddy left the next afternoon, and all the guests too. That evening, it was very hot and the air felt thick and heavy when you breathed, as if all the oxygen had been sucked out of it. The house fell silent – Daisy had gone on her weekly trip to take tea with her friend Edith, so there wasn't even the sound of her grumbling or singing (out of the two, I preferred the grumbling) over the washing-up. Of which there was a lot, still stacked on trays in the scullery waiting to be cleaned. I had offered to help with the glasses, but Daisy said I'd be more trouble than I was worth, which I thought was quite unfair.

LUCINDA RILEY

Maman had taken to her bed the minute the last car had disappeared beyond the chestnut trees. She had one of her migraines, apparently, which Daisy said was a posh word for a hangover, whatever that was. I sat in my room, curled up on the window seat positioned over the portico at the front of Admiral House. This meant that, if someone was expected, I was the first one to see them arrive. Daddy called me his 'little look-out', and since Frederick, the butler, had gone off to fight, I was usually the one who opened the front door.

From here, I had a perfect view of the drive, carved between lines of very old chestnut and oak trees. Daddy had told me that some of them had been planted nearly three hundred years ago when the first Admiral had built himself the house. (I found this thought fascinating because it meant that trees lived on Earth almost five times longer than people, if the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in the library was right and the average human life expectancy was sixty-one for men and sixty-seven for women.) If I squinted hard, on a clear day I could see a thin line of greyish-blue above the treetops and below the sky. It was the North Sea, which lay just five miles away from Admiral House. It was frightening to think that one day soon, Daddy could be flying across it in his little plane.

'Come home safely, come home soon,' I whispered to the dark grey clouds that were pressing down on the sun as it set, about to squash it like a juicy orange (I hadn't tasted one of those for a *very* long time). The air was still and there was no breeze wafting through my open window. I heard the rumble of thunder in the distance and hoped Daisy wasn't right and God wasn't angry with us. I could

The Butterfly Room

never work out whether He was Daisy's cross God or the vicar's kind one. Maybe He was like a parent and could be both.

As the first drops of rain began to fall, soon turning into a torrent as streaks of God's anger flashed across the sky, I hoped Daddy had arrived safely at his base, otherwise he would get very wet indeed, or worse, struck by lightning. I closed the window because the sill was getting wet and then realised my tummy was rumbling nearly as loudly as the thunder. So I went downstairs to find the bread and jam Daisy had left me for supper.

As I walked down the wide oak stairs in the gloomy dusk, I thought how silent the house was compared to yesterday, like a nest of buzzing, talkative bees had arrived, then left just as suddenly. Another clap of thunder roared above me, breaking the silence, and I decided it was a good job I wasn't a scaredy-cat about dark and thunderstorms and being alone.

'Ooh Posy, your house is creepy,' Mabel had said when I had invited her home for tea. 'Look at all them pictures of dead people in their old-fashioned costumes! They give me the willies, they do,' she'd pronounced with a shiver, pointing up at the paintings of Anderson ancestors that lined the stairs. 'I'd be too scared to leave me room to go to the lavvy at night in case of ghosts.'

'They're my relatives from long ago, and I'm sure they would be very friendly if they did come back to say hello,' I'd said, upset that she didn't love Admiral House immediately like I did.

Now, as I walked across the hall and along the echoey corridor that led to the kitchen, I didn't feel frightened at

LUCINDA RILEY

all, even though it was very dark now and Maman, who was probably still asleep upstairs in her bedroom, would never hear me if I screamed.

I knew I was safe here, that nothing bad could ever happen inside the house's sturdy walls.

I reached to turn on the light in the kitchen, but it didn't seem to be working, so instead I lit one of the candles that sat on a shelf. I was good at lighting candles, because the electricity at Admiral House, especially since the war, could not be relied upon. I loved their soft, flickering glow that just lit the area you were in and seemed to make even the ugliest person look pretty. Taking the bread Daisy had cut for me earlier – I might be allowed to light candles but I was forbidden to touch sharp knives – I slathered on the butter and jam thickly. Then, with a piece already in my mouth, I took the plate and the candle and went back upstairs to my bedroom to watch the storm.

I sat on my window seat chewing the bread and jam and thinking how Daisy worried about me when she left for her evening off. Especially when Daddy was away.

'It's not right for a little girl to be alone in such a big house,' she'd mutter. I'd explain that I wasn't alone because Maman was here too and besides, I wasn't 'little' as I was seven, which was quite big.

'Hmph!' she'd reply as she took off her apron and hung it on the hook on the back of the kitchen door. 'Never mind what she says, you go and wake your mum if you need her.'

'I will,' I always said, but of course, I never did, not even when I'd been sick on the floor once and my tummy had hurt really badly. I knew Maman would get cross if I woke her up because she needed her sleep. In any case,

The Butterfly Room

I didn't mind being alone, because since Daddy had gone to the war, I was used to it. Besides, there was the whole collection of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* from the library to read. I had finished the first two volumes, but I had another twenty-two to go, which I reckoned would take me until I was a grown-up.

Tonight, without electricity, it was too dark to read and the candle was now only a stub, so I watched the skies instead, trying not to think about Daddy going away or tears might start falling from my eyes as fast as the raindrops that were beating on the window.

As I looked out, a sudden flash of red caught my eye in the top corner of the pane.

'Oh! It's a butterfly! A Red Admiral!'

I stood up on the window seat and saw that the poor thing was doing its best to shelter from the storm by nestling underneath the window frame. I had to rescue it, so I very carefully opened the latch on the top pane and reached my hand outside. Even though it wasn't moving, it took me a while to clasp it between my forefinger and thumb because I didn't want to damage its fragile wings, which were firmly closed and very wet and slippery.

'Got you,' I whispered as I carefully drew my hand – which was now soaking wet – back through the window and shut it firmly with my dry hand.

'Now then, little one,' I whispered as I studied it sitting in the palm of my hand. 'I wonder how I dry your wings?'

I thought about how they might dry if they were outside in nature because they must get wet all the time.

'A warm breeze,' I said, and began to gently blow my own breath onto them. At first, the butterfly didn't move,

LUCINDA RILEY

but finally, as I thought I might faint from using so much breath, I watched as the wings fluttered and opened. I had never had a butterfly sitting still on the palm of my hand, so I bent my head and studied the lovely colour and intricate pattern on the top of them.

‘You are a real beauty,’ I told it. ‘Now, you can’t go back outside tonight or you will drown, so why don’t I leave you here on the windowsill so you can see your friends outside and I will set you free tomorrow morning?’

Very gently, I picked up the butterfly with the tips of my fingers and placed it on the windowsill. I watched it for a while, wondering if butterflies slept with their wings open or closed. But by now, my own eyes were closing, so I drew the curtains across the window in order that the tiny creature wouldn’t be tempted to fly into the room and attach itself to the ceiling high above me. I would never be able to reach to get it down again if it did and it might die of hunger or fear in the meantime.

Taking the candle, I walked across the room and climbed into bed, feeling satisfied that I’d managed to save a life and that maybe it was a good omen and Daddy would not get hurt again this time.

‘Goodnight, butterfly. Sleep well until the morning,’ I whispered as I blew the candle out and fell asleep.

When I woke up, I saw shards of light crossing the ceiling from the gaps in the curtains. They were golden today, which meant the sun was already out. Remembering my butterfly, I climbed out of bed and drew back the curtains carefully.

‘Oh!’

I caught my breath as I saw my butterfly, wings closed

The Butterfly Room

and lying on one side with its tiny feet in the air. Because the underside of its wings were mostly dark brown, it looked more like a large and very dead moth. Tears sprang to my eyes as I touched it just to check, but it didn't stir, so I knew its soul was already up in heaven. Maybe I had killed it by not setting it free last night. Daddy always said you had to release them very quickly and even though it hadn't been in a glass jar, it had been inside. Or maybe it had died of pneumonia or bronchitis because it had got so wet.

I stood there looking at it, and I just *knew* it was a very bad omen indeed.

Autumn 1944

I liked the moment when summer began to fade into the long dead winter. The mist began to hang across the tops of the trees like huge spiders' webs and the air smelt woody and rich with fermentation (I'd learnt that word recently when I went to visit the local brewery on a school trip and watched the hops being turned into beer). Maman said she found the English weather depressing, that she wanted to live somewhere where it was sunny and warm all year round. Personally, I thought that would be very boring. Watching the cycle of nature, the invisible magic hands that turned the emerald-green leaves on the beech trees to a shiny bronze colour, was exciting. Or maybe I just lived a very dull life.

And it *had* been dull since Daddy left. No more parties or people coming to visit, except for Uncle Ralph, who turned up quite a lot with flowers and French cigarettes for Maman and occasionally, chocolate for me. The monotony

LUCINDA RILEY

had at least been broken with the annual August trip down to Cornwall to visit Granny. Usually, Maman would come with me, and Daddy would join us for a few days if he could get leave, but this year, Maman announced I was old enough to go by myself.

‘It is you she wishes to see, Posy, not me. She hates me, she always has done.’

I was sure this wasn’t true, as no one could hate Maman, with her beauty and her lovely singing voice, but the consequence was, I went alone, with a bad-tempered Daisy accompanying me on the long journey there and back.

Granny lived just outside a small village called Blisland, which nestled on the western edge of Bodmin Moor. Although her house was quite big and quite grand, its grey walls and heavy dark furniture always seemed a bit gloomy to me after the light-filled rooms of Admiral House. Outdoors was fun to explore, at least. When Daddy came, we would walk onto the moor to pick samples of the heather and the pretty wildflowers that grew between the gorse.

Sadly, on this visit, Daddy wasn’t there and it rained every day, which meant that outdoors was out of bounds. During the long, wet afternoons, Granny taught me to play Patience and we ate a lot of cake, but I was very glad when it was time to leave. When we arrived home, Daisy and I had climbed out of the pony and trap which Benson, our part-time gardener (who was probably one hundred years old) sometimes drove to collect people from the railway station. Leaving Benson and Daisy to bring in the suitcases, I ran into the house in search of Maman. I could hear ‘Blue Moon’ playing from the gramophone in the drawing room and had found Maman and Uncle Ralph dancing together.

The Butterfly Room

‘Posy!’ she’d said, leaving Uncle Ralph’s arms and coming over to hug me. ‘We didn’t hear you arrive.’

‘It was probably the loud music in here, Maman,’ I’d answered, thinking how pretty and happy she looked, with her flushed cheeks and her lovely long hair, which had fallen out of its clip and was making a pale golden trail down her back.

‘We were celebrating, Posy,’ said Uncle Ralph. ‘There’s more good news from France, you see. It looks as though Jerry will soon surrender and the war will be finally over.’

‘Oh, good,’ I replied. ‘That means Daddy will be home soon.’

‘Yes.’

There was a pause before Maman had told me to run along up to my room to wash and change after my long journey. As I did so, I’d truly hoped Uncle Ralph was right and Daddy *would* be home soon. Since the radio had begun to tell us in the news bulletins about the triumph of D-Day, I had been hoping to see him constantly. It was over three months ago now and he still hadn’t come back, even though Maman had been to visit him when he had short leave, because it was easier. When I queried why he wasn’t home yet when we’d almost won the war, she had shrugged.

‘He is very busy, Posy, and will be home when he is home.’

‘But how do you know he is well? Has he written to you?’

‘*Oui, chérie*, he has. Be patient. Wars take a long time to end.’

The food shortages were even worse and we were down to our last two chickens, who hadn’t had their necks broken because they were the best egg producers. Even they seemed

LUCINDA RILEY

down in the mouth, though I went to talk to them every day, as Benson said happy chickens produced more eggs. My chatter wasn't working, because neither Ethel nor Ruby had produced an egg for the past five days.

'Where are you, Daddy?' I asked the skies, thinking how wonderful it would be if I suddenly saw a Spitfire appear from between the clouds and there was Daddy, zooming downwards to land on the wide lawns.

November came, and each afternoon after school, I spent my time hunting in the sodden, frost-soaked undergrowth for kindling for the fire Maman and I lit in the morning room in the evening, because it was much smaller to heat than the great big drawing room.

'Posy, I have been thinking about Christmas,' Maman said to me one night.

'Maybe Daddy will be home by then and we can spend it together.'

'No, he will not be home and I have been invited to London to celebrate with my friends. Of course, it will be far too boring for you being with so many adults, so I have written to your grandmother and she is willing to take you for Christmas.'

'But I . . .'

'Posy, please understand that we cannot stay here. The house is freezing, there is no coal for the fires . . .'

'But we have logs and—'

'We have no food on our plates, Posy! Your grandmother has lost her help recently and is willing to take Daisy too whilst she finds a local replacement.'

I bit my lip, very close to tears. 'But what if Daddy comes back to find us gone?'

The Butterfly Room

‘I will write to him and tell him.’

‘He may not get the letter, and besides, I would rather stay here and starve than spend Christmas at Granny’s! I love her, but she is old and the house isn’t my home and—’

‘Enough! I have made up my mind. Remember, Posy, we must all do what we can to survive the last months of this brutal war. At least you will be warm and safe, with food inside you. This is much more than many others across the world who are starving or even dead.’

I had never seen Maman so angry, so even though a torrent of tears was poised behind my eyes and making them ache, I swallowed hard and nodded.

‘Yes, Maman.’

After that, at least Maman seemed to cheer up, even if Daisy and I were walking about the house like pale spectres doomed for the rest of our existence.

‘If I had any choice, I wouldn’t be going,’ Daisy grumbled as she helped me pack my suitcase. ‘But the mistress tells me she has no money to pay me here, so what can I do? I can’t live on buttons, can I?’

‘I’m sure things will be better when the war is over and Daddy comes back home,’ I told her, comforting myself at the same time.

‘Well, they can’t get any worse than they’ve been. Things have come to a pretty pass here and that’s for sure,’ Daisy replied darkly. ‘I’ve half a mind that she’s getting us both out of the way, so that she can . . .’

‘She can what?’ I asked her.

‘Never you mind, young lady, but the sooner your dad is home, the better.’

*

LUCINDA RILEY

As the house was being shut up for the next month, Daisy went to work on cleaning every single inch of it.

‘But why are you cleaning it if no one’s going to be here?’ I asked her.

‘Enough of your questions, Miss Posy, and help me with these instead,’ she said, picking up a pile of white sheets and flapping them open like big white sails. Together we spread them over all the beds and the furniture in the twenty-six rooms of the house, until it looked like a large family of ghosts had moved in.

Once the school holidays began, I took out my coloured pencils and my pad of clean white paper sheets and drew what I could find from the garden. It was quite hard because everything was dead. One chilly December day, I took my magnifying glass into the garden. It hadn’t snowed yet, but there was a shiny white frost on all the holly bushes, and I took off my mittens so I could hold the lens to see the stems properly. Daddy had taught me exactly where to look to find the pupae of the Holly Blue butterfly.

As I did so, I saw the door of the Folly open and Daisy came out, her face flushed and her arms full of cleaning supplies.

‘Miss Posy, what are you doing out here without your mittens on?’ she scolded me. ‘Put them back on, you’ll get frostbite and your fingers will drop off.’ With that, she stalked off to the house, and I looked at the door of the Folly, which hadn’t quite swung shut behind her. Before I could think better of it, I slipped inside, and the door creaked shut behind me.

It was very dark, but my eyes soon got used to it, and I could make out the shapes of the cricket stumps and croquet

The Butterfly Room

hoops that Daddy kept in here as well as the locked gun cupboard that he had told me never to open. I glanced up at the stairs that led to Daddy's room and stood there in an agony of indecision. If Daisy had left the downstairs door unlocked, maybe the one to Daddy's private room was still open too. I wanted to see the inside of it so, so badly . . .

Eventually, curiosity won, and I tripped up the stairs that turned round and round quickly before Daisy returned. When I reached the top, I put my hand to the knob of the big oak door and twisted it. Daisy clearly hadn't locked it, because it opened, and one step later, there I was in Daddy's secret office.

It smelt of polish, and light illuminated the circular walls that surrounded the windows Daisy had just cleaned. On the wall directly in front of me hung what must be an entire extended family of Red Admiral butterflies. They were lined up in rows of four behind glass enclosed by a gilt frame.

As I took a step closer, I was confused, because I wondered how the butterflies could stay so still, and what they had found to eat inside their glass prison.

Then I saw the heads of the pins that stuck them to the backing. I glanced at the other walls and saw that they too were covered with the butterflies we'd caught over the years.

With a groan of horror, I turned and pelted down the steps and out into the garden. Seeing Daisy approaching from the house, I turned and ran around the back of the Folly and into the woodland that surrounded it. When I was far enough away, I sank down onto the roots of a big oak tree, gulping in breath.

'They're dead! They're dead! They're dead! How could he have lied to me?' I shouted in between sobs.

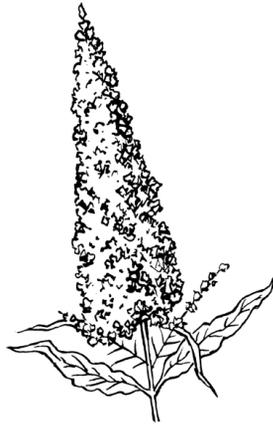
LUCINDA RILEY

I stayed in the woods a very long time, until I heard Daisy calling for me. I only wished I could ask Daddy why he'd killed them when they were so beautiful, and then hung them up like trophies so he could look up and see their deadness on the walls.

Well, I couldn't ask, because he wasn't here, but I had to trust and believe there was a very good reason for the murders in our butterfly kingdom.

As I stood and began to walk slowly back to the house, I couldn't think of a single one. All I knew was that I never wanted to set foot in the Folly again.

Admiral House
September 2006



Butterfly Bush
(Buddleja davidii)

Chapter 1

Posy was in the kitchen garden picking some carrots when she heard her mobile ringing from the depths of her Barbour. Pulling it out of her pocket, she answered it.

‘Hello, Mum. I didn’t wake you, did I?’

‘Goodness no, and besides, even if you had, it’s lovely to hear from you. How are you, Nick?’

‘I’m good, Mum.’

‘And how is Perth?’ Posy enquired, standing up and wandering through the garden and into the kitchen.

‘Just starting to hot up as England begins to cool down. How are things with you?’

‘I’m fine. Nothing much changes around here, as you know.’

‘Listen, I’m calling to let you know that I’m coming back to England later this month.’

‘Oh Nick! How wonderful. After all these years.’

‘Ten, actually,’ her son confirmed. ‘It’s about time I came home, don’t you think?’

LUCINDA RILEY

‘I do indeed. I’m over the moon, darling. You know how much I miss you.’

‘And I you, Mum.’

‘How long will you be staying? Could it be as long as to be the guest of honour at my seventieth birthday party next June?’ Posy smiled.

‘We’ll have to see how things go, but even if I decide to come back here, I’ll make sure I’m there at your party, of course I will.’

‘So, shall I come and pick you up from the airport?’

‘No, don’t worry about that. I’m going to stay in London for a few days with my friends Paul and Jane as I have some business I want to sort out, but I’ll ring you when I’m clearer on my plans and drive up to Admiral House to see you.’

‘I can hardly wait, darling.’

‘Nor me, Mum. It’s been too long. I’d better go, but I’ll be in touch soon.’

‘Righty-ho. Oh Nick . . . I can’t quite believe you’re coming home.’

He heard the catch in her voice. ‘Nor me. Lots of love, and I’ll call you as soon as I have things organised. Bye for now.’

‘Bye, darling.’

Posy sank into the ancient leather chair next to the Aga, feeling weak with emotion.

Of her two sons, it was Nick of whom she had the most vivid memories as an infant. Perhaps, because he’d been born so soon after his father’s tragic death, Posy had always felt that Nick was utterly hers.

His premature arrival – hastened almost certainly by the

The Butterfly Room

appalling shock of losing Jonny, her husband of thirteen years, so tragically – meant Posy, with three-year-old Sam on top of the newborn Nick, had found little time to wallow.

There had been much to sort out, a lot of hard decisions to make at a time when she was at her lowest ebb. All the plans she and Jonny had made for the future had to be shelved. With two small children to bring up alone – children who would need their mother’s love and attention more than ever – Posy had realised it would be an impossible task to try and run Admiral House as the business they had planned.

If there was ever a particularly bad moment to lose one’s husband, Posy thought, that had been it. After twelve years of being stationed around the globe, Jonny had decided to leave the army and fulfil his wife’s longed-for dream: to return to Admiral House and give their young family – and the two of them – a proper home.

Posy put the kettle on to boil, thinking back to how hot it had been that August thirty-four years ago, when Jonny had driven them through the golden Suffolk countryside towards the house. She had been newly pregnant with Nick; anxiety mixed with morning sickness had caused them to pull over twice. When they’d finally driven through the old wrought-iron gates, Posy had held her breath.

As Admiral House had come into view, a flood of memories had washed over her. It looked just as she remembered it, perhaps a little older and wearier, but then again, so was she. Jonny had opened the door of the car for her and helped her out, and Sam had run up beside her and gripped her hand tightly as they had walked up the steps to the huge front door.

LUCINDA RILEY

‘Do you want to open it?’ she had asked him, placing the heavy key into the palm of his small hand.

He had nodded and she had lifted him up so he could slot the key into the lock.

Together, they’d pushed open the heavy door, and the sun had shone a path into the dark and shuttered house. Going on memory, Posy had found the light switch. The hall was suddenly flooded with electric light, and they had all looked upwards at the magnificent chandelier hanging twenty feet above them.

White sheets were draped over the furniture, and dust had lain thickly on the floor, whirling up into the air as Sam had run up the magnificent cantilevered staircase. Tears had come to Posy’s eyes, and she had shut them tightly as she had been assailed by the sights and smells of her childhood, Maman, Daisy, Daddy . . . when she had opened them, she had seen Sam waving from the top of the stairs and she had joined him up there to see the rest of the house.

Jonny had loved it too, though with obvious reservations about its upkeep.

‘It’s enormous, darling,’ he’d said as they’d sat in the kitchen in which Posy so vividly remembered Daisy rolling pastry on the old oak table. ‘And obviously in need of some updating.’

‘Well, it hasn’t been lived in for more than a quarter of a century,’ she’d answered.

Once they’d settled in, the two of them had talked about how Admiral House could provide a much-needed income to supplement Jonny’s army pension. They’d agreed that they could set about renovating the house and one day, open it as a bed and breakfast to paying guests.

The Butterfly Room

Ironically, Jonny's death, after all his years in the military, had come only months later at the metal teeth of a combine harvester, which had hit him head-on as he negotiated a narrow bend only two miles away from Admiral House.

Jonny had left her his pension and a couple of life insurance policies. She'd also inherited her grandmother's estate when she'd died a couple of years before, and had put the money she'd received from the sale of the Manor House in Cornwall into investments. She'd also received a small bequest from her mother, who had died of pneumonia (a fact that Posy still found odd, given she'd spent many years in Italy) at the age of fifty-five.

She'd considered selling Admiral House, but as the estate agent she'd brought in to value it had told her, few people wanted a house of that size any longer. Even if she found a buyer, the price she'd get for it would be well below what it was worth.

Besides, she adored the house – had only just returned to it after all those years – and with Jonny gone, Posy needed the familiar and comforting walls of her childhood home around her.

So, she'd worked out that as long as she remained frugal with their living costs, and braced herself to dip into her savings and investments to subsidise her income, the three of them could just about get by.

Throughout the lonely, dark days of those first months without Jonny, Nick's sunny, undemanding nature had provided endless solace, and as she'd watched her baby boy grow into a happy, contented child, toddling around the kitchen garden, he'd given her hope for the future.

Of course, it had been easier for Nick; what he'd never

LUCINDA RILEY

known he couldn't miss. Whereas Sam had been old enough to acknowledge the chill wind of death as it blew across his life.

'When's Daddy coming back?'

Posy remembered him asking the same question every night for weeks on end after his father's death, her heart breaking as she saw the confusion in his big blue eyes, so similar to his father's. Posy would steel herself to tell him that Daddy wasn't coming back ever again. That he'd gone up to heaven to watch over them from there and finally, Sam had stopped asking.

Posy stood listening to the sizzle of the water beginning to boil. She stirred the coffee granules into the milk at the bottom of the cup, then topped it up with hot water.

Cradling her cup, she walked towards the window and stared out at the ancient horse chestnut that had stoically given generations of children a bumper crop of conkers. She could see the green, prickly husks already formed, heralding the end of the summer and the beginning of autumn.

The thought of conkers reminded her of the start of the school year – a moment she'd dreaded when her boys were younger, as it marked the buying of new school uniforms, the label-sewing and the trunks she'd heave up from the cellar. Then the dreadful silence when they'd left.

Posy had thought long and hard about sending her beloved boys away to boarding school. Even if generations of both Jonny's and her own family had been sent away, it had been the late seventies and times had changed. Yet she knew her own experience had not only given her an education, but independence and discipline. Jonny would have wanted his sons to go – he had often talked about sending

The Butterfly Room

them to his alma mater. So Posy had dug into her investments – comforting herself with the thought that her grandmother would approve too – and sent them away to school in Norfolk; not so far that she could never see them play rugby or appear in a school play, but far enough so she couldn't be tempted to fetch them on the occasions when one or the other of them was homesick.

Sam had been the most frequent caller – he'd struggled to settle and always seemed to be falling out with one of his friends. When Nick had followed his brother three years later, she'd rarely heard from him.

In the early days of her widowhood when both the boys were small, she had longed for time to herself, but when both her sons had left for school and she'd finally had it, the cool breeze of loneliness had blown through the damp walls and lodged in her heart.

For the first time in her life, Posy remembered waking up in the morning and struggling to find a reason to climb out of bed. She'd realised it was because the core of her life had been torn away from her and everything around the edges of it was merely padding. Sending her boys away was like going through bereavement all over again.

The feeling had humbled her – up to that point in her life she had never understood depression and had seen it as a sign of weakness, but in that dreadful month after Nick had first left for school, she had felt guilty for ever thinking one could simply snap out of it. She'd realised she needed a project to take her mind off how much she missed her boys.

She'd been in her father's study one autumnal morning and stumbled across an old set of plans for the garden in the drawer of his desk. From the look of them, he'd obviously

LUCINDA RILEY

been planning to turn the parkland gardens into something spectacular. Having been protected from light, the ink was still vivid on the parchment paper, the lines and proportions of the park rendered in her father's meticulous hand. She could see that beside the Folly, he had marked a space for a butterfly garden, listing nectar-rich perennials that she knew would be a riot of colour in full bloom. A wisteria walk led to an orchard full of all of her favourite fruits: pears, apples, plums, and even figs.

Beside the kitchen garden, he had marked out a large greenhouse and a smaller walled garden, with a note that had read 'willow walkway for Posy to play'. Whimsical garden pathways were sketched in to connect the disparate parts, and Posy had chuckled at his plan for a pond near to the croquet lawn ('to cool off hot tempers'). There was also a rose garden marked 'for Adriana'.

So, she'd gone out that afternoon with string and willow sticks and had started marking out some of the borders he'd planned, which would be filled with grape hyacinths, alliums and crocuses, all of which didn't need much attention and were perfect for attracting bees when they woke from their winter sojourn.

A few days later, with her hands deep in the soft earth, Posy remembered smiling for the first time in weeks. The smell of compost, the feel of the gentle sun on her head and the planting of bulbs that would provide welcome colour next spring, had reminded her of her time at Kew.

That day had been the start of what had become a twenty-five-year passion. She'd laid out the vast area into sections, and each spring and autumn, she'd worked on a new part of it, adding her own designs to those of her father,

The Butterfly Room

including her personal *pièce de résistance* – an ambitious parterre below the terrace, comprising intricate curves of low box hedges enclosing beds of fragrant lavender and roses. It was an absolute devil to maintain, but the view it afforded from the formal reception rooms and bedrooms was sublime.

In short, the garden had become her master, her friend and her lover, leaving her little time for anything else.

‘Mum, it’s amazing,’ Nick would say when he arrived home in the summer holidays and she’d show him the new work in progress.

‘Yeah, but what’s for supper?’ Sam would ask as he kicked a ball across the terrace. Posy remembered he’d broken the greenhouse windows three times as a boy.

As she gathered the ingredients together to whip up a cake to take over to her grandchildren later, Posy felt the familiar twinge of guilt prompted by any thoughts of her eldest son.

Although she loved Sam dearly, she’d always found him far more difficult than Nick. Perhaps it was simply that she and her second son shared so much in common. His love for ‘old things’, as Sam had called them, watching his younger brother painstakingly restore an old chest rotting away from woodworm. Where Sam was all action – his attention span short and his temper quick to ignite – Nick was far calmer. He had an eye for beauty that Posy liked to think he’d inherited from her.

The terrible truth was, she thought as she stirred the eggs into the cake mixture, one could love one’s children, but that didn’t mean to say one would like them equally.

The thing that upset her most was that her two sons

LUCINDA RILEY

were not close. Posy remembered Nick toddling around the garden after his big brother when they were small. It had been obvious he worshipped the ground Sam walked on, but as the years had fled by, she'd noticed that Nick had actively begun to avoid him during the school holidays, preferring to spend time with her in the kitchen, or restoring his bits of furniture in the barn.

They were polar opposites, of course – Sam, so outwardly confident and Nick introspective. Like a silken thread that had been spun through the decades from their childhood, their adult lives were connected, but had continued to take them in different directions too.

Since leaving school, Sam had flunked university and moved to London. He'd tried his hand at computers, cheffing and estate agency. All of these endeavours seemed to have melted away like snow after a few months. He'd returned to Southwold ten years ago, married, and after further failed start-ups, was at present trying to set up his own property business.

Posy always encouraged him as best she could when he came to her with a new money-making scheme. But recently, she'd made a pact with herself that there would be no more lending, however hard Sam pleaded with her. Besides, with most of her investments eaten up by her beloved garden, she had little left to give. A year ago, she had sold one of her precious Staffordshire figurines to finance Sam's 'water-tight' business plan to make films to help market local businesses. The funds from the figurine's sale had been lost forever when the company folded after only nine months.

The difficulty she had in saying no to Sam was compounded by the fact that he had managed to find himself

The Butterfly Room

an angel of a wife. Amy was a complete sweetheart who had even managed to smile when recently, for the umpteenth time, Sam announced they had to move from their rented house to another, smaller one, due to lack of cash.

Amy had borne Sam two healthy children – Jake, who was six, and Sara, four – *and* managed to hold down a job as a receptionist at a local hotel to provide an albeit small but much-needed regular flow of cash into the household, as well as stoically supporting her husband, which made Amy a saint in Posy's book.

As for Nick, Posy's heart filled with happiness that her son was finally returning to the UK. After he'd left school, he'd ignored the offers of a couple of excellent universities and instead announced he wanted to go into the antiques trade. After working part-time at a local auctioneer's, he'd managed to get himself an apprenticeship with an antique dealer in Lavenham, commuting daily from Admiral House.

When he was just twenty-one, Nick had opened his own shop in Southwold and had soon begun to garner a reputation for stocking interesting and unusual antiques. Posy could not have been happier that her son had chosen to live his life locally. Two years later, he'd rented the premises next door to double the space for his flourishing business. If he was away buying, Posy would leave her beloved garden and spend a day in the shop serving the customers.

A few months later, Nick had announced he had taken on a full-time assistant to run the shop when he was attending auctions. Evie Newman was not traditionally beautiful, her small frame and elfin features giving her the air of a child rather than a woman, but her huge brown eyes were haunting in their loveliness. The first time Nick

LUCINDA RILEY

had introduced Posy to Evie, she had watched her son watching every move Evie made, and had known without a doubt that Nick had fallen in love.

Not that Nick was able to do anything about his feelings. Evie had a long-standing boyfriend to whom she was seemingly devoted. Posy had met him once and been surprised that Evie could find the weasel-faced, pseudo-intellectual Brian attractive. A divorced sociology lecturer at the local community college and older than Evie by a good fifteen years, Brian had strong opinions and liked to air them as often as possible. Posy had disliked him on the spot.

As Nick spent more time away on buying trips, Posy had helped Evie learn the ropes at the shop. Despite the difference in age between the two women, they'd become firm friends. Evie had lost both her parents very young, and lived with her grandmother in a rambling Victorian house in Southwold. Having never had a daughter of her own, Posy revelled in the fondness she felt for her.

Sometimes Evie would travel with Nick and Posy would be left holding the fort at the shop. She loved to see Evie's sparkling eyes when she returned from a buying trip, her expressive hands conjuring up an elegant chiffonier they had got for next to nothing in a sale from a magnificent chateau in the South of France.

Despite her promise to herself not to rely on Nick's presence in her life, after years of coexisting happily at Admiral House, the shock she'd felt when, out of the blue, he'd told her he was selling up and moving to Australia, had been devastating. This was compounded by Evie announcing soon afterwards that Brian had got a good job at a college in Leicester. He had asked her to marry him,

The Butterfly Room

apparently, and she had agreed. They were to leave Southwold imminently.

Posy had tried to discover exactly why her son felt he had to extinguish the successful business he'd worked so hard to build and move to the other side of the world, but Nick was not forthcoming. She'd suspected it was something to do with Evie, and given she was moving away too, something didn't quite fit.

The business sold almost immediately and Nick had left soon after for Perth, shipping stock over with him to give him a start in his new Antipodean venture. Posy had given no clue as to how lost she would feel without him.

The fact that Evie had not come to say goodbye before she'd left Southwold had cut Posy to the quick, but she'd accepted that she was an older woman in a young person's life. Just because she had strong feelings for Evie did not mean they were or should be reciprocated.

As winter had drawn in, again Posy had felt the familiar frost of loneliness. Due to the time of year, her beloved garden was sleeping and there was little she could do until the spring. Without the comfort of that to bury herself in, Posy knew she had to find something urgently to fill the void. So she'd taken herself off into Southwold and managed to find herself a part-time job. Three mornings a week she worked at an art gallery. Even though modern paintings were not really her kind of thing, the job brought in some pin money and kept her busy. She had never admitted to the owner how old she really was and ten years later, Posy was still working there.

'Almost seventy,' murmured Posy as she put the cake mixture into the Aga to bake and set the timer to take with

LUCINDA RILEY

her. As she left the kitchen and headed for the main stairs, Posy thought what a Herculean task being a mother was. However old her two sons had become, she had never stopped worrying about them. If anything, she worried more; at least when they were small she had known exactly where and how they were. They'd been under her control and of course, as they had grown into adults and fled the nest, that was no longer the case.

Her legs ached slightly as she climbed the stairs, reminding her of all the things she tried not to think about. Even though she was of an age where she could legitimately start to complain about her health, she knew how lucky she was to be so fit.

'But,' she said to an ancestor whose image hung on the landing, 'just how long will it last?'

Entering the bedroom, Posy walked towards the windows and drew back the heavy curtains. There had never been the money to replace them and the original pattern on the fabric had bleached beyond recognition.

From here, she had the best view of the garden she'd created. Even in early autumn as nature was preparing itself for sleep, the oblique rays of the afternoon sun caressed the leaves of trees that were slowly ripening to gold, and the last of the roses hung heavy with scent. Fat orange pumpkins sat in the kitchen garden, and the trees in the orchard were laden with blush-red apples. And the parterre, immediately below her window, looked simply stunning.

Posy turned away from the beauty outside and faced the enormous bedroom, where generations of Andersons had slept. Her eyes skimmed over the once exquisite chinoiserie wallpaper that was now peeling surreptitiously in the corners

The Butterfly Room

and spotted with damp, the threadbare rug that was past recovering from so many spills, and the fading mahogany furniture.

‘And this is just one room; there are another twenty-five that need a complete overhaul, let alone the actual fabric of the building,’ she muttered to herself.

As she undressed, Posy knew that over the years she had done the bare minimum to the house, partly because of money, but mostly because, like a favourite child, she had thrown all her attention at the garden. And, like any neglected progeny, the house had continued crumbling away unnoticed.

‘I’m living here on borrowed time,’ she sighed, and admitted to herself that this beautiful old house was beginning to feel like a yoke round her neck. Even though she *was* fit and able for a woman who had seen sixty-nine years, just how much longer would she be? Besides, she knew that the house itself was edging to the point of no return if it didn’t receive serious renovation soon.

The thought of throwing in the towel and moving to somewhere more manageable appalled her, but Posy knew she had to be practical about the situation. She hadn’t mentioned the idea of selling Admiral House to either Sam or Nick, but perhaps, now Nick was returning, she should.

Undressing, Posy saw her reflected image staring back from the cheval mirror. The grey in her hair, the wrinkles around her eyes and the flesh that was no longer as taut as it used to be depressed her, and she averted her gaze. It was easier not to look, because inside, she was still a young woman full of youthful vigour, the same Posy who had danced and laughed and loved.

LUCINDA RILEY

‘Golly, I miss sex!’ she announced to the chest of drawers as she searched for her underwear. Thirty-four years was an awfully long time not to feel the touch of a man, his skin against hers, caressing her body as he rose and fell inside her . . .

After Jonny had died, there had been men who had crossed her path occasionally and shown an interest, especially in the early days. Maybe it had been that her attention was on the boys, and later the garden, but after a couple of ‘dates’, as her sons would call them, Posy had never found the enthusiasm to pursue a relationship.

‘And now it is too late,’ she said to her reflection as she sat down at her dressing table and dabbed the cheap cold cream – the only beauty routine she regularly pursued – onto her face.

‘Don’t be greedy, Posy. To find two loves in your life is more than most people are ever granted.’

As she rose, Posy put both dark and fanciful thoughts out of her head and concentrated on the far more positive thought of her son returning home from Australia. Downstairs, she took the cake out of the Aga, emptied it from its tin and left it to cool. Then she walked through the kitchen door into the rear courtyard. She unlocked her battered Volvo and drove along the drive, turning right onto the road that would lead her on the ten-minute journey into Southwold.

She headed towards the sea front, and despite the chilly September wind, rolled down her window to breathe in the briny sea air, mingled with the perpetual scent of fried doughnuts and fish and chips from the shop by the pier, which reached out into the North Sea, a steel grey under a

The Butterfly Room

hazy blue sky. Smart white terraced houses lined the road, the shop-fronts beneath them filled with beach bric-a-brac, and seagulls patrolled the pavement for stray pieces of food.

The fabric of the town had hardly changed since she'd been a child, but unfortunately, its old-fashioned seaside quaintness had inspired hordes of affluent middle-class families to invest in holiday homes here. This had driven up property prices to obscene levels, and, although good for the economy of the small town, had undoubtedly altered the dynamics of the once tight-knit community. The second-homers flocked into Southwold in the summer, making parking a nightmare, then left at the end of August like a pack of vultures who had finished feasting on a carcass.

Now, in September, the town felt dead and deserted, as if all its energy had been sucked out by the hordes and taken away with them. As Posy parked in the high street, she saw an 'end of season sale' poster in the boutique, and the bookshop no longer had its trestle tables offering second-hand novels stationed outside.

She walked briskly along the street, nodding good morning to those who passed and acknowledged her. The sense of belonging gave her pleasure at least. Stopping at the newsagents, Posy collected her daily copy of the *Telegraph*.

Coming out of the shop with her nose buried in the headlines, she bumped straight into a young girl.

'Pardon me,' she apologised, lowering her gaze to meet that of the brown-eyed child in front of her.

'That's okay,' the girl shrugged.

'My goodness,' Posy finally responded, 'do forgive me for staring, but you look awfully like someone I used to know.'

LUCINDA RILEY

‘Oh.’ The child shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. Posy moved aside so she could pass by her and step inside the shop. ‘Goodbye, then.’

‘Goodbye.’ Posy turned and walked up the high street towards the gallery. As she did so, a familiar figure came running down the street towards her.

‘Evie? It is you, isn’t it?’

The young woman stopped dead in her tracks, her pale face reddening from embarrassment.

‘Yes. Hello, Posy,’ she said quietly.

‘How are you, dear girl? And what on earth are you doing back in Southwold? Visiting old friends?’

‘No.’ Evie studied her feet. ‘We moved back here a couple of weeks ago. I . . . we live here now.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh, I see.’

Posy watched Evie as she continued to avoid making eye contact. She was far thinner than she used to be, and her lovely long dark hair had been chopped into a short crop.

‘I think I may have seen your daughter just now outside the newsagent. I thought she looked very like you. Back for good, the three of you?’

‘The two of us, yes,’ answered Evie. ‘Now if you’ll excuse me, Posy, I’m in a terrible hurry.’

‘Of course, and,’ Posy added, ‘these days I work in Mason’s Gallery, three doors down from The Swan. Any time you fancy a spot of lunch, you know I’d love to see you. And your daughter, whose name is . . . ?’

‘Clemmie, she’s called Clemmie.’

The Butterfly Room

‘Short for Clementine, I presume, like Winston Churchill’s wife.’

‘Yes.’

‘What a lovely name. Well, goodbye, Evie, and welcome back.’

‘Thank you. Bye.’

Evie headed towards the newsagents in search of her daughter, and Posy walked the last few yards down the road to the gallery. Feeling more than a little hurt at Evie’s obvious discomfort in her presence, and wondering what on earth she had done to garner such a negative reaction, Posy took the keys to the gallery out of her bag.

As she unlocked the front door, entered and fumbled for the light switch, she thought about what Evie had implied: that Brian, her partner of all those years ago, was no longer in her life. Inquisitive to know more, Posy thought it unlikely she ever would. From Evie’s reaction, it was more likely that she would probably cross the street to avoid her the next time they met.

However, the one thing she had learnt in her almost seventy years on this earth was that human beings were a queer lot and constantly surprised her. *Evie has her reasons*, Posy mused as she went to the office at the back of the gallery and switched on the kettle for her ritual second cup of coffee.

She only wished she knew what they were.