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The Wildflower Path

Written by Sarah Harrison

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The Wildflower Path

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Christmas Eve 1999

There were now over a thousand people in the chapel. The combined body heat of the congregation poured upwards to be lost among the fan vaulting. Evie and Kate, sitting halfway down the nave on the north side, had priority tickets but they'd still had to be here early and the cold of the stone floors was beginning to bite.

Evie felt for her grandmother's hand, gauging its temperature. Outside the midwinter was nothing if not bleak, the afternoon rapidly darkening towards a clear, freezing night. In here, though, it was softly bright, and the crowded pews gave off a murmurous rustle of anticipation, like waves on shingle. Stone fountains leapt. The candlelit choir stalls glowed. This was an atmosphere beyond price, and everyone knew it. Evie closed her eyes for a moment and thought, intensely, of those who weren't here; and of Raff, waiting with the others for the choir's entrance. This piercing, yearning feeling – was this, she wondered, what it was to pray?

Kate felt and appreciated that little squeeze of the hand. Her granddaughter wasn't an especially demonstrative girl and had quite enough to think about without shepherding an old lady to church on this always hectic day. It was sweet of her, and so much appreciated. Kate's part of the bargain was to enjoy it to the full. Heaven knows how those who'd queued must be feeling. But, oh—! No matter how often she came here, she never tired of the beauty of the building's soaring splendour. She tipped back her head, gazing upwards in wonder. Just to be here, away from the retail frenzy, the processed pop music and the blitzkrieg of advertising, was balm to her soul. Peace – that was what she hoped for, for all of them. Peace, and strength, on this most potent day of

the year, freighted with memory, sadness and hope, especially for her.

She closed her eyes for a second, and when she opened them, Evie was looking at her.

'All right, Gran?'

'Never better.'

'Are you missing Stella?'

'Yes,' said Kate. 'I am. But I'm sure she's not missing us. And I don't wish her back.'

The first small figures of the choir appeared in the south doorway. The congregation stood, with a sound like a giant sigh. A soft blanket of silence fell over them. Snow on snow … This time it was Kate who felt for Evie's hand, and held it tight.

Evie closed her eyes as the pure lone voice curled up into the still air like a thread of smoke. After a few seconds, unable to contain herself, she looked over her shoulder. Across something like twenty rows of people behind her, through a chink in the thickly clad figures she could see, clearly magnified as if through a pinhole, the ramrod-straight back of the choirmaster.

Incandescent with pride and emotion, she glanced across the aisle at the pews opposite: all the rapt faces, caught in this moment; all those memories that would hold it, all those voices that would describe it, over the years to come.

As she scanned the faces, her eyes were drawn as if magnetised to one that she recognised. Even as she told herself it couldn't be – could it? – she knew that it was him. His expression in profile, listening, was weary and quizzical, with the hint of a wistful smile; the habit of charm so strong it could not be broken, even here. Oh God, it *was* him. Changed, but not out of all recognition, still as fond and familiar, as infuriating, as her own reflection.

With the second verse, the organ and the massed voices of the choir released their powerful wave of sound, and Evie's tense heart unfurled.

Chapter One

1944–1946

Stella's earliest memories were a mixed bag – disordered, but separate, vivid and distinct, like the collection of old buttons her paternal grandmother kept in a satin handkerchief sachet.

The very earliest (she was almost certain she had not been told) was of the V-2s. She and her mother had certainly been in south London for a while at the end of the war, at Great-Uncle Aubrey's (to her) grand and gloomy house, before they went to join her father in Berlin. She definitely had a clear recollection of toiling up the stairs to the bedroom she and her mother shared on the third floor. There were different kinds of stair carpet on the different levels, beginning with a thick, woolly one covered in red and purple flowers with a black and red border. That gave way to a paisley leaf pattern in faded mauve, and finally to a plain dark red with threadbare patches of hairy beige string. It was the same with the stairs themselves, the edges of which were a shiny varnished brown between the ground and second floors, then becoming a dull, scarred black. (There was a cellar full of old trunks, flowerpots and bric-a-brac, but the stairs down to that were of icy grey concrete.) They would joke about how the two of them were in 'the servants' quarters', as if they'd been banished there, but in fact Kate had chosen the room because, though low-ceilinged, it was large, and had a view, of sorts.

'In Africa, where I grew up,' she used to say in a wondering, wistful voice, 'I could ride my pony in one direction for two hours and still be on our land. In London, you're lucky if you can see the next street.'

They weren't lucky; they couldn't see the next street, but they could see the backs of the houses that lined it, and the gardens in between. The houses were tall, like this one but seen from behind;

without the steps and porticos and porches and mouldings that they presented to the outside world, they looked rather scruffy. One afternoon, when she was in the garden, Stella had checked, and theirs was no different from the back. And the garden itself, which at ground level appeared imposingly long and set with giant trees, was just a strip among many similar strips when viewed from the top-floor window. Still, they liked being up high.

Other memories of that house: mealtimes, which she liked because of the sense of security they gave her – the way the grown-ups talked across and around her and complimented her on her appetite. It was easy to be good when eating; she liked food, and wasn't fussy. A 'good doer', her Great-Uncle Aubrey said, an expression more usually applied to horses, but a compliment nonetheless, and a characteristic that was to stand her in good stead at boarding school.

No, she did remember the V-2s – the drone that became a whine, then a high-pitched howl, a hunting-wolf shriek of approaching danger … Then the awful split second of silence when your heart stopped beating and your skin prickled and shrank … And finally the thunderous boom and crash of someone else's house, and life, being blown to smithereens. They hadn't had an Anderson shelter; she hadn't even known such things existed until later – they used to go down to the cellar when the air-raid warning sounded. She remembered the solid chill of the steps, and the smell of the paraffin heater, and the wonderful thrill occasionally of seeing Great-Uncle Aubrey in his whiskery dressing gown and slippers, all of them sitting round on boxes and drinking plastic-smelling tea poured from a Thermos. And then coming up, stiff and bug-eyed, in the morning to find that everything here was all right, but that not far away there were piles of smoking rubble where houses had been, and the acrid smudge of burning brick dust on the morning air. Sometimes she and Kate went out to shop or do errands the day after a raid, and they'd have to take a roundabout route because of bomb damage, and there would be ARP wardens, firemen and ambulance crews going about their business, taking no notice of anything else, moving doggedly between the pedestrians and the groups of exhausted displaced people, bereft of everything but what they stood up in – women with babies and frightened, peaky-faced children wrapped in rough brown blankets, whatever

the weather. 'Because of shock,' Kate explained. 'It makes you cold and shivery.'

Mainly, these experiences had given the young Stella a sense of her own good fortune, because once again the Bad Thing had happened to someone else. She hung on to her small store of pity, as yet unformed by experience, to apply to herself when – if – the time came.

What did sometimes make her cry was the absence of her father. She felt a homesickness for the texture of him, the scratch of his battledress, the smooth prickle of his evening face when he read to her, his hands, which, though stronger than her mother's, were more tentative from lack of practice, his infectious carefree laugh, which made his scalp move back slightly so his whole face smoothed out and looked young. She knew Kate missed him too, because she became snappy if Stella complained about it once too often.

'Oh, he'll be in touch when he's ready. The war'll be over soon,' she'd say, or something similar, briskly and determinedly putting the feelings back in their box.

Great-Uncle Aubrey had been a comfort. Kate had once called him 'a funny old stick', but whatever that meant, Stella thought, it couldn't have been that bad. He was nice: big, and solid and unchanging – she almost believed that a V-2 wouldn't dare hit the house in Mapleton Road while he was there – and though he didn't say very much, she found him always approachable. She would go into his dressing room (a masculine preserve, quite separate from the large, two-bedded room he shared with Aunt I) in the morning, and sit on the narrow camp bed, the grey blanket tickly beneath her bare legs, watching him perform the unvarying rituals of his masculine toilette: hair-brushing with two brushes, shoe-cleaning, snapping on of sock-suspenders, insertion of cufflinks, vigorous application of the clothes brush – he allowed her to stand on the camp bed and brush the back of his jacket – and finally the replacing of everything in its rightful place on top of the tallboy. When standing on the bed, she could see that the tallboy was like a sort of altar, everything arranged symmetrically before the mirror, with its twisted columns: the tortoiseshell cufflink box, the dappled ivory shoehorn and the silver-backed hairbrushes with their thick yellow bristles. There was a drawer – the top

right-hand drawer – which was more mysterious. Aubrey would take a clean handkerchief from this drawer and thrust it, folded, into his trouser pocket, or less frequently into the breast pocket of his jacket, but then quite often he would peer into the drawer and move the contents about, stirring them slightly and thoughtfully as if they were potpourri from which he was trying to coax scent. She'd been too small to see into this drawer, so a mystery it remained.

On the wall over the bed was a framed photograph of a school rugger team, with Great-Uncle Aubrey – he had pointed himself out – third from the left in the front row, sitting very upright with his arms folded. All the boys wore striped shirts and skull caps with dangly tassels.

The two of them rarely conversed. Her great-uncle was a man of few words and an inherent reserve. He did what he had to do, and she watched him do it. She liked the austere, business-like air of the dressing room, with its smell of starchy cotton and shoe polish. As well as the jacket-brushing, Aubrey encouraged her to tie his shoelaces; that was where she had learned to tie bows. Stella knew her mother thought him grumpy, but she herself found him patient and was comfortable with him. But then she'd been a small child. As an adult, she often looked back and wondered how it had been for Kate – an attractive, impatient, energetic young woman – to be stuck in that house without her husband and with only fuddy-duddy Aubrey and homely Aunt I for company. Had there been tensions? What did they talk about in the evenings, when Stella had gone to bed? How in God's name had her mother borne it?

Immediately after the war, they'd gone to join her father in Berlin. Once there, she had been protected by her parents' happiness in being together once more. Her child's world was a small one, its parameters extended only so far. She peered out at the biting cold of that first post-war winter, the desolate city of ruined buildings and thin, sad-faced people, from a cocoon of security and contentment such as a person feels at their fireside during a storm.

There had been three German people working at the house in Charlottenburg: the live-in maid, Gisela, a minxy girl in her twenties; an easy-going mother's help, Hildegarde, who came in daily

on the tram from Spandau; and Heinz, the scrawny teenage odd-job boy, son of a previous cook who had left under a (to Stella) unspecified cloud. Stella sensed that there was not just expediency but kindness in the arrangement. Outside the tall brick house on Meikelstrasse – a house not unlike Aubrey's in Mapleton Road – Berliners faced a harsh world. 'The Russians' were referred to in hushed tones. There were matters in the recent past not spoken of, things she did not and was not supposed to understand. Gisela, Hildegarde and Heinz worked for the Drakes not simply for a wage, but for protection.

One morning, Gisela was not in the kitchen. The table had been laid the night before, but no further preparations had been made. Hildegarde arrived and took over the making of breakfast. She positively bristled with annoyance and disapproval. Heinz kept his head down as he brought in the coal. When Kate asked, tentatively, where Gisela might be, Hildegarde mumbled without meeting her eye.

'She is still out, madam. She is not in her room.'

'But it's' – Kate consulted her watch – 'eight thirty.'

Stella felt the tremor of anxiety in the air. Hildegarde's cowed silence was broken by the arrival of Lawrence, trotting down the stairs, buttoning his battledress jacket.

'Am I keeping everyone waiting?'

'No,' said Kate. 'We haven't started. Gisela's not here.'

'Is she not?' He picked up Stella and gave her a kiss. 'Does she need waking?'

'Hildegarde says she's not in her room.'

'Don't let's panic. Morning, Hildegarde. Heinz, *guten Tag*.'

'Good morning, sir.' Hildegarde mouthed a prompt at Heinz, who managed a stifled syllable.

'No news is probably good news.' Lawrence plopped Stella down again and went into the dining room. 'Let's have breakfast and see what the situation is by the time I leave.'

Stella caught the sharp look her mother gave him. She thought her father should have been more angry, or worried, or – *something*. They sat down at the table in the dining room, a room so chilly their breath smoked. Lawrence touched Kate's hand and she pulled a rueful smile. Stella felt a little flop of relief in her stomach. Her father decapitated her egg neatly for her and cut

toast into soldiers. She was munching the third soldier when they heard the back door open and close, and tense, lowered voices in the kitchen. Kate made a move, hardly more than a twitch, but Lawrence shook his head. A minute or two later Gisela came in, her face as pale as her apron, bluish-white except for the dark scoops under her eyes and a blurry colour around her mouth where she – or perhaps Hildegarde – had scrubbed the lipstick off.

'Gisela,' said Lawrence in his pleasant way. 'We're glad to see you back.'

'I'm sorry to be late, sir.' She looked close to tears. Stella hoped she wouldn't cry; she hated grown-ups crying. 'I have missed the train.'

'We were worried about you,' said Kate, more pointedly.

'I know, I'm sorry, madam. It won't happen more.'

'As long as you're all right,' said Lawrence. 'Could we have a couple more slices of toast?'

'Yes, sir.' Glad of the excuse, Gisela snatched up the toast rack like a talisman and fled.

'Oh dear,' said Kate. 'She looks ghastly. Do you think I should give her the day off?'

'Why not just let nature take its course? She can sleep it off this afternoon.'

'Poor girl. I feel awful.'

'Never mind.' Lawrence winked at Stella as if they were in on something. 'She's back, and no harm done.'

'No …' Kate looked as if she were about to demur, but restrained herself. Because of her, Stella inferred.

When Gisela came back in with the toast, she had regained something of her old swagger, and nothing more was mentioned. Much, much later, Stella learned, from other sources as well as her mother, about the *Zigarettenkultur* of the Ku'damm, and the money to be made from it. A girl like Gisela was going to snatch her opportunities wherever she could. Now she slid Lawrence an oblique glance from beneath puffy lids as she left the room.

It was obvious to Stella that while Gisela and Hildegarde liked Kate well enough, they adored the Major. Not only did he embody the basic decency and fair-mindedness of the upright English officer, he was so tall, fair and handsome. As a child, Stella took her

parents' good looks for granted, but as a grown woman not herself endowed with beauty, she could, with hindsight, fully appreciate theirs. Hildegarde's admiration showed itself in a quasi-motherly doting, though she couldn't have been more than thirty-five herself. Gisela's was more straightforwardly flirtatious. There was nothing calculating in this; she was the kind of girl for whom flirtatiousness was a reflexive reaction to any attractive man. She had dark red hair and luminous porcelain skin. There was a smudge of amber down on her upper lip, too, and a pungent slick of it under either arm which showed when in warmer weather she wore one of her sleeveless blouses. Stella thought Gisela beautiful, but recognised there was something else about her too, something more grownup and dangerous.

Weaker marriages might have been vulnerable to the sultry Gisela of the bedroom eyes and nocturnal habits sashaying about their house, but Stella was sure she had never posed a threat to her parents. Gisela's little ways were a sort of shared joke between them. Besides, one of Lawrence's outstanding qualities was his capacity for happiness. It was a gift. Even in those dark and difficult times he'd been a glass-half-full man, able to take pleasure in his family and the everyday happenings of their lives. The notion of Stella's father, or her mother, straying would have been literally unimaginable; the stability of family life was a given. Her parents had something rare that made them almost unassailable: a true love match.

Christmas came, and was even more thrilling than usual because of the thick snow. They had a big Christmas tree in the drawing room, brought in by Heinz and Gisela's brothers, two lads of about twelve and sixteen. Once the giant tree with its black-wet smell had been wedged in a coal bucket near the window, they'd stayed for tea and cake, perching self-consciously on the edge of the sofa, melted snow making dark patches on the rug around their cheap split shoes. Kate made conversation in her spirited pidgin-German and Gisela translated, elaborating where necessary. Heinz and the older lad did the talking, while the younger one gazed mutely at the ground and Stella stared, fascinated, at his hands; they were thin and dirty, the stubby nails torn and the knuckles scaly and red. Those hands were a message from outside, and she was glad when the brothers had gone, carrying the bag

of clothes Kate had given them 'in case you know anyone who'd find them useful'.

Something strange happened that Christmas Eve. Stella didn't know what, to this day. It had taken place elsewhere; she had only been conscious of an atmosphere – strained and tense, hanging in the air like a single long-drawn-out note on a violin, or as if that horrible V-2 howling sound were going on for hours and hours. The explosion had not come, but the foundations of family life had been momentarily shaken, and shifted in some invisible way.

There was a children's party in the gym of the army infants' school. Stella hadn't really wanted to go – she was shy and would know none of the other children – but there was firm, gentle pressure to attend; it was expected of her, and Kate would remain there with the other younger children's mothers for the two hours of the party's duration. To sweeten the pill, Kate had found her some pretty party shoes at the army thrift shop, but even they did nothing to dispel the feeling of dread. Even the proximity of Christmas itself was no comfort.

She tried not to think about the party. The night before, she was allowed to stay up quite late in her dressing gown, colouring by the fire in the drawing room. When the phone rang, her mother answered it in her usual cheerful, businesslike way, but the next time she spoke it was in a quite different tone, low and urgent, the words inaudible. Stella scrubbed away with her red crayon at Santa's coat.

The phone went down and her mother came into the room and sat on the sofa just behind her with her hands laced on her knees. She wore a knobbly green jumper with an orange scarf knotted round her neck, and loose tan trousers. Out of the corner of her eye Stella could see her socks, and thick-soled shoes with tasselled laces. She lifted her crayon from the page and Kate leaned forward to admire.

'Good colouring, darling. He looks very festive.'

'What colour is his sack?'

'Whatever you like …' Her mother took a cigarette from the box on the side table and lit it. 'Brown usually, I suppose.'

Dutifully, because she wanted to soothe her mother, who seemed agitated, Stella took a brown crayon and began to apply it, round

and round inside the outline of the sack. Kate got up and went to the window. The tree was decorated now, but the lights wouldn't be lit till four o'clock, when it would be dark. The dreaded party tomorrow was at half past three, so they would be on when she got back; she'd be able to see them from the road, welcoming her. Not that it was proper daylight even now – they already had a lamp on, and the road outside was grey and bleak. Her mother stood with her shoulders slightly hunched, the elbow of her right arm cupped in the hand of her left, cigarette poised. Someone went slowly, stooping, past the window, collar up and hat down, pushing a loaded wheelbarrow. Kate turned back into the room and Stella coloured busily as her mother returned to the sofa and stroked the back of her hair.

'Darling … Stop a moment?' Stella stopped. 'Look at me?' She looked. Her mother's face was very bright, and nervous. Stella realised that she, Stella, was in a position of power, though she didn't know why or how, and she didn't want to be. Kate stubbed out the half-smoked cigarette.

'Would you mind if Hildegarde took you to the party tomorrow?'

She turned back to the safety of the colouring book. 'Why?'

'I have to go out. I'm really sorry, sweetheart, but it wouldn't make any difference, would it?'

'Will you be able to come?'

'Oh, of course I will. We both will, a bit later.'

'What are you doing?'

'Just seeing a friend, someone I haven't seen for ages. Good girl.' Another quick stroke of the hair. 'I bet I will be along.'

Stella noticed the slightly different form of words. Her mother dropped a kiss on her head – another slightly absent-minded caress – and went upstairs.

The next day was even more bitterly cold, dark and short. That morning, before her father left for work, her mother followed him into the hall and there was some sort of very quiet conversation, clearly not intended for Stella, still finishing her toast at the table, to hear. She knew there were secrets at Christmas – nice ones – but for some reason she didn't think it was one of those.

The day slunk by. Her mother was preoccupied. Gisela was snappy. Heinz trudged about, keeping his head down. Hildegarde

took Stella out to the nearby park, crunching and slipping through the frozen streets. They took stale bread for the starving ducks, Hildegarde kept it stuffed deep in her big coat pockets because there were plenty of people who would have taken it.

As the time for the party bore down on her, Stella sat and turned the pages of *Babar the Elephant*. She could hear her mother walking quickly about upstairs, short intervals of silence, then more walking around. She sounded brisk and purposeful. Perhaps everyone would forget about the party.

But Hildegarde was looking forward to it, and it wasn't long before she put her head round the drawing room door.

'*Alles alein?* Where is *Mutti*?'

'Upstairs.'

'The time!' Hildegarde pointed at the clock on the mantelpiece. 'We are going to the party?'

Against every instinct Stella said, grudgingly: 'Yes.'

'You should get ready.'

'Okay.'

'"Okay"!' Hildegarde pulled a face. 'Come come, *liebchen*, let's go!'

Reluctantly, Stella stood up, then, in response to Hildegarde's stern look, put the crayons back in their tin. Hildegarde laid a hand on her shoulder and steered her gently towards the stairs.

While Hildegarde got her things out, Stella looked in on her mother. Kate was sitting in front of the dressing table in the bedroom. She wasn't actually doing anything; just sitting there with her hairbrush in her hands, gazing at her reflection in a preoccupied way.

'Mummy?'

'What?' Kate jumped slightly. 'Oh, hello, poppet.'

'Hildegarde told me to get ready.'

'Ready? Yes!' She glanced at her watch and got up with almost comical enthusiasm. 'Come on, I'll come and help – and you've got those lovely shoes!'

Stella's party dress was dark red velvet with smocking, long sleeves and a narrow trimming of white lace round the collar and cuffs. Granny Drake had made it for her and everyone thought it was beautiful and so clever, but she was less than enthusiastic. Neither the skirt nor the sleeves puffed out, and there was only a

small floppy bow at the back, not a full butterfly sash. But once Kate had hitched her hair up in a green and white ribbon, and the shoes were on, set off by gleaming new socks, she felt a little better.

Hildegarde stood back in fond admiration. Kate bent to give Stella a kiss; she had put her evening scent on and its fragrance washed over Stella.

'You look so pretty. You'll be the belle of the ball.'

This wasn't the sort of thing her mother usually said, and anyway, Stella took leave to doubt it. She was *not* pretty. Though she quite looked forward to going with Hildegarde in the staff car, there was no doubt she was being fobbed off. She felt again the curious sense of her own power in this situation, and tested it with a whine:

'Do I *have* to go?'

'Yes!' Her mother's voice was impatient, then she changed it: 'You're all ready. Anyway, there'll be super food, and games – it'll be fun!'

The mention of games was no comfort at all. Games featured heavily in Stella's worst nightmares – the cheating, the covert bullying, the screeching, her own uselessness, the not-being-picked. And the food would be wasted on her; she'd be too nervous to eat. There would probably be a Father Christmas, and she would be asked what she wanted – what was she supposed to say, in front of all those people? But now her best coat had been removed from its hanger and was being held out. The inexorable process had begun.

Naturally, the party wasn't nearly as bad as she'd feared. Her father came early. Tea was as scrumptious as an army of wives and Red Cross helpers could make it, and the games were well regulated; she won musical bumps. She still, however, drew the line at Father Christmas, even though her father explained he was really Drum Major Watts, whom she liked. The German children got their presents first, and then sang carols. They sang beautifully. Hildegarde beamed and dabbed her eyes. Stella's father clapped his hands and said 'Bravo!' – but quietly. The two dreaded hours had passed, and it was going-home time.

'Where's Mummy?' she asked.

There was a tiny pause before he answered. 'She'll come soon, I expect.'

But by the time Stella lined up with the others to say goodbye and thank you to all the ladies who had given the party, and to the Drum Major, now out of his Father Christmas costume, she had still not come. Watts handed her father a small package, then he bent down from his immense height and addressed her jovially.

'Now then, young lady. Promise me you'll have a happy Christmas!'

'I promise,' Stella muttered.

The sergeant major seemed to find this funny and laughed like anything.

'With plenty of presents.'

'I promise,' she said again, this having gone down well the first time.

Hildegarde rode with them just as far as her bus stop. Stella's father jumped out and held the door for her, pressed something into her hand. Once he was back in the car, his good humour seemed to desert him. He sat deep in his corner of the seat, with one hand covering his mouth. When he caught Stella peering at him, he dropped his hand and smiled for a moment as if to reassure her, but she was sure the smile didn't last once his mouth was hidden again. When she asked again about her mother and why she hadn't come, he said he didn't know. It was obvious he didn't want to talk about it, perhaps because of the driver, Corporal Baker. Feeling slightly car sick Stella opened the Father Christmas present and found a paper doll with three sets of cut-out clothes. This cheered her up; she looked forward to getting home and undoing the packet and carefully separating the clothes along their perforated outlines.

The house felt lonely and empty without her mother. When Stella's father had hung his cap on the hook in the hall, he paused for a moment as if listening, but there was only a solid, resentful silence. They went into the drawing room, where the tree lights had at least been turned on by someone, and the fire was banked up so that it looked like a wall of black, veined with sulky red, behind the tall hinged fireguard. Lawrence turned on the lamps but left the curtains open.

'That'll be welcoming for Mummy when she comes back,' he

said. He rubbed his hands and sat down on the sofa, patting the cushion next to him. 'Now, what shall we do?'

What Stella wanted to do was play with the new paper doll, but her father seemed to want her attention. They talked 'best bits' and 'worst bits' of the party.

'Drum Major Watts thought *you* were the best bit,' said Lawrence. She wasn't quite sure how she should reply. 'He said you favoured your mother.' This time she didn't know what he meant, and anyway he seemed to be talking to himself. 'Hmm.' He took her face in his hands and scrutinised her with a comically stern scowl. 'Do you look like Mummy? Hard to say. You're like her in other ways, though.'

'What ways?' asked Stella, with interest.

'What ways, right. You're independent, and you know your own mind, you can be quite bolshie when crossed. But you're also' – he kissed the top of her head – 'my sweet girl. Stay here and keep warm, I'm going to get a spot of Scottish cough medicine.'

Stella hadn't understood most of this, but she recognised a slight improvement in her father's mood. While he was out of the room, she opened the packet and took out the doll and the clothes. When he came back, he said: 'That your present? Looks like a good one,' and sat down with his glass and the BFO newspaper. A moment later he got up and turned on the wireless, twiddling through a variety of digestive sounds until he found some dance music.

'This do us?' he asked, and she nodded. All these questions that didn't seem to require an answer – her father was restless. She kept her head bowed over her task, but soon became aware that he was looking at her round the paper.

'Isn't she smart?'

She held up the doll for his inspection. 'Do you like her shoes?'

'I do.' He leaned forward and tapped one of Stella's feet. 'Not as much as yours, though.'

'They're new.'

'I thought they must be. Did Mummy get them?'

'Yes.'

No one else *could* have bought them, thought Stella; he just wanted to mention her. He picked up the paper again and she started on the next sheet of doll's clothes, a beach ensemble of

shorts, shirt and straw hat. A few quiet, but not peaceful, minutes elapsed.

'You know,' he said, and she looked up politely. 'You know, we ought to get changed. Kate would have our guts for garters if she could see you on the floor in your party dress and me lolling about in uniform.'

'Mummy' had become 'Kate', Stella noticed.

Suddenly there was a patter down the stairs, and clack-clack across the hall and Gisela appeared, slightly flustered, with bright eyes and a shiny red mouth, feet like Minnie Mouse in high heels. She'd laid the table and put supper out, had the Major noticed?

Lawrence hadn't. They thanked her and did their best with the cold meat and potato salad, but after the party tea they weren't hungry. Stella's father found Gisela's Christmas present (stockings – Stella had helped to wrap them) and sent her on her way on a tide of thank yous.

Now the house was even emptier.

'When's Mummy coming back?' she asked.

'Any minute, I should think. How about a bath – that be nice?'

So her father didn't know and didn't want to tell her. Stella didn't ask again because he was in such a funny mood and the atmosphere between them was so awkward and wobbly. But as they went upstairs – he carried her most of the way – she felt a cold lump of anxiety bobbing in her chest. It made her feel a little sick.

He took off his battledress jacket and tie and his clumpy shoes and put on a khaki jumper and leather slippers. Then he ran her a bath. The bathroom was freezing and the hot water steamed like a volcanic spring. He helped her get out of the party dress carefully, and then said, 'Hop in,' and took her clothes to the bedroom. When he came back, he soaped her back and sat on the stool by the bath, trailing one hand in the water. He rubbed the soap in his hand and tried to blow bubbles through the 'O' of his finger and thumb, but it didn't work.

'Your mother's the expert,' he said ruefully.

He'd often bathed her before, but this time was different because there was no Mummy in another part of the house, wondering how they were getting on, looking in on them so it felt like a game. This time Daddy was in sole charge, and they didn't know

where Mummy was or when she would be back. They didn't play any more, and after a very few minutes she stood up and he pulled out the plug and lifted her out wrapped in a towel as the water gurgled and growled down the plughole.

When she was in her nightie, a yawn rose up from deep inside Stella, fought its way round the anxiety lump and forced her mouth open, until her whole face was stretched wide as a cat's.

'Bedtime?' She nodded. 'I think so. I'll read to you.' He stood and lifted her up. 'Now that I *am* good at.'

She leaned against his neck. He carried her across the landing and into her room. She had a white wooden shelf full of books – Beatrix Potter, Alison Uttley, Enid Blyton, *A Child's Garden of Verses*, Hans Andersen and the brothers Grimm (the pictures in that one almost too frightening) – but on the bedside table there lay just *The Wind in the Willows*, which her parents were taking turns to read aloud to her at night. It was quite a grown-up book with few pictures, but she loved the sound of it when they read it to her. She took off her dressing gown and Lawrence hung it on the bedpost. When she was sitting comfortably, with her pillow against the headboard and the covers tucked snugly under her armpits, he began to read. The last part had been rather sad, with poor Mole missing his home, and knowing it was nearby but not able to find it, and then when he did, feeling sad because it was neglected and empty – rather as this house felt tonight, though she tried not to think of that.

But it was Christmas time in the story, too, and Ratty bustled round and found some food, and said, 'Capital, capital!' and cheered the Mole up, and then there were carol singers at the door, little field mice with lanterns who sang in piping voices. Ratty invited them in – her father was particularly good at doing Ratty – so it was quite a party, and Mole was cheerful once more, tired and happy.

They didn't hear the front door. Stella saw her first when she appeared in the doorway with her big coat undone, her scarf trailing and her red wool gloves in her hand. There were snowflakes still twinkling in her hair and on her shoulders. Her face was shiny bright with the cold, and with that other something that Stella had noticed earlier, before she went out, only now the light seemed directed at the two of them.

‘Here’s Mummy,’ Stella said. She gave her father a little push. ‘Make room for her.’

They looked at her, and she at them. She smiled. She was beautiful, a wintry angel.

Stella felt her father smile too, as he moved both of them to one side so she could join them.