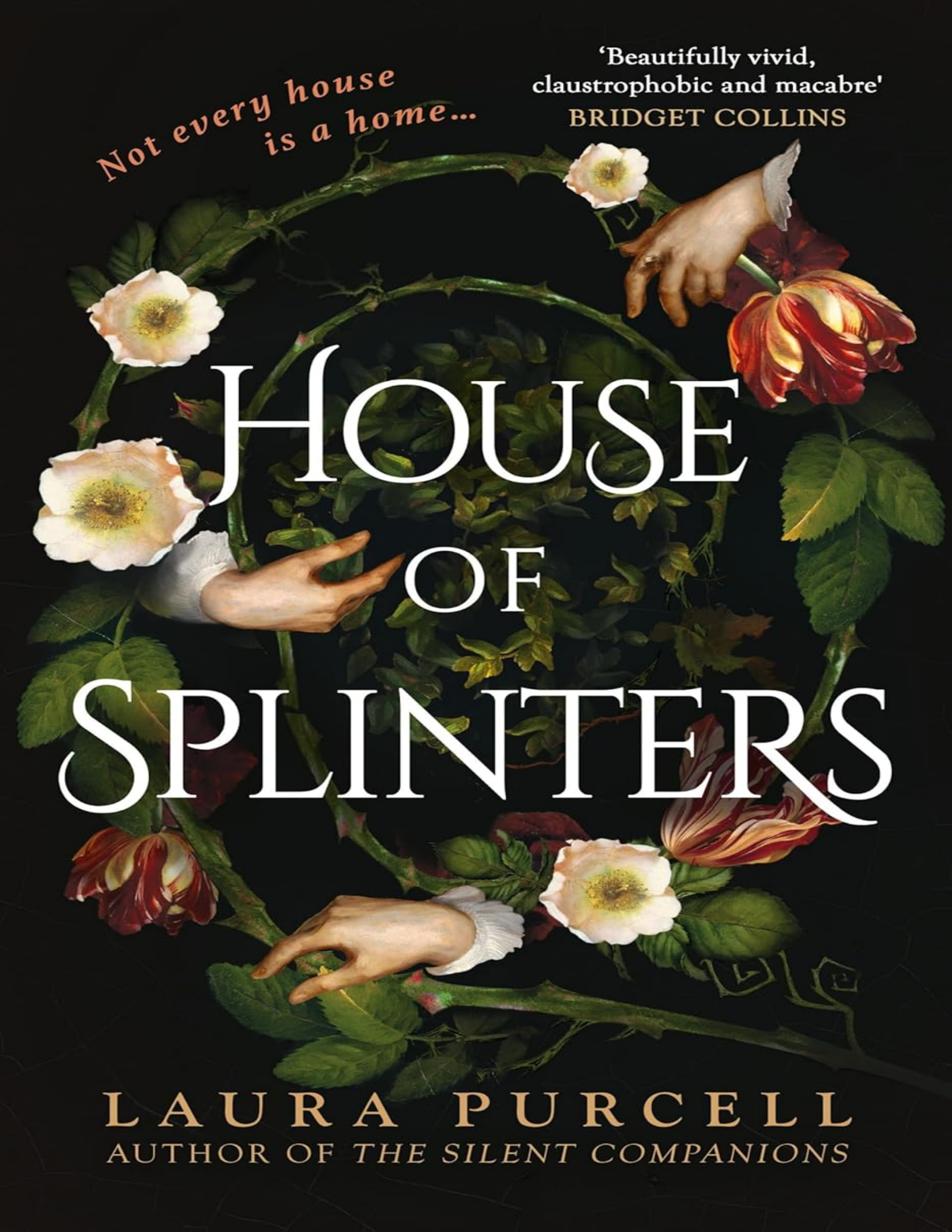


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is a home...*

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BRIDGET COLLINS



HOUSE OF SPLINTERS

LAURA PURCELL
AUTHOR OF *THE SILENT COMPANIONS*

HOUSE
OF
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The Silent Companions

The Corset

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For the readers of The Silent Companions, with heartfelt thanks

HOUSE OF SPLINTERS

Laura Purcell

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CHAPTER 1

It reminded Belinda of a play she'd seen: the king being arrayed for battle. Of course, she didn't have gauntlets or plate armour to arrange. Her maid Sawyer was helping her on with crochet gloves and a dark shawl. The big black hat had been brought out of its spring retirement, drooping its wide brim and feathers; hardly comparable to a helmet and cowl. But Belinda almost wished she *were* preparing to face violent hordes. The weapons she had to contend with were more insidious; they slipped in between the cracks when least expected.

'I hate to do it, madam,' Phoebe the nursemaid droned on in the background. 'I'm ever so sorry. Going up to The Bridge for a few weeks each summer is one thing, but my sister's ill... If I couldn't pop over and help her on my half-days, I don't know what would become of her children.'

Belinda had endured this conversation so many times that it was difficult to put any feeling into her response. 'Do not upset yourself, Phoebe. I half-expected you to tender your notice.'

'I just hope Master Freddy won't be too unhappy to see me go! I've a great regard for him, madam.'

'I am sure the feeling is mutual. I will be certain to have your reference written up before we leave next week.'

The nursemaid bobbed a curtsey. 'Thank you, madam.'

Belinda waited for Sawyer to dust the hair powder off her shoulders before inspecting her reflection. Propped along the bottom of the mirror were notes of condolence from the ladies in her circle. She'd spent so many years cut off from the world that these marks of friendship she'd managed to cultivate were truly precious. How typical that she was being forced to quit society at the height of the Season, just as she was making headway. And now all the

staff she'd grown comfortable with were peeling away too, unable or unwilling to relocate their lives to an estate so far from London. Mrs Marsh was staying on as housekeeper to oversee the town property in their absence, but that was all. The little kingdom Belinda had painstakingly built seemed to be crumbling to dust.

It was true she'd wanted change and the chance to become mistress of a family seat. She wanted it still – but the timing was wrong. These events had a habit of pouncing on her too soon, before she was prepared for them. First marriage, then motherhood, and now an inheritance had been thrust into her hands, and it was never in her power to refuse any of them.

'Come then, Sawyer. Let us be going.'

Creswell the footman opened the front door. Outside the day was mild, the streets rinsed clean by recent rain. People were venturing out in thinner fabrics and lighter colours. A hint of pale blue peeped from behind the clouds. Birds called from the blossom-laden trees in the square as white petals drifted this way and that in the breeze.

Belinda steadied herself against the black iron railing and descended the steps. Neighbours twitched their curtains aside to watch her. She shouldn't be leaving the house at all this soon after her father-in-law's death, visitors were supposed to come to *her*... But what could be done? As always, Mamma had left her with no choice. And there were small mercies. She was glad for an excuse to be out in the soft March air with everyone else.

A young lady of perhaps sixteen years old sat on a bench in the square. She wore no shawl, and her stays pushed her bosom up outrageously high. Belinda saw her flutter her eyelashes at a buck strolling past. Bold. But then again, the Season was approaching its Easter zenith. Perhaps the poor child was growing desperate to make her match. To escape from some situation at home.

The footman heaved her into the carriage. Sawyer climbed in opposite and closed the door. 'I do wish you'd let me go alone, ma'am. She'll only upset you.'

'It's kind of you to offer, but I cannot delegate a message like this. I must face up to my duty.'

Sawyer sniffed. 'It seems to me your duty is to your husband now, and to your children. Servants can run around after Mrs Kipling and bear with her scolding. You shouldn't have to. Not any more.'

Belinda let the words hang. Sawyer was so much more than a servant to her, but one could not voice these sentiments aloud. The carriage jerked into motion, startling the baby. She rubbed at her belly.

For a while, she watched the world scroll past – fine equipages, shops and couples strolling arm-in-arm – her window open a crack to hear the rhythmic clop of the horse's hooves. There was a twinge of the old excitement to be going somewhere, *anywhere*. But as the carriage drew towards the City, ever nearer to the river, she could no longer pretend that this was a pleasure trip. Open-top phaetons gave way to plain wagons and carts. Traffic slowed. She was forced to close the window against noisome smells of brine and sewage. No, this carriage was not taking her away to freedom: it was reversing time, winding her back like a seamstress gathering thread onto a bobbin.

She glanced at Sawyer. The maid had a talent for keeping her face impassive, but she could not be as comfortable as she looked; she *must* feel the net tightening too. Returning always seemed like a strange dream. Not visceral enough to be a nightmare, just unpleasant and off-kilter. Everything almost the same. Belinda spotted a new iron railing, a freshly painted door, and a streetlamp in a slightly different position to where she remembered it being before.

The driver stopped in front of a respectable three-storey house with white-framed windows, Ionic columns and a pediment on top. Once, it had been the finest on the street, but years of soot had tarnished the brickwork, and a pall seemed to hang in the air, even on a bright day. Papa could afford a far superior residence to this now. He'd rented better rooms for Paul and for Luke. But the present occupant would not shift until... When? Belinda couldn't say. Part of her believed Mamma would linger in this house long after her death.

The footman was climbing down from his perch, unfolding the passenger steps. Sawyer pulled her own shawl tightly around her shoulders. 'Are you ready, ma'am?'

Belinda nodded, but she wasn't. The carriage door swung open regardless.

The Kipling servants must have seen her clambering out of the coach and struggling up the short front path, yet they waited until Sawyer knocked before springing into action. Clare, the moon-faced maid, opened the door a

slit, releasing a waft of the misery fermenting inside. Distantly, a parrot screeched.

‘Please come in, Mrs Bainbridge.’ Clare shuffled back, widening the gap just enough to let Belinda, then Sawyer slip by, single file.

It took a moment for Belinda’s eyes to adjust to the dimness. As the door snapped shut behind her, she glimpsed a shadow hovering at the end of the hallway. ‘Mamma.’

Mrs Kipling hurried forward, grasping Belinda’s fingers and pulling her further into the house. ‘My dear! I have been watching for you this last hour at least. I was sure your carriage must have overturned. What kept you?’ Her papery lips fluttered against Belinda’s cheek. She did not wait for a reply before rushing on. ‘Oh, what a to-do with poor Mr Bainbridge Senior! The grief has struck you. You look pale and thin.’ An extraordinary claim, given that Belinda was pregnant and bigger than she’d ever been with Freddy. But Mamma relinquished her and moved across to Sawyer instead.

‘There, now! Are you well, child?’

The maid curtsied. ‘I am in good health, thank you, ma’am.’

‘I praise God for it.’ For a moment, it looked as if Mamma would embrace her too. But another bird squawked and she stepped back. ‘Where is my grandson? He isn’t ill, is he? Clare said they had the scarlet fever in the next parish over...’

‘No, nobody is ill. Freddy wished to stay at home.’ Seeing that poor Clare was squashed against the coat stand, Belinda removed her hat and gloves and set them on a side table herself. ‘Come, Mamma, let us sit down. I am fatigued.’

‘Go on upstairs then.’

Casting a rueful glance at Sawyer, Belinda placed her hand on the banister rail and began to climb the stairs. They must part to their separate worlds again. Clare would take Sawyer to the kitchens to sit by the fire and catch up on all the servants’ gossip. The task of managing Mrs Kipling would fall to Belinda, and Belinda alone.

The parakeets grew louder with every step, but other birds were twittering alongside: canaries and sparrows. The eldest of the parrots, the ones Belinda had sat with day after day throughout her girlhood, had long since died, yet there seemed to be a steady stream of newcomers. Gently, she opened the door to the parlour. Wings fluttered and feathers drifted. Cages hung from

the ceiling at various heights, confusing the eye. Each hopping occupant glowed in vivid colour: acid green, cobalt blue, the scarlet of a regimental uniform. Trophies of Papa's voyages, filling the void of his absence.

'I've ordered tea.' Mamma was entering the room already. 'Clare will bring it straight up.'

'Might we open a window? The air is dreadfully close in here.'

'Goodness, no! The smell out there makes me choke.' She chivvied Belinda towards the sofa. 'Then the gulls start calling and upset my poor birds. No, no, no.'

Belinda had never once heard a seagull in all the years she'd lived here. 'Surely you are too far away from the wharves and quays for that?'

'Oh, no, I assure you! I can hear the gulls very well, and those uncouth lumpers, plying their dirty trade!'

That was not physically possible, but Belinda held her tongue. She'd have to pick her battles carefully today. She sat in her accustomed spot and the cushions seemed to remember her, moulding around her contours as if she'd never been away. The baby squirmed. Belinda rubbed her stomach again, partly to comfort the child, partly to comfort herself.

Mamma resumed her seat and the birds settled along with her – yet maybe 'settled' was the wrong word, for Mamma's hands were always in some kind of motion. Often she picked at the skin around her fingernails; today she sat with her palms pressed together, one hand kneading the other like dough. 'Oh, I am so glad to have you here. Poor Wilfred has gone off already, has he, to get everything in order for the funeral at The Bridge? Dear, dear. And little Freddy did not wish to come and see me? How is that possible?'

'Freddy does not feel... equal to company at the moment,' Belinda said tactfully. 'He is upset about losing his Grandpa Bainbridge.' That was untrue. At five years old, Freddy had barely known his grandfather. If anything, he'd been a little afraid of him. But he was even more afraid of his Grandma Kipling with her noisy birds and jittery hands. He'd rather have a tooth pulled than come to this house.

Mamma tutted. 'The poor child is grieving, and you left him? I am surprised at you, Belinda. That was badly done.'

'I *would* have stayed by Freddy's side, but you implored me to come and visit you. I could not very well do both, could I?' Mamma paled at the edge in

her voice. Belinda had seldom dared to put one there before, but the trials of pregnancy were shortening her temper.

‘It is a trying time for everyone,’ Mamma acknowledged. ‘I shall not detain you here for long, my dear. Only I have felt so unsettled! You cannot imagine how this death has affected me.’

A tap at the door. One of the new parrots, yellow-bellied with an azure coat, opened its mouth and croaked, ‘Tea.’

Belinda laughed in spite of herself. ‘How clever! When did he learn to do that?’

Clare shouldered the door open. There was a little fluttering as she brought the tray in and set it carefully on the grand mahogany sideboard. Mamma rose to unlock the caddy. ‘That will do, Clare. Thank you.’ The parrot cried ‘Tea’ again and Mamma clucked indulgently. ‘Oh, do be quiet, you silly boy. It is funny, isn’t it? He’s only taken that word into his head lately. I’m not certain he understands about the drink, he seems to believe it’s Clare’s name.’

Clare curtsied. Belinda watched her leave with envy. It must be so much more comfortable down in the kitchen with Sawyer.

Crockery chinked and clattered while Mamma served the tea. One of the parakeets began climbing across the bars of its cage, all talons and beak. A single emerald feather drifted slowly to the floor.

Tea-making always used to be Belinda’s task, but she resisted the urge to get up and help her mother. At last, Mamma rattled back over to her with an insipidly weak dish. Of course, there was no sugar.

‘Oh, I *am* glad to have you here,’ Mamma repeated.

Belinda took the saucer and wrapped her palm around the warm porcelain bowl, sensing how fragile it was.

‘Your father did not consider, when he left for the West Indies to sort out this dreadful credit business, how alone I would be.’ Mamma fetched her own drink and went on, ‘Even Luke is in Bristol now, doing something with copper hulls. And I *have* been feeling ever so anxious since your terrible news arrived. Doesn’t it make you morbid? I cannot help thinking that Mr Bainbridge was about the same age as my Kipling. When I imagine that in a very few years’ time...’ She trailed off to take a delicate sip of tea.

Belinda tamped down her irritation. It was typical of Mamma to make this about herself. Her fear of widowhood – her fear of everything. Mamma was

only fifty-three, but she had fretted herself much older. While her hair remained wheat-blond, the skin around her eyes had taken on the texture of crêpe. Lines marked the sides of her mouth and there was an unhealthy sallowness to her complexion. Hardly surprising, given she never left the house. Lack of exercise meant there was no muscle at all on that fidgety frame.

‘Wilfred’s father *was* of a similar age,’ Belinda admitted. She remembered her few glimpses of *the old man*, as Wilfred called him, sitting in a wingchair, nursing his swollen foot and his grudges. He had died in that very chair late at night, having first discharged his pistol into the wall. A strange man, so unlike her own papa with his weather-beaten skin, striding confidently around the City. ‘Yet you must see their circumstances are very different? Poor Mr Bainbridge was never active and hearty like Papa is. Gout kept him confined – and he did not have a solicitous wife to oversee his health.’

Mamma swallowed. ‘No, no, you are right there. Mr Bainbridge had no wife to care for him. Goodness knows, I do *try* to advise Kipling! But he does not listen to me as he used to do. All these voyages, at his time of life!’ She heard one of the birds hop to another perch. ‘I wish he would give the mahogany trade up,’ Mamma said fervently. ‘Many have, now the banks are in trouble. I wish we could forget the whole sordid business.’

But that was never going to happen. Papa was no quitter. The tea bowl grew slippery in Belinda’s grasp. She turned it around and took a sip.

‘I will be better now *you* are here,’ Mamma went on. ‘My Bel, my beloved. You always make me better.’

The tea seemed to stick in her throat. She swallowed it down, wincing. ‘It’s my pleasure to come. And I was keen to take the opportunity, while I still can.’ The baby gave a kick, prodding her to say more. She wet her lips. ‘You must realise that I won’t be able to sit with you like this again for a long time.’

It was only a beat of silence, yet to Belinda it seemed to last an age. Mamma’s brow contracted, then cleared. ‘Oh, you mean the precious baby! Your confinement, and then that endless wait to be Church’d. Of course, I remember it well...’ A sigh. ‘Yes, the separation will be hard for me to bear. But at least when you return, you will bring a consolation with you.’ Mamma

smiled benignly at the swell of Belinda's belly. 'Another little light. I cannot wait to meet them! And Freddy will accompany you on *that* visit, of course.'

Belinda's heart thudded in her throat. What if she just... did not say it? Played along and then sent a letter to her mother later, from The Bridge? The temptation was enormous, but she couldn't play such a shabby trick.

'No, Mamma, I meant...' She adjusted her position on the sofa. 'I meant it will not be in my power to come so far. Because we will all be living at... at The Bridge.' She didn't dare to look up. She kept her eyes fixed on the anaemic tea, ripples crossing the surface as her hand trembled.

There was no response from Mamma. The birds chirruped, blithe and oblivious. Belinda waited. The passing seconds became dangerous, each heavier than the last.

Finally, Mamma dropped a single word. 'Why?'

'It's... it's the ancestral estate.' Belinda sounded like a child who had failed to learn her lesson. 'People who own country houses generally do... live in them.' The baby wriggled, as uncomfortable as she felt.

'Nonsense,' Mamma replied harshly. 'The Bridge is an escape for a month or two a year, nothing more. If your husband had ever intended a more permanent residence, he would have moved you there from the start of your marriage.'

Actually the topic had been broached, but Wilfred never liked to play second fiddle. He would have chafed living in his father's household again, his orders undermined at every turn. Besides, Belinda had known how Mamma would take it. Like *this*. They'd agreed to wait.

'Well, I cannot tell what was in Wilfred's mind back then,' she said awkwardly. 'But he intends for us to live at The Bridge now: that is an absolute fact. I received a letter just this morning, instructing me to be ready to leave next week.' Warily, Belinda raised her gaze. Her mother was a statue, even her hands utterly still on the saucer.

'I forbid it,' Mamma decreed.

An old, childish panic flared inside Belinda's chest. She placed the tea down. 'You *cannot* forbid me. Only my husband has the power to do that. I answer to Wilfred now.' Perhaps it was cowardly, blaming everything on him, but it was the best she could do.

Mamma seized her own bowl of tea and threw it against the wall. The birds shrieked as it shattered. She sobbed bitterly.

Belinda curled into herself, protective arms wrapped around the baby. 'Please, Mamma. Don't be upset.'

'Upset!' her mother echoed. 'This will break my heart. I might as well put an end to myself immediately.'

She often threatened this. Sometimes, unforgivably, Belinda wished that she would. One quick, sharp bolt of agony compared to the prolonged pain of her displeasure.

'You must think of Freddy and his future,' she tried. 'This is his chance to become a proper gentleman. Landed gentry! *He* need never go anywhere near ships or trade. That part of his legacy will be erased.'

Mamma's chest was still heaving. 'That's all very well for the years to come. But right now, he is so young! He ought not to be moved. He should be kept where he is *safe*.'

'Will... will he not be safe with his own parents at The Bridge?'

'I do not know!' Mamma cried, driving her fingernails into the arms of her chair. 'I have no acquaintance with that part of the country. Anywhere new, anywhere you do not understand, is *unsafe*.'

'But... But Wilfred knows it. He was bred there. I have visited before – why, Freddy was even born in the house!'

Even as Belinda spoke, a cold finger touched her heart. For Mamma had used a word that described exactly how she'd felt during those first weeks at The Bridge with baby Freddy. *Unsafe*. Hunted, somehow.

But many ladies experienced such feelings just after childbirth. It was nothing out of the common way.

Sunlight slanted through the windows onto the floor, touching the patch of tea soaking into the carpet and the little shards of porcelain that lay in it like broken teeth. Shadows cast lines across the mess. Long, narrow shadows, the bars of the birdcages.

'Children are so fragile,' Mamma protested. 'One false step may scar them for life. Do you not realise how much damage can be done to a child by a bad environment?'

The irony that Mamma should say that here, in the very room where she had kept Belinda her prisoner for nearly twenty years.

'*Nothing* bad will happen,' she blurted out. 'I won't let it. I'd never let harm come to Freddy. And The Bridge is not a bad environment! It is a

country estate. Wilfred will be there, and Sawyer will be there... Everything will be under control.'

'You think you know the world now.' Mamma's hands drew together again. She picked at the skin on her index finger, already red and raw. 'But I once spoke as you do. I gave my mother every assurance when I married. I said Kipling was as loyal as a hound and would always keep me safe.' She shook her head. It was more like a spasm, a quiver that ran into her lips. 'Look, Belinda. Look what became of me.'

