Meet Mrs Poll…

An extract from *The Butterfly Summer*

Mrs Poll arrived, like Mary Poppins, out of the blue when I was about six months old. I was almost eleven when she died suddenly at the beginning of her holiday in Lyme Regis, so we had her for just over ten years. At the time I considered it especially unfair she'd died there, as she'd always wanted to visit Lyme. She never went on holiday, preferring day trips instead: she had a friend in Bath and a remote relative in Cambridge and occasionally she'd take herself off for the day or night, but rarely. I still look up out of habit as I walk down Noel Road, hoping to see the lights on in her flat. She was always in. Similarly, I wish I could picture her more clearly, but my memory of her face is hazy. I don't have any photos of her. She was just always there.

For years Mum waitressed at an old-school Italian restaurant on Upper Street. Three days a week, when I was little, Mrs Poll used to pick me up from school and give me tea while Mum was working. But most days I'd go up there, anyway. I came to dread weekends: no excuse to go and see her. Sometimes I'd find reasons: *I think I can smell smoke, Mrs Poll. Come and look at this ladybird in the garden, Mrs Poll. Mum has been gone for hours and I'm lonely, Mrs Poll.* She left her door on the latch, but I always knocked. Mum had drilled it into me that I mustn't assume it was my home, that I must give her her own space. But I didn't believe her. I was convinced, with the arrogance of youth, that she loved having me there.

The kitchen was stylish, for its time. So was she, but she'd worn much better. It was decked out in violently orange kitchen units and a brown freestanding cooker; there was a bench on one side of the yellow pine table, upon which I used to kneel and look out over the canal our house backed on to, and the City of London behind. Now, monolithic offices and empty millionaires' flats have wiped out that view. But then, you could see the edge of the great Smithfield meat market, the open space of the ancient Charterhouse, the dome of St Paul's Cathedral, the patchwork of streets sewn together with new estates and offices built in the spaces left by bombs.

'How was school today, my little Nina?'

'Good, thank you. Mrs Poll, it's Friday.'

'Well, so it is. Would you like some cinnamon toast, perhaps?'

'Yes, please.'

The beringed hand, beckoning me to come and give her a kiss, then smoothing my hair, then turning to the cooker and switching the grill on, the buttered bread sprinkled with sugar and cinnamon that she'd let me mix together, the smell of caramelising, nutty, spicy toast – do you have that smell, that one smell that takes you back? That is mine. And it is so wonderful to recall, to feel her again, that I often make it when I am by myself just to capture the essence of her again.

I knew her better than anyone, but I wish I had asked more about her life before me. I was a child when I knew her, and children are selfish, and though my mother pressed her for more details she, too, was afterwards always vague on Mrs Poll's background: her Americanness sometimes meant she missed nuances of speech, anyway, and didn't understand things, like Kent being a county. But I knew Mrs Poll was a widow who, having spent her married life in Bromley, or thereabouts, had decided to move back to London after her husband died. She wanted to live in the city again before she was too old to enjoy it: 'Before my mind goes, or my body – whichever's first.' And I remember this terrifying me – the idea that Mrs Poll, the centre of our world, might not be here one day.

I think she was Jewish, I don't know why. She had grown up in the East End and she'd talk about the kosher butchers and the old weavers' houses and the Bethnal Green Boys' Club organising dances the girls would attend. They had day trips to Kent every summer to pick strawberries, and if I'm right her family were dockers, had been for generations. She had a young brother who'd died of the measles when he was two. Little April had held him as he died, and then wrapped up his body so her mother wouldn't have to see it. She was a proud woman, proud of herself for growing up there and for getting out of it, and proud of this new life of hers.

She was exactly the same, every day – and to me, coming from the basement flat where papers and clothes lay scattered on the floor and open tins of baked beans rusted on the kitchen counter, where I knew I was loved but often wasn't sure where my knickers and vest and socks might be, or where I was sleeping, I can't tell you how comforting this was. She smelled lovely, was always immaculately turned out, her solid but elegant silhouette decked out in neatly pressed tweed skirts and silk shirts, with court shoes in a variety of browns and blacks, some with tiny, dashing, decorative buckles. She wore a watch on a chain around her neck, rose-gold earrings and a matching bracelet. She had a thick, black woollen coat with huge velvet collar and cuffs, lined with sky-blue silk – it was a beautiful thing, and she wore it every winter I knew her. She didn't have much money. I knew this because she constantly told me how poor she was. She economised religiously – I knew this also because she hammered home to me the cost of everything in her cupboard, taking me shopping for food, making sure I knew what was in the basket and how much it would be. To this day, I can calculate exactly the shopping in my basket and I'm sure one of the reasons Sebastian and I couldn't stay together was his total disregard for budgeting. Mrs Poll would have fainted clean away at his cavalier adding of Ibérico ham at £15.99 a packet to our paltry food basket. I used to wonder what she'd make of my husband, what she'd say if she could see so many things today. I miss her.

She liked music – she'd get tickets for the slips at Covent Garden to see the ballet and the opera, although she preferred the former. She said opera made her feel too sad and she couldn't watch *Tosca* again. She loved exhibitions, and was often to be found in the café at the Royal Academy or the Tate – if you wonder who those smartly dressed older ladies you see having tea and cake alone are, they're a version of Mrs Poll. She organised jumble sales for the local community centre, sorting out clothes and keeping some back for me and Mum, which she paid a good price for. She liked travelling on buses, knew London like the back of her hand, albeit a version of London several decades out of date. She, like me, loved the city, its nooks and secrets, its passageways and adventures. But mostly she liked her cosy flat, with her books and her radio and her small plastic TV with the neat white handle on it that she'd carry from the kitchen into her bedroom if we watched a film together. She was a homebody, she'd tell me, as we snuggled together in bed. 'I don't like to go too far from London. I've got everything I need here, haven't I?'

Her husband, whom she'd met during the war, was a Russian refugee, Mikhail Polianskaya, and I think she rather liked the exoticism of her married surname. I wish, too, that I'd asked her to tell me more about him and their life together before she came to Noel Road. I ran upstairs once on a sunny day to ask her if she wanted to come with me along the canal, and when she didn't answer I crept into the kitchen, and found her holding a photograph of a short, dark-haired boy with a wide, grinning smile.

She was sniffing into a tissue, and when she saw me she wiped her eyes. 'There, now. Hello, darling. Don't mind me, just having a cry.'

'Is that your husband?' I asked, curiously.

'Yes, poppet. Just before – just before we were married.' She stood up and put the photo carefully away, in her bureau drawer in the hallway.

I followed her. 'Are you sad?'

'I am, when I think about him. He was a good man.'

I never knew her maiden name: it was Mum who christened her Mrs Poll, all those years ago, the first time they met. Mum told me about that moment over and over again; it was my favourite story, growing up. My father had been confirmed dead a few weeks before. Mum was still waiting for the Oxford Museum of Natural History to give her more information – what had happened, would they bring the body back home? Not least so she could work out what to do next – she had no money, and actually hadn't eaten that day. Her parents were sending a cheque, almost begrudgingly; she'd had to reverse the charges to call them. Jack and Betty Griffiths had almost seemed to welcome the news of her misfortune, inasmuch as it proved them right in their dire imprecations not to throw over her promising future for this 'butterfly hunter', as her father referred to him. Her child benefit hadn't come through, because of some problem with proving that she, an American, was married to a Briton. It was another bitterly cold April – spring refusing to arrive, frost every morning – and the damp in the flat was blooming, forming its own terrain. The few friends she possessed had long since melted away, and she was utterly alone. This was, as she used to tell me when I asked about Mrs Poll, her Lowest Point.

We were in the hallway, Mum and I, on our way out for a walk, with me crying in the home-made sling my enterprising mother had made out of a torn-up sheet (we had not been donated the pram yet) bundled up in a padded all-in-one Mum had been sent by a girlfriend in the States, which she used to put me in most days – especially to sleep in, because it was warm, and we were always cold. Mum was wild-eyed with lack of sleep, and grief. As she attempted to soothe me, she saw a woman coming down the stairs, and knew it must be the new neighbour from the top floor who had moved in swiftly, neatly, the day before. 'A very classy lady,' Mr Lawson had told Mum pointedly, that morning. 'We like her kind.'

So Mum had flattened herself against the corridor wall, hoping to avoid an encounter: she said she really couldn't face people much, in those days, and often Mr Lawson or Captain Wellum, before he went deaf, would complain about my crying. I would not be soothed though, I carried on crying.

'Hello, there,' came a voice, and Mrs Poll reached the last step and smiled at Mum. 'What a beautiful baby.'

It was the first kind voice Mum had heard for days, and she looked at Mrs Poll like a drowning woman seeing a life raft. Mrs Poll was in the soft, sleek woollen-and-velvet coat, her shining black hair shot with grey and neatly pinned up, her sparkling eyes smiling. She had a basket over her arm, and a neatly written list clutched between her gloved fingers.

'April Polilan— Poli— Oh!' she'd said, holding out her hand to Mum. 'Polianskaya. I'm sorry, I'm a little tired and my name is something of a mouthful. My husband was . . . Russian.'

Mum thought she was a little nervous. 'Let's just say Mrs Poll,' she said to her.

'Oh yes, let's,' this strange, kind woman agreed, and she smiled at me. 'So we must be neighbours. And who's this?'

Mum told her, 'This is Nina. She has a tooth coming through and she's very grumpy and her mummy is a little tired, too.'

Mrs Poll apparently took me, holding me so that I was facing her, and I stared at her, bright red with rage, nose running, eyes bulging with anger. She blew softly on my face, then gave me a gentle kiss. 'Oh, you're lovely,' she said. 'But what a cross little person you are!' She looked at Mum, and Mum said she knew something then, that this woman was a good woman. 'Why don't I take you for a quick walk and your mummy can have a cup of tea and close her eyes for five minutes. How does that sound?'

'Oh. Thanks, but . . .' My mother began to give reasons as to why this wouldn't work. '. . . don't worry. You don't want to do that.'

And Mrs Poll said, 'I was a nurse, I'm used to babies. I miss them dreadfully, in fact. Please, dear, go back downstairs and have a rest. She'll be fine with me.'

You may think my mother was crazy to agree to this, but if you had met Mrs Poll you wouldn't find it strange.

She was rather grand, in her way, that's what strikes me now: she liked things just so, was punctilious about manners and timings, and yet never put herself forward. She always said it was her East London upbringing. She was taught to respect others, to do good. She was from a different generation, of course, and sometimes she and Mum clashed, as she tried, I think, to buck my mother up. But she and Mum loved each other. Mum called her a 'trench friend' – someone you needed next to you in the trench when times were rough. And how we needed her.

Over tea one afternoon, Mum asked her why she did it, helped us, made us her project. Mrs Poll smoothed down her skirt and was silent for longer than Mum had ever known.

'I'd sit there every day, waiting at the bus stop for the little hopper bus to come and take me into Bromley,' she said eventually. 'I'd walk around the shops, go to the library. Sometimes I'd end up in the park with a sandwich, sitting on the bench, watching everyone else's lives, and I'd be screaming inside, wanting to stroke a little girl's hair, or chat to a father, or help a mum with her baby's buggy. And I couldn't. The man three doors down from me, he died, and no one knew for a month. I realised then, you see, I was totally alone, in the place I'd lived for thirty years. You don't know what that's like.'

'I can guess,' my mother said.

'Of course. Well, I knew I'd go mad if I didn't do something about it. My husband's dead, my sister's dead, my nieces are in Canada. I needed new things to look at, places to go, ways to be helpful. So don't ever thank me. I should thank you. I'm very lucky to . . . to have found you.'

On my ninth birthday, Mum gave me a card and a present and a harried McDonald's expedition with four uninterested friends. As she and I walked home, holding hands, she said, 'Well, that's over, what a relief!' and we went upstairs, as Mrs Poll had said to come up for tea.

Mrs Poll had always cut out recipe ideas from *Woman's Own* or *Good Housekeeping*. She was waiting for us, and as we got to the second floor she called out, 'Happy Birthday!' She had made me a castle cake, replete with battlements, portcullis and moat, and she had found in Chapel Market a massive candle that played a kazoo-like 'Happy Birthday'. And she'd got me a CD Discman, which I'd wanted for years but never dared hope for. And a Take That CD. I played that CD for years and years, until the outer casing of the disc itself actually cracked and it came apart.

It wasn't the CD player, though. It was the cinnamon toast, the trips to the library, the three little china dogs on the mantelpiece I was allowed to name, the bath-time egg whisk and the Matey bubble bath she used to make the frothiest foam, as well as the castle cakes, because they all made me understand that someone cared about me, someone was looking after me, that someone loved me. That's all children need, really. It's very simple.

That year Mum's third book was published and she was away a lot, visiting libraries and reading to children in schools, and for one blissful week I stayed with Mrs Poll. On the third night in a row that I woke up screaming from a nightmare, having wet the bed again, Mrs Poll ran me a bath and made me some cocoa and then we climbed into her bed together. The clock in the kitchen said 2.13 a.m. I'd never been up this late: the previous two nights, she'd bundled me straight back into bed again.

'Do you want to tell me what's so terrible it makes you scream in your sleep like you're being torn apart by a pack of hungry wolves?' she asked me eventually, in her nicest voice.

I giggled, nervously, because I didn't want to go over it all. 'Just stuff.'

'Just stuff. Hmm.' She drank some more of her cocoa and I nestled against her, feeling the heavy eiderdown pressing on my toes; I wasn't at all tired. 'Nina, if something's bothering you, you can't just lock it away. Otherwise it gets stuck.' She tapped her head. 'Up here. What's the dream about?'

'Nothing.'

'Stuff and nothing,' said Mrs Poll. 'Do you know what I was doing, when you woke me up? I was writing in my diary.'

'You keep a diary?' It seemed such an un-Mrs-Poll-ish thing to do.

'Yes, I do, young lady. For my eyes only, so don't go getting any ideas.'

'Don't worry. I don't see the point of diaries,' I said, loftily.

'I didn't use to. But I like keeping mine. It's only for me. I put everything in there that's worried or upset me that day. I write all the little mistakes I made, how I could have done things better. And then I do a list, of what made me smile, what I'm grateful for that day and then I read it all through, and remember how lucky I am, and then I turn the page and I don't look at it again.'

'What were you grateful for today?' I said, curiously, because she never talked about herself.

She was silent for a moment. 'Well, Nina. I'm grateful the bus came when it started to rain. And I'm grateful my friend Ann and I met today and had a bite to eat at the British Museum.'

'Oh, what did you see? Did you see the Egyptians—'

Ignoring this, for she had long ago tired of my all-consuming Egyptology obsession, Mrs Poll carried on, 'And I'm grateful that you went to school, and even though you got a four out of ten in your maths test I'm grateful you gave it a go. And I can tell your mother that, when she asks me, because the teachers keep saying you're not concentrating enough, but I know that's not true.'

I didn't say anything, just rubbed my toes against her soft feet, and took another sip of my drink.

She said, 'Oh yes . . . well, I'm grateful for you, and your mum. That's all.'

'Me?'

'Yes, you.'

I huddled closer to her.

'I've told you what I'm grateful for,' she said. 'Do you want to tell me about that dream, then?'

I bit my lip. 'There's this girl,' I said, rubbing my eyes. 'She's mean. She comes and talks to me when I'm asleep. She looks like me but she's got yellow-blonde hair. And she has a party dress on, lace, like she's from olden times. She tells me all the bad things I've done. She puts her hands on my head so I can't see and moves my head around so fast and then . . . all the time she's laughing, telling me I'm weird, I'm weird, I'm weird.' My voice broke. 'And I'm afraid she'll keep me there and I'll never get out of the dream.'

I hadn't told anyone this, though it had been going on for months, because I was terrified they'd take me away to a madhouse, like some Victorian child. But now I'd started I couldn't stop. 'She comes to me when I'm asleep and she sits in my head . . . I can't concentrate at school lately because she yells at me, and when I'm reading now she's always there whispering to me. I hate her.'

Mrs Poll's cool hand smoothed my hair, but she didn't immediately reply. 'She doesn't sound very nice,' she said eventually.

'Of course she's not,' I said, annoyed she hadn't fully grasped it. 'She's horrible, Mrs Poll.'

'I think she sounds lonely.' Mrs Poll clambered briskly out of bed, and tied her dressing gown around her. 'Tell you what, let's give her a name.'

'A name?'

'Yes. And she can have the room next door. And some clothes to hang in there.'

I kneeled up in bed, my legs crackling in Mrs Poll's spare nylon nightie, and stared at her in amazement. 'I don't want her in the room next door,' I said. 'Don't you understand? She's scary. I hate her!'

Mrs Poll grabbed my hands in one of hers, large and strong. She came up close to me. I could see the lines around her eyes, the grey flecks in her brows, smell the rosewater scent that always clung to her. She said, almost furiously, 'Listen to me, Nina Parr. You have to face your fears. You can't let them control you. I turn the page every day. *Every day*. Do you understand me? You have to do the same, darling. Look. Come with me.'

I'd never seen her like this. She pulled me out of bed, and we went into the room next door, the room I usually slept in. She opened the built-in cupboard doors, pulled open the little drawers of the teak dressing table, drew back the curtains.

'Here!' she said, loudly. 'Here you are, young lady. This is your room.' She looked around her. 'Can you hear me?'

'Are you OK, Mrs Poll?' I said. I thought she must have lost it, like Jonas's Granny Violet when she started giving her things away to the neighbours on the estate.

'Shh. This girl who's giving you all this bother, what shall we call her? Let's give her a name.'

'Call her?' I said, horrified. 'I don't want to give her a name! Mrs Poll, stop it.'

'How about Matty?' she said.

'No! I'm not—'

She crouched down in front of me, smoothing the hair out of my eyes. She was beautiful, in the darkness, her own hair falling in front of her face. 'For me, darling. Just try it. Give it a week. All right?'

Along with *Face your fears*, the exhortation to *Give it a week* was a big feature of Mrs Poll's bargaining tactics. It was how she changed my mind about going to school, about my plan to run away when I was six – and, every year, about going on holiday with Mum.

I stood in the doorway, hugging myself, my chin resting on my chest, and I suddenly felt tired. 'OK, then. Matty's a good name.'

'Right.' She picked up *Nina and the Butterflies*, which was our favourite book, because there was a girl in it called, yes, Nina – and because my father had loved it as a child, I knew, and because it had always been in Noel Road, it was one of the few things he'd left behind. At some point, it must have migrated up to Mrs Poll's flat. 'Matty, this is your room, as well as Nina's,' Mrs Poll said. 'Come in, make yourself at home.'

'Who are you talking to?'

She ignored me, and spread her arms wide, smiling up at the ceiling. In her blue velvet dressing gown, her hair loose around her shoulders, she looked like a witch – a good one, of course. 'Listen to me, Matty. We'll put some clothes in the wardrobe for you. You can play with Nina's toys when she's at school. You can read this book, there's a little girl called Matty in here, too. Just don't bother us when we're asleep. Otherwise we'll open the window and send you tumbling down into the canal.' She looked over at me. 'Nina? Anything you want to add?'

I stood in the centre of the room, looking at my small, single bed, the orange varnished bookcase, the lamp, swinging slightly from the ceiling. I looked over at Mrs Poll, magnificent in royal blue, and she smiled at me.

I spread my arms wide. 'Yes, Matty. Listen to me now. We can play together when I'm up here when I say so. And I will bring you marvellous silks and cloaks from ancient lands, and oils and jewels from distant kings. Otherwise don't bother me. Or Mrs Poll.'

'That's it.' Mrs Poll clasped her hands together and bowed her head, then looked up, and around the empty room. 'Come back to my room. I videoed *Coronation Street* and I'm about to watch it, and as a very, very special treat you can, too.' I followed her out of the room but in the doorway she turned and glanced up at the still swinging ceiling lamp. 'Right. I don't think we'll have any more trouble with *her*.'

* * *

She was right, of course. Gradually, the room became known as Matty's room. I kept my best clothes and toys and books in there. Matty mutated from a tormentor to an imaginary friend – a sort of alternate me, the best version of me. We'd play together. She was ideal company, of course. She came up with the most imaginative ideas, had the most friends, knew what to say to grown-ups, never made *her* mother cross. When I slept up at Mrs Poll's it was in Matty's room, and I no longer had nightmares, because I felt Matty there, a benign presence now.

For years after Mrs Poll died, and before it was made into Mum's study, Matty's room wasn't used, but the idea of her stayed with me. I'd talk to her sometimes, run through ideas, leave books in her room she might want to read. When we took over the empty flat I chose Mrs Poll's room as my new bedroom. Matty's room was recarpeted and painted, but it stood half-empty, cleared of Mrs Poll's possessions, a repository for our papers and boxes.

And that was where the box file about my father ended up. In Matty's room. I'd put it all away when I married Sebastian, hadn't looked at it for years. Until the day the second photograph arrived and I climbed upstairs, and felt Mrs Poll's presence again, went into Matty's room, lifted the old, strange book out of its box-file hibernation.

Holding it again was as rich and potent as the smell of cinnamon toast. I sat on the floor of the bare office that evening, cross-legged, and when I opened the first page I froze. The pictures unchanged, the words I knew so well, and there – yes, there it was. This place again. *Keepsake.*

That is your family, the old woman had written on that photograph. *You don't know them / don't know what they did.*

As I began to read it again I realised something. I could probably have recited the story to you off by heart. I'd locked it away in my memory, forgotten about it, and it had been in this house all along, waiting to be found.

Nina And The Butterflies

Alexandra Parr

*

For Theodora, Whom I Call Thea

Lady Nina was the only child born to a great lord. His sorrow was great for he had no sons. When he died, he left her Keepsake, the house fashioned by the greatest craftsmen of its day and now hidden away on a green and silent creek, invisible to the casual traveller by road and from the water.

'Be modest, and good, and kind,' her father had told her as he lay dying. 'You bring me great sadness for you are not a son. Do you endeavour to give a great man sons that our name might endure through the ages to the glory of God. This house is the greatest built by the hand of Man. It will hide him and it will save him.'

But during the great Civil War which rent our fair Land in two, Nina lost also her mother and her betrothed, Francis, from a great family across the river. And so she was left utterly alone at Keepsake.

But Nina was not lonely, for she had butterflies in her garden, clouds of them rising up into the fragrant rich air in summer. Now, Children, in this time, butterflies were more plentiful than flies, and filled the air. They had not been caught and killed in vast numbers, or exposed to man's destruction of the green Earth.

Each winter, Nina watched the eggs they had laid, and cared for those that hibernated in the chapel, waiting for the sun to shine and the cruel winds that raged over the estuary to drop. In spring, she saw the caterpillars, eating their way through her garden, neatly slicing their curved lace patterns through the leaves. And in summer, she watched as they broke out of their pupae, as they gently, tremulously unfurled their wings that they might dry out in the breeze, fill with blood and become sturdy for that first journey.

She knew them all, from the smallest and humblest Meadow Brown to the Purple Emperor, whose great beauty and size has driven men to insanity. They knew her too. For butterflies are our friends. They show man the Earth at its finest. When we hurt the Earth we hurt them. Where there are no butterflies there is no good growing in the Earth thereabouts.

The house might have slumbered on, drowsing in the sunshine and playing host to its winged guests, but that was not its destiny, as forewarned by Nina's father. For one night under cover of darkness His Majesty King Charles II arrived by boat, accompanied only by his most trusted companion, Colonel Wilmot.

The King came seeking shelter from the evil Roundheads, who wrought so much damage to our peaceful land. He had been routed from Worcester, and he had hidden in oak trees, disguised himself as a stable hand, worn too-small shoes that bent and cut his sore feet. This gentle King had aped the manners of the stable boy, the farm hand and the humble country gentleman to avoid detection. He had skittered across the country, searching for a place to hide, and it was to Keepsake that he eventually came.

He remained there for two long weeks. At first, he was quiet, hidden in the tiny chapel at the back of the house, where Nina and her mother had long prayed for peace to come, where the butterflies sought shelter inside the cool walls. Then he grew more confident, and walked in the garden with Nina in the shade of the evening, where she offered him sweetmeats, and sliced pineapple grown in the special pits laid for that purpose in the garden. Side by side they watched the butterflies, a mist of colour and movement above them.

'You have made a beautiful world here,' the King told Nina.

The servants would hear them, laughing together. One afternoon, as they sat together, and Nina sang to the King, hooves were heard in the distance, and a terrible sound – the sound of the horn, heralding the arrival of the Roundheads.

Charles hid in the chamber, and though Cromwell's men searched the house, they did not find the chapel, hidden as it was behind the staircase, with windows thin as slits for light. And Nina stood under the arch of her house, and bade them leave.

'This is my home,' she told them. 'I will die here, rather than give it to someone else.'

At that time she understood at last that Keepsake belonged to her.

When the King left her, Nina was distraught. She spoke only of him. He wept as he left her. Months passed and there was no word from him. In time, Nina gave birth to a child, whom she named Charlotte, for her father.

She gave the servants holiday leave, and left the child with a nursemaid, her most trusted servant and friend who was called Matty. And then she went into the tiny chapel where the King had hidden himself, and she took her own life, in a manner not suitable for a child's ears.

After her death, the servants returned to the house with the child, and found a note that had arrived in their absence from the King, leaving Keepsake to his child, and to every daughter born there. And he sent a diamond brooch, shaped like a butterfly, which Charlotte his daughter wore when she was older, and which she gave to her own daughter before she died. Upon the thorax of the butterfly are engraved the words:

What's Loved Is Never Lost.

I myself think Nina was very brave. She died because she did not want to live any more without him. She knew what the King said was true. What's Loved Is Never Lost. She knew that though he was far away, attempting to win back his crown under threat of death, and though later he would sit upon the throne and rule over us all, and his life be made public, his body and personage be for us all, that there were two weeks, long ago one September, at the edge of summer, that were his and hers and theirs alone.

What's Loved Is Never Lost.

The house slumbers on, guarded by Nina's descendants, who keep her secrets. Perhaps one day, Children, you will find it. Along the river, down the creek – you cannot reach it by road, or using a map. You will know when you arrive. Only a clear, pure heart can find its way there.

*

The End

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The Butterfly Summer

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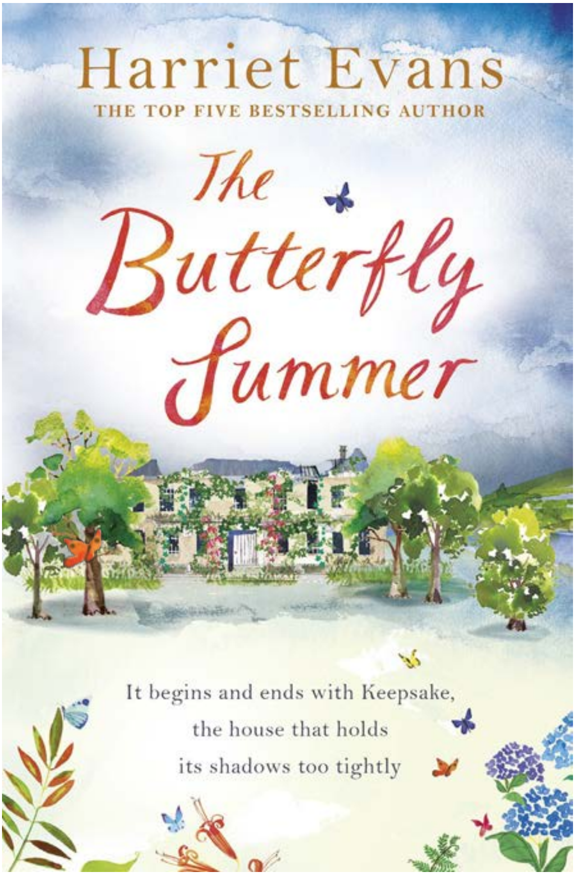
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the house that holds
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