



ARSENIC FOR TEA



TEA AT THREE. MURDER AT MIDNIGHT.

ROBIN STEVENS



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Daisy's Guide to Fallingford
Acknowledgments
About the Author
Also by Robin Stevens
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About the Book

Schoolgirl detectives Daisy Wells and Hazel Wong are at Daisy's home, Fallingford, for the holidays. Daisy's glamorous mother is throwing a tea party for Daisy's birthday, and the whole family is invited, from eccentric Aunt Saskia to dashing Uncle Felix. But it soon becomes clear that this party isn't really about Daisy at all. Naturally, Daisy is furious.

Then one of their party falls seriously, mysteriously ill - and everything points to poison.

With wild storms preventing anyone from leaving, or the police from arriving, Fallingford suddenly feels like a very dangerous place to be. Not a single person present is what they seem - and everyone has a secret or two. And when someone very close to Daisy looks suspicious, the Detective Society must do everything they can to reveal the truth . . . no matter the consequences.

ARSENIC FOR TEA

The title 'ARSENIC FOR TEA' is written in a black, ornate, serif font. The word 'ARSENIC' is on the top line, 'FOR' is on the middle line, and 'TEA' is on the bottom line. A black silhouette of a teapot is positioned at the top right, with a plume of grey steam rising from its spout and curling around the word 'ARSENIC'.

ROBIN STEVENS

RHCP DIGITAL

To Boadie and the MBs, with thanks for years of kindness
and friendship - and for giving Daisy her house.



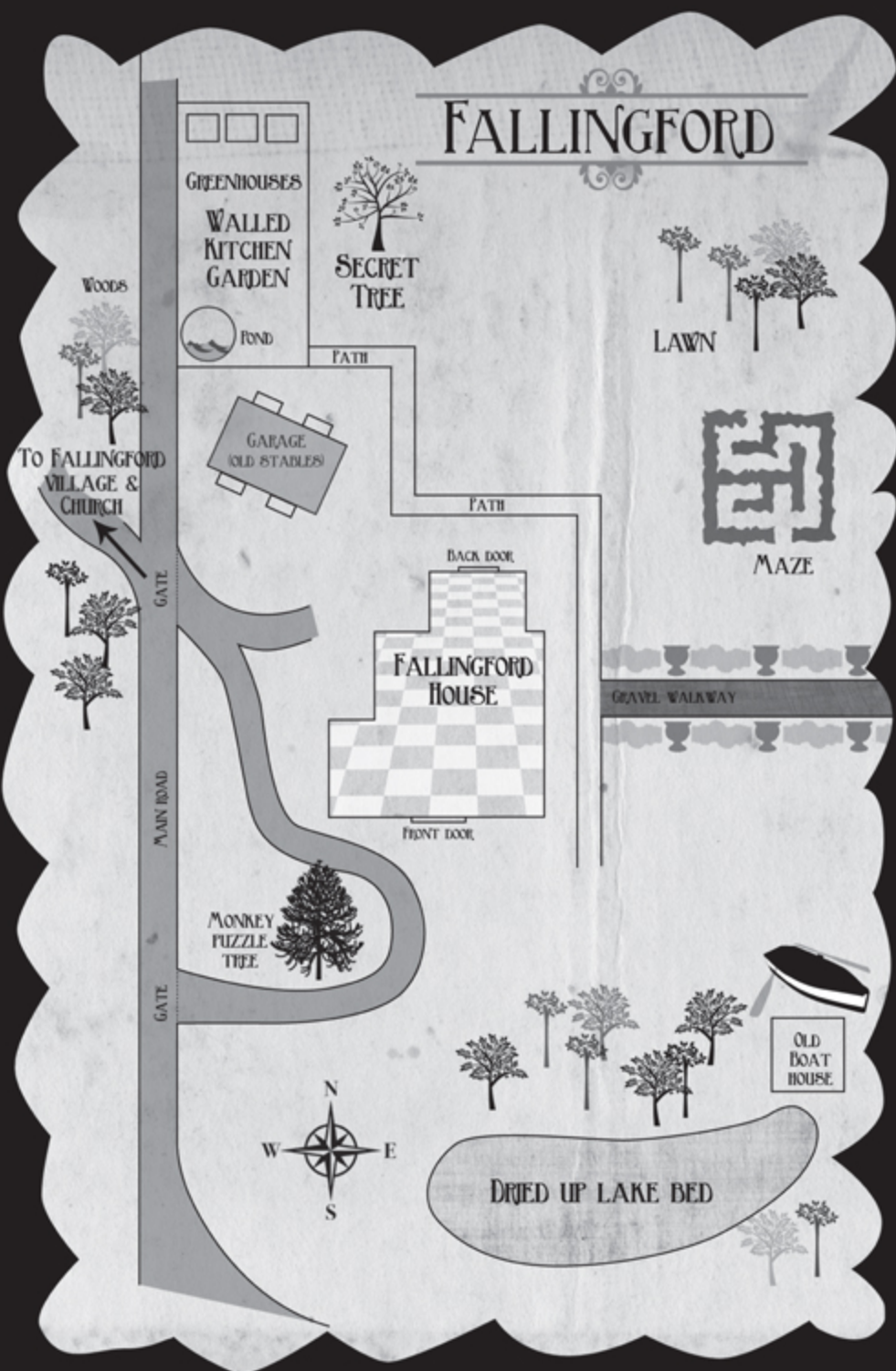
Being an account of

The Case of Mr Curtis,
an investigation by the Wells and Wong Detective Society.

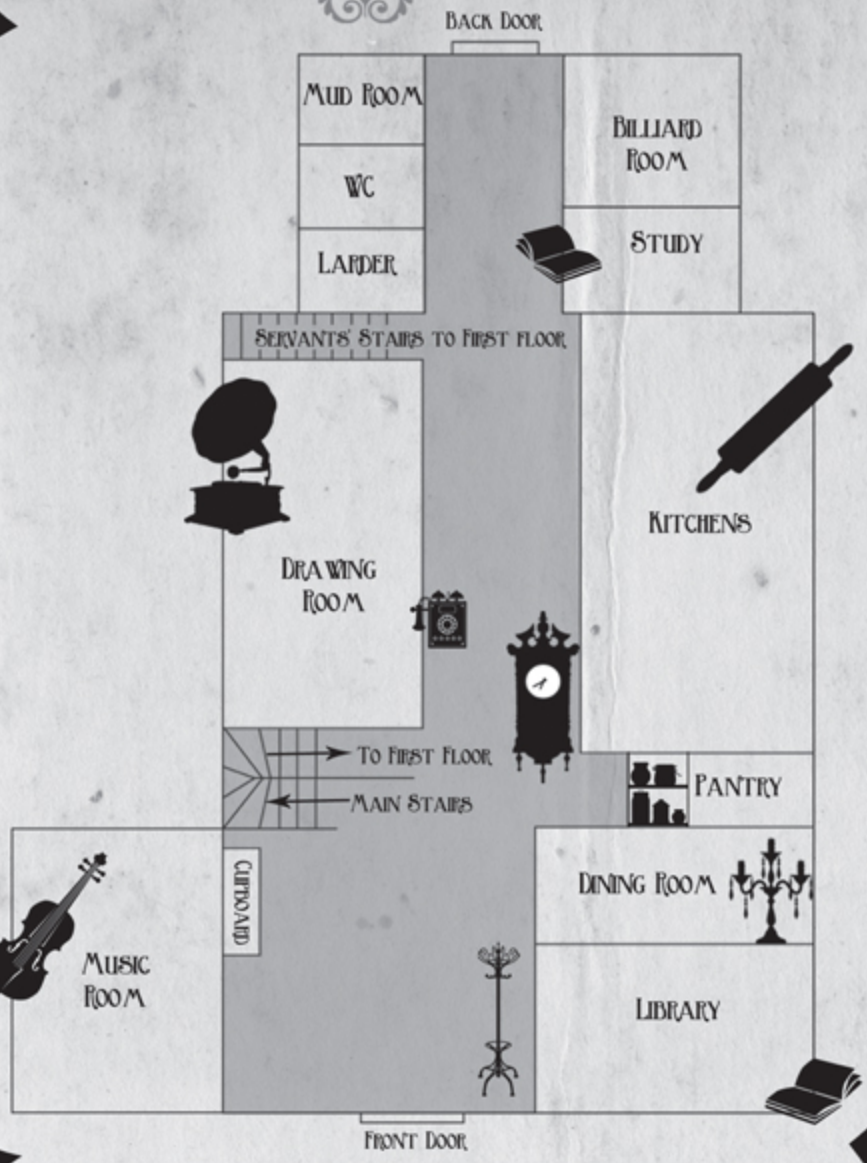
Written by Hazel Wong
(Detective Society Vice-President and Secretary), aged 13.

Begun Saturday 13th April 1935.

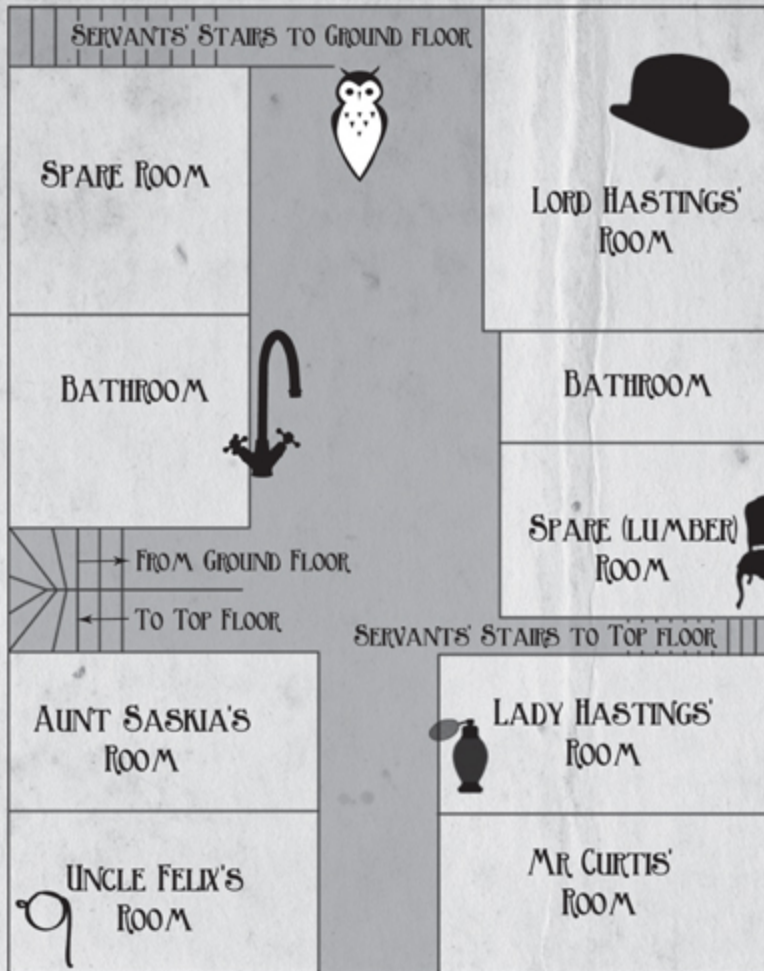
FALLINGFORD



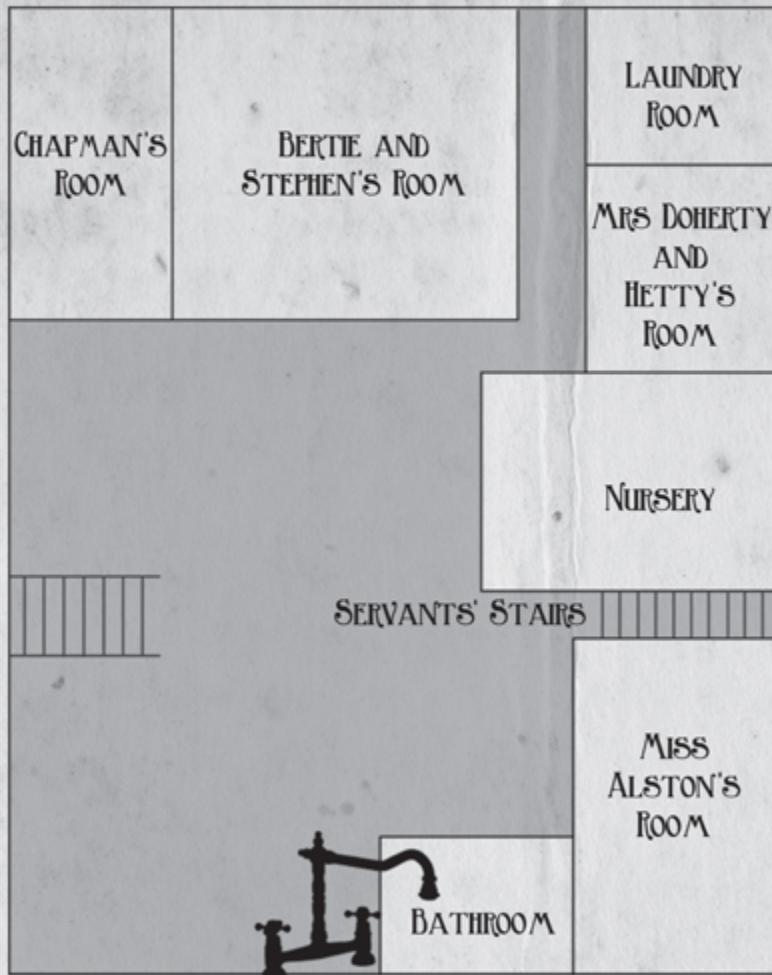
GROUND FLOOR



FIRST FLOOR



TOP FLOOR





FALLINGFORD



THE WELLS FAMILY

George Wells - *Lord Hastings*

Margaret Wells (née Mountfitchet) - *Lady Hastings*

Saskia Wells - *Aunt of Lord Hastings*

Felix Mountfitchet - *Brother of Lady Hastings*

Albert 'Bertie' Wells - *Son of Lord and Lady Hastings*

Daisy Wells - *Daughter of Lord and Lady Hastings and
President of the Detective Society*

GUESTS

Hazel Wong - *Vice-President and Secretary of the Detective Society*

Katherine 'Kitty' Freebody

Rebecca 'Beanie' Martineau

Denis Curtis - *Friend of Lady Hastings*

Miss Lucy Alston - *Governess to Daisy Wells*

Stephen Bampton - *School friend of Bertie Wells*

STAFF

Chapman - *Butler to the Wells family*

Mrs Doherty - *Cook and housekeeper to the Wells family*

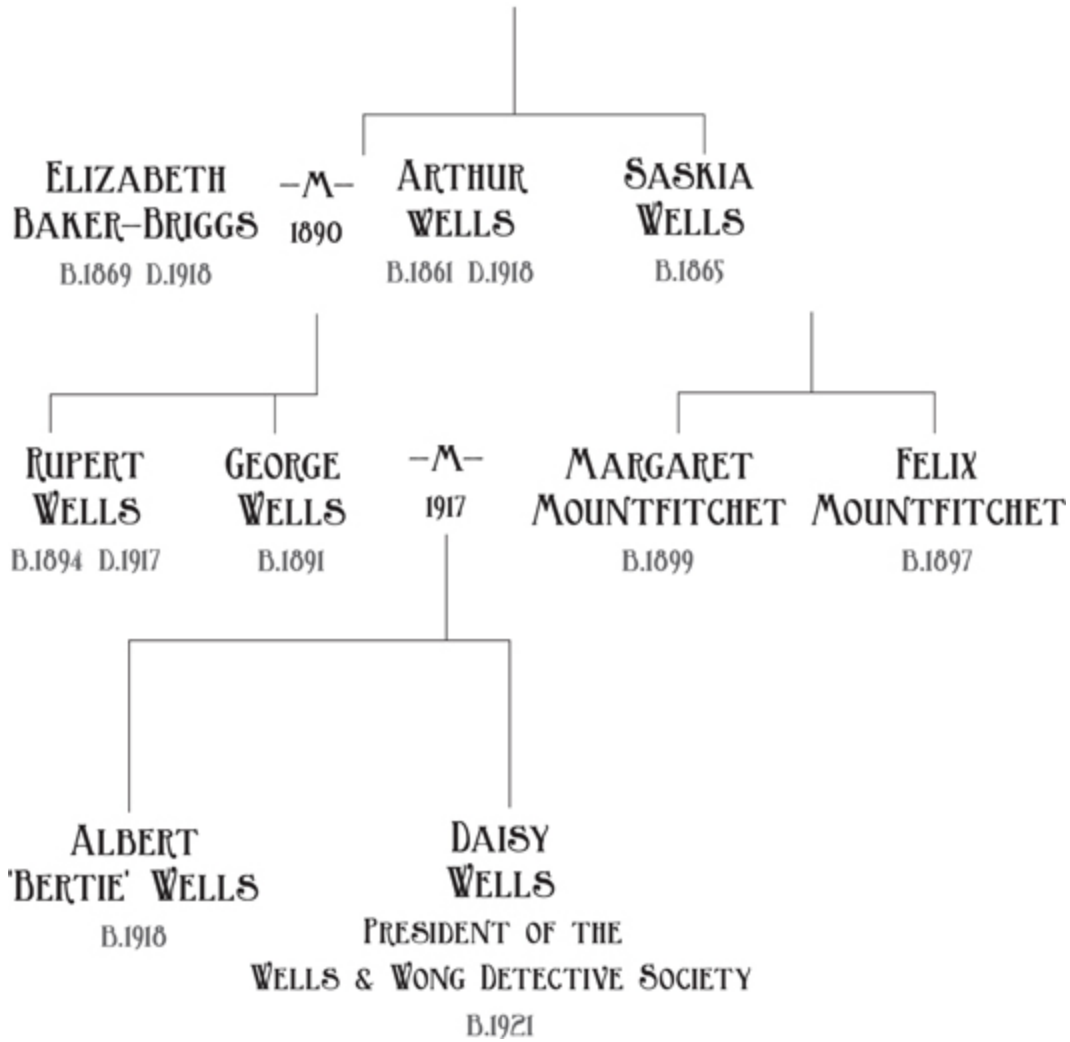
Hetty - *Maid to the Wells family*

DOGS

Toast Dog

Millie

← THE WELLS → FAMILY TREE



← PART ONE →


THE ARRIVAL
OF MR CURTIS

1

Something dreadful has happened to Mr Curtis.

I am quite surprised to realize that I mind. If you had asked me this morning what I thought of him, I should have told you that Mr Curtis was not a nice man at all. But not even the nastiest person deserves this.

Of course, Daisy doesn't see it like that. To her, crimes are not real things to be upset about. She is only interested in the fact that something has *happened*, and she wants to understand what it means. So do I, of course - I wouldn't be a proper member of the Detective Society if I didn't - but no matter how hard I try, I can't *only* think like a detective.

The fact is, Daisy and I will both need to think like detectives again. You see, just now we overheard something quite awful; something that proves that what happened to Mr Curtis was not simply an accident, or a sudden illness. Someone did this to him, and that can only mean one thing: the Detective Society has a brand-new case to investigate.

Daisy has ordered me to write what we have found out so far in the Detective Society's casebook. She is always on about the importance of taking notes - and also very sure that *she* should not have to take them. Notes are up to me - I am the Society's Secretary, as well as its Vice-President, and Daisy is its President. Although I am just as good a detective as she is - I proved that during our first real case, the Murder of Miss Bell - I am a quite different sort of person to Daisy. I like thinking about things before I act,

while Daisy always has to go rushing head over heels into things like a dog after a rabbit, and that doesn't leave much time for note-making. We are entirely different to look at, too: I am dark-haired and short and round, and Daisy is whippet-thin and tall, with glorious golden hair. But all the same, we are best friends, and an excellent crime-detecting partnership.

I think I had better hurry up and explain what has happened, and who Mr Curtis is.

I suppose it all began when I came to Daisy's house, Fallingford, for the Easter holidays and her birthday.

Spring term at our school, Deepdean, had been quite safe and ordinary. That was surprising after everything that had happened there last year - I mean the murder, and then the awful business with the school nearly closing down. But the spring term was quite peaceful, without any hint of danger or death, and I was very glad. The most exciting case we had investigated recently was the Case of the Frog in Kitty's Bed.

I was expecting Fallingford to be just as calm. Fallingford, for this new casebook, is Daisy's house: a proper English country mansion, with wood-panelled walls and acres of sprawling grounds with a maze and even an enormous monkey puzzle tree in the middle of the front drive. At first I thought the tree was a fake, but then I investigated and it is quite real.

Honestly, Fallingford is just like a house in a book. It has its own woods and lake, four sets of stairs (Daisy thinks there must be a secret passageway too, only she has never discovered it) and a walled kitchen garden just as hidden as Mary Lennox's in the book. From the outside it is a great grand square of warm yellow stone that people have been busily adding to for hundreds of years; the inside is a magic box of rooms and staircases and corridors, all unfolding and leading into each other three ways at once. There are whole flocks of stuffed birds (most especially a stuffed owl on the first-floor landing), a grand piano, several Spanish chests and even a real suit of armour in the hall. Just like at Deepdean, everything is treated so carelessly, and is so old

and battered, that it took me a while to realize how valuable all these things really are. Daisy's mother leaves her jewels about on her dressing table, the dogs are dried off after muddy walks with towels that were a wedding present to Daisy's grandmother from the King, and Daisy dog-ears the first-edition books in the library. Nothing is younger than Daisy's father, and it makes my family's glossy white wedding-cake compound in Hong Kong look as if it is only pretending to be real.

We arrived in the family car, driven by the chauffeur, O'Brian (who is also the gardener - unlike our family, the Wellses don't seem to have quite enough servants, and I wonder whether this also has something to do with the fading state of the house), on a sunny Saturday morning, the sixth of April. We came out of the light into the big dark hallway (stone-floored, with the suit of armour looming out at you alarmingly from the dimness), and Chapman, the Wellses' old butler, was there to greet us. He is white-haired and stooping, and he has been in the family so long that he is beginning to run down, just like the grandfather clock. The two dogs were there too - the little spaniel, Millie, bouncing around Daisy's knees, and the fat old yellow Labrador, Toast Dog, rocking back and forth on his stiff legs and making groaning noises as though he were ill. Chapman bent down to pick up Daisy's tuck box with a groan just like Toast Dog's (he really is very old - I kept worrying that he would seize up in the middle of something like a rusty toy) and said, 'Miss Daisy, it's good to have you home.'

Then Daisy's father came bounding out of the library. Lord Hastings (*Lord Hastings* is what Daisy's father is called, although his last name is Wells, like Daisy - apparently, when you are made a lord, you are given an extra name to show how important you are) has fat pink cheeks, a fat white moustache and a stomach that strains

against his tweed jackets, but when he smiles, he looks just like Daisy.

‘Daughter!’ he shouted, holding out his arms. ‘Daughter’s friend! Do I know you?’

Daisy’s father is very forgetful.

‘Of course you know Hazel, Daddy,’ said Daisy, sighing. ‘She came for Christmas.’

‘Hazel! Welcome, welcome. How are you? *Who* are you? You don’t look like Daisy’s friends usually do. Are you English?’

‘She’s from Hong Kong, Daddy,’ said Daisy. ‘She can’t help it.’

I squeezed my fingers tight around the handles of my travelling case and tried to keep smiling. I am so used to being at Deepdean now – and everyone there is so used to me – that I can sometimes forget that I’m different. But as soon as I leave school I remember all over again. The first time people see me they stare at me and sometimes say things under their breath. Usually they say them out loud. I know it is the way things are, but I wish I was not the only one of me – and I wish that the *me* I am did not seem like the wrong sort of *me* to be.

‘My name is Lord Hastings,’ said Lord Hastings, obviously trying to be helpful, ‘but you may call me Daisy’s father, because that is who I am.’

‘She knows, Daddy!’ said Daisy. ‘I told you, she’s been here before.’

‘Well, I’m terribly pleased you’re both here now,’ said her father. ‘Come through to the library.’ He was bouncing up and down on his toes, his cheeks all scrunched up above his moustache.

Daisy looked at him suspiciously. ‘If this is one of your tricks . . .’ she said.

‘Oh, come along, tiresome child.’ He put out his arm and Daisy, grinning, took it like a lady being escorted in to dinner.

Lord Hastings led her out of the hall and into the library. I followed on behind. It's warmer in there, and the shelves are lined with battered and well-read leather books. It is odd to compare it to my father's library, where everything matches, and is dusted twice daily by one of the valets. Fallingford really is as untidy as the inside of Daisy's head.

Lord Hastings motioned Daisy into a fat green chair, scattered with cushions. She sat gracefully - and there was a loud and very rude sound.

Lord Hastings roared with laughter. 'Isn't it good?' he cried. 'I saw it in the *Boy's Own Paper* and sent off for it at once.'

Daisy groaned. 'Daddy,' she said, 'you are an awful fool.'

'Oh, come now, Daisy dearest. It's an excellent joke. Sometimes I wonder whether you are a child at all.'

Daisy drew herself up to her full height. 'Really, Daddy,' she said, 'I shouldn't think there's room for *another* child in this house.' But she was grinning again, and Lord Hastings twinkled back.

'Now, come along, Hazel, I think we ought to go up to our room.'

And off we went.

3

Lord Hastings kept on playing humorous jokes all week. 'Daddy,' groaned Daisy as she picked a splash of fake ink off her dinner plate on Tuesday, 'you are an embarrassment to me.' But I could tell, from the way she looked at him as he giggled into his handkerchief, that she didn't mean it. Although the careful, good-show Daisy was still in place whenever her mother was watching, I noticed that her secret side, clever and fiercely interested in everything, kept popping out around Lord Hastings - and that, I knew, meant something. Daisy only shows her real self to people she truly likes, and there are not many of them at all. At dinner that day, though, Lady Hastings was there - and so Daisy was careful to be absolutely proper.

'*Really, George,*' snapped Lady Hastings, glaring at her husband.

We all cringed a bit. There was something very wrong between Lord and Lady Hastings this hols. At Christmas I had thought Daisy's mother perfectly nice, if slightly vague, but this time she was quite different - all brittle and angry at everything. She was still just as tall and blonde and glamorously beautiful as she had been at Christmas, but now her beauty was like a porcelain vase that must not be touched. Everything Lord Hastings did seemed to be wrong. Staying in the house with them was a bit like being stuck in the middle of a war, with troops on either side sending shells over our heads. I know all about parents not speaking - at home there are weeks when my mother and father talk to each other through me, as though I'm a living

telephone - but this seemed to be something else entirely. Poor Lord Hastings drooped. Hopeful presents of sagging flowers and squashed chocolates kept appearing outside Lady Hastings' room, and then were banished straight down to the kitchens, which began to look very much like the inside of a hot-house. Daisy and I ate most of the chocolates for our bunbreaks (Daisy insisted on having bunbreaks in the hols, 'in honour of Deepdean', and I saw no reason to argue with her).

'He loves her,' said Daisy, munching an orange cream, 'and she loves him too, really, only she sometimes doesn't show it. She'll come round in the end.'

I wasn't so sure. Lady Hastings seemed to spend all her time either locked away in her bedroom or on the telephone in the hall, whispering away into it and falling silent when we came too close.

It was not just Daisy and I who had been turned into hostages of the row between her parents. Daisy's brother Bertie, who was in his final year at Eton, was home for the holidays too.

Bertie looked unnervingly like Daisy - a Daisy stretched out like India rubber and shorn of her hair - but if Daisy fizzed like a rocket, Bertie hummed with rage. He was cross all the time, and as soon as he arrived he began to crash about the house. He had a pair of bright green trousers, an out-of-tune ukulele which he insisted on playing at odd hours of the day and night (according to Daisy he could only play three songs, and they were all rude), and a friend whose name was Stephen Bampton.

I felt very grateful that Stephen was *not* a cross person. He was short and stocky, with smooth reddish hair, and he seemed gentle and slightly sad. He looked at me as though I were a *person* rather than The Orient, and I liked him at once.

I was glad he was there, because this hols, Fallingford felt foreign - or perhaps it reminded me how foreign *I* was.

Bertie jangled away on his ukulele, musically angry, and Lord and Lady Hastings argued, and Daisy went bouncing around the house, showing me secret hiding places and house-martin nests and a sword that had belonged to her great-grandfather, and I began to be hungry for my own Hong Kong house's gluey heat and fake flower arrangements.

The last person in the house - apart from the cook and housekeeper, Mrs Doherty, and Hetty the maid - was Miss Alston, Daisy's governess. There was always a governess in the holidays at Deepdean, to help Daisy with prep and keep her out of trouble - and to help Lord Hastings write letters. 'He gets muddled when he tries to do it himself, poor dear,' Daisy told me, by way of explanation.

This hols, though, dull, droning Miss Rose, who we'd had to suffer at Christmas, had quite inexplicably gone away. 'With only the briefest telephone call!' said Lady Hastings, as cross as ever. 'Really!' Instead, we had Miss Alston.

Miss Alston was, as our Deepdean dorm mate Kitty would have said, a frump. She was the very image of a spinster bluestocking: she wore ugly square clothes without a waist, her hair stood out from her forehead in a heavy clump, and she always carried an enormous handbag in ugly brown pigskin. On first acquaintance, she seemed very safe and very dull, but that was misleading. The more lessons we had with her, the more we realized that Miss Alston was not dull at all. She was interesting.

Miss Rose had simply marched us through our Deepdean prep like an army general with no time to waste, but Miss Alston was not like that at all. If we were working on a Latin translation about Hannibal, she would stop to talk about his elephants. If we were learning about water, she took us outside to look at the clouds. If we were reading a Shakespeare play, she asked us whether we felt sorry for the Macbeths. I said yes (though they shouldn't have done it), and Daisy said absolutely not, of course. 'Explain,' said

Miss Alston, and for almost half an hour we both quite forgot that we were doing prep, in the holidays, with a governess.

The oddest thing was that, around the grown-ups, Miss Alston was very different. She was perfectly ordinary. When she wasn't busy with us, she sat with Lord Hastings, drafting his letters and making lists and ordering him yo-yos and fake moustaches from his *Boy's Own* catalogues. He thought Miss Alston deadly dull, just as Daisy and I had before she began teaching us. 'She doesn't even laugh at my jokes!' he complained.

'I shouldn't think *that* was a surprise,' said Daisy, patting him on the head as if she were stroking Toast Dog.

'Mummy, where did you find Miss Alston?'

'Goodness, how should I remember?' asked Lady Hastings, who was busy trying to brush dog hair off her cape. 'The agency, I suppose. There was a letter . . . Heavens, Daisy, why must you complain about your governesses? You know perfectly well that I can't look after you.'

'Quite obviously,' said Daisy icily. I knew what lay behind the question. Daisy wanted to understand Miss Alston, and what made her so different - but there was no easy answer to that. Miss Alston kept on being privately interesting and publicly dull, and Daisy and I became more and more curious about her.