

# THE SECRET STARLING



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90 YEARS OF EXCELLENCE

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## Chapter One

Most people believe a little routine to be a good thing. Babies thrive on a routine of milk, cuddle, sleep; milk, cuddle, sleep; milk, cuddle, sleep. Schools tend towards a ship-shape routine of lining up, lessons and play. A good routine, say certain people, gives you a sense of purpose and adds structure and order to the day.

But the routine that Clara was meant to follow at Braithwaite Manor would send those very people half mad. Day in, day out, it was always the same.

Get up, get washed (in the freezing bathroom, where in winter icicles hung), have breakfast alone in the draughty dining room. The dining room, as always,

would be deadly quiet except for the solemn tick of the grandfather clock and Clara's chewing noises, which seemed extraordinarily loud.

After breakfast came lessons, taught by a governess. The governesses changed almost on a monthly basis. 'It's like life GROUND to a halt in the nineteenth century!' the last-but-one had cried, grabbing her bag and click-clacking furiously down the hall to the door.

Clara couldn't agree more.

The house did, after all, look like something out of a Victorian gothic novel, crouching in the middle of the moors like an angry crow. A single dark turret rose up to stab the gloomy skies, and flinty little windows glittered meanly at anyone with the gumption to approach.

The governesses had strict orders from Clara's uncle to teach her the most boring lessons known to man or woman. Clara knew full well they would have preferred to teach her fun projects, like making collages, putting on shows and writing stories. But Uncle didn't have a fun bone in his body and preferred the traditional approach: endless times tables, fiendishly hard spelling tests and complicated grammatical exercises that made both Clara's and the governesses' brains hurt.

After lessons, came lunch, and after lunch it was time for a walk in the scrubby grounds.

Perhaps if the sun ever shone, the garden might have held a bit more promise. After all, as certain grown-ups will tell you, there are endless games to be played in the great outdoors.

But at Braithwaite Manor the sun rarely shone. Instead, the freezing wind whipped and whirled, and the rain spliced the air and grazed your face until it hurt.

So while the governesses swaddled themselves in fur coats found in the upstairs wardrobes and huddled on the bench reading old copies of *Vogue*, Clara hung around and kicked her heels on the half-frozen ground. She never felt like playing with the mouldy old dirt and stones on her own.

After the walk came the dreariest part of all, the daily visit to Uncle. And here is the truth of it: Uncle was an icily cold man. Not a glimmer of warmth emanated from this sternest of beings. It is entirely possible that he had no real feelings at all. His eyes never twinkled. He rarely smiled. He didn't hug, or laugh, or cry, or do any of the things that warmer-blooded humans do. As far as Clara could see, the only things he liked were rules and routine.

'Children should be seen and not heard,' was his favourite saying. Clara was not to run in the house, but must always tiptoe quietly. He detested chatter, so

Cook and Clara had to wait until he went out, which was rare. There was no television or radio, and he did not take a newspaper. To all intents and purposes they were quite adrift from the outside world.

Clara had wasted hour upon hour wondering why Uncle was so mean-spirited. One likely explanation was that he was permanently grief-stricken. His parents had died suddenly when he was a very young man. His sister, Clara's mother, had died in childbirth and Uncle had long ago made it clear that not one of the deceased was to be spoken about or referred to in any way, shape or form. Clara knew she had a father *somewhere* out there in the great wide world, but she had stopped asking about him ages ago.

'He doesn't even know you exist,' Uncle had told her meanly. 'How many times do I have to tell you before it gets into that woolly head of yours?'

The daily visits to Uncle followed a familiar pattern. There he would sit, deep in his armchair, in his cosy study in front of the one roaring fire, and gaze at Clara as though he wished she wasn't there. Sometimes he would close his eyes, breathe deeply and open them again in a kind of despair. It was at times like these that Clara couldn't help wondering if he would just prefer her to disappear.

Then he would ask the questions. The same questions he asked every day.

‘How were your lessons today? What did you learn? Did you say your prayers?’

Clara barely heard the questions now, so familiar was she with the mind-numbing tedium of it all. Anyhow, her answers were always the same.

‘Good, Uncle,’ ‘Many things, Uncle,’ and, ‘Yes.’

The yes was a lie because Clara couldn’t always be bothered to pray, just like she couldn’t always be bothered to brush her teeth. Instead she put her hands together, shut her eyes and counted backwards from ten.

Clara knew that if she changed her answers Uncle wouldn’t bat an eyelid. Once she had tried it just to see. She’d answered, ‘Boring,’ ‘Nothing at all,’ and ‘I never do.’

Then she’d squeezed her eyes tight shut and held her breath, waiting for Uncle to explode. Or at least to look at her and take notice. He did neither. It gave Clara a weird sinking feeling. At least now she was one hundred per cent sure he didn’t listen to her any more than she cared to listen to him.

After the visit to Uncle it was teatime.

‘What’s for tea?’ Clara would ask in the vain hope that Cook might say something interesting like coq au

vin, or beef Wellington or prawn cocktail, just some of the recipes she had read about in her governesses' magazines. But Uncle was a firm believer in plain meals – nothing fancy was allowed.

Recently the answer was always 'spreadables': three slices of bread and margarine and a variety of jars on the table. The jars were full of untempting things like fish paste, strangely crunchy honey and gloopy jam.

'Sorry,' said Cook, when Clara's face fell again. It wasn't Cook's fault. Clara knew that Uncle was terribly mean with the housekeeping money. Last month he had halved Cook's budget and two weeks later he had halved it again. Cook whispered to Clara that she was almost at her wits' end.

When tea was finished, it was time for bed. And that was it: the exact same thing, over and over, day in, day out, forever and ever, amen.

It was true that, occasionally, Uncle did disappear for a day or two. Then Clara, James the butler and the governess-of-the-month would join Cook in the kitchen for hot buttered toast and card games. If she was lucky, James would teach Clara some DIY skills. Now she knew how to saw wood, drill holes and hammer in nails.

In bed, Clara would read until she couldn't keep



her eyes open. Besides a scrap of red ribbon tucked inside her shell box, books were the only things she had of her mother's: a battered collection of paperbacks with yellowing pages, the fly leaf of each inscribed in violet ink:

*Property of Christobel Starling.*

*Return if found.*

Clara loved to hold the open books to her nose, inhaling the musty oldness of them. Her favourite was *The Secret Garden*, which she had read again and again and again. It was a shame there was nothing remotely resembling a secret garden at Braithwaite Manor. Just a patch of scrub, a tumbling-down stone wall and beyond that, miles and miles of desolate moor.

It was hard not to feel hopeless. But Clara tried her best to look on the bright side even though the days dragged interminably and there was no one to play with, nothing new to see.

