

## Secrets of the Butler Sisters

Elma, Polly and Fay sit in the stuffy front room, listening to the tick of the mantle clock and watching shadows climb the wall as they wait for Papa to pull up in the Model T and introduce them to their new mother. Papa had instructed Elma to please have a light meal prepared since it would be their first family dinner together. Those words, “first family dinner,” had made 16-year-old Elma want to wretch. The idea of Leona Banks taking Mama’s place, with those horrible rumors swirling, make Elma’s lips tremble and her heart quicken every time she thinks of it.

Now, Elma perches on the edge of the red velvet Victorian sofa, her back straight, neck in line with her shoulders as she was taught, chin pulled back. Her fingers shake as she tucks back into place loose strands of hair that have fallen from the braided bun coiled at the back of her neck. She would love to scream, to release the tension building in her shoulders, but she stifles the urge. She doesn’t want to frighten Polly and Fay.

Polly, 10, pretty as a picture with her long brown hair, sits in the wing-back chair reading Anne of Green Gables. She’s the smart one. Too smart for her own good sometimes, with those all-knowing eyes, Elma thinks. Polly doesn’t listen when she thinks she is right, and will just as soon snap at you as be pleasant.

Little Fay, who is six, sprawls at Polly’s feet, on her belly on the red floral carpet, wrinkling her jumper and likely snagging her tights. Elma had spent hours combing tangles out of Fay’s thick black hair, which hangs now in unruly, thick curls around her shoulders as though it has a springy life of its own.

Elma glances at the clock, but she doesn't need to look to know the time. She can tell by the fading light that Papa and the new mother will be here soon. The kitchen table is set with Mama's white and gold china plates and crystal glasses, resting properly on a linen cloth. These are Mama's things, Elma thinks, delicate and cherished as spring flowers, handed down from her mother, and destined to become Elma's someday, as the first-born girl.

Elma had fried a chicken that morning that she would warm in the oven for dinner. She had prepared a mess of green beans from last summer's garden and baked a loaf of bread. A lot of work for one person, but it kept her mind occupied, kept her from thinking of all the things Henry said.

Henry, her beau, lives with and works for his uncle at the car shop in Nashville during the week, but on week-ends he stays with his own family in Fern Dale, two towns over, so he can take Elma on pic-nicks and to the movies or church socials.

Leona Banks used to live in Fern Dale. Henry has all kind of stories, says people are talking in whispers, saying Leona poisoned her late husband, burned his barn for insurance money and has now snagged another man to take care of her.

Elma had tried to warn Papa, but he had given her a stern look, admonished her not to listen to gossip, said his bride to be is a fine Christian woman. But Elma believed Henry, who didn't think Leona Banks and her family ever darkened the church door. Henry said people roll their eyes when talking about her, said she was a proud one, thought she was better than everyone else.

Papa would not listen to any of it. Would not be reasonable. He had changed since Mama died. He was slipping away.

Elma bites her lip and stares tenderly at her sisters. She will graduate high school in a few months and had planned to attend nursing college in Nashville, to get a skill and be near Henry, and marry him once she graduated. *I can't leave them behind*, Elma thinks. *I won't leave them in the hands of an evil woman. I'll take care of them.* Maybe she would skip nursing school and marry Henry straight away, bring Polly and Fay to live with them.

Polly clears her throat and Elma looks up.

"Why can't you be our mother?" Polly asks, as if reading Elma's thoughts. "I don't want a mother I don't even know."

Elma answers with a weak smile and pats the couch, motioning for the girls to sit by her. Polly bookmarks her place with a ribbon, sits down the novel as she stands and smooths her jumper and makes her way into Elma's outstretched arms. Fay runs to Elma as well, nearly tripping on the rug's fringe.

The girls smell of lye soap and honeysuckle, clean and fresh. Elma squeezes them, kisses their salty, tear-slick cheeks. She revels at the smoothness of their skin, their bony, sun-freckled arms. The flesh of sisters, the flesh of a family. *I'll always take care of them*, Elma thinks. Her eyes smart with tears but she holds them back. She must be strong. Oh, how happy they had all been just a little over a year ago!

"We'll stick together," Elma says. "We're sisters. No one can take that away."

'Unless somebody else dies,' Fay says, her eyes brimming with tears.

'Shush, Fay,' Elma says. "Don't talk like that." Her sister's comment brings a lump in Elma's throat, though. How can a four-year-old cope with so much loss and now have a new mother forced on her? How could any of them?

"Let's make a pledge," Polly says. Polly likes to occupy herself with made-up secret codes and languages. She's writing a diary in code, marking in it every day. Elma would like to read it, know her sister's inner-most thoughts. But Polly keeps private.

"Hold hands, close your eyes and say three times, "Sisters stick together," Polly instructs. Elma says the words but doesn't close her eyes. She instead watches Fay wrinkle her freckled nose and scrunch her eyes as tightly shut as possible, perhaps to insure the pledge will take. After the third repeat they sit together in a heap, the little girls leaning on Elma, until a horn blasts outside.

Elma stands and smooths her dress, nudges the girls to do the same.

"It's our new mother," Fay whispers, and takes off running through the kitchen. Elma knows she's headed to the back yard and on to the garden or the woods where she often goes to hide and talk to what she says is Mama's spirit. Elma chases after and catches Fay by the arm before she leaves the kitchen.

"Please behave right now," Elma says. "Sisters stick together, so stick with me and Polly." She wipes a tear from Fay's cheek and kisses her crown.

"I already don't like her," Fay says.

“You don’t know,” Elma says.

On the other side of the door, Papa and the new woman laugh and talk while Papa fiddles with the skeleton key. He can’t get it to work. “Elma,” he shouts, shaking the doorknob, “We’re here! Let us in.”

Elma swallows bile that had inched into her throat and walks stiffly across the room in her best long dress, the beige one with white lace around the collar, the dress mother had sewn for her while teaching Elma how to pick good material, to cut the cloth on the grain from tissue-paper patterns. Elma remembered standing still and turning slowly as mother pinned the hem. She takes a deep breath and unlatches the lock.