

© Belinda Murrell 2016

the *Lost*  
SAPPHIRE

### **Pippa's Island**

*Book 1: The Beach Shack Cafe*

*Book 2: Cub Reporters*

*The Locket of Dreams*

*The Ruby Talisman*

*The Ivory Rose*

*The Forgotten Pearl*

*The River Charm*

*The Sequin Star*

*The Lost Sapphire*

### **The Sun Sword Trilogy**

*Book 1: The Quest for the Sun Gem*

*Book 2: The Voyage of the Owl*

*Book 3: The Snowy Tower*

### **Lulu Bell**

*Lulu Bell and the Birthday Unicorn*

*Lulu Bell and the Fairy Penguin*

*Lulu Bell and the Cubby Fort*

*Lulu Bell and the Moon Dragon*

*Lulu Bell and the Circus Pup*

*Lulu Bell and the Sea Turtle*

*Lulu Bell and the Tiger Cub*

*Lulu Bell and the Pyjama Party*

*Lulu Bell and the Christmas Elf*

*Lulu Bell and the Koala Joey*

*Lulu Bell and the Arabian Nights*

*Lulu Bell and the Magical Garden*

*Lulu Bell and the Pirate Fun*

© Belinda Murrell 2016

the *Lost*  
SAPPHIRE

---

BELINDA  
MURRELL

---



RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

© Belinda Murrell 2016

A Random House book  
Published by Penguin Random House Australia Pty Ltd  
Level 3, 100 Pacific Highway, North Sydney NSW 2060  
[www.randomhouse.com.au](http://www.randomhouse.com.au)



Penguin  
Random House  
Australia

First published by Random House Australia in 2016

Copyright © Belinda Murrell 2016

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted by any person or entity, including internet search engines or retailers, in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying (except under the statutory exceptions provisions of the Australian *Copyright Act 1968*), recording, scanning or by any information storage and retrieval system without the prior written permission of Penguin Random House Australia.

Addresses for the Penguin Random House group of companies can be found at [global.penguinrandomhouse.com/offices](http://global.penguinrandomhouse.com/offices).

National Library of Australia  
Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Creator: Murrell, Belinda, author.  
Title: The lost sapphire/Belinda Murrell.  
ISBN: 978 1 92532 411 2 (paperback)  
Target Audience: For primary school age.  
Subjects: Nineteen twenties – Juvenile fiction.  
Melbourne (Vic.) – History – Juvenile fiction.  
Dewey Number: A823.4

Cover design: book design by saso  
Cover images: wren © Katarina Christenson/Shutterstock; mansion  
© Jon Bilous/Shutterstock; wisteria © Valery Sidelnykov/Shutterstock;  
flowers © Oleksandra Vasylenko/Shutterstock; girl © Aleshyn\_Andrei/  
Shutterstock  
Internal design and typesetting by Midland Typesetters, Australia  
Printed in Australia by Griffin Press, an accredited ISO AS/NZS 14001:2004  
Environmental Management System printer

Penguin Random House Australia uses papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

*To my beautiful family – Rob, Nick, Emily and Lachie,  
who fill my life with love and joy.*



# 1

## *Arrival*



### **Melbourne, modern day**

The plane skimmed high above the billowing white clouds. Marli peered out the window. She felt free, soaring so far above the earth. For a moment she forgot why she was there, where she was flying to. Then reality came back with a rush, and she felt her stomach sink.

As the plane wheeled and began its descent, Marli could see silver-roofed farmhouses scattered below, along with lush green paddocks bordered with darker hedges and dams that gleamed like shiny coins. The farmland looked like a magical miniature world. Despite herself, Marli felt a flicker of excitement.

Planes and airports always made her feel like that. They seemed to offer the promise of adventure, an escape from the everyday life of school, homework and soccer training.

*But not this time*, Marli told herself firmly. *This time, the plane is not taking me away on a journey to an exciting, exotic*

*place. This time the plane is dragging me to the world's most boring summer.*

Marli turned away from the view, scowling, her arms firmly crossed. The flight attendant sashayed down the aisle, pausing beside Marli. Her uniform was crisp and bright, her face perfectly made up, her hair lacquered in a tight bun. Marli immediately felt scruffy and awkward in her grey jumper, ripped jeans and short black lace-up boots. Her mother had encouraged her to wear something pretty, but Marli had insisted she needed to wear something loose and comfortable for the trip.

'Coming home?' the flight attendant chirped.

'No.' Marli pushed a hank of auburn hair behind her ear. Her own bun was messy and unravelling. 'Just visiting.'

'Family or friends?' asked the flight attendant.

'My dad.' Marli fiddled with the engraved silver bangle on her wrist. 'For the school holidays. I don't see him often,' she confessed.

*Why did I tell her that?* thought Marli. *Too much information.* She hunched down in her seat.

'Well, have a wonderful holiday,' said the flight attendant. 'Melbourne is one of the most exciting cities in the world.' The flight attendant continued down the aisle, checking that all passengers were ready to land.

Marli's thoughts returned to her problems — there were several. The major problem was that Marli's mum had been offered an opportunity that was simply too good to refuse. She had been invited to England for eight weeks to lecture in history at Cambridge University and research a book she was writing on Celtic culture.

Several times in the past, Marli had accompanied her mum when she taught at interstate universities for a week or two. The best trip had been when Marli was twelve, and she and her mother had lived in Ireland for six months while her mother completed her PhD in Dublin and Marli attended a local school. She had come home with a broad Irish accent that had lasted for months.

However, this time Mum had decided that Marli should spend the summer holidays with her father in Melbourne. Marli had argued and sulked and begged, but to no avail. Her mother was adamant that it was the perfect opportunity for her to spend quality time with her father.

Marli's parents had separated four years ago, when she was ten. Dad had been offered a high-flying job in his home town of Melbourne while Marli and her mother had stayed behind in Brisbane. At first Marli had been devastated – she missed him terribly – but over time she became used to having the odd holiday with him or the occasional dinner when he came to town on business. They had gone from being close, with her dad teaching her about photography and coaching her soccer team, to having an awkward, intermittent relationship of hasty phone calls once a week. Now they only saw each other once or twice a year.

But she didn't want to spend a whole summer in a strange city where she didn't really know anyone. All her friends had been talking about their plans to have fun together. There would be parties and movies and picnics and beach trips. And Marli would miss everything.

She slumped further down in her seat and glared out the window. The colour of the sky had deepened and golden lights twinkled from the buildings below. The pilot made

an announcement over the loudspeaker and the plane continued its descent.

Marli thought back to Mum's words as she'd dropped her at the airport. 'Marli, sweetheart, try to have fun. Your father is so looking forward to you coming. Please don't ruin it all by insisting on being miserable.'

'I'm not insisting on being miserable,' retorted Marli. 'I *am* miserable. I want to come to England with you, or stay at Evie's house so I can see my friends this summer.'

'Sweetie, we've been over this,' Mum said. 'You can't come to England with me because I have a really hectic work schedule. This is a huge chance for me. And I couldn't expect Evie's parents to have you for two whole months. Besides, Alex is your father and it's important you see him.'

Marli shook her head. 'It will be so *boring* staying with Dad,' she insisted. 'He'll be working all the time, and I won't know anyone in Melbourne.'

Mum had hugged her close, and Marli snuggled in against her, breathing in her warmth and the faint scent of citrus.

Mum abruptly pulled away and put her hands on Marli's shoulders. 'You'll make friends,' she assured her. 'Think of it as a great adventure.'

Marli felt her heart lift for a moment, then she frowned. She actually wanted to feel miserable. She was so angry with her mother for going off to England and making her go to Melbourne. She was angry with her father for leaving them in the first place. And she was angry with herself for not being able to persuade her mother to change her plans. She hoped Mum was worrying about her now and feeling sorry that she'd sent her away.

Marli felt her ears pop as the plane descended. Raindrops raced down the windows.

The plane thumped down and trundled along through the runway puddles towards the terminal before coming to a stop. Marli quickly switched her phone off airplane mode and checked for messages. Disappointingly, there were none from any of her friends. Just one from Mum: ‘Love you. Have fun. M xxx’.

Marli grabbed her canvas backpack, heavy with books, from the overhead locker and shuffled up the aisle with the rest of the passengers, down the stairs and onto the tarmac. She shivered as a biting wind whipped around her, cutting through her thin jumper and tangling her hair. It had been summery and hot when she left home. Inside the airport, people waited to meet family and friends. Marli looked around, a knot of apprehension in her stomach. Would he be there?

‘Marli-myshka,’ called a familiar voice and Marli swung her head in its direction. There he was, her father, Alex Peterson, tall with dark hair and brown eyes, just like hers. He swept her up in a hug. ‘I’m so glad you’re here.’

For a moment Marli relaxed into the embrace, then she stiffened and pulled away. ‘Hi, Dad.’

Her dad looked momentarily disappointed before schooling his face into one of warm welcome. ‘Your grandfather can’t wait to see you. He’ll hardly recognise you – you’re so grown up.’

Her father kept up a steady flow of chat as they queued to collect Marli’s luggage, talking about his plans to take two weeks off over Christmas so they could drive along the Great Ocean Road.

‘I thought we’d go out for dinner tonight, just the two of us,’ he suggested as they made their way to the car park. ‘There’re some fantastic Vietnamese restaurants in Richmond near my place. That’s if you’re not too tired.’

Marli felt like saying yes, she was too tired to go out on a cold, drizzly night. But then she thought about the long evening ahead. Perhaps it would be better to be out in a noisy restaurant than sitting with Dad in his quiet apartment.

She nodded. ‘That sounds good.’

‘Great, then tomorrow we’ll visit Didi. He says he has a special surprise for us.’

Marli felt a rush of anticipation at the thought of seeing her grandfather again. She hadn’t seen him for two years. Memories came back of childhood games, reading by the fire and bushwalking with her grandparents.

It was a long, slow drive through peak-hour traffic to Victoria Street, Richmond, weaving through cars and trams. Pedestrians dashed across the road. Horns blared. Lights dazzled. Marli noticed that the streetscape changed drastically, becoming more exotic the farther they drove. Dad parked the car down a side street and they strolled along the crowded footpath.

Marli felt like they had been transported to a foreign country as they walked past vibrantly coloured buildings, a jumble of Asian signs and shopfronts crowded with mounds of vegetables, hanging barbecued ducks, baskets of shellfish and other unusual groceries.

‘They call this area Little Saigon because there is such a large Vietnamese population living here,’ explained Dad. ‘Some time you must come down for the Moon Lantern Festival in autumn. It’s great fun.’

Marli looked around with wide eyes, soaking up the sights and sounds of Little Saigon. The scent of mysterious spices and sizzling food wafted from the shopfronts. A Vietnamese woman in a quilted jacket stood beside a stall on the pavement selling fresh herbs, salad greens and golden mangoes.

Dad pointed further down Victoria Street. 'My favourite restaurant is just up here if you're happy with Vietnamese, or we could go to the Greek precinct in Swan Street, or there're Mexican, Chinese and Japanese eateries if you'd rather something else,' he said. 'I must confess, I don't cook much when there's so much amazing food right on my doorstep.'

'Vietnamese sounds great,' Marli said, suddenly feeling hungry.

Dad eased his way into a packed restaurant with crimson walls, simple wooden tables and chairs, and paper lanterns hanging from the ceiling. The proprietor hurried forward with a broad smile.

'Hi, Than,' said Dad. 'How are you?'

'Good, Alex,' replied Than. 'You're very early. We don't normally see you till nearly closing time. Are you eating in tonight?'

Dad beamed and gestured to Marli. 'Yes, I have a good incentive today. My beautiful daughter, Marli, has just flown in from Brisbane to spend a few weeks with me. I told my boss that neither fire nor high water would keep me in the office tonight.'

'Great to meet you finally,' said Than to Marli. 'Your father is our best customer, but he always comes very late. His boss works him hard.'

‘I often pull up out the front and grab a quick takeaway,’ Dad confessed with a rueful smile.

*That must get rather lonely for Dad, eating takeaway on his own*, Marli thought. Than chatted about business while he settled them at a table overlooking the bustling street. A babble of voices sounded from the kitchen, calling out in Vietnamese.

The two pored over the menu, sipped steaming green tea in tiny cups and discussed what to order. The food came quickly – delicate rice paper rolls stuffed with prawns, rice noodles and mint, lemongrass chilli chicken, barbecued spicy pork with fresh herbs and fluffy rice.

Dad asked Marli questions about school, soccer and who she was hanging out with. Marli told him about her best friends – Evie, Charlie, Max and Tess. She tried not to sound petulant as she talked about the movies they had seen, the soccer grand final and weekend excursions to the beach. It reminded her of what she would be missing out on over the summer.

‘And how’s your mother?’ asked Dad. Was Marli imagining it or did he seem wistful?

Marli tossed her head, feeling the frustration welling up again as she thought of Mum winging her way to England without her.

‘Fine,’ replied Marli, stabbing a piece of chicken with her chopstick. ‘She’ll be in heaven in Cambridge, surrounded by all those grand, old buildings and dusty manuscripts. She’ll forget all about us, discussing druids and burial rites with her students.’

When they had lived in Ireland, one of their favourite places had been the Long Room of Trinity College

Library, with its soaring arched ceilings, marble busts and galleries holding two hundred thousand books. Marli had loved to read or draw in one of the peaceful, silent library nooks. She still remembered the feeling of awe when Mum had shown her the famous Book of Kells, a collection of extravagantly illuminated manuscripts written twelve hundred years ago by the monks of Iona.

On weekends, they had travelled the countryside, staying in quaint cottages, grand country homes and ancient castles that had been turned into guesthouses. Mum had her guidebook in hand everywhere, telling Marli fascinating stories about the history of the buildings and the people who had lived there. It had been one of the happiest times of her life. Marli shook herself mentally. Mum would soon be in Cambridge, having an amazing time, and she was stuck here in Melbourne.

‘Your mother’s done brilliantly well,’ Dad said, taking another spring roll and dunking it in the peanut sauce. ‘It couldn’t have been easy forging a career as an historical expert on Celtic culture while raising a child.’

‘I guess so,’ Marli replied, twisting the silver bangle on her arm. She hadn’t thought about it from that angle before.

‘I thought you might like to come into work with me one day next week,’ said Dad, changing the subject. ‘We’re building an exciting new development down in the Docklands, a series of ultra-modern skyscrapers with apartments, offices, restaurants, cafés, shops and businesses. It will be a high-rise city with amazing views of the bay.’

‘Sure,’ said Marli. She didn’t imagine it would be that interesting to spend the day on a big construction site, but what else was she going to do?

Dad frowned and rubbed his forehead. ‘It’s been a challenging project – we’ve had endless problems with environmental issues, delayed materials, unreliable suppliers and budget blowouts. I’ve been working day and night for months . . .’

As he spoke about work, Marli thought her father looked tired and worried. Dad was an architect. A few years ago he had his own small business in Brisbane, designing renovations for family homes, many of them old timber Queenslanders with ornate fretwork and wide verandahs. When Marli was young, her parents had spent every weekend sanding, painting, repairing and restoring their own hundred-year-old timber cottage in Paddington.

But while Dad had enjoyed renovating old homes, he had been offered a high-paying job with a national property developer, designing huge apartment blocks. Dad had said it was an offer too good to refuse – no more worrying about chasing up bills or looking for new clients. However, the corporate job had meant long hours, stressful deadlines and extensive trips away. Two years later, her parents had separated and Dad had been offered a promotion in Melbourne.

‘It’s been a *nightmare*,’ Dad continued, then he grinned. ‘I’ll try and get home a lot earlier now that you’re staying, and we’ll have fun on the weekends. But enough about my boring work. What’s your favourite thing to do with your mum on the weekend?’

Marli paused for a moment, feeling awkward talking to her dad about her mother. ‘The local markets. Mum and I love rummaging through the second-hand stalls, finding bargains, like vintage clothes, or books, jewellery

and knick-knacks. We have a pretty collection of antique cups and saucers that we've found over the years. Then we go out for brunch at our favourite café in Paddington for poached eggs and smashed avocado.'

Dad's face softened with nostalgia. 'Yes, I remember the markets. Well, there're some pretty cool vintage markets in Melbourne, too, you know. Maybe we can do a bit of rummaging ourselves.' He put his chopsticks down and smiled. 'It's so good to see you, myshka.'



The next morning Marli woke up to the sound of a coffee grinder. She sat up, disoriented, expecting to be at home in her own turquoise-and-white bedroom. But she realised she was in her dad's spare bedroom instead, which doubled as his home office, with shelves of files, piles of architectural magazines, her father's drawing board, computer and a pinboard covered with building plans and photographs.

The smell of freshly ground coffee wafted through the open door, making her feel hungry. Through the window, she had a view over the red rooftops of trendy Richmond to the parkland by the river and beyond to the leafy gardens of Hawthorn. The grey clouds had gone, replaced by blue sky, but it was still cool. Marli showered and dressed in her torn jeans, sloppy jumper and black boots.

She came out into the living room and looked around in the morning light. The apartment was very modern and sparse. Not at all like the charming, colourful clutter of the little timber cottage that she shared with Mum. There

were arty black-and-white photographs that Dad had taken on the walls, a big flat-screen television and a small kitchen. The whole place was decorated like a spread in an architectural magazine – lots of black, white and grey. *It looks like a stylish hotel*, Marli decided.

‘Good morning, myshka,’ her dad said, standing at the stove with a spatula in one hand and a frypan in the other. The smell of sizzling butter filled the air. ‘Did you sleep well?’

‘Okay,’ replied Marli, taking a seat at the bench. She pulled out her phone and checked for messages. There was just one from her mum, wishing her a good morning. Marli decided not to reply just yet.

‘Coffee?’ asked Dad.

Marli wrinkled her nose. ‘I don’t drink coffee, but I’d love a cup of tea, please.’

Dad raised his eyebrows in mock horror. ‘Sorry, all out of tea. We’ll get some this morning.’

He poured batter in the hot pan, swished it around, then flipped it. ‘I’ve made pancakes, a special welcome breakfast.’

Marli remembered that her dad often used to make her pancakes when she was younger, served with sour cream and berry jam. It was her favourite breakfast as a child. She hadn’t had them in years.

‘That’s nice, Dad,’ said Marli. ‘Do you have any muesli?’

Dad looked down at the tottering pile of fluffy, brown pancakes. ‘No, I don’t,’ he replied. ‘But we’ll go to the shops later this morning and stock up on whatever you normally like to eat.’

Marli bit her lip. She didn't want to hurt her dad's feelings – it just slipped out. She was still feeling grumpy and cross.

'Thanks, Dad.'

The pancakes were as delicious as she remembered, but Marli pushed a forkful of pancake around her plate. She wondered what her friends were doing today back home. She imagined them all at the beach, laughing and splashing.

'You don't have to eat it,' said Dad, taking away her plate and scraping the leftovers into the bin. 'I'm a little out of practice. I usually just grab something on my way to work.'

He stacked the dishes in the half-size dishwasher. Marli checked her phone again.

'Are you ready to go?' asked Dad in a cheery voice. 'I spoke to Didi this morning, and he's mad keen for us to get there.'

## 2

# *The Abandoned House*



It was a short drive from Dad's apartment, across the Yarra River to Didi's retirement unit in Hawthorn. After the bustling chaos of Richmond, it seemed serene and quiet in the back streets.

Dad knocked on the door and then used his key to enter the apartment. Marli followed him into the room. Her grandfather was sitting in a wing-backed chair by the window, reading a letter.

'Hello, Dad,' said her father. 'Look who I've brought to see you. It's our gorgeous Marli-myshka.'

As Didi struggled to his feet, Marli was surprised at how much frailer he looked from when she last saw him.

Didi's eyes misted up as he hugged her. 'Let me look at you, Marli.'

‘Hello, Didi,’ Marli replied. ‘It’s great to see you.’

‘What a beautiful young lady you’ve become.’

‘Hasn’t she just?’ Dad said proudly. ‘And very clever, too. Your mother sent me a copy of your latest report, myshka. It’s great to see you’re doing so well.’

Marli laughed despite herself. ‘Actually, Dad, I think most of my teachers said, “Marli is dreamy in class and could do better if she focused.”’

Dad grinned. ‘Just what my reports always said. The sign of a highly creative mind.’

Didi gazed at Marli as though memorising her features. ‘Well, she would be creative. It’s in her genes. You know, Marli, you have a very strong resemblance to my mother, Violet Hamilton Peterson. The same red-gold hair – although her eyes were green, not brown. I have a photo of her around here somewhere. She was exceptionally creative, like you and your father.’

Marli vaguely remembered her grandfather mentioning this when she was younger.

‘I thought we’d go out to a café, Didi,’ suggested Dad.

Didi assumed an air of great mystery. ‘First, I have a surprise to tell you about.’

‘What is it?’ asked Marli.

‘I’ve received a rather interesting letter,’ he confided. ‘Perhaps you could fetch it for me, please, Marli. It’s there on my desk in the buff envelope.’

Marli found the envelope and brought it over. Didi extracted the letter with a flourish, and the three of them sat at the round dining table.

‘It’s from Macdonald, Mackenzie and Blakeney – a firm of lawyers,’ Didi began.

‘What do they want?’ asked Dad.

Didi paused, reading the letter, then grinned broadly. ‘It seems we have just inherited an abandoned house,’ he announced theatrically. ‘A grand old mansion, in fact.’

Marli leaned forward – an abandoned mansion sounded very intriguing.

Dad raised his eyebrows in surprise. ‘Whoever would have left you a *house*?’

‘Ms Blakeney has been a little sketchy, but it’s the house where my mother, Violet, grew up, right here in Hawthorn on the banks of the Yarra,’ explained Didi. ‘It was called Riversleigh.’

The name sent a little shiver up Marli’s spine. *Riversleigh*. Didi handed the letter to Dad, who quickly scanned it.

‘Mmm. Nanna came from quite a wealthy family, if I remember correctly,’ Dad said. ‘Didn’t she have some kind of tragic childhood?’

‘She did, but Mum wouldn’t talk about it very much,’ replied Didi. ‘There was some kind of falling out with her father. Albert didn’t approve of her marriage to my father, and she was effectively disinherited.’

Dad stroked Marli’s cheek. ‘It’s hard to believe that a parent would disown his daughter.’

‘My grandfather was very traditional, like many of his generation.’ Didi shook his head. ‘He truly believed that duty to king, country and family came before personal happiness. My mother was expected to make a brilliant society match rather than follow her heart.’

‘You mean marry for money rather than love?’ Marli asked with dismay. ‘That’s crazy.’

Didi nodded. ‘Many people felt that way before the wars. Anyway, Albert lost all his money and the house was given away to the government on a ninety-year lease. But now the house is empty and run-down. The government doesn’t want the bother of it anymore, so the house is to revert back to the family early.’

‘Can we go and see it?’ asked Marli. ‘It sounds exciting.’

‘Of course we can. I thought perhaps we could go on an excursion this morning. That’s if your poor father doesn’t have to rush off to work.’

‘But it’s Saturday,’ Marli replied.

‘Yes,’ said Didi with a twinkle in his eye, ‘but your Dad’s boss, Tony, has a habit of ringing constantly with dire emergencies, so your father seems to work six or seven days a week most of the time. But perhaps today will be an exception.’

Dad held up his hands in surrender. ‘I wouldn’t dare go to work and deprive us of a family excursion. In fact, I’m fascinated too.’

‘Then let’s go,’ replied Didi.



Riversleigh Grove was a wide, curving street lined with mature oak trees, forming a leafy-green tunnel overhead. On either side of the road were grand heritage houses with tall fences and lush gardens. Dad drove, with Didi in the front passenger seat, leaning forward to check the house numbers. Marli sat in the back.

‘Originally, in the 1880s, none of these houses were here, and this road was the driveway,’ explained Didi.

‘In the days of my great-grandfather, that little cottage was the gatehouse to the estate.’

Marli stared at the quaint gingerbread cottage they were passing, with its steep-pitched roof.

‘There it is,’ Didi said, pointing. ‘Riversleigh.’

Dad pulled up and parked the car on the opposite side of the road. They all looked across to where a high, stone wall surrounded the property. A pair of ornate wrought-iron gates had been covered by a metal mesh barricade. A large sign read Keep Out. Behind the wall, Marli could see the tops of gnarled old trees – oaks, elms, conifers and magnolias with ivory flowers.

A thin boy with dark hair was ambling past the gate, his hands in the pockets of his black jeans, headphones on. A grey cat came to greet him, winding around his legs, arching her back to be patted. The boy scooped the cat up in his arms and stared curiously at Marli and her family in the car before glancing away. He turned into the neighbouring driveway and disappeared.

‘It’s looking rather forlorn,’ said Dad, frowning.

‘The house has been abandoned for nearly ten years,’ Didi explained. ‘I think at one stage squatters were living there. Before that it was a nursing home, a school and a convalescent home for soldiers during the Second World War. It’s nearly ninety years since the Hamilton family lived here.’

They all climbed out of the car and walked towards the barricaded and padlocked gate. Through the bars, they could see extensive overgrown gardens with waist-high grass and thick weeds. A circular bitumen driveway surrounded a broken marble fountain. Behind that was the two-storey house.

It must have been beautiful once: cream-coloured with graceful arches across the upper and lower loggias, arched windows in the rounded bays. On the left-hand side was a three-storey square tower with a rooftop terrace enclosed by a balustrade. Yet closer inspection showed dirty, peeling paint, boarded-up windows and cracked glass.

‘It’s a bit of a dump,’ said Marli, wrinkling her nose.

‘But you can see how grand it once was,’ said Dad. ‘The Italianate style of architecture was very popular in the late nineteenth century. Many wealthy families built these huge, extravagant mansions in the boom years after the gold rush to demonstrate their prosperity.’

‘That’s why they called it Marvellous Melbourne,’ Didi added. ‘There were lots more of these grand mansions around all over the city when I was young. But so many of them have been demolished for development in the last fifty years.’

‘Can we go in and have a look around?’ Marli asked. She pressed her face against the mesh barricade to get a closer look.

Didi shook his head. ‘We won’t get access for a couple of weeks.’

‘Perhaps we can find a way into the garden,’ Marli said.

Dad peered through the gate. ‘It looks like the wall completely surrounds the property. I’ll ask the lawyer if we can get early access. We’ll have to decide what we’re going to do with it.’

Didi stared dreamily at the mansion. ‘My mother said that when she was a girl her family owned all the land along the banks of the Yarra River here. The land was gradually subdivided during the early twentieth century.’

‘They must have been very rich,’ said Marli. ‘Did you ever visit the house when you were young, Didi?’

‘No, the house was turned over to the state government before I was born,’ Didi said. ‘I remember my mother bringing me here a couple of times when it was a soldier’s convalescent hospital. We walked around the gardens, and there were lots of soldiers in wheelchairs.’

Didi turned to Marli. ‘I think it made her quite sad coming back here – too many painful memories.’

‘It’s a large block of land,’ Dad said. ‘It would be worth a lot of money to a developer. We could build a dozen townhouses, or a multi-storey block of ultra-modern apartments.’ Dad gazed up, visualising the development he would design.

‘I’d hate to see Riversleigh demolished,’ said Didi. ‘The house was built by my great-grandfather back in the 1880s. That makes him your great-great-great-grandfather, Marli.’

‘But Marli’s right – the house is pretty derelict,’ Dad said. ‘It would take a lot of hard work to restore it.’

Didi shook his head. ‘So much history is being lost.’

Marli’s phone beeped as a message came in. She eagerly grabbed it from her pocket, hoping the text might be from one of her friends with news of what they were all doing. But instead it was Mum, saying she was boarding her plane and would phone once she got to England. Marli thought about replying but decided she was still too annoyed. She’d answer later.

A flash of colour caught her eye. It was a small bird with vibrant bands of blue, brown and black plumage. It darted above her head and sat for a moment on top of the wall,

examining her with bright, beady eyes. It chirruped a song then hopped over the wall into the wilderness of the overgrown garden.

‘A fairy wren,’ Didi said. ‘The males are so pretty with that bright blue colouring.’

Marli scuffed the toe of her boot on the footpath. The old abandoned house made her feel sad. It looked so forgotten, so unloved.

‘Should we go now?’ Marli asked. ‘There’s not much to see if we can’t go in.’

Didi looked disappointed.

‘Yes, of course,’ Dad replied. ‘I thought we could go up to Burwood Road. There’s a little café there that serves a great brunch. Marli, you must be starving.’



Sunday was grey and drizzly, so Marli and Dad had caught a tram into the city centre and wandered around, getting thoroughly drenched. Dad bought her a black jacket with a hood to keep her warm and dry. They ate souvlaki in Lonsdale Street, took photographs of the graffiti art in the laneways, then came home to watch an old movie.

On Monday morning, Marli slept in late and woke to find that Dad had already gone to work. There was a note written in his neat architect’s handwriting:

*Good morning, myshka. Hope you slept well. Food in fridge. Keys on bench. Bike in garage if you want it. I'll be home early. Promise! Ring if you need me.  
Love, Dad ☺ xx*

Marli took a photo of herself crashed back on the sofa, pulling a funny face, and sent it to her friends.

Nice pad. Having an AWESOME time in Melbourne all by myself. Miss you guys. xxx

She made herself some breakfast, cleaned up, had long phone conversations with Evie and Tess, then read her book. After a couple of hours, she put the book down and wandered restlessly from perfect room to perfect room. *I could watch a movie*, Marli thought, noting the neat row of DVDs stored in the cupboard under the television, but nothing took her fancy.

Marli went out onto the balcony and looked out at the view. In the distance to the west were the tall, silver skyscrapers of the city centre, glittering in the sun. To the east was the river, with parkland and walking paths winding along beside it. Cyclists raced past, overtaking mothers pushing prams and couples walking dogs.

*I have to get out or I'll go mad with boredom*, thought Marli. *How on earth am I going to survive two months living down here?*

She packed her backpack with a bottle of water, an apple, her book and phone, then grabbed the keys from the bench.

In a few minutes she had a helmet on and was off cycling, winding her way through the busy Richmond roads towards the river. Marli felt so much better when she was out doing something. It was peaceful riding the bike along the main trail through the picturesque parkland beside the river. Sunlight glimmered through the leaves, dappling the ground and glinting off the water. Marli crossed over a bridge and followed her nose through the quiet streets of Hawthorn.

It wasn't until she found herself cruising down Riversleigh Grove towards the wrought-iron gates that Marli realised where she was heading. She padlocked the bike to a telegraph pole, grabbed her backpack and set off to explore. The old house and its high-walled garden had captured her imagination. There must be some way of getting in.

Next door to the walls of the property on the southern side was a small block of Art Deco apartments with a low brick fence across the front. Looking down the driveway, she could see the stone wall of Riversleigh stretching towards the river. On the northern side was a large Federation house. An old man was pottering in the garden and waved to her as she hovered.

A trilling warble sounded. The cheerful fairy wren, with his iridescent blue bands, was back. He swooped down over Marli's head, then alighted on top of the wall. The bird danced along, cocking his head from side to side, observing Marli. He trilled again, then flew off into the garden beyond, as though enticing Marli to follow. This made her even more determined to find a way in.

On her second prowling, Marli peered into the garden of the block of flats. The fairy wren appeared again, skimming over her head, then alighted on a branch of a tree growing beside the wall. He watched Marli with his bright, beady eyes, then hopped from the branch onto the wall. He cocked his head to the side and flitted down into the garden.

The fairy wren had shown her a way in. Marli glanced around, hoping no-one was watching. Then she quickly shimmied up the tree and onto the top of the two-metre

high wall. She didn't hesitate, dropping over the other side, breaking her fall by bending her knees.

It was only once she was in the garden that she suddenly wondered if she'd be able to get out again. Marli gazed around. She hoped there weren't any snakes lurking nearby in the waist-high grass – luckily she was wearing jeans and sturdy boots. Marli set off, wading through the vegetation, feeling like an explorer in another world. The scent of sun-warmed stone, crushed grass and sweet blossom floated around her as she wandered.

On the southern side of the house was a massive, dark-green hedge that must once have been clipped but now grew rampant. The belvedere tower was on this side also, jutting above the dense foliage like a fairytale turret. Marli headed towards the front of the house, which faced east.

The going was easier once she reached the crumbling circular driveway. The marble fountain in the centre of the circle had a cracked rim and its three basins were filled with slimy green water. Dragonflies flitted above the basins, their wings a silvery blur. Marli felt nervous as she crept up the stone front steps, past the smashed urns on either side and onto the front verandah.

The windows were boarded up, as was the arched front door. Graffiti was scrawled across the peeling paintwork; ivy crept up the walls.

Marli continued around the house, past the protruding bay window with its three arches. A stone-flagged terrace, crazed and cracked, ran along the northern and western sides. The doors along the terraces were also boarded up. One of the hoardings was loose, so Marli prised it away,

revealing French doors. Sunlight flooded through the glass and Marli could see a dusty parquet floor and a vast room. She tried the handle but it was locked.

The phone in her backpack rang, making her jump. She quickly pulled it out and checked the screen. It was Mum, calling from England. Marli sighed. *Should I answer it?*

‘Hi, Mum,’ said Marli. ‘How was your flight?’

‘Long.’ Mum’s familiar voice sounded far away over the phone. ‘But I’m here now in Cambridge. I was worried because you didn’t reply to my texts. Is everything all right?’

The sound of Mum’s voice made Marli feel sad and homesick.

‘Sorry, Mum,’ replied Marli, ‘there wasn’t really anything to say. It’s been pretty boring. I don’t know anyone down here and Dad’s at work all day. So what am I supposed to do?’

Marli felt a twinge of guilt because of course there had been things happening, but she wasn’t going to tell her mum that.

‘Perhaps you should think about taking some photos?’ Mum suggested. ‘You haven’t taken any for a while, and it might be a good chance to practise. And you could post them online; I could see what you’re doing.’

Marli huffed. ‘I might have had lots to photograph if I was in Cambridge with you, but there’s not much worth photographing *here*.’

‘Well, I’m glad you’re all right,’ said Mum, trying to sound patient. ‘I’ll call you again in a few days, but in the meantime could you please text me so I know everything is all right?’

‘Okay, Mum,’ Marli groaned. ‘I promise.’

Marli felt uneasy because she was hardly ever in disagreement with her mother. For years it had been just the two of them, so they usually loved spending time together – watching movies, making dinner, walking and reading. She didn’t like arguing with her mother, even if she’d gone off on an adventure without her.

Marli said goodbye and stashed the phone into her backpack. She looked down over the gardens towards the thick shrubbery that hid the river below. To the left was a sunken area that, despite decades of neglect, was filled with rambling roses in shades of pink, cream, white and yellow, filling the air with their rich scent. Marble benches, spotted with lichen, were set on each side of the square, facing the roses.

A path led right across the garden towards a tumble-down summerhouse on the right. Its roof was weighed down with wisteria vines that twisted and twined around the posts, their tendrils bursting through the wooden shingles. A pair of swallows had made a small mud nest under the eaves. They darted above the ground, chasing whirring insects.

A sudden hacking cough made Marli jump. She swung around, her heart thudding.

A thin, dark-haired boy about her own age was standing on the terrace, hands on hips, staring at her. Marli recognised him as the boy she’d seen walking past the house on Saturday. He still had the earphones hanging around his neck.

‘What are you doing?’ he demanded, his face flushed. ‘You shouldn’t be here. It’s private property.’

Marli immediately felt guilty, but that quickly turned to anger. 'What are *you* doing here?' she retorted. 'You're the one trespassing.'

'I'm not,' insisted the boy, his voice rising petulantly. 'Leave, or I'll . . . I'll call the police.'

Marli mirrored the boy's stance: hands on hips, glowering. All the anger and frustration that she had been trying to keep bottled up over the last few days bubbled to the surface. This boy was being rude, and she wasn't going to let him bully her.

'You do that,' she snapped. 'I'm not leaving.'

The boy glared at her. Marli glared back. The silence stretched out. The boy was the first to break the impasse.

'My grandfather keeps an eye on the place,' he explained grumpily. 'Nonno hates it when people break in and graffiti the house and break windows. Someone tried to set fire to it a few years ago.'

'This house belongs to my family,' Marli explained.

The boy shook his head. 'No it doesn't — it's been owned by the government for years. It was a nursing home when I was younger, but no-one's used it for ages.'

Marli decided he was a most unpleasant boy. 'It was only leased to the government,' she retorted. 'But they've released it, and it belongs to my grandfather, Michael Peterson. So I have every right to be here.'

The boy looked discomfited. 'Oh,' he said. 'My name's Luca Costa, and I live in the flats next door.'

'I'm Amalia Peterson, Marli for short. I usually live in Brisbane, but I'm down here for a few weeks.'

'I saw you climb the tree in our front yard,' Luca explained. 'So I followed you in.'

Marli had the grace to look embarrassed. ‘Well, I probably was trespassing in your garden, but I couldn’t work out how else to get over the wall.’

‘My bedroom looks out over the garden here at the back,’ Luca said. ‘I’ve never been in here before, and I’ve always wanted to know what it was like.’ The boy coughed harshly, making him breathless.

‘Why would your grandfather keep an eye on the place? Is he some sort of caretaker?’ Marli asked.

‘We live next door, but my great-grandfather used to work here many years ago.’

‘What a coincidence,’ said Marli, feeling rather prickly about Luca’s connection to the estate. ‘Did he work here when it was a hospital?’

Luca shook his head. ‘No, he was a gardener here when it was owned by the Hamilton family. You know, the old cursed family who lived here.’

Marli felt a shiver run up her spine. ‘Cursed?’

‘Yes, my grandfather’s parents knew the family and said that some terrible things happened to them. My great-grandfather was sure that someone had cursed them with the *malocchio* – that’s Italian for “evil eye”,’ Luca explained.

Marli thought that, with its rose brambles, wild shrubbery and weeds, the garden looked like it could belong to a cursed castle.

‘Really?’ she replied. ‘That sounds sinister. My grandfather said it was his mother, Violet Hamilton Peterson, who lived here – and it made her sad to come back.’

The two started walking down the steps and into the garden, back towards the tree where they had climbed in.

‘Ouch,’ cried Marli, bashing her shin on something buried in the long grass. It was a fallen statue of Cupid, the god of love, his nose chipped, staring sightlessly up at the sky.

‘Give me a hand,’ Luca suggested.

Together, the two wrestled the statue upright on its plinth, facing back towards the house. The effort made the boy cough into his hand.

‘That’s better,’ said Marli, rubbing Cupid’s marble curls.

Her mind was bubbling with curiosity and unanswered questions. Was the family really cursed? What had happened to the Hamilton family to make them give up this beautiful house? Marli was determined to find some answers.

# 3

## *Early Morning*



**Riversleigh, 6 November 1922**

Violet Hamilton woke at a slight sound and burrowed deeper under her coverlet. *It can't be time to wake up yet*, she thought. *Just a few more minutes*. Next, she heard the sound of the heavy curtains being pulled back. Early-morning light flooded the room. Violet sighed, rolled over and opened her eyes. A steaming cup of milky tea had been placed on the bedside table.

Violet sat up, leaned against the pillows, lifted the cup and took a long sip.

Silhouetted against the sunlight of the window was a young maid in a blue floral dress and starched apron, tying back the grey silk curtains. Her brown hair was pulled back into a tight bun, hidden under a frilled cap, her nose sprinkled with freckles.

'Good morning, Sally,' said Violet, resting the pale aqua cup in its saucer. 'Thanks for the tea.'

Sally bobbed a curtsey. ‘Mornin’, miss. Would you like anythin’?’ Sally was an Australian-born working-class girl, but her accent hinted at her parents’ Irish heritage.

Violet took another sip, savouring the invigorating warmth of the tea. Through the window she could see the wide blue sky scudded with fluffy clouds and the vivid green sea of the treetops. It was a glorious morning, perfect for a swim. Could she manage it? Could she sneak away? Violet’s eyes sparkled with mischief.

‘Do you think you could come back, please, Sally?’ asked Violet. ‘In about fifteen minutes?’

The maid nodded. ‘Very good, Miss Violet.’ Sally padded away, her footsteps silent on the plush carpet, and closed the door behind her.

Violet threw back the white coverlet on her wrought-iron bed and jumped up. If she was going for a swim, she would need to be quick to make it before her father came down to breakfast. Violet flung open the armoire door and searched through the drawers, tugging out the items she needed.

She tossed her nightgown on the rumpled bed and wriggled into a navy swimsuit dress, slipping a colourful silk kimono wrap over everything. She didn’t bother with the canvas slippers or the matching cap, preferring to leave her hair hanging down her back in a long braid.

Violet took a towel from the hanging rail, pulled open the creaky, white-panelled door and peeked into the hallway. Her sister Imogen’s door was firmly closed. She might not be up for hours if she’d been out the night before. At the front of the house, the doors to her father’s room and dressing room were also tightly shut.

*Perfect, thought Violet. No-one up yet.*

She escaped down the sweeping staircase to the entry hall. The house was eerily quiet. Beside the staircase, a narrow corridor led towards the servants' wing. It was hard to believe that behind the green baize door was a hive of activity where the cook, housemaids and footmen would be busying themselves with preparing breakfast, making tea and polishing silver.

To the left of the stairs was the rear of the house, with its darkened billiard room, sunny morning room and the vast ballroom that ran across much of the back, overlooking the river. Violet, however, went straight ahead down the short corridor that led out onto the northern stone terrace, down the steps and onto the croquet lawn.

The house was surrounded on three sides by formal lawns and flowerbeds. The southern side was the service quadrangle, hidden from view. The old stables and carriage house had recently been converted into a garage with the male servants' quarters above.

Violet was greeted on the lawn by her boisterous dog, a black-and-white Dalmatian called Romeo. The dog pranced on his paws then reared up on his hind legs, dancing backwards, his pink tongue lolling in welcome.

'Hello, boy,' said Violet, scratching Romeo's head. 'Want to come walkies?'

Romeo bounded around her in circles, licking her hand, ecstatic to be accompanying her on an early-morning adventure. Violet stopped to give him a good rub under his chin.

The two headed towards the river, down paved terraces with wide, shallow steps. Stone urns were bursting with white primula, blue hyacinths and sweetly scented freesias.

In the centre of the lawn was a sunken rose garden, filled with a profusion of blooms of ivory, cream, yellows and blushing pinks. Wider beds, perfectly weeded and mulched, were filled with flowers in every shade of blue, mauve and white – daphne, daisies, forget-me-nots, agapanthus, lupins, gardenias and hydrangeas. Violet stopped to breathe in the scent, enjoying the sunshine on her face and the feathery grass under her bare feet.

Two gardeners in flat caps, one balancing precariously on a ladder, clipped the tall camellia hedges. They tipped their caps as she walked past.

‘Good morning, Alf. Good morning, Joseph,’ Violet called.

‘Morning, miss,’ they replied in unison, in their thick accents.

Violet crunched down the gravel path flanked with box hedges, past the summerhouse. From here, the path zigzagged down the bank, hidden from above by dense shrubbery. A fairy wren darted above her head.

Once out of sight of the house, Violet began to run, hurtling downhill towards the boathouse, Romeo chasing her. The green-brown water of the Yarra rippled past, carrying swirling leaves and small twigs. The banks were lined with weeping willows, feathery ferns and tall gums.

She looked around to see if anyone was about, then dropped her wrap and towel on the timber decking. Violet’s father, Albert Hamilton, didn’t approve of his daughters swimming in the river, and she was definitely not supposed to venture down here on her own. The river looked tranquil from above, but its depths had many hidden dangers – tangled roots, submerged logs and jagged rocks.

She dived – a clean, shallow curve – into the deepest pool. The water was freezing, making her gasp. Romeo preferred to scabble down the steep bank and launch himself into the water from the river’s edge. He paddled next to her, head held high above the water.

Violet faced upriver and swam hard against the current, propelling herself with powerful strokes. At the northern bend she stopped and turned, treading water. From here she could see the house – her house. Riversleigh.

With its cream arches, shady loggias and graceful tower, it was perched high on the riverbank, surrounded by greenery. The morning sun bathed the house in a rosy golden glow. Overhead soared a deep-blue sky with pale wisps of cloud. The beauty made her catch her breath.

Riversleigh looked so solid, so safe. Like an Italianate castle, guarded by high walls and forest, it had sheltered her family for generations, a haven from the turmoil of the outside world. At least that’s what she’d thought as a child.

Violet lay back, staring at the sky, letting the river carry her back downstream. Romeo’s bark woke her from her reverie. She’d better hurry or she’d be late for breakfast, and late for school. That would definitely make her father cross.

She scrambled up the metal ladder and grabbed the towel to dry herself and squeeze the water out of her long hair, then twisted the towel up in a turban. Flinging her silk kimono around her shoulders, she hastened back up through the shrubbery.

Violet was cautious as she sped across the lawn with Romeo. Her father could be down from his bedroom

now, sitting in the morning room, or he could be upstairs watching from his bedroom window. But there was no sign of him as she crept back into the house, leaving Romeo outside to dry in the sun. Violet made it back to her bed-chamber without being detected. She pushed open her door and went in, leaning her back against the door in relief. Or was it disappointment?

She looked around. It was a pretty room – dove-grey walls, white woodwork, a French writing desk by the window and a rose-pink velvet armchair beside the fireplace. While Violet had been swimming, Sally had made the bed, tied back its filmy muslin curtains and tidied away the belongings Violet had strewn around.

Sally was laying out Violet's school uniform on the bed – silk underwear and dark stockings, white shirt, navy box-pleat tunic and tie, with black buckle shoes. Violet let out a little sigh. Sally looked up and bobbed her head.

'Thanks, Sally,' said Violet. 'I'm running terribly late, but it was worth it.' Violet stripped off her sodden wrap and costume, passing them to the maid.

'Yes, miss,' replied Sally, handing her the fresh underwear and uniform, piece by piece. 'Was the water cold?'

'Freezing,' Violet said, 'but refreshing.'

Sally helped Violet with the buttons and knotting the tie while they chatted. Violet sat down on the stool in front of the dressing table, regarding her reflection: pale skin, green eyes and a sprinkling of freckles across her nose. She glanced away. She thought her school uniform hung like a sack on her slight frame, and her long, wet hair made her look half-drowned. It was Imogen who was the renowned beauty of the family.

‘How’s your family, Sally?’ asked Violet. ‘You went home to Richmond yesterday?’

‘Mmm,’ Sally agreed, her mouth full of bobby pins. She put the pins down on a crystal tray and unbraided Violet’s hair. ‘Ma made lovely scones for us all, an’ it was good to see the kiddies. Billy has grown so much in a month, an’ Maisie is as cheeky as a barrel full of monkeys.’

Violet nodded, trying to imagine Sally’s mother’s house full of children. She thought it must be a rowdy, warm and loving place.

‘Did your mother like the basket of goodies from Mrs Darling?’ asked Violet.

Sally nodded vigorously. ‘Oh yes. The kiddies were so excited about the apple cake an’ the meat pie. They scoffed the lot in no time at all.’

Violet could imagine the merry scene. She glanced wistfully at her image in the mirror. ‘One day I’d like to come and visit your ma, and all your brothers and sisters. It would be lovely to meet them.’

Sally looked a little embarrassed. ‘Oh no, miss. You wouldn’t like to come to my place. It’s not right for the likes of you. It’s too noisy an’ crowded.’

‘It sounds charming.’

‘Yes, miss.’

There was silence as Sally pulled long, sweeping strokes through Violet’s wet hair with a silver-backed brush. When it was dry, Violet’s hair was thick and curly, hanging to her waist. Her father used to say that both his girls were true Scottish lassies with their rich auburn tresses with hints of gold through it. Violet flicked a hank of hair behind her ear in irritation.

‘What else is news in the kitchen?’ she asked, changing the subject. ‘Has Monsieur Dufour been throwing any pots this morning?’

Sally shook her head as she continued to work the brush through the knots. ‘Only a little one, an’ it was empty.’

Violet laughed. The French chef was very temperamental and seemed to think that it was part of his job description to hurl pots and pans around the kitchen when his fellow workers annoyed him with their stupidity. When they were younger, Violet and Imogen had loved to venture into the kitchen to beg titbits from the kitchen maids, but when Monsieur Dufour had taken charge of the kitchen last year, he had swiftly declared that his domain was definitely out of bounds for the misses of the house.

‘The new chauffeur started today, miss,’ said Sally after a moment’s thought.

‘Oh, I’ll miss Ellis,’ Violet said. ‘And the horses.’

Mr Ellis had worked for the Hamilton family for decades, first as a carriage driver and then as chauffeur, though his first love had always been the horses. He had driven Violet to school each day and ferried Imogen around to her social engagements.

Violet smiled as she remembered the furious scolding Ellis had given her when she was twelve. One of the grooms had left the buggy, hitched to a pair of horses, tied up outside the carriage house. When she spied them, Violet had decided to take the buggy for a joy ride. She had urged the horses into a canter and had taken the corner too fast. The left-side horse shied and the buggy overturned, throwing Violet into the hydrangea bushes.

Ellis had come chasing after her, calmed the horses, then checked that she was not too badly hurt. Violet had been scratched and bruised, but that was nothing compared to the tongue lashing she received for endangering his precious horses. Ellis then told her that the consequences would be dire if she ever did anything so foolish again, but he never told her father about the accident, and that week he taught Violet how to drive the buggy properly. That was the beginning of a firm friendship between the two.

‘It broke Mr Ellis’s heart when your father sold all the horses, an’ he said it’s better to go now while he can still find another place,’ explained Sally. ‘He’s gone to a big house in Toorak that still keep horses and carriages.’

‘Dad decided the horses weren’t being used enough and he finds the motor car more convenient for longer trips,’ said Violet. ‘But I loved riding Sultan and driving the buggy. It’s not the same being driven everywhere.’

Violet suspected that the real reason her father had decided he no longer needed horses was so he could sell the paddock. The neighbouring houses were creeping closer every year as parts of the estate had been sold off.

‘The new chauffeur’s a foreigner,’ Sally continued, wrinkling her nose. ‘A Russian. Maybe he’s one of those Bolshies.’

Violet smiled at the thought of her father having a communist revolutionary driving his beloved automobile. That was totally incongruous.

‘I don’t think Father would employ a Bolshevik,’ said Violet. ‘The Bolshevik threat to the world order is one of his favourite topics at dinner parties.’

Sally nodded. ‘They say the Russians are starvin’. Those Bolshies are a murderous lot, killin’ their emperor an’ his poor family.’

Tsar Nicholas II of Russia, his wife Tsarina Alexandra and their five children had been executed in 1918 by Bolshevik soldiers during the Russian Civil War.

‘It was very sad,’ Violet agreed, ‘but I don’t think our chauffeur will be murderous.’

‘He’s young an’ charmin’. An’ a bit of a looker, if you like foreign types.’

There was something about Sally’s repressed air of excitement that piqued Violet’s curiosity.

‘Oh? And does this chauffeur have a name?’ Violet asked.

Sally concentrated as she untangled a knot. ‘Nikolai,’ she said. ‘Nikolai Khakovsky.’ Sally stumbled a little over the unfamiliar surname.

Violet smiled at Sally in the mirror. ‘I look forward to meeting him.’

Sally finished the braid and pinned back the loose wisps of hair. ‘Best head down for breakfast, miss,’ she said. ‘The bell rang quite a few minutes ago.’

Violet nodded. It was time to face her family.

Breakfast was laid out downstairs, in the morning room, on the small round table near the French doors that opened to the terrace. A vase of blue hydrangeas, sweet-scented freesias and white roses nodded in the centre. Golden toast stood upright in its silver toast rack beside the silver domed butter dish and crystal dishes of citrus marmalade and berry jam. Boiled eggs were nestled in delicate silver egg cups at each place.

Mr Hamilton was already seated, dressed in a grey three-piece suit, reading his newspaper. The remains of his breakfast lay on the plate in front of him. To Violet's surprise, Imogen was also there, eating half a grapefruit. She raised her eyebrows at her sister.

'Good morning, Violet,' her father said, not looking up. 'You're late.'

Saunders, the butler, pulled Violet's chair back for her then stepped over near the sideboard, his face impassive. He was dressed in his black livery of tailcoat, tie, vest and trousers with a white wing-collar shirt. Romeo was lying beside the French doors. He thumped his tail on the floor as Violet walked towards the table.

'Good morning, Dad,' replied Violet, slipping into her chair and placing her napkin in her lap. 'It's the most glorious morning.' She pushed her damp braid over her shoulder.

Imogen shook her head and gently waggled her finger. She had noticed the damp hair and assumed it meant an illicit swim in the river. Violet screwed up her nose in defiance and stuck out her tongue.

The silver teapot, jug and sugar bowl were placed beside Imogen. She poured tea and milk into a rosebud teacup and passed it to Violet.

'Thanks,' Violet replied as she helped herself to toast and a curl of butter. She chipped at her boiled egg with a silver teaspoon.

Her father huffed and shook his paper, still reading. 'Steel stocks are down again.'

On the sideboard stood various dishes of stewed fruit and silver salvers of bacon, mushrooms and sausages. The

footman, Harry, brought fresh hot toast and tea from the kitchen.

‘More strikes,’ her father commented. ‘Utterly ridiculous nonsense. Don’t these workers realise that the trade unions are being stirred up by communist agitators? They should throw the lot of them into prison. That would solve the problem.’

Violet rolled her eyes at Imogen, who patted her lips in a fake yawn. Their father’s breakfast conversation was drearily familiar.

‘Why are you up so early today?’ Violet asked her sister. ‘You’re hardly ever up before noon these days. Too many late nights out at dinners and balls.’

‘No time for sleep when there’s fun to be had,’ Imogen replied with a grin before turning to her father, her blue eyes wide with innocence. ‘Daddy, could I please have the car today? We’ve a meeting of the ball fundraising committee this morning at Audrey’s, then a gang of us are playing tennis there this afternoon. That is, if you don’t need it?’

Her father looked up. His face softened as he looked at his elder daughter. She was undeniably pretty, with her red hair pinned up in a low bun and her ivory skin. Imogen was dressed in the height of fashion in a loose-fitting pale-blue dress, which emphasised the colour of her eyes.

He thought for a moment then nodded. ‘The new chauffeur can drive you there, after he takes Violet to school,’ he decided. ‘The car can come back for me mid-morning and take me to the factory. I have a meeting with my foreman, but that can wait.’

Imogen looked delighted. ‘Thank you, Daddy.’

Violet felt annoyed. How did her sister get her way so often, when her father hardly seemed to acknowledge Violet's own existence? Imogen was Dad's favourite, no doubt about it. Violet flicked her damp plait over her shoulder again, willing her father to ask why her hair was wet. He didn't notice, turning back to his newspaper instead.

Violet put her spoon down – she didn't feel hungry anymore – and gazed out the French doors onto the terrace. The grey cat, Juliet, sat on the flagging, delicately licking her paw.

'Excuse me, Miss Violet,' said Saunders. 'The chauffeur has brought the car around.'