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the *Ruby*
TALISMAN

Pippa's Island

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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

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BELINDA
MURRELL



RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.



A Random House book

Published by Random House Australia Pty Ltd
Level 3, 100 Pacific Highway, North Sydney NSW 2060
www.randomhouse.com.au

First published by Random House Australia in 2010
This edition first published 2015

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Addresses for companies within the Random House Group can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com

National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-Publication Entry

Author: Murrell, Belinda

Title: The ruby talisman / Belinda Murrell

ISBN: 978 0 85798 694 8 (pbk)

Target Audience: For primary school age

Subjects: Adventure stories

Time travel – Juvenile fiction

France – History – Revolution, 1789–1799 – Juvenile fiction

Dewey Number: A823.4

Cover design by book design by saso

Cover images © gettyimages.com.au and © iStockphoto.com

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

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.

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*For Emily-Charlotte, Nick, Lachie and Rob who shared
many adventures with me in Paris and Versailles*

*I wander'd lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.*

— Excerpt from 'Daffodils',
William Wordsworth, 1804

Glossary of French Words

Absolument	absolutely
Allez	go
Anglais/Angleterre	English/England
Aristos	aristocrats
Au revoir	goodbye
Belle	beautiful
Bon	good
Bonjour	good day
Bon nuit	good night
Bonsoir	good evening
Café au lait	milky coffee
Chérie	darling
Chevalier	knight
Comte/comtesse	count/countess
Croissant	flaky, crescent-shaped pastry
Dauphin/dauphine	crown prince/princess
Duchesse	duchess
Enchanté	enchanting
En garde	on guard
Épée	duelling sword
Excusez-moi	excuse me
Fantastique	fantastic
Fichu	delicate lace scarf
Grand-mère	grandmother
Grand-père	grandfather
Incroyable	incredible
Madame	Mrs (my dame)
Mademoiselle	Miss
Magnifique	magnificent

Mais non	but no!
Maman	mamma
Merci	thank you
Mes amies	my friends
Mon/ma	my
Mon Dieu	my God
Monseigneur	my lord
Monsieur	Mister (my sir)
Non	no
Oui	yes
Panniers	twin baskets, like those carried by a donkey, worn under skirts to make them full
Petit-déjeuner	light breakfast
Postillion	groom who rides one of the leading carriage horses
Révérence	an act showing respect, especially a bow or curtsy
Salut	salute, greetings
S'il vous plaît	if you please
Tante	aunt
Toilette	the act or process of dressing or grooming
Très	very
Très bon	very good
Tricorne	three-cornered hat
Versailles	the royal palace about 23 kilometres south-west of Paris

1

Salut



Tilly pulled the mesh faceguard down and limbered up her right wrist, circling it nervously, her long, thin fencing foil drawing through the air. She was dressed all in white, with padding to protect her chest and padded gloves on her hands. She jiggled up and down, adrenaline surging through her body.

'Salut.'

Tilly lifted the foil in front of her face in a formal salute to her opponent on the other side of the narrow mat.

'En garde.'

The foils flashed forward into the defensive position.

'Allez!'

The two fencers leapt forward, foils slashing. Tilly felt her hot, seething thoughts turn cold and hard as steel. Her mind stilled and became totally focused on the silver weapon surging towards her. She scanned her opponent, Bella, for a weakness, judging her body language, looking

for an opening, a moment's delay. The two girls tested each other, dancing back and forth, feinting and parrying.

Tilly finally saw her chance and lunged, her foil slipping through Bella's defence, stabbing her chest.

'*Touché,*' yelled the referee. 'Retreat.'

Tilly leapt back behind her line, a warm glow of satisfaction flowing through her. Bella shook her head in frustration, her long, black ponytail swinging.

'*En garde. Allez!*'

The two girls fought again, graceful as dancers, fierce as warriors, gliding across the mat. This time it was Bella who saw the opening and lunged. Tilly tried to parry the thrust, but missed, the foil finding its mark on her shoulder.

Stupid. Stupid, thought Tilly angrily. *I should have seen that coming.*

'*Touché,*' called the referee. 'Retreat.'

Tilly's mistake threw her off guard, making her lose focus and rhythm. The next bout was easily won by her opposition. Tilly bit her lip in frustration and disappointment. She felt like hurling her foil across the room at the wall.

But Jack, her coach, would never tolerate such bad sportsmanship. Tilly gritted her teeth and shook hands with Bella.

'Well done, Tilly,' congratulated Jack, smiling warmly. 'It was a close bout. You're really improving. Keep up the good training.'

Jack was two years older than Tilly and helped teach fencing at the local community hall every Thursday afternoon. He was tall with short, dark hair, green eyes and the narrow frame and graceful movement of a natural athlete.

Tilly blushed and hunched her shoulders.

‘I lost,’ she muttered, scowling, but secretly she felt warmed by Jack’s praise.

The easy smile dropped from Jack’s face. He stepped away.

‘Next time, try not to let your anger get the better of you.’

Tilly’s heart contracted sharply. She turned away, tears smarting her eyes.

In the change room, she pulled on a big, baggy sweater that had belonged to her dad, a pair of old faded jeans and scruffy runners. She carefully packed away her fencing clothes and foil into her kit bag, checking it all carefully. She ignored the other girls chatting and giggling in the corner. They were congratulating Bella, who had just defeated Tilly.

Bella looked gorgeous with her deep brown skin, black eyes and long hair. Dressed now in black leggings and top, a purple-and-black tartan skirt and silver ballet shoes, she looked graceful and confident surrounded by her friends.

‘Bye, Tilly,’ called Bella cheerfully. ‘You fought well today.’

A hot flush stained Tilly’s cheeks.

‘Thanks,’ Tilly muttered, her eyes glued to the floor as she loped for the door.

Tilly glanced back to see Bella raising her eyebrows and shoulders in a *what’s up with her?* gesture to the other girls, who shrugged and tittered in response.

At the park on the corner, Tilly sat on a bench, staring at the hole in the toe of her runner and scuffing her heel in the dirt.

Tilly *was* angry.

The last six months had been the worst in her life. Six months ago she had been a normal girl with normal friends and a normal family. Then one night everything had changed. Her dad had come home from work and explained that he had met a woman at the office. That he had fallen in love. That he would be moving in with 'Bunny' and her children. That he still loved Tilly, but he couldn't live with her and her mother anymore.

Tilly had run up to her room and slammed the door, the anger like bubbling lava, threatening to boil over. The anger had come suddenly, but it stayed. Tilly was angry with her mother for not doing whatever it took to make her dad stay. Tilly was angry with her brother for being so annoying that he'd probably driven him away. She was angry with her father, his new 'friend' Bunny and her horrible children. She was angry with her teachers, her friends and, most of all, with herself for not being loveable enough.

Tilly's head ached with the memory of it.

Her younger brother, Tim, often went to stay with Dad and the new family, but Tilly refused. She would rather lie on her bed with her iPod turned up high to drown out the world. A tear trickled down Tilly's face and she wiped it away fiercely with the back of her hand.

Reluctantly, she picked up her kit bag and walked home. In the hallway she met her brother in his soccer training gear, zooming a Lego spaceship through the air.

'Mum's cross,' announced Tim as he walked past her, soccer bootlaces undone.

A wave of annoyance washed over Tilly. Tim was always messy and always in the way.

‘Poor bubba,’ hissed Tilly. ‘Is mumsy *cross* with you? Did you leave Lego all over the lounge room floor again?’

A flash of pain crossed Tim’s freckled face, then a mask of nonchalance dropped down.

‘No, she’s cross with *you*,’ Tim retorted quickly. ‘Again!’

Tilly’s heart sank. What had she done now?

Tilly’s mother, Juliette, was in the kitchen unpacking the dishwasher.

‘Where have you been?’ cried Juliette, hand on hip, face knotted with anxiety. ‘You were supposed to pick Tim up from the neighbour’s house half an hour ago. She rang me at work, and when I couldn’t find you on the mobile I had to come home early. *And* you were supposed to unpack the dishwasher before school.’

Tilly threw her bag down. A flood of guilt washed over her. She had forgotten about Tim, and the dishwasher. She pushed away the guilt and reached for the anger.

‘I ... I ... I was caught up after fencing. Besides, why should I always have to look after Tim? He’s so annoying and never does what I tell him. No-one else has to mind their pesky little brother. It’s so unfair.’ The headache came pounding back.

‘I don’t want to argue with you, Tilly,’ Juliette sighed. ‘Could you *please* finish unpacking the dishwasher?’

Tilly shook her head, forming a ‘W’ with her two hands. ‘*Whatever*,’ she mouthed.

Juliette closed her eyes and gritted her teeth, refusing to answer.

Tilly groaned loudly and stomped around the kitchen, dropping knives in the drawer with a clatter, banging saucepans and clashing plates. *Life is so unfair*, she thought.

When the dishwasher was emptied, Tilly crept upstairs before Juliette could give her another job. As she tiptoed past her mother's room she heard a funny sound coming from behind the almost closed door.

It sounded like sobbing. Tilly listened in carefully.

'I just can't *do* any more, Kara.' Juliette sniffled. 'Tilly's being revolting all the time. I think she hates me ... I know ... I know ... She's so angry with me, as if it's all my fault ... But so do I ... All I do is work and clean and cook and wash and help the children. I just feel like my life is a misery ... Yes, but where would I go? ... I couldn't possibly! ... I know ... It would be wonderful, but the children? ... Tilly won't go to Richard's. Tim will, but ... Would you? ... Are you sure? ... That would be fantastic ... Thank you, Kara. I just need to get away from everything and everyone.'

Tilly heard her mother say goodbye, and she quickly snuck away. *What's going on? Is Mum going away too?* Tilly thought anxiously, her stomach churning.

Nothing more was said until the next morning when Juliette was making tea, looking pale and drawn, her puffy eyes surrounded by dark circles.

Tilly looked at her mum closely. There was a thread of grey in her dark hair that hadn't been there before and two deep furrows across her brow. Had Juliette aged overnight? Or had Tilly simply not noticed?

'Are you all right, Mum?' Tilly asked. 'You look tired.'

Juliette smiled gratefully and rubbed her forehead. 'I didn't sleep very well last night,' she admitted. 'But then, I haven't been sleeping well for ages.'

Juliette poured the tea.

'Actually, Tilly, there's something I need to talk to you

about. I'm going away for the weekend. I simply need to get away from everything. Tim is going to stay with your father, but I thought you might prefer to go and stay with Auntie Kara.'

Tilly scowled. 'But I don't want to go to —'

'Please, Tilly,' interrupted her mother. 'For once, can you just not argue with me? You have no choice. I'm going away today and you can't stay here on your own. I know it's been hard, believe me. But now you just need to grow up a little and realise how your behaviour is affecting everyone else. You just aren't that nice to be around anymore, Tilly.'

Tilly scowled again and then stormed out of the room, banging the door behind her. *Unfair, unfair*, she thought. *Nothing is right anymore.*

'Kara will pick you up from school,' Juliette called up the stairs.

That afternoon, Tilly dawdled out of the classroom. In the bag room she could hear some of the girls chatting and giggling. Last year these girls had been her friends. When Tilly had first been sad and angry at school, they had been sympathetic and supportive. But over time they had started to avoid her.

'Don't forget your pillows on Saturday night,' Maddie reminded the other girls. 'Mum's going to set up a whole pile of mattresses in the lounge room. She's making popcorn and pizza to eat in front of the DVD.'

'I can't wait,' Jess exclaimed. 'And I've bought you the most awesome present.'

Tilly's stomach clenched and her heart beat faster. Maddie was having her birthday sleepover this weekend,

and she wasn't invited. Tilly crept back into the classroom, pretending to look for her ruler. She waited until she heard the girls race down the stairs, still laughing and chatting, before she went to the bag room, tears in her eyes.

By the time she came through the gates, she was one of the last to leave. She saw her aunt's silver sports car, the convertible roof folded down. Her aunt was chatting on her mobile phone, arms gesticulating wildly. Kara saw Tilly and waved frantically.

'Over here, darling,' Kara cried. 'How was school?'

Tilly shrugged noncommittally, hoping her eyes weren't red. Kara gave her a huge bear hug and scanned her niece's face, noting the pale, pinched skin, the unkempt brown hair and the puffy eyes.

'Darling ...' soothed Kara, squeezing Tilly's hand. 'We are going to have a lovely weekend – and a little bit of girly spoiling. I haven't bought your birthday present yet, and I thought we might go shopping tomorrow. It will be such fun. I don't have a daughter to spoil, so I just have to lavish all my attention on you. I haven't seen you for such a long time.'

Tilly squirmed, picking at the hem of her school skirt.

'I don't worry much about clothes,' Tilly admitted. 'There doesn't seem much point somehow.'

'Why not, Tilly?' replied Kara. 'It'll be fun. Come on. Let's go home.'

2

The Heirloom



Kara lived in a small sandstone terrace house in Annandale, where she ran her own interior design business.

The house was gorgeous, painted in soft shades of white and cream, with polished timber floorboards, ornate plaster ceilings and old fireplaces. The first room was Kara's office, the large antique desk littered with swatches of linen and silk. Other rooms opened off the narrow hallway, each one elegant yet inviting with their cosy arrangement of furniture, colourful Persian rugs and artwork.

Kara showed Tilly up to the spare room, a tiny attic bedroom with a sloping ceiling. A dormer window looked out over the terracotta chimneypots and rooftops of Annandale. In the centre of the room was a large antique sleigh bed covered in crisp, white damask. A vase of purple lavender on the bedside table filled the room with its delicate scent.

'We're all on our own this weekend,' Kara explained, tweaking the bedcover into place. 'Andrew has taken Zac

away for a boys' weekend, so I thought we'd pick up some Thai takeaway and watch a movie. What do you think?'

'Sounds good,' murmured Tilly, sharply reminded once more of Maddie's sleepover. She would be stuck here with Aunt Kara all weekend, while her friends – her ex-friends – would be having a party. Tilly turned away sharply, fighting back the tears, and started to unpack her bag. *Kara's lovely but I'd much rather be hanging out with kids my own age*, Tilly thought. *How did it happen that I lost all my friends?*

Out came the baggy sweater, the faded jeans, the scuffed runners, a pair of worn pink flannelette pyjamas covered in brown teddy bears, and a pair of rainbow-striped bedsocks. The scruffy clothes looked completely out of place in the exquisite bedroom.

Kara stifled a sigh.

'There's a shower in the little bathroom next door but, if you feel like it, you can have a long, hot soak in the bath downstairs,' Kara offered. 'I have all sorts of beautiful potions and lotions. There's nothing like a hot bath to wash away all sorts of miseries.'

Tilly smiled wanly. *It would take more than a hot bath to wash away this misery*, she thought.

Kara gave Tilly a hug. 'I'll put the kettle on. Come down when you're ready.'

The green, checked school uniform was exchanged for the sweater and jeans. The pink teddy bear pyjamas and rainbow socks were tucked under the pillows, and the schoolbag and backpack stowed in the wardrobe. There was nothing else for Tilly to do so she wandered downstairs to the spacious, light-filled kitchen at the back of the house.

Kara was reading some work documents, which she hastily put aside when Tilly entered. A huge, white teapot sat on the bench next to two blue-and-white cups.

‘Any homework to do this weekend?’ asked Kara as she poured fragrant tea into the two cups.

‘A history assignment on the French Revolution,’ scoffed Tilly, lounging back and crossing her arms. ‘Discuss the causes, et cetera, et cetera. Blah, blah. Boring, boring.’

Kara raised her eyebrows in surprise. ‘Chilling. Terrifying. Bloody. But hardly boring,’ she replied.

‘Did you know that one of your ancestors was a French aristocrat? Her family was killed during the Revolution and somehow, as a young girl, she escaped to England, travelling across France disguised as a laundress, so the story goes.’

Tilly sat up, warming her hands on her teacup. ‘Really? I’d never heard that.’

‘Didn’t your mum tell you? Yes – most of our family was English, but we’re also part French. I like to think that’s where my love of style comes from,’ replied Kara, gesturing around at the gorgeous kitchen, interior design magazines and her own smartly tailored outfit.

‘The French flair must have missed me completely,’ retorted Tilly, pointing at her faded, baggy clothes.

Kara laughed ruefully. ‘I think your own unique style is somewhat latent at the moment, but who knows when it will unfurl and blossom?’ she assured Tilly. ‘I think you’ll be a real beauty like your mum.’

‘Mum – a beauty?’ Tilly wrinkled her nose, thinking of Juliette’s worry furrows and new streaks of grey. ‘She’s just Mum.’

Kara stroked Tilly's shaggy, long fringe back from her face.

'Actually, you're named for our aristocratic ancestress,' continued Kara.

'Tilly?'

'Mathilde. Her name was Amelie-Mathilde-Louise de Montjoyeuse,' Kara explained. 'There have been quite a few Amelies and Mathildes in our family over the last two hundred years.'

'What a mouthful of a name!' exclaimed Tilly. 'I've never really liked Mathilde. The kids used to tease me by singing "Waltzing Matilda, waltzing Matilda – who'll come a-waltzing Matilda with me?"'

Kara laughed, putting down her teacup and patting Tilly on the hand.

'Tilly is pretty, but Mathilde is a good strong name, too,' Kara assured her. 'It's an old German name that means "battle mighty", like a courageous warrior. Don't you think that's a fitting name for a brave ancestress? I'd love to know how Amelie-Mathilde came to escape the horrors of the Revolution. Imagine if she had been guillotined like Queen Marie-Antoinette?'

A frown flickered across Tilly's face. She had not known anything about the French Revolution or Marie-Antoinette. While her teacher had talked about it in class, Tilly had been doodling flowers in her diary.

'Would you like to see the family heirloom?' Kara asked suddenly. 'My great-grandmother left it to me. According to family legend, it was the only belonging that Amelie-Mathilde managed to save from her family's fortune when she fled to England. It's stunning – and probably priceless

— so I keep it locked in our safe. I hardly ever get it out.’

Tilly’s face lit up — of course she was interested in a priceless family heirloom.

Kara returned a few moments later with a small velvet pouch. Tenderly and reverently, she drew open the cord and lifted out a heavy gold chain. It glinted and shone in the light.

Dangling from the chain was a flash of flame, a glow of jewels. Kara lay the pendant in Tilly’s palm. It filled her cupped hand like a puddle of blood.

Tilly gasped in amazement. She had never seen anything so precious, so beautiful.

A huge oval ruby, the size of Tilly’s thumb pad, glistened. Surrounding the central stone were ‘petals’ or ‘rays’ of smaller rubies and tiny, snowy seed pearls.

‘It’s a ruby flower,’ Kara explained. ‘Would you like to try it on?’

Tilly nodded as Kara lifted the golden chain over Tilly’s head. The ruby nestled low on the chest of her blue sweater. Tilly stroked the gems with her fingers, the surface surprisingly cold and smooth. The heat and life of the ruby flame was merely an illusion.

‘Of course, originally this pendant would have been worn nestled in the décolletage of a very low-cut silk ball dress,’ Kara explained jokingly, ‘not worn with torn jeans and runners!’

Tilly glanced self-consciously at her shabby clothes. She held the ruby pendant in her fingers and pressed the cool jewels to her face.

‘Come on — let’s order some takeaway,’ suggested Kara. ‘I’d love some Tom Ka Gai soup.’

The evening passed pleasantly, eating curry puffs and fishcakes, Tom Ka Gai and red chicken curry.

After the movie Tilly wandered up to bed, yawning. She pulled on her pink flannelette pyjamas covered in brown teddy bears, and pulled her stripy rainbow bedsocks over her feet. As she cleaned her teeth, Tilly realised she was still wearing the priceless heirloom, the ruby talisman.

She rubbed it gently with her fingertips then reluctantly took it off and placed it on her bedside table. As she fell asleep Tilly visualised the French ruby pendant, recreating its crimson fire. She felt herself diving into that vivid pool of colour and swimming down, down into a deep, vivid dream.

3

The Dream



Candles blazed in a pair of gilt candelabra, bathing the small chamber in golden light.

A girl sat on a stool in front of a dressing table covered in crystal bottles and jars. Behind her a maid fussed with her hair, coaxing a ringlet to fall just so over one shoulder. The girl looked pleased with her reflection. She had moon-pale skin, lustrous black hair and dark brown, almost black, eyes. Her hair was dressed high above her forehead, combed over horsehair pads to give it height, then fell at the back in long, glossy ringlets.

The girl sat patiently as the maid fussed and primped. When at last she was satisfied with the ringlets, the maid stepped back to admire her work.

‘*Merci, Claudette,*’ murmured the girl, stroking the loose ringlet with her finger. ‘It looks very pretty.’

‘Now for the pomade and powder, mademoiselle,’ replied Claudette, picking up a jar of spicy-smelling cream.

First she smeared Amelie's hair liberally with the sticky pomade, then she deftly sprinkled white powder over the whole creation. The glossy black curls gradually disappeared under the white coating, changing the girl's entire appearance. Lastly, the maid applied two strokes of rouge to give the illusion of flushed cheeks.

'Tis finished, mademoiselle,' announced Claudette, gently removing the huge white wrapper that protected the girl's clothes. 'Madame la Comtesse would like to see you in her chamber.'

The girl rose and gazed at her reflection in the gilt mirror. It had taken Claudette two hours to dress her.

The gown was blue silk with a ladder of rose-pink bows down the centre of the tightly laced bodice. A white ruffle softened the neckline, with white lace ruffles at the elbow and hem. The wide skirts billowed over a support of panniers and flounced petticoats, while rose high-heeled satin shoes peeked from underneath.

'*Magnifique*, mademoiselle,' breathed Claudette. 'I cannot believe you are the same convent schoolgirl who arrived home a few weeks ago.'

The girl flicked open her fan and curtsied to her reflection, pretending to simper behind its painted shield.

'Do you think the old Chevalier will like me?' asked the girl, wrinkling her nose at her reflection.

'*Oui*, of course, how could he not, mademoiselle?' replied Claudette politely, her face expressionless.

'Oh, I rather hope he will not!' the girl explained. 'I am sure he is old enough to be my *grand-père*, and he is probably stout. But if he will not marry me, what will I do?'

‘Madame is waiting, mademoiselle,’ Claudette reminded her.

The girl nodded, stiffened her back and closed her fan, heading to the door.

In the main chamber of the apartment a middle-aged woman sat on a sofa, wide gold skirts spread out on either side, hair towering half a metre above her head. Her face was permanently moulded into a haughty expression of disdain.

Behind her stood a young negro pageboy, aged no more than ten, dressed in a white wig, tricorne hat, navy blue jacket and knee breeches, and white silk stockings, staring at the wall opposite him.

A small brown monkey dressed in a matching gold gown nestled in the woman’s skirts, picking fleas from its feet. The girl sank into a graceful curtsy.

‘Ah, Amelie-Mathilde,’ sighed the woman. ‘*Bon*, you are ready at last — your curtsy has improved somewhat. Let me take a look at you. Of course, you are too thin, with no bosom to speak of. I hope the Chevalier will overlook that. You are still young, so it may yet develop.’

Amelie flushed in embarrassment, her pleasure in the new dress completely shattered.

‘*Oui*, Tante Beatrice,’ replied Amelie, eyes downcast.

‘Your complexion is paler since you have been using the cream I procured.’ Tante Beatrice continued her critical examination.

The young pageboy flicked a curious glance at Amelie, then his eyes returned to their impassive stare.

‘Now, let me see how Monsieur Le Dancing Master has fared with your deportment. Show me the walk,’ commanded Tante Beatrice.

Amelie had been having regular lessons with a fashionable dancing master in Paris, who taught her the Versailles Glide – a graceful, floating walk that was deceptively difficult when wearing high heels; wide, panniered skirts; a long train and a tall, heavy hairdo of padded horsehair and feathers. He had shown her how to wield a fan and the many formal dance steps.

Finally, he had taught her the different *révérences* required and when to use them, from the deep, obsequious curtsy reserved for royalty to the polite nod for those of lesser consequence.

Amelie floated down the room, taking quick, little steps, her silk skirts shimmering and swaying in the candlelight.

‘Now – the presentation to the Queen,’ demanded Tante Beatrice.

Amelie returned to the far end of the room. She pulled herself up regally, trying to look both modest and gracious. As she walked down the room, she made three deep curtseys, sinking at last at Tante Beatrice’s feet, as though to kiss her hem.

‘And a curtsy for the Chevalier.’

This curtsy was not so deep and designed to be alluring.

Tante Beatrice sighed, snapping her ivory fan shut in annoyance.

‘I just pray that the Chevalier will have you, or I do not know what we will do with you,’ moaned Tante Beatrice. ‘I hope that I have not wasted my money on gowns and dancing lessons for nothing. That convent obviously did very little for your education.’

Amelie bit her lip, choking back a response. Thoughts of

the convent school flooded back – the endless hours spent praying in the chapel on a cold, stone floor. Days spent locked in a pitch-black crypt as punishment for laughing. The boredom, the loneliness. Amelie shuddered. Nothing could be worse than returning to the convent school, unless of course it was being forced to marry a rich old man.

A scratching sounded on the door, which opened to reveal an exquisitely dressed gentleman, Amelie's uncle, the Comte. On his head was a carefully coiffed and curled white wig. His flared, purple silk jacket was open to reveal a lavishly embroidered waistcoat with flowers of gold and silver thread.

A snowy cravat encased his throat, a large emerald and diamond pin nestled in its fold. In one bejewelled hand he held a green-and-gilt enamelled snuffbox and a lace handkerchief. Upon his legs were lilac satin knee breeches, a bunch of ribbons and rosettes at each knee and pale pink stockings. His shoes were very high-heeled and adorned with diamond buckles. He bowed slowly, flourishing his scented handkerchief.

The monkey jumped up and down, chittering with annoyance, golden skirts flapping.

'Mimi, *chérie*, that will do,' soothed Tante Beatrice, stroking the monkey. 'What do you think, monsieur?'

Completely ignoring Amelie, the Comte flicked open his snuffbox and gracefully took a tiny pinch of powdered tobacco between his thumb and forefinger. He held this to his nostril and delicately sniffed. He snapped the box shut and dusted his fingers with the handkerchief.

'The cinnamon blend is not my favourite, but it is quite tolerable, and the green snuffbox looks rather fine with this coat. Or do you prefer the amethyst and silver?'

‘Not the snuffbox, but your niece,’ corrected Tante Beatrice. ‘Amelie-Mathilde could hardly be called a beauty, but it might serve.’

Hanging around his neck on a violet ribbon was an ornate quizzing glass, or lorgnette, which the Comte held to one eye and pointed at Amelie.

His gaze travelled from her white powdered hair, down her gown, to her rose satin shoes and back again to her powdered and rouged face. Amelie flushed but held her head high. She wondered if she might have a dab of dirt on her nose or a spot on her skirt.

‘She needs jewels,’ pronounced the Comte, dropping his quizzing glass with a sneer of disdain. ‘Can’t have her looking like a pauper’s brat.’

Tante Beatrice frowned, stroking Mimi with her gloved hands. She picked up a small gold bell on the table and tinkled it. Tomas, the pageboy, stepped forward and bowed.

‘Tell Jacques to fetch my jewellery box,’ instructed Tante Beatrice with a flick of her hand. The pageboy hurried to obey.

‘Have you seen this snuffbox, madame?’ asked the Comte, eagerly stepping forward. ‘It is most cunningly wrought. Look, if you press this button it plays a birdsong.’

The snuffbox began to play a tinny rendition of a nightingale tune. The Comte held out his hand to show Tante Beatrice and Amelie the green-and-gold box, with its intricate engravings of birds and flowers, encrusted with jewels.

‘You know I have a collection of over three hundred snuffboxes?’ the Comte informed Amelie, closing the box. ‘But this is my latest – it is uncommonly clever.’

A scratch at the door announced the arrival of the two servants, Tomas and Jacques, carrying a leather-bound chest about sixty centimetres wide by thirty centimetres high, which was placed on the side table. Jacques bowed to the group and opened the chest for inspection, then stepped back against the wall with Tomas beside him. Both servants were dressed identically, although Jacques had a gold watch and fob chain as a sign of his greater superiority in the household.

The chest was filled with tiers of trays, each lined in mulberry velvet, which folded out to reveal their contents. Tante Beatrice rummaged through the trays, the jewels glittering and sparkling in the candlelight – diamonds, emeralds, sapphires, pearls, rubies and amethysts made into every kind of jewellery imaginable.

Mimi slyly slipped a wrinkled brown paw into the chest and snatched a diamond tiara and pearl bracelet. The monkey jammed the tiara on her head and the bracelet on her skinny wrist and then leapt up onto the back of the sofa, capering like a crazed hornpiper.

‘*Mimi*,’ admonished Tante Beatrice. ‘Come back at once!’

Mimi screeched with monkey laughter and scampered for the credenza.

Amelie flicked her fan open and across her face to hide a giggle. Monsieur le Comte yawned and flicked an imaginary speck of dust from his wide cuffs. Jacques kept his face resolutely straight ahead, but young Tomas couldn’t resist watching the monkey’s antics with wide eyes and a quickly repressed grin.

‘Jacques. Tomas,’ ordered Tante Beatrice. ‘Catch Mimi and retrieve my jewels.’

The valet and young page gave chase. Mimi scampered away over the furniture, Tomas and Jacques close behind. Mimi removed the jewels and threw them inside a tall Chinese jar atop the credenza and leapt, shrieking, onto Tomas's shoulder.

She whisked off his tricorne and perched on his head, the hat now covering her own head and much of her tiny body. Mimi sat perfectly still, hiding, as though no-one could possibly see her in this perfect secret spot.

Fluttering her fan furiously, Amelie doubled her efforts to mask her laughter as Jacques helped Tomas retrieve his hat and scooped the monkey from his powdered wig.

'I should wring that wretched monkey's neck,' snarled the Comte, waving his handkerchief in annoyance. 'This ludicrous fashion for exotic pets passes all bounds. Next you'll be wanting a zebra.'

Tante Beatrice held out her plump, braceleted arms, and Jacques safely returned Mimi with a bow.

'I know just the thing,' continued Tante Beatrice, searching in the very bottom of the chest.

She pulled out a long gold chain, at the end of which flamed a crimson pendant. Amelie's heart leapt.

'Come, Amelie-Mathilde,' ordered Tante Beatrice. 'These rubies belonged to your mother. Your father bought them as a wedding present. They should suit admirably. Your mother left them to you, but I have kept them until you were old enough. There was a note with them, but I seem to have misplaced it. Wherever could it be?'

Amelie leant down so Tante Beatrice could fasten the pendant around her neck, her eyes welling with tears at the thought of her long-dead parents. In the gilt mirror over

the fireplace, Amelie could see her reflection, the dazzling ruby pendant nestled against her white chest. She stroked the precious stones gently with her gloved finger.

‘Of course, it would look better if Amelie-Mathilde had a décolletage to speak of, but that cannot be helped,’ complained Tante Beatrice. ‘What think you, *chérie*?’

‘Bracelets,’ announced the Comte, once more studying Amelie through his quizzing glass. ‘The pearls will finish the effect nicely.’

‘Not my pearls,’ argued Tante Beatrice. ‘They are too valuable for a mere chit of a girl.’

‘Indeed the pearls,’ snapped Monsieur le Comte, a flush of anger staining his chalk-white cheeks. ‘Have you forgotten what is at stake? The chit must be married off, and while the Chevalier may overlook the fact that she has no fortune, he must be reminded that she is from one of the oldest and finest families in France, even if her father was a sentimental fool. She needs diamonds, too – a hairclip, some earrings – perhaps buckles for her shoes.’

Tante Beatrice nodded quickly, her eyes wide.

The Comte puffed up his chest and twitched his coat-tails. ‘Make no mistake – I want that wretched girl married off, and if the Chevalier won’t have her, I’ll hold you responsible.’

‘Now I must away. I am late for my card party and have wasted quite enough time on my tiresome niece. You know, I do think the amethyst snuffbox would be better. Jacques, why didn’t you think of it? Fetch the amethyst box at once.’

Jacques stared straight ahead and bowed stiffly. ‘My apologies, monsieur. I will fetch it immediately.’

The Comte bowed to his wife and tiresome niece, and left, followed by Jacques.

Tante Beatrice sighed and extricated the pearl bracelets.

‘These are merely on loan to you until your engagement is fixed,’ scolded Tante Beatrice, slipping them onto Amelie’s thin wrist. ‘Do not lose them or it is more than your life is worth. Show me that curtsy again.’