

Miss

McAllister's Ghost



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was at her bedside
ago! I was in
at Pont...

Elizabeth Fenham



Miss
McAllister's
Ghost

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Also by Elizabeth Fensham

Helicopter Man
RIP Jamie Boyd

Miss
McAllister's
Ghost



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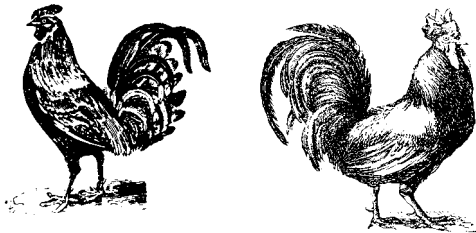
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For Grizelda

Chapter 1

THE DAY WILF SAW THE GHOST, OUR LIVES BEGAN TO change. That Wednesday had started like most other school days. Mum was not often home in the early part of the morning. If she was, she would be asleep. Mum was a nurse on a rotating shift. It seemed like she was always asleep, at work or anywhere but home.

Weekdays, Dad would usually wake me. I had to wake my brothers, Mick and Wilf. Those mornings were a scramble. Wilf made it worse. He was a dreamer. Despite Mum's occasional lectures on child psychology, we would be bellowing at Wilf within the first ten minutes of his being awake. None of us would have got out the front door an hour later if we didn't scream at Wilf.

Wilf's dreamy slowness was chronic. Once, when we were in too much of a hurry to notice, he arrived at school with his slippers on and his pyjama top under his jumper. You had to live with Wilf to know that a resident saint would be tempted daily to resign. And yet later I would always regret yelling at him.

It's a few years since all the drama about the ghost, and Wilf, who's now a young adult, still has a kind of orphan look. He has big, startled eyes. His sandy hair is dead straight, soft and dry, like chicken's down. It sticks up all over the place. You can wet it down and style it, but as soon as it's dry it springs out in all directions – like the way some people look when they first get up in the morning.

Some school days, Dad would drive us to school on his way to work at the car yard. First he would drop off Wilf at Milton Primary. Wilf would get out of the car really slowly and muddle around getting his things together. Then, if no one was nearby, he would give me a kiss. 'Maybe see y' later, Cassie,' he'd say. And he'd walk through the school gates like a condemned man walking to the gallows. He'd look back at us and give secret little waves. I'd watch the back of his messy head disappear into the schoolyard and I'd promise myself not to yell at him the next morning. Twenty-four hours later, I'd be yelling at him.

I usually got home half an hour later than Wilf and Mick in the afternoons. Mick and I both went to Milton High, but being in Year 8 gave Mick a shorter day. Being in

Year 9 had its advantages, but I was never fully convinced about the privilege of a longer day. Mum had given us all a key to get into the house for the afternoons she was not home. But she did not count on the fact that Wilf would be alone. Mick never hung around home if he could help it. Most days after school, he'd dump his bag inside the front gate and race off to join a mate a few streets away.

I often found Wilf sitting quietly on the front step. He could have gone inside and made himself a snack. After a while I found out he was frightened to go into the house by himself. Our place wasn't old or spooky. It was a modern, semi-detached brick-veneer house in the inner-city suburb of Milton. But Wilfie's imagination could make anything terrifying. That's why none of us took Wilf seriously when he told us about the ghost.



Chapter 2

ON THE PARTICULAR WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON I'M TALKING about, when Wilf and I got inside the house there was a note from Mum on the kitchen bench. Dad's car (a special from the boss's car yard) had broken down for the third time in a year. Mum had to go over and give Dad a lift home. They would be late and I had to take a casserole out of the freezer, thaw it in the microwave and keep an eye on Wilf.

I walked into the lounge. Wilf was lying on his back on the carpet sipping a packet drink through a straw and walking his legs up and down the wall. I got a drink, too, and switched on the television, but there were just little kids' shows. I pressed the 'off' button and settled myself into Dad's well-used chair with this spine-chilling book about

spies. From then on I don't remember much except for Wilf saying, 'I'm bored, Cassie,' and me saying something friendly like, 'Well, take yourself for a walk and stop hassling me.' So he did.

I forgot all about him. The next thing it was 7.00 pm. And there was no Mum and Dad and no Wilf. I raced that casserole into the microwave and turned it up high. Mick barged through the door and I asked him if he had seen Wilf.

'Nope,' he said opening the fridge door and sizing up its contents. 'Don't get so uptight about him. You've got to let him grow up. Mellow out a bit, Cas.'

After these words of wisdom, Mick made himself some bread with a gravity-defying layer of margarine and jam. It was easy for Mick to be unconcerned. I was the one who would get ripped into if something happened to Wilf.

I told Mick to stay put and ran out of the house to go searching for Wilf.

I walked up both ends of the street calling for him. I went to the patch of dried grass with its rusting iron swings they call a children's park – no Wilf. I walked past there to the corner shop where Mr Bellini sometimes gives him free lollies – no Wilf. I walked another twenty minutes in the opposite direction to John Frievert's house. Wilf had been to John's birthday party a month earlier. He had eaten too much pavlova and was sick on Mrs Frievert's new blue carpet. She seemed delighted to tell me that Wilf was not there.

The only other place I could think of was Mr O'Hagen, our next-door neighbour. He was middle-aged and he slept and lived horse-racing. He had a grey felt hat with a little feather tucked in the band, and if he was wearing that you knew he was off to the races. Mr O'Hagen smoked too much; he made rollies and he had yellow fingers. There was always a radio on his laminex table blaring out the races. He used to save up new, shiny, five-cent pieces in a tin for us kids. But his house smelt stale and we didn't go there much. Just the same, I checked on him in case. He was sitting at the kitchen table with another racing mate and our Wilf was not there.

It was 8.30 pm and getting dark when I walked into our house. Mum was sitting wild-eyed and white-faced on the couch. Dad was in his chair, his head tilted back, draining off one of his nightly string of beers. Mick was sitting next to Mum looking almost angelic.

'You haven't bloody found Wilf yet, have you?' Dad thumped his beer glass onto the coffee table. 'You've let us down. What the hell do you think you've been doing, Cassie?' he shouted. 'Mum's had to miss her shift.'

Hunger for his uneaten casserole was doing more to make him like this than Wilf's being missing. I stared at his hard-boned face with its nose as pitted and purple-red as an old plum. He had a sour smell about him, as if all the beer he had ever drunk was sweating its way out of his pores.

‘I’ve looked everywhere,’ I said. ‘I was hoping he’d be back by now.’

‘Better ring the police,’ said Mum.

‘Mum, you know I love Wilf. I was so hot and tired I just didn’t notice he’d been gone so long.’

She nodded, then her face crumpled and she started crying into a tissue. ‘Wilfie! Oh my God. Where *is* he?’

Mick put his hand on her shoulder. He had his pure-as-the-driven-snow face on.

Dad was about to dial the local police when there was a thumping on the front door. I was the first to get there. When I opened the door, Wilf staggered in. Mum ran to him and flung her arms around him, but he struggled to get free. He could not catch his breath and he looked more frightened than I had ever seen him.

‘Let him go a moment, Mum,’ I said.

‘Sorry, Wilfie,’ said Mum. ‘Come and sit down here.’ She led him into the lounge room to the couch.

‘Make yourself useful. Get your brother a drink!’ Dad ordered me.

When I returned with a glass of water, Wilf was still taking his breath in great gulps, like someone drowning. Dad had poured himself another beer from the bottle on the coffee table and was crouching down in front of him. Mum was holding Wilf’s hands. His eyes were staring beyond us.

‘Come on, mate,’ said Dad, with a rare gentleness.

'You're safe now.'

'Did somebody try to hurt you, Wilfie?' Mum asked.

Wilf shook his head.

'Get it off your chest, boy,' said Dad, a touch of impatience creeping into his voice.

'Ghost ... I seen a ghost,' Wilf said.

Mick got off the couch and sat down in an armchair that faced Wilf. He stared at Wilf as if he could not believe they were related.

'Yeah, right,' he said.

Dad did not look too impressed either.

'Tell us about the ghost,' said Mum.

Wilf took a drink of his water. 'She was wearing a long black dress and she had a candle. She kept disappearing and then ...'

'Then what?' I asked.

'Tell us, love,' said Mum.

Wilf looked around at us and relaxed a bit. 'And then she came straight at me – straight to the window. She had a white face and white hair ...' Wilf paused, searching for the right words, 'and I never seen anyone so old in my holy life.' Then he began to whimper. 'And all in a long black dress. Like them old movies ... and the candle.'

'Where were you, Wilf?' Dad asked.

'Down at an old house. I never been down that street before.'

'Go on,' I urged.

‘Well, there was this tall wall and a tree next to it. So I climbed the tree and just sat on the wall ...’

Mum interrupted. ‘Wilf, I’m sure you have just seen an ordinary person, and because it was getting dark and things get shadowy you thought the lady was wearing a long dress. Maybe she was in a dressing-gown and carrying a torch because her light bulb had blown and she was trying to put a new one in.’

‘I seen what I seen,’ he said, staring around wildly.

Dad lost interest at this point. He finished off a third beer, helped himself to the casserole and sat down in his armchair to watch TV, where he would probably spend the rest of the evening and eventually fall asleep.

Mum and I managed to calm Wilf down enough to eat a bit of dinner. Then we got him into his pyjamas and into bed. That is where the hard part came. He slept in the same room as Mick and he wanted the light left on all night. Mick objected, saying that he could not sleep with the light on. Mum was worn out. She went to bed and left me to sort things out between Wilf and Mick.

‘Say a prayer to protect me from ghosts,’ Wilf begged me.

‘Yeah, Cassie. And say a prayer to protect me from this eight-year-old nut case I have to share a room with,’ said Mick.

‘Shut up, Mick,’ I said. ‘You don’t know what Wilf saw. Anyway, do you remember when you sat up almost all night

too scared to sleep because you thought the towel hanging on the door knob was a spook?’

Mick scowled. ‘I was half his age.’

‘Listen, Wilf,’ I said, ‘I’ll say a prayer for you and then I’ll have to turn the light off. It really is too bright and there’s no such thing as ghosts.’

Wilfie hung onto my arm. ‘But I really did see a ghost.’

‘It was probably your own reflection in the window, you pale little wimp,’ said Mick.

Wilfie started crying. He was angry in a way I had never seen him before. I had to hold him back from having a go at Mick, who lay in his bed leaning on one elbow and smirking.

‘I tell you it was real,’ Wilf yelled. ‘I dare you, Mick and Cassie. I dare you to see it tomorrow. I’m not a wimp and I’m not a nut.’

‘I’ll go, alright?’ said Mick in his casual way. His curiosity had been aroused. ‘Now get on with this prayer and let me get some damn sleep.’ He rolled over and put his back to us.

I held Wilf’s hand in mine.

‘Hello, out there. Come in, God. Whatever Wilf saw today must be a part of all the things you have made. So there’s nothing to be afraid of. And it might be an idea to send a special angel tonight to protect Wilf and not let him be frightened. Amen.’

‘And, please, God, don’t let the angel look like a ghost,’
added Wilfie.

‘Amen!’ snarled Mick.



Chapter 3

I GOT UP EXTRA EARLY THE NEXT MORNING. IT GAVE ME a chance to be alone with Mum before school. She was on a late day-shift and was going to do some shopping beforehand. We had been sitting at the kitchen table enjoying a satisfying anti-Dad, anti-Mick session, and then we got onto Wilf.

‘Do you believe in ghosts, Mum?’

She scraped some of the burnt part off her toast and then decided against eating it. ‘Not really, but I know people who do.’

Mum stood up and dumped her dishes in the kitchen sink. I never got much time talking to her. She had her ‘I’m in a tearing hurry’ look on her face. ‘Have to get some food

in. We're really low. Tell Dad he can have my car. I'll use the bus. Give us a kiss, Cas.'

Mum raced out the front door and slammed it shut. It flew open again and Mum panicked down the hall, her handbag flapping over her shoulder, two other bags in her hands and a letter sticking out of her mouth. I knew what she'd come back for. I ran around to the various places where Mum stashed her house keys and saw them sticking out of a vase of fortnight-old flowers that sat on the hall table.

'Found them,' I said, handing the keys to Mum. She looked piteously grateful.

'Thank goodness for you, Cas.'

That's how it always was.

Mick appeared in the kitchen looking tough in jeans and an old suede jacket. His long dark hair was pulled back and he had three sleepers in his left ear. He'd just had them put in and he thought he looked pretty cool. At that moment we heard Dad yelling about not being able to find any matching socks. I went up to his bedroom to help him look. The floor was littered with unmatched socks he'd just emptied from the drawer. In the end, he had to get Wednesday's socks out of the laundry basket. Forgive the pun, but that really put him in a stinking mood. He was threatening to belt Wilf if he didn't get dressed faster. But when it came to dressing, the threats only made Wilf take even longer. When you think about articles of clothing going on at four- or five-minute intervals, and then you

add up two socks, underpants, singlet, tracksuit top and bottom and two shoes – eight items – that makes nearly forty minutes. Dad was demented by the time Wilf was ready to step into the car.

‘If I get into shit for being late at work, then just look out,’ said Dad as he drove too fast down the street and through some orange lights into the main road.

We stayed silent, which was the only way to handle Dad at moments like these. When Dad pulled up outside the primary school, Wilf got out, saying, ‘Don’t forget what you promised, Cas – and you too, Mick.’

‘What’s this promise?’ Dad asked as he drove off.

‘Just thought we’d settle Wilf down by seeing that house in daylight,’ Mick said casually.

‘I don’t care what y’ do, so long as y’ stay out of trouble,’ grunted Dad.

That was Dad’s sole child-raising philosophy – stay out of his way and stay out of trouble.

The school day seemed as long as two days rolled into one, like most do. But this Thursday was more painful because I was kept in at lunchtime by Mrs Ridgeway for not doing a History assignment on Indonesia.

Being kept in for lunch meant I missed my daily dose of seeing Peter Murphy. I’d liked him since Primary. He was a Koori – tall, brown-skinned and with stunning blue-grey eyes and thick black lashes. He was a natural at sport and got straight A’s in his schoolwork. The most gorgeous thing

about him was that he wasn't full of himself. He acted sort of shy and kind. The one hitch was that he was Shauna Andrew's boyfriend, and Shauna was part of the group I hung around with. But that didn't stop me dreaming. Anyway, by the end of the day I was bored out of my brain and itching to see this house of Wilf's. I was in the mood to see a ghost.

When I got home, Mick was in the kitchen with Wilf. Mick was in the most good-natured mood I'd seen him in for a long time. He had made Wilf and himself milkshakes in Mum's blender and they were drinking them at the table in an atmosphere of brotherly comradeship. The sun shone specially bright for Wilf when Mick decided to be nice to him.

'How about making me one of those?' I said to Mick.

'Run out of ice-cream, sorry,' he said.

I got myself a lemonade from the fridge and joined the boys at the table. 'I've been thinking,' I began. 'We've got to plan this carefully.'

'Why?' asked Mick.

'Because I reckon we should be at the house at exactly the same time as Wilfie saw his ghost. That was about 8 o'clock, wasn't it?'

'That'd be right,' said Mick. 'But why all the careful planning?'

'Well, if we stick around here until just before the right time, Dad might change his mind and not let us go,' I explained.

Mick looked impressed. 'Right. So we need to leave a friendly note saying we've gone out to muck around at the park before our house visit, and we'll be back by about half-past eight and we'll keep a good eye on young Wilf here.'

'Exactly,' I said.

I found Mum's message pad and wrote the note. We were not lying. We paid a visit to Mr O'Hagen and collected \$1.80 in five-cent pieces. Then we blew the lot on mixed lollies at Mr Bellini's shop. After that we went to the park. I tried the swings, but my legs had grown too long and my feet kept scraping the dirt. Mick got a stick and walked around stabbing ants to death. Wilf wanted to play 'I Spy'. Mick and I got frustrated with him because he kept on 'spying' things that were not around the park – things like flying saucers and dinosaurs. All this had only got us to half-past six.

'Let's just go and look at this place of Wilf's,' said Mick in desperation. 'We're probably too early for ghosts, but I'll go nuts hanging around this hole much longer.'

We set off with Wilf triumphantly directing us down streets and around corners. Twenty minutes later we were in an area that was not part of our world. You can spend a lifetime in your own neighbourhood and still discover parts you have never seen before. We were walking down one of these strange streets filled with a mixture of modern blocks of flats that towered over little old houses refusing to budge, when Wilf stopped suddenly. At first I thought Wilf had

seen something important, but then I realised that he was confused. Mick saw this, too.

‘You’re lost!’ he accused Wilf. ‘You’ve bloody well got us lost. Come on. You are, aren’t you?’

All that build-up and waiting around. And what were the chances of Wilf’s finding the ghost house again? He was an eight-year-old kid who had gone for a wander, got a fright and run home without looking over his shoulder. I thought we’d probably never find the place.

‘I’m a tiny, weeny bit lost,’ he explained, ‘but I can’t think properly when you keep yelling.’

Mick had picked up Dad’s habit of speaking through tightly clenched teeth just before he exploded. I could see his jaw grinding. He was angry, for sure. If his anger burst out, Wilf would get more muddled. I had to take control.

‘Take your time, Wilfie,’ I said, all patience and sweetness. ‘Try and think of some landmarks that could get us there.’

‘What are landmarks?’

‘Things about a place that make it different so you remember it – like a big tree or a hill or something.’

‘Well, it had a kind of canal like in that dyke story you read me,’ said Wilf.

‘A canal?’ Mick asked.

‘Right near the house. The old place was sort of by itself at the end of the road. And there was this big canal thing down the side.’

'Canal,' said Mick, more to himself than to us. He looked at me. 'He means a culvert. We've been doing that sort of stuff in Mr Graeme's class. We need a map, Cas.'

The sun was getting lower in the sky. The red bricks of the houses looked like they were on fire. Time was running out. I glanced across the road and saw an elderly man and his wife getting into a car. Mick and I had the same idea, but I got to the old couple first. When I asked to see their street directory to find the nearest culvert, they were happy to help.

The man opened the directory and flipped to the page where Milton blended with two other suburbs and then stabbed at a line with his index finger.

'That'd be your culvert,' he said. 'It's a small tributary that runs into the main river. When my father was a lad, it was a proper stream with grass and trees on the banks. You've got about a twenty-minute walk that away.' He pointed in a direction south of where we were coming from.

'Thanks a lot,' I said.

We started walking again. After about fifteen minutes, Wilf stopped. 'That closed-down shop there, on the corner,' he said. 'It's near there!'

The three of us ran to the shop. Its windows were boarded up and covered with outdated advertisements for biscuits and soap. From the corner, we could see down a side street that ran straight and then dipped away. I could see the top of a wire fence running along the far end like a

barricade. Wilf began jumping up and down.

‘I’m sure this is it!’ he cried out.

I looked at my watch. It was a quarter to eight. We were running out of time. We started sprinting.

Wilf kept saying, ‘This is it! This is it!’ It was. The culvert was there. It punctuated the end of the quietest, deadest street I had ever been in. It had semi-detached houses and no sign of a human being. Right at the end, next to the barbed wire, was a high, stone wall. There was a heavy wooden gate like you’d see in a castle. It was covered in ivy that was as thick and knotted as chains. A sort of English-looking tree was growing next to it. Some branches hung low and looked easy to climb.

Wilf was a mix of pride and fear. ‘See! This is the tree I had to climb. This is the wall I sat on.’

‘Okay, Wilfie boy, one more climb,’ said Mick. I followed the boys up the tree. By five minutes to eight, the three of us were sitting on that wall gazing down into a forgotten world.



Chapter 4

THE HOUSE WAS AS HOLLOW-EYED AS A SKELETON. THIS sort of house, surrounded by wide verandahs, needed paddocks around it. The iron roof was blotched with patches of red-brown rust. The weatherboard walls had gone lead-grey from lack of painting. From our perch in the tree we could see a large central front door flanked by French windows. The verandah floorboards were buckled as though a giant had stomped along them. Worn stone steps, dipping at the centre, led down to the garden.

I loved the wildness of it. Tree-sized rose and camellia bushes bloomed with soft cabbagey flowers. There were lots of other trees and flowering shrubs too. What really grabbed me were the secret paths meandering through it all.

On the culvert side of the house to the west was a tall wooden fence. Blackberry bushes grew high above it, peering into the garden and throwing down long shoots like tentacles. Along the eastern side of the property towered a windowless, two-storey brick wall of some sort of abandoned warehouse. No chance of looking down into the mystery house from there.

All this time the boys were silent. Wilf was crouching ready to jump down and run home at any moment. Mick was confidently sitting there, drinking the place in, like I was.

The sun had dropped behind the horizon, but there was a soft twilight. I looked at my watch. It was 8.10 pm. Then Mick grabbed my arm so hard it hurt. He motioned with his head in the direction of the window to the right of the front door. And there was the ghost – a ruinous, shroud-pale face looking into the garden. It was not just a face, though. The body was all in black with a high white collar that went up under the chin. Not even the oldest person I knew would dress like that. I can't tell you what Mick and Wilf were doing. I only remember needing to go to the toilet. I get like that when I'm in small spaces like telephone boxes or if I'm scared witless. I was off that brick wall in a flash, down the tree and into the street, and somehow Mick and Wilf were with me, too. I did not stop running until I got to the corner. I would have kept on except Mick pulled me up short by yanking my pony-tail. Wilf stopped, too.

'We're going back, Cas,' Mick panted.

'Like hell we are!' I said. 'I'm going to find myself a public toilet and then I'm heading home. H-O-M-E.' I spelt the word as if it meant 'heaven'.

'Me, too,' said Wilf moving up close to me and holding tightly to my T-shirt.

Mick raised his eyes skywards. 'You are a pair of losers!'

Wilf held more tightly to my shirt.

'Okay, then. So what do you reckon we should do?' I asked.

'I reckon we should climb down into that garden and knock on the door to see if anyone's home.'

'Good one!' I said. 'And what do we say we're doing if someone comes to the door, you fool?'

'We ask to use their phone to ring home because we're lost and don't want the old fogeys at home to worry.'

I was unmoved.

'Come on, Cassie,' Mick pleaded. 'You carry on as much as me about how pissed off you get with everything being so boring. If it is a ghost, it can't kill us. What's the use of all your book reading if you pass up your first and only chance of a bit of an adrenalin kick? Please, Cas.'

I could count on one hand the number of times Mick had talked to me like a normal human being. If I didn't go along with him, he might never trust me again.

'Okay,' I said. 'I'll go as far as the door.'

‘Excellent!’ Mick was triumphant. ‘Ready?’

Wilf was speechless with fear. He looked at me as if I had betrayed him.

‘Toilet first!’ I said to Mick.

We found a block of toilets a couple of streets away. Wilf and I made good use of them, then we turned back for the old house. Wilf kept looking over his shoulder, homewards. He said sadly, ‘I don’t like this at all.’

By the time we had reached the tree, dusk was deepening into night. We climbed up and crawled out to the wall. Mick sprang down into the jungle garden. I dangled the quietly whimpering Wilf while Mick caught him from below. Then I leapt, too. We had jumped into this place and there was no quick way out.

My chest was thudding, but the garden lured me. I wanted to be the one to discover the way. Mick and Wilf followed me past huge bushes. I could smell damp earth in shaded places and the magic-potion scent of flowers. A single bird was calling out a fading farewell to the day. When we got to the bottom of the stone verandah steps, I let Mick go in front. We walked up the steps and creaked our way across the verandah to the wooden door. Mick was about to knock, but just the contact of his hand on the door sent it open a few centimetres. He pushed it further open. It moved with a questioning whine.

We stood looking down a hallway big enough to set up home in. The present century was back over that garden wall.

Mick and I, with Wilf attached to me like a Siamese-twin, walked about a metre inside. There were massive pieces of carved furniture – a hallstand, side-tables and carved chairs backing up against the walls. On those walls we could just make out gloomy portraits of people dressed in dark clothes like the figure we had seen at the window. Two doorways led off to the right and left. Further down the hall were heavy curtains pulled back a little by girdles of rope. Beyond that was blackness. But what I will always remember was the sound of a clock ticking the silence away and the musty smell of old things that had not seen sunlight.

And then there was the candle moving towards us. It came from the dark void behind the curtain and moved of its own accord. Each of us stood, petrified, our eyes fixed on the travelling light. Then behind the candle I saw the ghost – the deathly face and the long black dress descending from where the neck should be to the floor. I wish I could say that I continued to stand there bravely or, even better, that I placed myself in front of my brothers, but I didn't. I grabbed Wilf's hand and ran out of the house and back into the garden. I almost threw Wilf up onto the wall. How I did it, I don't know, but I found invisible footholds in those stones and clawed my way up, into the tree and down into the street. My fingernails were torn, my palms and arms grazed and bleeding and my jeans ripped at one knee. Wilf, too, was scratched all over his arms and legs, because he was wearing only a T-shirt and shorts. Mick had not made it.

Everything in me wanted to race home. What I would have given for us all to be safely and blissfully bored, but I had to go back for Mick.

‘Don’t leave me!’ begged Wilf as he watched me hoist myself up the tree.

‘Don’t be so hopeless. I can’t let Mick down now.’

Wilf watched my ascent with glassy tears welling up in his eyes. I reached the limb that leant across the garden wall and took one last look into the street, down at little Wilf who was now sobbing and reaching his arms up to me. I turned away and started the climb across to the wall.



Chapter 5

THERE WAS A MOON SO I COULD SEE FAIRLY WELL, BUT the garden had lost its enchantment. I was about to push myself off the wall when I saw Mick coming out the front door. The ghost, candle in one hand, was holding him by the ear with the other. Mick's face was all screwed up. I heard a voice that crackled and faded like a BBC news reader on short-wave radio saying, 'This is an outrage!'

The raspy voice flew up at me. 'Come down from there this instant!'

I felt a fool. Down I went for the second time. I made my way through the bushes to the verandah steps. From there, I looked up at the most ancient person I have ever seen. The black dress was not just a bit old – it was a museum

piece. There was something stiff in the collar part that went straight up to her chin. The sleeves of the dress reached to the wrists where there was a row of small buttons. How she ever got herself dressed was beyond me. Poking from beneath the black skirt was a weird pair of black boots with buttons running up the leg near the ankle. My eyes lifted to the thin, bony face. The skin looked as fragile as the finest tissue paper. Colourless eyes swam in a wash of fluid. It was impossible to imagine what the face might have been when it was a young girl's. And she stank. Lavender and old age – it was like the decaying smell of compost.

This small black and white vulture in nineteenth-century costume and a ramrod-straight back could make you feel guilty without raising her voice. Like pellets from a pea-shooter, she stung us with phrases like 'outrageous behaviour' and 'unforgivable intrusion', and her way of saying 'how dare you' made me burn with shame. Mick was shifting uneasily from foot to foot and using all his courage to try to meet her eyes. In no time at all she had extracted our names and address. The end of it saw the three of us walking home in the dark carrying a note addressed to our parents that we had promised to deliver. The note said:

Dear Mr and Mrs Miller,

It is a matter of deep regret that I have to inform you of your children's misbehaviour. They seemed to find it necessary to intrude not only

upon my garden but also upon my house.

Please be so kind as to restrain these miscreants. In the words of the Scottish kings, 'Nemo me impune lacessit'.

I beg you not to trouble yourselves by calling on me. It would suffice if you would reply by letter and give me assurance that there will be no further intrusion.

*Yours faithfully,
Grizelda McAllister*

Breaking the strained silence, I said, 'She's a mobile skeleton. The weirdest thing I've ever seen.'

'We're not going to deliver that old cow's letter,' Mick said.

We all knew what he meant. This was not just rebelliousness. It was self-preservation. Mick was thinking about Dad's violence. It didn't happen all the time, not even when you expected it.

Once when I was about four and Mick was around three, he was refusing to eat his dinner. Mum was at work and Dad was looking after us. Dad tried coaxing Mick a bit, but Mick just sat there shaking his head. Then Dad let fly and hit him smack across his little head. Mick fell off his chair. Dad dragged him back onto the chair and roared at him to eat his dinner. Mick was sobbing. He couldn't eat. I was just sitting at the table. There was nothing I could do

to help. Dad shook Mick and struck him again, this time across the face. Ever since, Mick has had a clicking jaw when he eats.

Mum knew about Dad. She did her best to keep the family together and she let Dad know what she thought of his temper. I remember Dad going for me once. I took off down the hall with Dad after me. Mum chased Dad, threw herself on him and locked his arms behind his back. The point is, though, that we all had reason to be afraid of Dad. Giving Dad that letter could be like poking sticks into a volcano.

Each of us had a different idea about what to do with the letter.

‘We’ll chuck this thing away. Better not to say a thing about it,’ said Mick.

‘We could write a pretend letter from Mum and Dad to the lady. And tell her how Dad is going to belt us. That might please her,’ said Wilf sadly.

‘That old weirdo would probably know the handwriting wasn’t an adult’s. And if we don’t do anything at all, like Mick says, she might check up on us now she’s got our address,’ I said.

‘Well, that was really dumb. You should have given a false address!’ Mick snapped at me.

‘Come on! It was you who gave our address away, you moron!’ I said.

The truth of it was we couldn’t remember which of us

had done that. We had been too frightened at the time.

'Anyway, I bet you haven't got a decent idea in your head,' Mick said to me.

'Well, what do you suggest, Einstein?' I said.

'It's simple,' said Mick. 'We're going to be almost honest. We tell Mum and Dad we met the old lady who lives in the house. That she invited us into her garden. That because she's so old we felt sorry for her and offered to do a few jobs about the place for one day of the holidays.'

We'd stopped walking for a moment. I looked at Mick with hope.

'Sounds good so far,' I said. 'But what do we tell the old lady?'

'I'm coming to that. We tell the old crow that Mum and Dad are so upset with our behaviour that we've been sent to help her out. Just for one day, mind you.'

'Where does the "almost honest" bit come in?' I asked.

'Well, Mum and Dad would be upset if we told them what happened, so that's true. And Mum might have thought about sending us over to apologise and all that, so that's probably true, too.'

This was another occasion when I was glad Mick's devious mind was on my side.

'You're on,' I said and we did a high-five.

By now we were within one block of home. I began to forget the truth of the situation. I started to think I was really a 'community-minded citizen' type that gets her

picture in the local newspaper. My dream was interrupted by Wilf's small voice.

'The old lady might lock us up. She's probably mad.'

'Shut up, Wilf. You got us into this,' said Mick.

'You two-faced creep!' I said to Mick. '*You* got us into this and Wilf's got a point. The old lady might be crazy. Maybe she's been crazy all her life or maybe living like that has sent her crazy. She might have a shotgun or a cellar or something and we'll never be heard of again.'

We had stopped again on the footpath. Mick was looking serious. 'I'd rather risk all that than Dad. I'm for real. But Wilf's right. Someone that old would normally be living in an old people's home. And those clothes she wears. Yeah, I think she might be nuts. We'll just have to be careful.'

We walked in silence until we reached our front gate.

'Act casual,' whispered Mick. I watched the way he turned up the collar of his jacket as he sauntered into the house.

Dad was asleep on the couch with a couple of empty stubbies beside him on the coffee table. Mum believed our story. I did not want to tell her too much or she might get interested and want to visit.

'She's just your average old lady, Mum. They all look the same – a bit behind the times with the way they dress.'

'Was I right about the torch making her look like a ghost?' asked Mum.

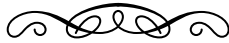
‘Probably. We didn’t get around to talking about that. We were spending the time just getting to know each other ... I’d better go to my room for some homework. Last test for the term tomorrow.’

Mum turned to Wilf. ‘You’re still looking a bit peaky.’

Mick put his arm tightly around Wilf’s neck. ‘Just too much excitement in one day, eh, squirt? We’d better all hit the sack, I reckon.’ He got up to go, pulling Wilf with him.

‘I think you’re starting to grow up, Mick,’ said Mum proudly. ‘You’re looking after your brother.’

That night I dreamt we were in Miss Grizelda McAllister’s garden and we couldn’t get back over the wall.



Chapter 6

LOOKING FROM THE TREE, THE THREE OF US COULD SEE Grizelda McAllister standing on one of the meandering paths. It was a let-down. I had been hoping she might not be home. She was wearing the same ankle-length black dress as well as a straw hat with a chewed brim, and in the long thin fingers of one hand she held some lethal-looking hedge clippers. It seemed like she was waiting for us.

‘I don’t want any fuss,’ she called up to us. ‘Just your parents’ assurance that this won’t be repeated.’ She waved the clippers in a threatening way. ‘Why are you here again? Have you brought a reply from your parents?’

I had the job of keeping this old fogey happy and Dad completely out of the picture. I made my way down into

the garden. Mick and Wilf followed. As I came closer to Grizelda McAllister, I was struck again by how prehistoric she looked and by the strange odour that lingered about her.

'I'll be straight with you, Grizelda,' I began.

'Miss McAllister,' she barked, her watery eyes popping. 'Such effrontery,' she added, shaking her head.

'Sorry, Miss McAllister. Look, Mum and Dad felt we should help you with any work around the place that needs doing. You know, the difficult sorts of things that old people can't cope with.'

Miss McAllister stiffened. Up went the ancient chin, sprouting bristles like cacti on a desert plain. 'Without disclosing my age, girl, I can assure you that I have been more or less running this household since ten years after our Queen died. My good parents would be proud of the way I have kept everything exactly as it always was.'

'But the Queen isn't dead yet,' I said.

'What are you suggesting? I have to this day kept the black armbands my parents wore at the time of Her Majesty's death and the one I wore for the losses in the Great War.' She touched a narrow band of black material strapped around the sleeve on her upper left arm. 'And I've worn it ever since. All of the nation was in mourning.' She looked confused. 'But I'm forgetting. You were not here then, were you?'

'Not here?' asked Mick.

‘Not when our great Queen Victoria died,’ she said.

I was making swift calculations as to Miss McAllister’s age. Running a household a few years after Queen Victoria died. I didn’t know the year, but I could remember from History lessons that Queen Victoria died before World War I. Perhaps Miss McAllister really was some form of ghost. There were two other possibilities. She was either the oldest person we had ever met or, as Wilf thought, she was truly mad. Mick spoke next, breaking through my thoughts.

‘Geez, Miss McAllister, you look much younger than you must be.’

What a liar. She looked about two thousand years old. But did I see a flicker of vanity cross those filmy eyes? It could not be possible for an old fossil like her to feel flattered by Mick’s smooth talking. By the time I took a second look, she had regained her composure, or maybe I had imagined it all anyway. Her manner was icy. She waved her clippers in the air.

‘To return to the point, just because your upbringing has been inadequate does not mean I should have to bear the brunt of it. I simply do not want you near me or my house again. However, I still do demand word from your parents that my wishes will be respected.’

I had to steer Miss McAllister off the dangerous subject of contact with Mum and Dad.

‘I can see your point,’ I said. ‘Us kids have shaken you up badly and having us here would sure as anything remind

you of that shock every time you looked at us. It's just that Mum and Dad both work and they were hoping that while we were on holiday we could do something useful to make up for what we did. Otherwise we'd just be lying around watching videos.'

'Videos?' Miss McAllister looked vague again. She peered at us as if we were extraterrestrial aliens.

'You don't know what a video is?' But as I gazed around Miss McAllister's lost world I checked myself. 'Of course you wouldn't know. Silly of me. It's a bit like TV except you choose what you want to see.'

'TV?'

'Television,' said Mick. 'It's been around forever.'

'Oh, the television. I've heard about it. It was when the television arrived that this street finally died.'

'How come?' asked Wilf.

Miss McAllister gazed at us with a faraway look. 'Before the television there were children in this street and families visiting each other and going for walks and suchlike. Of course, the tone of the neighbourhood had changed since my childhood here, but families are families.' She seemed to lose the thread of what she was saying. We stood waiting to see if she would explain why the street had died. With a sigh and a bird-like flutter of her hand, she went on, 'Naturally, I kept to myself. It would not do to mix. Just the same, I would go to the gate for my correspondence and I could see what was happening in the street. I knew

when the first television came. The street went quiet and became quieter and quieter.’

Suddenly, Miss McAllister focused on me and said, ‘I pity you children, and I feel sorry for your mother having to go out to work. Why does she not take in washing or ironing instead?’

How could I explain that Mum hated domestic chores and how important her job was to her. Could Miss McAllister understand Mum’s involvement in her Women’s Assertiveness Group?

‘Miss McAllister,’ I said, ‘it’s more different than you realise out there.’

Then Miss McAllister did the strangest thing. She stepped right up close to Mick and stared him in the eyes. He did not flinch. He stared straight back. Then the watery eyes turned on me. I wanted to look away, but I trained my eyes on a particularly hairy mole that grew near her left eyebrow. She turned around to Wilf who was now behind her. As she stepped towards him, her long skirt caught on the thorny cane of a rambling rose. The skirt pulled back like a black sail, revealing a voluminous pair of white pantaloons reaching down below her knees.

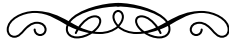
‘Old lady,’ said Wilf with concern, ‘your pants are falling down.’

Miss McAllister glanced down. She coughed in a way that could have been a rusty laugh. For a moment, all the map-like lines on her face leapt upwards so that it looked

like she was covered in a thousand smiles. Just as quickly, her face fell back into its habitual grimness. I was not sure if it had been a laugh or something sinister. She wrenched her skirt free and advanced on Wilf. 'He'll do. He'll do,' she said and she pinched his skinny arm as if testing the flesh like the witch did to Hansel and Gretel. 'You'll all do,' she pronounced in her crackling voice. 'When do your holidays begin?'

'Next week,' said Mick. 'We can come on the Monday.'

'I've probably got a week's work for you,' said Miss McAllister. 'I think that will be very satisfactory. Be here in the morning at 8 o'clock.'



Chapter 7

'I'M NOT WASTING A WEEK OF MY HOLIDAYS ON THAT geriatric,' snarled Mick as we walked home. 'She'll be darn lucky to get a day out of me.'

When we got home, Mum was on her way out to an aerobics class. 'How's the old lady?' she asked.

Mick stomped past her without answering and headed for his room. Mum just shrugged her shoulders. We were all used to Mick's moods.

'We're going to give her a hand next week with a few jobs.'

'That's nice of you. Solves the problem of what to do with you over the holidays, too.'

'How do you mean?'

'I'm taking on some extra shifts.'

'Aaw, Mum. You're never home.'

'You know we need the money, Cas.' Mum gave Wilf and me a peck on the cheek. 'Have to fly. I've left some money on the bench. You can all get fish and chips for tea.'

That night I did some research on the internet to find out when Queen Victoria died. It was 1901. Next I made some calculations on a scrap of paper.

'Impossible,' I said aloud.

Wilf was standing next to me. 'What, Cas?'

'Miss McAllister has to be almost a hundred years old. And that would make her about your age when she was running the house.'

'She may as well be a ghost,' said Wilf.

'Yeah. Maybe she's just got left behind. But it still doesn't make sense.'

For once the holidays came too quickly. The Monday morning was autumn at its most perfect. I stuck my head out the bedroom window. The sky was a clean blue. There was a bite in the air, but you knew the last warmth of the year would gradually fill out the day. Because we'd slept in, we had to run most of the way to Miss McAllister's. From on top of the wall we could see her walking around a climbing rose that swathed the end of her verandah in white blooms. She was blasting them with something from

a small metal pump. I didn't know she had seen us, but she called, 'So there you are.'

Once in the garden, we made our way to the verandah. Miss McAllister pulled out a watch and chain from the folds of her black skirt. She clicked it open and said, 'Twenty minutes late! Punctuality is the courtesy of kings.' Then she turned back to her roses and started blasting away again with her pump. 'Poor Lamarque, you hate those horrid aphids, don't you?'

The three of us stood there waiting and feeling stupid. A few more sprays of her pump and Miss McAllister turned to us.

'There now.' She put the pump down on the ground, gave her hands a brush and said, 'Well, Miller children, I don't believe I remember your Christian names.'

I introduced us all over again. Miss McAllister peered hard at Mick. 'Long hair and earrings? Playing pirates, boy?' She did not give Mick time to reply. She waved a bony finger in front of our faces. 'I hope you all know the meaning of hard work. Remember what the Good Book says: "Go to the ant, thou sluggard, consider her ways and be wise".'

'What do you want us to do?' I asked.

'Well, today is Monday, girl, and if you are any use at home then you know very well what's doing on a Monday,' snapped Miss McAllister.

How on earth could Miss McAllister expect me to know what she did on Mondays? This added to my suspicion

that the old lady was not quite one hundred per cent up top. I had to be careful.

'I think you might do different jobs from us on Mondays, Miss.'

'Good gracious, girl,' Miss McAllister exploded. 'Everyone washes on Mondays. Surely your family still does that?'

Wilf must have felt our situation needed defending. 'In our house we just chuck in a load of washing whenever we need clean clothes. That's any old day.'

Miss McAllister shrank back. She rubbed her forehead and then pulled herself up straight. 'Messy lives,' she said. 'You need order. Now, Michael, you can chop the wood for the copper. You, Wilfred, can collect the eggs from the fowl-house, and you, Cassandra, will help me with the washing.'

It was my turn to be confused. Chopping wood? Coppers? A beautiful blue day and I had to be inside?

'Couldn't I chop the wood, instead?' I asked.

'No.'

I churned with resentment.

'Follow me, please.'

Miss McAllister led us along a mossy path on the warehouse side of the garden. We pushed our way through a forest of giant hydrangeas with drooping bouquets of washed-out blue flowers, past a rain tank, and emerged from those damp shadows into a sunny backyard.

There was about half an acre of land there – easily

three times the size of our yard. Immediately in front of us was a vegetable garden. Orange and green pumpkins looked like fat ladies between rows of tomatoes, lettuce, spinach, brussel sprouts and cabbages. Flowers popped up here and there amongst the vegetables. Down in the back left-hand corner was a stone shed or garage with an attic window looking over the garden. The garage became a high stone wall that ran along the back section of the garden. In the opposite corner, on the side of the culvert, was a shed with a fenced-in yard. Crowings and hen cries came from this shed. Up from there was an orchard of about fifteen trees. From where I stood, I could see lemons and apples. Near the orchard was a pyramid-shaped woodpile. Not a bit of space was wasted – even the garden walls were covered in vines. If you could get rid of the black Miss McAllister, it would be a paradise.

‘Very well, then,’ said Miss McAllister. ‘We must not have idle hands. Michael, you will find an axe in the wash-house there.’ She pointed to a lean-to addition jutting out from the back of the house. In the wall facing us were a couple of doors and a small-paned window. Under the window was the curved handle of an iron pump. Scarlet-red geraniums grew around the pump. From there a paved brick area ran along the length of the house. A washing-line strung between two T-shaped poles took up most of this paved area. Mick strolled towards one of the doors.

‘Not that one, that’s the outhouse,’ called Miss

McAllister. Mick went in the other door, re-appeared with the axe and headed for the woodpile.

'We need kindling for the copper,' Miss McAllister called to him.

'Yeah, alright,' he said.

Miss McAllister stood for a moment, bony hands on hips, viewing Mick's attempts to chip away at a log. She turned away with a contemptuous move of her white head and called to Wilf, 'Fetch my basket from the wash-house and get the eggs.'

Wilf liked the sound of this job. He found the basket and whistled as he skipped down to the shed.

Miss McAllister turned back to Mick's useless attempts to chop wood. He was getting nowhere. The axe kept sticking in the wood. He was getting angry and crashing the axe around on the ground, trying to dislodge the log.

'You don't get anywhere by losing your temper,' said Miss McAllister. She took the axe from Mick and with expert movements freed the axe from the wood. Chips of wood flew in the air. The log that had been Mick's enemy splintered into several pieces. That ancient body worked with confident energy. Mick was amazed. He didn't have time to arrange his usual cool, uninterested expression.

'Look there,' said Miss McAllister to him, pointing to another small log. 'See that weak spot on top? That's where you head for. There's no point in simply bashing. You've got

to read the log's character. It's not a matter of mere strength. Use your noggin.'

'Yeah, yeah, I get you,' said Mick, but she had not finished.

'It's also a matter of coordination. The movement has to be controlled.' She moved the axe effortlessly through the air. 'A smooth sweep in which you picture in your mind the axe passing on through.' Once again, the next log surrendered to what might have been almost a century of practice.

'It's an art,' said Mick, astonished.

Miss McAllister handed the axe to him in a way that suggested that this would be his one and only lesson. She swept past him towards the back door. Before she disappeared inside, she called over her shoulder to me, 'We can't do much until the copper is boiling, Cassandra, so you could get to work with some weeding in the vegetable garden.'

Before I began, I walked up to Mick and quietly asked, 'Do you still reckon she's an old cow?'

'Nah,' he said, swinging his axe back ready for another try, 'she's not an old cow, she's a bloody dinosaur. But she can chop wood, alright.'



Chapter 8

I KNELT BY THE VEGETABLE GARDEN AND STARTED PULLING out what I hoped were weeds. I forgot about Wilf until he appeared by my side, a forlorn look on his face. Miss McAllister emerged from her back door at the same moment. As she descended the steps, black skirt trailing behind, she called to him, 'Where are my eggs?'

'I couldn't get none. There's a cross hen sitting on them and she pecks me every time I try.'

'I couldn't get *any*,' she corrected. 'Look, boy, that's just a broody hen. Surely you know that?'

'Nope. I never seen a chook before 'cept on TV.'

'I have never seen,' she corrected a second time, and she got that faraway look again. 'Broody hens want to hatch

eggs. However, I need those eggs. Go back down, pull the hen out of her box and collect the eggs.'

For Wilf, being made to pull a cranky hen off her eggs would be like having to fight a fire-breathing dragon. Miss McAllister was a more dangerous dragon, though.

'Okay,' said Wilf reluctantly, 'but I have to go home and put some tougher clothes on.'

'Tougher clothes? To collect eggs? He's not cleaning chimneys!' Miss McAllister exploded, her watery eyes staring.

'Let him go, Miss. He'll do what he says. He probably means rougher clothes,' I said.

'No, I mean tougher clothes, Cas,' Wilf insisted.

'Just go, boy. Having you three help me has slowed my day down three times. Get on with you.'

Wilf disappeared around the side of the house before the old lady could change her mind. What he had said did not make sense to me, either. Miss McAllister gave me no time to think more about it. For the next half-hour, Miss McAllister, Mick and I carted wood to feed into the copper. The copper was a square, brick fireplace with a low, metal door that opened for feeding in the fuel. In the top of this 'fireplace' was a circular copper wash tub like a witch's cauldron. The aim was to boil the heck out of the clothes, which explains why none of us have great grandparents' clothes still hanging in our wardrobes.

'The water has got to be kept hot – boiling hot.' Miss

McAllister was panting from the exertion of carting wood.

What Mick had thought was a hill of chopped kindling was barely enough to keep the brick monster firing.

'Quickly! Not enough time for your namby-pamby chopping. Go and find as many smaller bits of wood as you can.' There was urgency in the old lady's voice.

We searched the garden, along the sides of the fences and against the stone walls of the old shed and ran back to the copper with our finds. Miss McAllister felt the water quickly with the tip of a gnarled finger. 'Just about ready,' she said. She picked up a cake of soap and what looked like a metal cheese-grater from a table and grated a mound of flaky soap into a bowl. The soap was tossed into the copper. She grabbed a wooden pole that had been leaning against a wall and started stirring.

'This basket first.' Miss McAllister pointed to a basket full of white clothes. 'Quick, girl. You, too, boy.'

We chucked in several pairs of white underpants that were big enough to use as windsocks at the airport. We threw in singlets, blouses, pinafores, a tablecloth, sheets and pillowcases. Before long, the water was boiling and the white things were rising to the surface and plopping. Miss McAllister, her mouth pinched and wrinkled, jabbed with her pole, pushing them back under.

The room was stifling. Mick and I were sweating and Miss McAllister's white face had gone wet-pink like baby's skin. Steam ran in rivulets down the paned window.

We continued feeding the copper with wood to keep the water hot, and again we were sent scavenging for bits of stray wood. 'More wood, boy. Go and chop more wood,' she croaked at Mick. 'This is only the first load of washing.'

Only pride stopped Mick from refusing. He was wrecked, but he went outside and started thwacking wood in a half-hearted way. I felt bushed too. Standing around on the laundry's cement floor had made my feet ache. The ache went up my legs, behind my knees and continued up my back. I was wondering if you could get varicose veins at the age of fourteen. The day already seemed long and hard and it was still morning. As I prodded the rolling mass of whites with the pole, I calculated that between the lighting of the kindling, the heating of the water and this slow torture of boiling and poking, the short cycle of our washing machine at home might have completed three loads of washing already. And we were not halfway through yet.

'Idle hands make idle work, for Satan finds some mischief for idle hands to do,' Miss McAllister said. 'We need to haul these wet things into the tub here to rinse them.'

As Miss McAllister filled two cement tubs with water from the tap, I thought I would be helpful. I went to put my hands into the copper to pull out the washing. Hot pain seared through my fingers and down my spine.

'Foolish girl! Don't you know anything?' Miss McAllister pulled me across to the tubs and held my hands

under the icy tap water. 'Feathers for brains, child! Why didn't you use the copper stick?'

Luckily, my fingers had not gone far into the scalding water. I started whimpering, more from shock and the constant chastisements than from any real damage.

'Feeling sorry for yourself does not get you anywhere,' Miss McAllister nagged on.

'Just one more bit of criticism and I'm going to finish your century for you in this copper,' I thought.

'Sit down, Miss. I can manage,' I said. My fingers were sore, but I grabbed the copper stick and stuck it into the gluey mass of clothes. I twisted it around as if I was trying to make toffee and heaved what I had managed to collect across a slanted draining board that lay between the copper and the tub. It was like dragging sacks of wet sand. Some burning water ran down the stick onto my fingers and splashed onto my jeans. I gritted my teeth. With both hands holding on to the copper stick, I learnt how to transfer the heavy, hot clothes with a minimum of damage to myself.

I had to keep dunking the clothes in the first tub to rinse them. After that, Miss McAllister produced a washboard – a small, hand-held frame with rippled wood down a centre panel. It was placed slanting towards the back of the tub. You soaped up any stains and scrubbed them on this. My knuckles kept catching on the serrations, and my hands became red and swollen. While I was scrubbing,

Miss McAllister crouched on a low stool like an ancient insect, busily sorting clothes.

I tried a bit of conversation. 'Where did you buy this soap, Miss McAllister?'

'Made it myself. Dripping, tallow and caustic,' she said.

Next came more lifting and heaving of the clothes into the second tub, which was filled with blue water.

'Why blue water?' I asked.

'Don't you even know what a blue bag is for?' she snapped.

I was too scared to answer. Miss McAllister had a way of making you feel a fool. What I did notice was that the white clothes that came out of the blue water were bright in a way that would have made stiff competition for a TV detergent advertisement.

Mick and I had been hoping that this was the end of the day's torture. It was not. We watched Miss McAllister pour a gluey liquid into a large enamel basin. She instructed us to put the pillow covers, sheets, apron and blouses into the liquid.

'And these things?' asked Mick, holding up Miss McAllister's gigantic bloomers on the end of the copper stick.

'Not the undergarments,' she said. 'As you would know, starch stiffens things considerably. I recall an occasion when my father and brothers had made life somewhat difficult

for me, so I starched their undergarments and made at least one day for them remarkably uncomfortable.'

So the old crow had been a girl afflicted with a father and brothers, just like me.

After the starching, we put the clothes through a hand-operated wringer. I turned the handle and Mick fed the wet clothes through. It would have been a tricky job with just one person doing it.

When the steaming clothes were piled in the straw washing-basket, Miss McAllister pointed out the coloured things that had to be washed. Mick and I re-stoked the fire and went through the whole process of washing again, all the time being watched by Miss McAllister who seemed to be waiting for us to make a mistake. We hauled two baskets of washing outside and hung the things on the clothes-line with wooden, round-headed pegs. Miss McAllister then pushed the clothes-line up with a forked wooden prop.

'The best weather for a wash,' she said, looking up into a blue sky with some cottonwool clouds floating along in the breeze. 'You think you have had a hard time, you children of the machines? Picture rain and a strong wind. The prop falls down and the clothes are in the mud. Back into the wash-house for the rest of the day.'

'No way!' said Mick fiercely. 'I'd be happy to wear dirty clothes for a week.'

'I think not!' she said peering at his ripped jeans, 'Cleanliness comes next to Godliness. In my time the

domestics would be up at five in the morning to get the washing onto the line before their neighbours did. You couldn't let the family down by being careless of appearance.'

Mick raised his eyes heavenwards, but he wasn't being religious.

'Well, time to put the billy on,' she said.

'You're on,' said Mick, who had guessed that Miss McAllister meant that she was going inside to put the kettle on for a cup of tea.



Chapter 9

THE WIRE SCREEN DOOR THWANGED SHUT BEHIND US. We were in the kitchen. A black and white dog, looking like a stuffed, moth-eaten trophy from a hunting expedition, shuffled across the lino floor to us and licked our hands.

‘Visitors, Dot,’ said Miss McAllister.

I bent to pat Dot. And then she made her way to the long table in the centre of the room and flopped underneath it.

It was surprisingly warm in here after our experience of the house in the chilly front hall. Miss McAllister was bending over a black monster of a stove. One of its many doors was open and the old lady was prodding inside with a metal rod. She slammed the door shut, reached for a

padded pot holder hanging from a hook on the mantelpiece and heaved a kettle from the perimeter of the stove to its centre. Some water slopped out of the spout and bubbled and hissed as it hit the hot metal. It was the stove that kept the room so warm. Mick, with blistered palms from his first encounter with an axe, was also thinking about the stove.

‘Do you keep that thing going day and night?’

‘I do. With wood or coke or sometimes even newspaper bricks. I slow her down at night. She’s only been completely out about four times. Pleasant for a good part of the year. Hades in summer.’

‘Newspaper bricks?’ I asked.

‘What a lot of questions. Now do sit down,’ she said in her matter-of-fact way. While she got things ready for our tea, Mick sat on a chair at the table. I chose a lumpy leather couch as cracked and lined as Miss McAllister’s face and sprouting wiry brown stuffing. There was a window behind me facing the fence on the western border, and through it the afternoon sun slanted beams across the floor. I leant back against some cushions and looked around me. On my side of the stove, a tabby cat lay in a box, one relaxed paw hanging over the side. Next to me was a cane table piled with books, a pair of circular steel-rimmed glasses resting on top. A calendar hung on a wall – a painted bush scene with ‘Dawson’s Butchers at your service, 1929’ printed underneath. To my left against the wall were two small cupboards – one of them metal – a large dresser, and

a strange little internal window. Next to that hung a framed tapestry of 'God is Love'.

In the short time I had known Miss McAllister, I had learnt that God liked people being clean and if you did not work hard the devil would get you. The old lady must have pleased God with her cleanliness and hard work, but the love part was not very evident.

As I walked back to join Mick at the table, I watched Miss McAllister reach up to the mantelpiece above the stove where there was a collection of patterned tin canisters. She brought down a tea caddy for 'Pannikin Blend Tea' (showing a swagman sitting on a log) and an octagonal-sided tin decorated with a Chinese painting and the word 'Sugar'. She put these on the table and went to the dresser where she rummaged among bowls, baking dishes, furniture and boot polish, flour, mustard, digestive syrup, cocoa, a tin of Brasso and finally produced some willow-pattern cups and saucers. They shook in a nervous kind of way as she carried them to the table and I wondered if we were about to be drugged. When she got the milk jug out of the cupboard with the metal sides, I realised it was a sort of fridge, but it didn't plug in anywhere. There were no light switches or power points anywhere.

The electricity commission didn't know Miss McAllister existed. Her isolation was total – and unnatural. Human beings did not live like this unless something was wrong. Was she hiding from a criminal past? Worse, perhaps she

really was mad. The danger was that no one knew where we were, except Wilf who would soon walk back into the trap.

‘If you didn’t have your head screwed on, you’d lose it. I asked you to pass me the milk and you passed me the sugar.’

‘Sorry,’ I said, ‘I was dreaming.’ I passed the milk to her and she poured it out and then poured tea from a fat china pot into cups and handed them to us. Nothing we did or said pleased her. Abrasive as steel wool, she criticised when we failed, but forgot to praise when we did something right.

Tiredness and the warmth of the room began to make me feel drowsy. From under the table, Dot laid a heavy head on my knee. Cradling my hot cup of tea in my hands, I watched the steam drift upwards. Fragments of fairy-dust rolled and floated in the rays of sun shining on the floor. Miss McAllister was back at the stove dipping slabs of bread in egg and milk and frying them in a pan. It smelt rich and buttery. A plate of the golden toast was put in front of us. Mick and I ate without talking.

The old hag was a good cook and I liked her kitchen. Another dog barked from far away, and the rooster down the back gave a lazy crow. On the roof a dove cooed. Inside, the only sound was the quiet, humming busyness of the fire in the stove. The cat stretched, arched its back, splayed a paw and then rearranged itself for further snoozing. The kettle threw out a spurt of water that splat on the stove.

All else was a sepia-coloured silence. Many smoky years had painted everything with the gentle mellowness of an aged photograph, and now Mick and I were inside that photograph, too.

Crash! A sound like tin cans being hurled came from close outside. Miss McAllister hurried to the screen door.

'Lordy-Dordy!' she exclaimed.

Mick and I rushed behind her. We looked out on chaos. Miss McAllister's compost bucket and its contents were scattered over the brick paving near the back door. Lying in the middle of this refuse was a hybrid version of Ned Kelly and an astronaut.

'Sorry about the mess.' It was Wilf. He had borrowed an old motorcycle helmet of Dad's, a huge black thing with a visor. His hands were four times their normal size in Dad's leather bike gloves. Tucked inside his shirt you could see the top of a bit of circular grey plastic which I recognised as his toy Roman warrior shield.

'Wake up, you psycho! What are you on about?' shouted Mick over Miss McAllister's shoulder.

I was trying not to laugh, but Miss McAllister did not look amused.

'I'm going to get the eggs, Mick,' said Wilf in an offended tone, standing up and scooping potato and carrot peelings into the bin.

'That's what he meant when he said he was going to put on something tougher,' I explained quietly to Mick.

‘Can’t you see? He’s terrified of those hens.’

The three of us watched as Wilf, slowed down by his armour, strode down the garden towards the chook shed. We went back to our cups of tea and fried egg bread.

After ten minutes, Miss McAllister said, ‘That child has been gone rather a long time.’

‘I’m sure he’ll manage this time,’ I said, although I didn’t feel very confident.

‘No comment,’ said Mick.

‘A clucky hen three times its normal size would be no match for our Wilf in armour,’ I said.

Suddenly we heard a clumping up the steps. The wire door swung open and Wilf entered. He swung his helmet off hero-style and announced, ‘I got her off the eggs!’

‘Good on you, mate!’ said Mick.

‘You were brave, little brother,’ I said.

‘Better late than never,’ said Miss McAllister. ‘Well, let’s have those precious eggs, lad.’

Wilf looked confused. ‘I never got no eggs.’

That’s our Wilf. He had spent so much of his courage and concentration on dealing with the hen that he had forgotten the second part of the job. Down the yard he went again, visor on, gloved hands stretched out like a robot. He came back with the eggs. Two got cracked on the way, but three arrived intact.

Miss McAllister looked tired. She fingered a brooch on her high collar and told us we had been helpful but that

would be enough for today. She would see us next morning
– on time.



Chapter 10

WALKING HOME IN THE LATE AFTERNOON, MICK TURNED to me and said, 'I'll be doing one more day, Cas, then it's quits. Wednesday I'm going skate-boarding with some mates.'

'How can you do this to me, you bastard?' I shouted.

I knew exactly what that con-man of a brother was thinking. He knew I would stick the week out with Miss McAllister because if I didn't Dad might find out. Even the faintest chance of that had to be avoided. I hated Mick – real hate. It was checkmate. He had me cornered. I refused to talk to him all that night, but it didn't appear to worry him.

Tuesday morning I woke up extra early and got the boys going. I was determined Mick would put in a full day's

work. I also thought that if we turned up on time Miss McAllister might give us some credit for punctuality. In fact, we knocked at her door ten minutes early. The door opened and it struck me all over again how old Miss McAllister was.

‘What? Early?’ she said in her croaking voice. ‘Didn’t you know that it is just as unpunctual to be early as to be late?’

If it had been okay to kick old ladies in the shins, I would have done it.

‘Well, I suppose you’ll have to come in,’ she said, as if we had been begging for the pleasure of wasting our holidays with her. She opened the door wider and we followed her down that spooky hall and through the heavy velvet curtains. Something huge loomed up at me. I stepped back, knocking into Mick, but the something huge was only a grandfather clock.

Miss McAllister opened a door to the right of us and we followed her into the kitchen. The cat was lying in its box next to the black stove. From under the table, Dot thumped a welcome on the floor with her tail. She got up stiffly, came across to lick our hands and then walked back to her place under the table. A big pot of something was bubbling on the hot-plate.

‘Smells good,’ said Mick, sniffing the air.

‘Your lunch,’ said Miss McAllister. ‘You’ll be earning it.’

‘How do we earn it?’ asked Wilf, peering up at Miss McAllister’s beard.

‘Ha! I had a feeling you wouldn’t know. Come on, girl,’ Miss McAllister said, poking a gnarled finger at me, ‘what’s doing today?’

‘I told you yesterday, you have different routines from us.’

‘We don’t have any routines, you mean!’ sniggered Mick.

‘As I thought!’ Miss McAllister jutted that chin triumphantly. ‘Well, it’s ironing day. Makes sense, doesn’t it? What you washed yesterday, you iron today!’

‘Sounds alright to me.’ Mick grinned. ‘Can’t see a place for me if Cas cops the ironing. I’m starting to like this unliberated world you live in.’

‘Only part of your presumption is correct,’ answered Miss McAllister stiffly. ‘Cassandra will indeed be doing the ironing, but there is most definitely a place for you. More wood chopping. The stove must stay hot to keep the irons hot. Out you go, young man, and get to work.’

Mick looked down at his blistered hands. ‘You’re on,’ he said and swaggered out the back door. It was all show.

‘Come on, lass, don’t be too downhearted,’ Miss McAllister said to me. ‘There’s a good side to ironing.’

‘Yeah, what?’ Nothing could be more boring or more solitary than ironing. Mum would make Mick and me take turns to do the ironing. Mick used to simplify it by ironing

as little as possible and claiming that it was the fashion to look crumpled. On Mick's ironing week we had to be satisfied looking like an advertisement for a charity shop.

Miss McAllister walked to the stove and pointed to three cordless irons sitting next to the soup. 'We have to have the stove hot enough for the irons, which means ironing day is the perfect day for biscuits.'

Miss McAllister had actually tried to cheer me up. I was thinking about that when Wilfie said, 'Those are funny irons. How do you plug them in?'

'There's no electricity to plug things into, you dill,' I said, laughing.

He stared in wonder at what were to be today's instruments of torture.

Turning to Wilf, Miss McAllister said, 'I think you can earn your biscuits, too.'

'As long as it's not collecting eggs,' he said. 'I didn't bring my protective clothing.'

'I'll get the eggs myself. I'll be needing them sooner than you could manage a delivery. You're going to clean the silver. Follow me.'

We walked behind Miss McAllister's black shape down the hallway and turned left into a room so vast that I felt shrunken to the size of a pinhead, like you do when you have a feverish dream. A small glow at the other side of the room was light from the outside world battling with a heavy curtain. It was the hush and the smell of polished wood

that I recall most clearly. I stood there in the dark silence breathing the spicy odour of furniture polish. Sunshine, the push and shove of supermarket sales and traffic-jams were locked out. Listening for life outside was like straining to hear the ocean in a sea-shell cupped to the ear. All I heard was the beat of the blood in my ears. In front of us was a dark, gleaming table that could have seated twenty people. It seemed to run into the distance like a long road, with straight-backed chairs standing at attention around it. I felt a tugging on my sleeve.

‘Look at the faces, Cas.’

Four portraits hung on the walls. Over a big fireplace hung the portrait of a stern old man, his coat gone so dark, it had blended with the browns and blacks of the background.

‘My great-grandfather,’ explained Miss McAllister. She then crisply introduced us to the other portraits.

‘To the left of Great-Grandfather McAllister is a portrait of Great-Uncle William and to the right is my grandfather Douglas McAllister.’

I felt I should be shaking hands with these men. They stared grimly as if they had never had to lower themselves to being children. They seemed above dirty nappies, snotty colds and arguments over what TV program was going to be watched or who had used up the last of the shampoo.

‘Uncle William has eyes that move,’ said Wilf.

‘Behind you, on this other wall, is a portrait of my two

great-aunts,' explained Miss McAllister in her cracked, fading voice. They were two smiling teenage girls, one raven-haired, the other fair, and they had their arms about each other.

'What did your grandfather Douglas do?' I asked Miss McAllister.

'In those days gentlemen and ladies did nothing.'

This was news. I would have to tell Mick. The idea of being a gentleman might appeal.

'You work hard, Miss McAllister. What does that make you?' asked Wilf, unaware of the insult.

'In my day children did not ask so many questions.'

Miss McAllister walked to a carved wooden side-table and pulled out a drawer full of knives, forks and spoons. She fetched a flannel and a bowl of hot soapy water with some soda dissolved in it. Wilf had to wash the silver in the water and dry it on a piece of leather.

'You will do this in here and not in the kitchen because of the ironing. It is safer here. Come along, Cassandra.'

I followed Miss McAllister out of the dining room. Looking back I saw Wilf clutching his polishing cloth, his brown eyes as wide as I'd ever seen them.

In the kitchen Miss McAllister pointed to an old cane basket full of washing and told me to begin the ironing while she collected the eggs.

I watched her black skirt catching momentarily on each back step as she walked down them. The table had been

covered with a blanket and a sheet ready for the ironing.

I was about to get the iron when I heard weeping through the wall of the kitchen. I walked to the small internal window and slid it open. It connected with the dining room. Little Wilf stood there snivelling.

‘It’s okay, Wilfie. I’ll leave this window open and you can watch me ironing.’

‘It’s not fair making me stay in here.’

‘No, it’s not, but just hurry up with your work and you can join me here.’

The first garment I pulled off the clothes pile was a pair of Miss McAllister’s voluminous white underpants. On the stove there were three irons. Which one should I choose? I used a padded cloth to randomly pick one off the stove and started to smooth out the rolling plains of the bloomers.

Outside I could hear the thwack, thwack of Mick’s axe and occasional splintering sounds. Suddenly I heard Mick yell.

‘Hell!’

I left my ironing and ran to the screen door. Mick was hopping around the yard on one leg and clutching the shin of the other.

‘You alright?’ I called.

‘A darn log just attacked me,’ he said.

He had not chopped a foot off, so I turned back to the bloomers. I had left the iron on them and when I lifted it off I saw a scorched hole the exact shape of the iron in the

seat of the pants. I was standing there staring at what I had done when Miss McAllister stomped through the kitchen door with her basket of eggs.

'Lordy-Dordy! What have we here?'

I was tired of all the apologising I had had to do in the last twenty-four hours.

'We have here an oversized pair of knickers with an extra hole in a convenient spot,' I said.

'Give me that!' Miss McAllister snatched the iron from me and crashed it back onto the stove. 'Such impertinence,' she muttered, shaking her white head with its frail pom-pom of hair on top.

I thought if there was going to be a moment when I would get us all chucked out, this was it. However, Miss McAllister continued in a gloomy voice, 'I suppose I should have given you an ironing lesson. I keep forgetting everything is electric nowadays. Come over to the stove, lass.'

I learnt that there was more than one iron on the stove because the one you are using cools down. You had to test that an iron was hot enough by putting a bit of spit on your middle finger and brushing it quickly across the iron's flat surface. If the spit made a squeaky sound, the iron was ready. Of course, the other lesson I learnt was how to test if the iron was too hot.

Despite my ironing lesson, Miss McAllister did not trust me for long on my own. She spent a lot of energy

pretending to do other things but quietly spying on me. It made me feel jittery. Occasionally, she would poke her head out the door to observe Mick's wood chopping. A little later, she stuck her head through the hatch into the dining room and told Wilf he could finish. When he reappeared in the kitchen he looked white-faced and relieved like a gallows prisoner on reprieve.

'Light is nice,' he said.

'Come here, boy. You can help me make some biscuits,' said Miss McAllister.

Wilf's eyes brightened. 'Mum never makes biscuits and things at home.'

'And why not?' asked Miss McAllister.

'She's always too busy,' Wilf said. 'Can I truly help?'

'Of course. I'll need your young muscles to do the mixing.'

I could not figure the old lady out. She was not as severe with Wilf as she was with Mick and me. It worried me that she could be so different. I kept my head down pretending to show no interest in Miss McAllister and Wilf. With aching arm, I clumped the iron across the clothes. Miss McAllister set a large yellow porcelain mixing bowl at the other end of the table. She then turned a chair around so that its back leant against the side of the table. Wilf was told to climb onto the chair. Miss McAllister measured all the ingredients and put them into smaller containers. Wilf was allowed to put butter and sugar into the bowl. She

handed him a wooden spoon.

'What's that for?' Wilf looked at the spoon. 'Oh yeah, I keep forgetting. There's no electric beater, is there?'

'You're my electrical beater,' said Miss McAllister in her raspy voice.

She had actually cracked a joke.

At first, Wilf thrashed the spoon about the bowl like a wild thing, and bits of sugary butter pinged around the air. Three minutes later, he threw the spoon down in the bowl and dramatically slumped across the table, exhausted. Wilfie, the human electric beater, had run out of enthusiasm for the job. Miss McAllister picked up the bowl, cradled it in the crook of her left arm like a baby, and with the spoon in her right hand thrashed the mixture into creamy submissiveness, and then broke in an egg.

'One egg well beaten is worth two not beaten,' she said, which was pretty mild advice compared with the acid she was in the habit of dishing out to me. In went a few other ingredients. Wilfie helped spoon the biscuit mixture onto trays, and while Miss McAllister held the oven door open Wilf slid the trays in.

The biscuits came out after ten minutes. Later, when we ate them for morning tea, they were, according to Wilf, his biscuits.



Chapter 11

WHEN MICK CAME IN FOR A DRINK OF HOMEMADE LEMON cordial and biscuits, I expected him to be fed-up and tired. Instead, he looked excited and a bit frightened like when you gave him a dare. The three of us were sitting down the end of the kitchen table furthest from the stove. (I had not finished my ironing, so the blanket was still across the other end of the table.) Miss McAllister jabbed the stove's furnace with the poker, shifted the kettle, stirred the soup in its heavy black pot, slammed oven doors and generally made a racket.

'What are you looking so revved up about?' I asked Mick quietly.

'Can't tell you now,' he said, keeping a careful eye on

Miss McAllister's stooping back. He shifted about his seat in a nervy way. 'Just discovered something interesting. Tell you later.'

'Do you like my bickies, Mick?' Wilf broke in.

'Did you make these biscuits?' Mick feigned surprise. 'They're great!'

Mick's mood was too genial. What was the something interesting that was transforming him into this kindly brother?

Miss McAllister came back to the table. Dressed so quaintly and with that funny smell that hung about her, she could have been a fresh exhibit from an archaeological dig. On the other hand, I had grown used to her, and she looked almost normal.

'There is no work like early work. Eat up, now!' Miss McAllister's speech was laced with maxims; she ladled them out like cough mixture.

'You must spend your whole life chopping wood to keep that monster going so you can cook your food,' I said. 'And then there's the time you take to wash and iron.'

'You're right. The domestics and the womenfolk in the family spent a large part of the day around the kitchen table.'

'Boring,' said Wilf.

'Boring it was not. This table was the hub of family life. There was bread, cake and biscuit baking, jam making, bottling, ironing and mending.' She stroked the rich patina

of the table with her claw-like hand. 'And the children would all help, like Wilfred did this morning. Morning and afternoon tea, we'd sit around and yarn. But the nights were best around this table.'

'Why the nights?' I asked.

'Sometimes we would "slum" it, as Father used to say, and eat our meal here instead of in the dining room. After we had eaten, the young ones would sit on the grown-ups' knees and the older folk would tell stories. Even the maid and the gardener would sit with us sometimes.'

'Is that what you mean when you speak about "domestics"?' Mick asked.

'Of course. Most people had help then.'

'Did the servants have servants?' asked Wilf.

'Don't ask such daft questions,' Miss McAllister snapped.

So there were other people who had lived in this house. Women, men, a father, children and servants. The place must have bustled. It might have been noisy. Maybe the children had been like us – laughing, shouting, even fighting. What had happened? Why was Miss McAllister the sole survivor? I couldn't ask. She was prickly about questions. Besides, I was fed up with the put-downs. She did not hold back from telling people they were daft, unpunctual, slovenly and incompetent. Was this the way they brought up children in her day?

'Stop your dreaming! You'd lose your head if it wasn't

screwed on properly.' More nagging from the old hag. 'Come on, we've an hour before lunch and the ironing must be finished.'

I clenched my teeth and went back to the ironing. Wilf was sent out the back to pick parsley from the vegetable garden. He was sure to make the job take as long as possible. He would roll about on his back over the grass like a puppy let loose from its kennel. Lucky Mick and Wilf out there in blue-skyed freedom. No matter how much I enjoyed the cosy kitchen, I did not appreciate Miss McAllister's constant scrutiny. She sat on the couch and, with her glasses perched on the end of her nose, mended clothes, all the time watching to make sure I did not goof it again.

At lunchtime, Miss McAllister called out the back door to the boys, 'Luncheon! Wash your hands in the laundry.'

Mick helped Miss McAllister ladle the soup into bowls and Wilf and I put them around the table. The soup, with crusty, home-made bread, was to be lunch. When we were sitting around the table, awkward and quiet, Miss McAllister said to Mick, 'We are going to do things properly for the few days we have to remain together. Would you be so kind as to say grace?'

Our family had never said grace before meals. Dad did not wait for anything or anybody: he would eat as soon as the food was in front of him. Mum had given up trying to make meal-time civilised. I had only heard about grace one time in Year 5 when I was staying at Danielle Dairs' house.

Now I watched in disbelief as Mick said to the old lady, 'Sure, I'll say grace.'

What could he think of to say? I watched Miss McAllister bow her head and clasp her hands. Wilf copied her. Mick did the same and, last of all, I ducked my head down. There was a moment of dramatic silence and then in a low solemn voice Mick said, 'Grace.'

Miss McAllister's head swung up. 'What do you think you are doing?'

'You asked me to say grace, so I did,' said Mick.

'Don't get upset about him, Miss,' I said. 'We're better off without him. Anyway, Mick says he's not coming back tomorrow. Just Wilf and I are. I think it's a good thing he won't be here. He's always upsetting people, not just you.'

Miss McAllister was fingering the brooch on her collar in an agitated way. I was worried she might die of a stroke right there in front of us.

'Look, I'm sorry, okay? It was just a joke. And I'm going to disappoint you, Cas, because I *am* coming back tomorrow,' said Mick.

'But ...' I said, almost choking on the word.

'I've changed my mind. I like to see a job well done. I'm going to chop enough wood out there to last Miss McAllister a month.'

Mick was charming his way back into Miss McAllister's good books. He was sacrificing skate-boarding for her. Miss McAllister was pacified. She said grace this time, a

proper one in a mournful voice obviously used specially for prayers.

‘For what we are about to receive
May the Lord make us truly thankful.’

‘Amen,’ I said. Mick and Wilf echoed their ‘Amens’. Mick kept his head bent a moment longer than the rest of us to show he was a reformed soul. Then he offered to wash up. Wilf and I got to dry up. Miss McAllister, looking a bit exhausted, sat on her couch sipping a cup of tea. I wanted to strangle Mick with my tea towel. He was such a user. I could not wait to get outside and find out what he was up to. When we had finished, Miss McAllister herself suggested we might like to go home early.

‘Thanks a lot,’ said Mick. ‘We could do with a break so we can work harder for you tomorrow.’

Mick was sickening. I was suspicious.



Chapter 12

IN THE RAW BRIGHTNESS OF THE STREET, I TURNED ON Mick for an explanation. He swung around to me at the same moment, so wound-up that he couldn't keep up his usual cool image.

'I saw a face, Cas. A face.'

'What are you going on about?'

'That old building down the back. The window up top. I saw a terrible face.'

'Whose face? What do you mean "terrible"?''

'I mean ugly. I didn't see it for long. When it saw me, it disappeared.'

'That's a load of bull, Mick. You just make trouble. Leave off, will you?'

Mick stepped in front of me, barring my way, his hands outstretched. 'I really did, Cas. You don't have to believe me. All I'm saying is I've got to check it out. That's why I'm coming back tomorrow.'

'Listen,' I said, 'you don't do much except hurt people. Stop hassling Miss McAllister. Get lost.'

'Hold on.' Mick held his arm in front of me so I couldn't get past. 'You've been wondering why the old bitch has lived on her own all this time. I reckon she's out of her tree. She's mad. I bet she's got someone locked up in that shed. It happens, you know. You read about it. You just don't expect to meet the people who do those things. I reckon there's danger.'

Mick made some sense. There were still a lot of unanswered questions. The old lady was secretive about things. Her moods would change suddenly, too. I thought of the witch in *Hansel and Gretel* again.

'If you think she's that dangerous, maybe we shouldn't go back,' I said.

Mick had overshot his mark. He came back with a remonstrance worthy of a saint. 'If people kept away from everything a bit dangerous, then no one would get rescued from people like Miss M. We have to go back. We have to find out who was at the window. It's a moral duty.'

Mick responding to a moral duty? Where had he even heard the words? I laughed at the thought.

We got home mid-afternoon. The phone was ringing

in the hall just as I opened the door. It was Mum saying she would not be home until late. Her friend Chantelle had had her husband walk out on her. Mum was going over to give some support. That meant another happy family night at home with Dad sleeping off the booze on the couch. I turned in early.

Mick got us up on time the next morning. We arrived at Miss McAllister's at five to eight, but there was no knocking early. We sat on the footpath, feet in the gutter, watching purple-black clouds bank up across the sky. It was going to pour. We planned our climb across the fence so that we knocked on the door at exactly 8 o'clock.

'We're punctual, Miss McAllister!' Wilfie was triumphant.

Expressionless, she said, 'You are precisely on time, but that is not polite. It is considered more thoughtful to arrive three or four minutes after the hour.'

She kept laying these traps for us. It was a minefield of etiquette that would blow up in our faces.

We followed Miss McAllister to the sanctuary of the kitchen. The first of the rain was splattering against the windows and soon the rain drumming on the tin roof grew so loud that Miss McAllister had to shout.

'We'll have to get out bowls and buckets. Out to the wash-house, Cassandra. Bring back both buckets. Michael, bring out every large bowl you can find in the pantry.' Miss McAllister pointed to the one door from the kitchen that we had never entered.

I got back from the wash-house so drenched that my jeans stuck to my legs. I soon realised why Miss McAllister was in a panic. The roof leaked.

'Come on, everyone!' bellowed Miss McAllister. We followed her into the hall, I with my buckets and the others carrying ceramic bowls. There was one small leak in the hall and Wilf placed a bowl beneath it. Next we entered the portrait-ridden dining room. Heavy drops of water fell onto the huge sideboard. Mick deposited one of his bowls under this leak and then we accompanied Miss McAllister back into the hall and down to the front room, the one in which Miss McAllister must have been when we first spied her with the candle. This rain was a great excuse to have a nose around.

At first glance, you could see it was a room made to be filled with people and life and was now desolate without it. Miss McAllister called it the 'drawing room'.

'Did you all draw in here?' asked Wilf.

'No, you would withdraw *to* it,' said Miss McAllister.

The room had a deep fireplace with a marble mantelpiece. The French windows on the two outside walls were heavily curtained. The material was rotting and parts of the curtains, fallen from the rings, hung drunkenly askew. The room had a 'Cinderella' look. The elegant chairs with their carved legs were vacant and surprised looking. A grand piano sat silent in one corner. The room was filled with bric-a-brac – doilies on small side-tables, footstools,

arrangements of dried flowers a moment away from dust, silver-framed photographs, embroideries, shells, lacquered boxes, and a treasure-trove of other ornaments. The old lady must have visited this room each night, but today's visit was one for action. She cast a practised glance across the ceiling and spotted the offending leak, and plonked her bowl down decisively on an oriental rug that lay in front of the fireplace.

'Hurry along,' Miss McAllister urged and we obeyed enthusiastically, full of curiosity to see the next room.

Across the hall from the drawing room was the study. Every bit of wall from ceiling to floor was lined with leather-bound books, and a stepladder leant against one of these bookcases. There was a vast wooden desk and three chairs covered in cracked, faded blue leather. There were no leaks in here so we filed out again.

Miss McAllister hesitated at the next door along from the study. It seemed to take courage to open it. When she did, we pushed forward to have a look, but we could not see anything apart from huge white shapes in the darkness.

'Have to get a candle,' she said to herself and disappeared down the hall. We stood where we were, listening to the roaring storm. The room was chilly and damp. When the old lady returned with a lit candle, we followed her into the mystery room. The white shapes were the entire collection of bedroom furniture – chairs, dressing-table, side-tables and a vast bed – draped in sheets

like bodies in a morgue. Not a chink of daylight made its way in through the one heavily curtained window.

'This room gives me the creeps,' said Wilfie in a small voice.

'Whose room is this?' asked Mick with careful casualness.

Miss McAllister did not answer at first. She handed me the candle, took a bowl from Mick and stretching across the bed placed it in the middle. When she was upright again, she said, 'This was my parents' room. I was born in this bed. My mother and, later, my father died in this bed. The others did not have the good fortune to die in any bed.' She finished this with a strange kind of laugh.

I wondered which others and how they had died. Not for the last time, I thought us fools for being in that house.

Next to the parents' bedroom was the bathroom, tiled in black and white. It had a claw-foot bath and a hand-basin big enough to wash a baby in. The leak in here was conveniently over the bath.

Miss McAllister's bedroom was one down from the bathroom. She had drawn up all the world she knew into this room, wrapping herself in it like a favourite rug. It was crammed with furniture and collectables. In a corner was her narrow bed covered in layers of blankets. Jammed up against the bed was a small table on which sat an oil lamp and a pile of books. There was an armchair, a dressing-table with an attached mirror, a washstand with a jug and bowl, a

chest of drawers with framed photographs covering its top surface, an incredibly tall wardrobe looking like a clumsy giant, and a writing desk with pigeon-holes full of bits of paper. There were rugs on the floor, prints on the walls and knick-knacks on every spare surface. The room was stuffy and smelt of Miss McAllister. The leak in here ran in a rivulet down the wall behind the chest of drawers.

‘That’s a new one,’ said Miss McAllister grimly.

We were not allowed into the next room.

‘Why not?’ asked Mick. He had been enjoying this house tour in much the same way as you enjoy the Ghost Train at a fairground.

‘Children should be seen and not heard,’ snapped Miss McAllister. She yanked a bucket from me and marched into the secret room, closing the door quickly.

We waited in the hall listening to the thundering rain. When Miss McAllister emerged, she looked deep in thought. We followed her again to where the hall ended at the grandfather clock; it then swung unexpectedly to the left. Down this shorter hall were two tiny wallpapered bedrooms with very simple furniture also draped in sheets. We placed my remaining bucket and a bowl under the leaks. The house was wearing out along with its owner. Miss McAllister was besieged.

When we were back in the warm kitchen, Miss McAllister looked at me and said, ‘Gracious, girl, you’re soaked to the skin.’

And I was. My jeans were clammy and water squelched in my runners. Miss McAllister made me go back to her bedroom with her. She told me to take off all my clothes and handed me a rug to put around me. She stepped out of the room long enough to let me do this. I left my soggy clothes and sneakers on the floor and stood like a shipwrecked survivor, the rug tightly around me. Miss McAllister knocked, re-entered and started scratching through her wardrobe like a hen. A strong smell of camphor filled the room. She tossed a pair of black boots onto the floor; the leather was cracked and had a greenish, mouldy tinge, and the toes turned up at the ends like a final signal of death. The rest of the scrummaging produced a long black skirt, a white blouse, a cardigan, thick woollen stockings, something called a girdle, a singlet, a complicated looking bra that was called a corset and a huge pair of white bloomers like the ones I had ironed.

‘I wouldn’t be seen dead in these things!’ I said.

Miss McAllister looked at me strangely, scooped up my clothes and runners and, leaving the room, said, ‘People don’t have a choice when they’re dead.’



Chapter 13

I WAS GLAD THE KIDS AT SCHOOL, ESPECIALLY PETER Murphy, couldn't see me when I lurched into the kitchen, tripping on my long skirt. I had rejected the corset and girdle, but everything else was on, including the stockings, which I had knotted above my knees. After a look at myself in the dressing-table mirror, I had decided I looked like Laura from *Little House on the Prairie*. Mick and Wilf didn't see it that way. They laughed until they almost wet themselves. It put Mick into a good enough mood to make us all cups of tea. While the three of us were warming our insides, Miss McAllister laid my wet clothes on a kind of aerial clothes-horse suspended from the ceiling above the stove; this device could be hoisted or lowered with a rope

and pulley. My runners were put into the warming oven.

Meanwhile, Mick tried his best to get outside. 'The rain's no worry. You need that wood kept up to you. You'd get through a bit in this cold weather.'

'Fortunately, I haven't needed to rely on you for my wood,' said Miss McAllister. 'I always keep a supply for the really wet weather. I've got other plans for you, thank you all the same.'

'Like what?' asked Mick, scowling.

'It's a good day for a bit of mending, I thought.'

To escape that fate, I suggested that Miss McAllister should throw away her worn-out things. She snapped back that she was brought up to waste nothing. 'Waste not, want not,' she added. We had to sit down around the stove and the mending basket. Not one of us had mended clothes in our lives, so Miss McAllister gave us a darning lesson. I had never seen Mick looking so miserable, sitting there with a darning needle in his right hand and a black sock over the left.

'I thought men didn't have to do stupid women's work in your day,' said Mick sulkily.

'Are you suggesting that women are stupid, or that the work they do is stupid?' asked the old lady with more than usual iciness.

'The work, Miss,' said Mick quickly, but it seemed to me that either way Mick had made an unwise statement.

'Everyone needs a few basic skills. During the Great

War, boys as well as girls knitted square face-washers for the poor soldiers on the Front. And what do you suppose our sailors, soldiers and the men out on farms would do about a hole in a sock or a pair of work pants?’

Great War? Boys who knitted? Mick opted just to answer Miss McAllister’s question about what men in her day would do about mending.

‘Like Cassie said. Chuck out the old clothes and get some new ones?’ he ventured.

‘Perish the idea! What do your family do with torn clothes or holes in socks?’

‘Chuck them out.’

Miss McAllister realised that from our nodding heads Mick was telling the truth. She looked astounded.

‘Sonny, like it or not, you need to learn how to look after your things. Imagine if the whole world threw out their clothes and other possessions for want of a little fixing!’

The three of us knew that most in the Western world were already throwing out a shocking amount of stuff, including food. That’s why Mick didn’t answer back. And that’s why we all just got stuck into our mending.

Wilf had a tea towel and I had a pillowcase to mend. Sitting there between my brothers, I rested my booted feet against the oven door. The starched collar of my blouse chafed against my neck; my legs itched like crazy in the woollen stockings; my black skirt trapped my knees and, worst of all, I kept stabbing myself with the darning needle.

I glanced at Miss McAllister in her look-alike black outfit. Eyes screwed up for better vision, she was leaning over Wilf, showing him how to loop his needle in and over the threads of the tea towel. She seemed as normal as me.

But half an hour later she did something to make me uneasy again. Dot scratched at the back door to be let out.

Mick leapt up. 'I'll take her out,' he said, all eagerness.

'I don't think that would be a good idea,' said Miss McAllister, getting to the door first. She opened it just enough to let Dot out and then shut it. 'It's time for you all to go home.'

The rain had stopped and I walked home in my dried clothes and runners. Mick kept three paces ahead in silent frustration. Wilf ran, backwards and forwards, between the two of us. We got home to an empty house. Mick did his disappearing trick for the rest of the day and I got lumped with Wilf. That night Mick announced to me that he was definitely going skate-boarding with his mates the next day. He said he would drop by Miss McAllister's in the late afternoon and find some way of getting into the stone shed.

Wilf and I arrived at Miss McAllister's on that overcast Thursday morning at four minutes past eight. When she opened the door, she surveyed us and said, 'The other one isn't here.'

‘He can’t come,’ said Wilf. ‘But we can, and we are politely on time.’

‘Yes,’ said Miss McAllister, and turned down the hall expecting us to follow.

In the kitchen Wilf and I sat around the table sipping lemon cordial and awaiting instructions for the day. Miss McAllister bent awkwardly to poke at the fire in the stove, then slowly sat down in her favourite chair.

‘This wet weather gets into the bones,’ she said to no one in particular, and turning to us said, ‘Thursdays are my cleaning days.’

‘What sort of cleaning?’ I asked.

‘The rooms. I rotate them so that all the used rooms get regularly done.’

‘What do you want us to do?’

Miss McAllister pointed with a bent finger. ‘Dust the china in here. Scrub down the table. Sweep and scrub the floor and then polish it. That should do.’

‘That’s a lot!’ exclaimed Wilf.

‘When we were a proper household, our maid had a day that would make your little tasks seem like nothing.’

‘Such as?’ I asked.

‘Up at dawn. Open the windows. Brush, clean and light the stove. Dining room prepared for breakfast – the rug rolled up, tablecloth laid, floor swept, fire lit. Next the hall would be swept, steps cleaned and the brass door handle polished. Family’s boots cleaned. Knives cleaned.

And all this before cooking breakfast. Let me think. What next?' She was enjoying the remembering. 'Yes, of course. Cleaning away and washing up. After that, the slops had to be taken from the bedrooms.'

'Slops?' asked Wilf.

The white hairs on Miss McAllister's chin twitched with irritation. 'Think it out for yourself,' she snapped. 'Slops, slops ... Yes. And then the beds made and the rooms tidied and dusted. By then it was time to assist the cook with luncheon and that would be followed by more cleaning. Then helping with the preparation for dinner and washing up, turning down the beds and filling the jugs and hot water bottles for the night. And you think I work you hard.'

'Wow!' I said.

Wilf chimed in, 'That's not fair. When was the maid free?'

'She'd have Sundays off, but what you don't seem to realise is that none of us were allowed to be idle. Father often used to quote Watts, the hymn writer, "For Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do".'

'It kind of rings a bell,' I said. 'I think you've already gone on about that.'

'Maybe so. Well, now, to work.'

Miss McAllister got up, fetched one of the tin buckets we had used the day before, and filled it with a mixture of grey soap and hot water. She handed me the bucket and a scrubbing brush, and told me to scrub the kitchen table

first. When I had finished, Wilf was still flicking a cloth in a half-hearted way at objects from the dresser that he held in his hand. He was getting nowhere.

‘What next?’ I asked.

‘You’ll have to sweep the floor first,’ said Miss McAllister, looking about her for the broom. ‘Where could that broom have gone? Oh, yes, I left it leaning against the wall, under the eaves of the stables.’

She made stiff movements as if to leave her chair.

‘Stay there. I’ll get it,’ I offered.

‘Alright. Straight back, mind you.’

Miss McAllister turned her attention to instructing Wilf on working in a more lively, dedicated way. She had a job ahead of her.

Outside, I jumped puddles, making my way past the vegetable garden and laundry towards what we had called a shed, but was really the stables. The building stood to the left of the fruit trees in the far corner of the property. There was no broom leaning against the wall, but a faded green door stood slightly open. Perhaps the old lady had absent-mindedly left the broom inside. In case Mick’s phantom at the window was real, I glanced up to check, but no face was there. I pushed the door open. At first, all I could see was darkness with darker shapes floating about. The shapes took form. I was looking at a room that had accumulated the paraphernalia of generations of living.

A pair of lanterns, coils of wire, lengths of looped rope,

a broken chair and a wooden bird-cage hung off ceiling hooks. On pegs around the walls hung battered hats, what looked like leather harnessing for a horse, a violin case and some empty gilt-edged picture frames. On the floor were packing-cases, sacks full of I don't know what, a stack of wooden suitcases, a rocking-horse with an ear and a tail missing and a tin hip-bath like one I'd seen in a cowboy movie.

On the other side of this chaos was a steep flight of stairs. Near the bottom of the stairs was a cupboard. Leaning against the cupboard were a couple of wooden tennis rackets and the broom. I manoeuvred my way to the broom and had just taken hold of the handle when I heard a sound coming from upstairs. It was like no other I had ever heard; it was human but not human; a high sound as though made through the nose, like Japanese singing and with the same sort of half-notes. It was unstructured, but seemed like an attempt at music, because it meandered, rose and fell, and some 'notes' were held longer than others. The eerie sound wound itself around me. I wanted to stay and listen more than I wanted to run away. Sometimes a note would be repeated again as if the singer really enjoyed that note. It had to be the sound of madness – for the moment, at least, a contented madness. Miss McAllister had deceived us. And worse, the person in the room above was probably a prisoner. Why else had we never met him or her? Miss McAllister's peculiar ways were explained. Abrupt, uncommunicative,

she had resented our intrusion into her warped and twisted life, but once we had arrived she was probably planning some terrible fate for us.

At that moment the broom slipped from my grasp with a clatter onto the stairs. I held my breath. The floating song stopped. There was clumping on the floorboards overhead and the something or somebody rattled wildly at a door handle. I grabbed the broom and crashed my way across the room. Boxes tipped over, things fell all about me and I remember crushing something underfoot. I charged out the door and up the garden without looking back, expecting a clawed hand to grab me from behind.

By the time I was in the kitchen, I was convinced that Wilf and I were in real danger. It was no time for manners.

‘Here’s your broom,’ I said to Miss McAllister who was still sitting in her chair. I dropped it on the ground and grabbed Wilf by the arm.

‘Mum wants us back early,’ I lied. ‘She has a cake in the oven and I have to take it out for her.’

Miss McAllister’s watery eyes narrowed. ‘That cake has been in the oven for well over an hour. Cakes don’t generally take so long. You have been meddling, haven’t you!’ She almost shrieked the accusation as she rose from her chair.

There was no time to lose. Still holding on to Wilf, I hurried across to the hall door. By the time I had opened it, I could hear the swishing sound of Miss McAllister’s skirts

behind me, coming at us like a black spider. I started down the hallway, but Wilf could not understand my panic and I had to drag him along. Arthritis or not, Miss McAllister was catching up on us. I got to the door, but it was latched from the inside. The latch was stiff with age and my struggle with it moved it a centimetre. Miss McAllister was only a stride away, when, with aching fingers, I heaved the latch sideways, catching my fingers in a stinging pinch. As I opened the door and pushed Wilf through first, my arm was grabbed by those prehistoric fingers of steel. I flung my arm upwards and behind me towards Miss McAllister. The force threw her back a step and gave me long enough to make my run. On the verandah I clutched Wilf again. I ran down the steps and through the garden, briars catching at my clothes like Miss McAllister's fingers. Only when I was on top of the garden wall with Wilf did I look back to see the thin, black form of the old lady standing on the verandah, one hand reaching out as if to draw us back.

'You must be here tomorrow. It's baking day,' she called in her raspy voice. 'I'll need you all.'



Chapter 14

'I HATE YOU, CAS. WHY DID YOU DO THAT?' SAID WILF.

I didn't answer. My aim was to put distance between us and the McAllister house. I pulled the unwilling Wilf along, tears streaming down his face. Halfway home, Mick came strolling towards us.

'What's going on? I left the Bowl early to come over,' he said.

'We're not going back.' I stared him straight in the eyes. 'I was in that old shed, stables she calls it, and there's a madman upstairs.' My voice shook. I kept seeing scenes running like a film in my mind – the moaning song, Miss McAllister chasing us down the hall, the escape over the wall.

'Steady on, Cass. Tell me about it,' said Mick, his hand on my shoulder.

I leant against someone's garden fence and began. Mick's whole being was concentrated on me. It was everything he wanted to hear: the weird singing and the rattled door handle.

'She chased me and tried to grab me, Mick. We were fools to get involved. Let's get home,' I finished.

While Mick interrogated me on the details, I quietly decided that Mum and Dad should be told. We would not be properly safe until they knew.

I sat at home for the rest of that afternoon waiting to talk to whichever parent walked through the door first. Things did not turn out as I had planned. Mum and Dad walked through the front door arm-in-arm. Dad had sold two cars in the one day after a dangerously long drought. He was taking us all out for a pizza.

He spotted my glum face before I had a chance to say anything. He pinched my cheeks with the thumb and index fingers of both hands. It hurt. 'We need a bit of pizza to put some colour back into those cheeks!' he boomed.

'I've got to tell you something, Dad,' I said.

Mick, who was scoffing a giant sandwich from the comfort of his favourite beanbag, almost choked. He glared angrily at me, but his mouth was so full he could only grunt.

'Save it for tomorrow,' said Dad. 'No sad faces tonight. We're going to have a bit of fun tonight.' And he whacked

Mick on the back, causing him to choke for real this time.

‘But Dad, I ...’

Mum cut me short. ‘Cas, we have few enough happy moments in this house. Times are tough. Tonight we’re going to enjoy ourselves.’

Tears of frustration rose in my eyes. Mum and Dad walked past me into the kitchen. I heard Mum say, ‘Probably that time of the month.’

An hour later, when we got to the restaurant, Mum and Dad were loud, cheerful and very hungry. All the family except me stowed the pizza away. Worrying about the dangerous mess my brothers and I were in made me lose my appetite. Mum took it for sulking. She said the look on my face would turn her wine into vinegar. While she and Dad discussed the merits of the different pizza toppings, I was quietly tongue-lashed by Mick for being a traitor. I don’t remember much else except for Wilf whingeing about the anchovies on his pizza.

‘You might never have tasted pizza again if I hadn’t made that run for it,’ I hissed.

Nothing was going to stop me telling Mum and Dad the truth the next morning. We had put ourselves in danger because we did not have the courage to tell the truth and cop the consequences. I slept a deep sleep with a lighter conscience.

When I woke, the house was strangely quiet. The morning sun was pouring a pool of warm light onto the

floor next to my bed. I walked down the hall to Mum and Dad's room. No one was there and the bed was made. I tried the kitchen. No one. I looked up at the kitchen clock. It was 10 am. I had slept in and missed my chance to sort things out with Mum and Dad. Then I panicked. I just *knew* that Mick would have gone to Miss McAllister's with Wilf. I raced back down the hall and threw open the boys' bedroom door. There was little Wilf asleep in bed, curled up under his doona, tufts of downy hair sticking up on his pillow. I stroked the bit of face I could see. His breath was warm on my hand. He slept on. Mick's bed was empty.

Mick could go jump. At least that is what I thought for the next hour, then loyalty won and I gave him until 4 o'clock that afternoon to walk through the door. After that Mum and Dad would be told and it might mean the police.

Wilf did not wake until almost midday. It was a bit lonely mucking around in the house with no one to talk to. On the other hand, twenty seconds after Wilf lifted his head from the pillow, he started nattering and he did not stop until I lost my patience and told him to shut up.

Wilf looked so hurt that I invited him to watch a DVD with me. By the end of that, Mick still was not home. I spent the next one and a half hours reading a novel I had borrowed from our school library called *Jane Eyre*. I had read the first part where Jane, who is an orphan, ends up in this terrible girls boarding school that is more like a

prisoner-of-war camp than a school. The girls are always freezing cold and underfed and eventually a whole lot of the girls die from some epidemic. Jane survives this and escapes school by getting a job as a governess in an old mansion. It's the mansion part I was reading that afternoon. Jane keeps hearing this terrible laughter coming from the attic. No one will tell her the truth about the place. It was so close to my experience that I was sure something was going to happen to Mick. When he did not appear at 4 o'clock, I put the book down and went straight to the phone to ring Mum at work. The first thing I said to her was 'Mum, I think you might have to come home'.

'My God, has something happened to Wilf?' she asked.

'Not Wilf, but Mick. I mean, he might be okay, but there is something I have to tell you.'

'For heaven's sake, Cas, just tell me!'

'Well, Mick is ...'

At that moment Mick burst through the door with a cheerful grin on his face.

I began again. 'Mick is behaving strangely,' I said. 'He's unnaturally cheerful.'

Mum exploded on the other end of the line. 'Do you realise what you have just put me through?'

'Sorry, Mum, it wasn't meant to be a joke. It's hard to explain.'

'Well, you can explain tonight and it had better be

good!' She hung up in my ear.

I turned on Mick. 'Where the hell have you been? I was out of my mind with worry. That was Mum on the phone. I almost blew it by telling her everything.'

'Cool it, Cas,' he said, 'It's all getting more and more interesting.'

Mick sat me down on the lounge and Wilf joined us. Mick was right, it was an interesting story. When he got to Miss McAllister's that morning he had apologised for my rude behaviour. He explained that I must have been tired. Surprise of all surprises, she apologised, too, and said she had been a bit snappy. She had invited Mick to help her with the bread-making. Mick was all keenness; he even put on a floral apron. Mick said the old lady was as chirpy as he had ever seen her. He worked at kneading the dough until his fingers ached and there was sweat on his face. By the time the dough was back in the bowl on the stove for a second rising, he had dared to ask Miss McAllister if she would mind if he went out the back for a breath of fresh air.

'Certainly,' was the relaxed reply. 'I don't mind.'

Mick couldn't believe what he was hearing.

Outside, Mick spent fifteen minutes admiring the pumpkins, sniffing the flowers and gazing up into the sky, all the time making his way closer to the stables. Once he got to the green door, he saw that a heavy lock and chain had been wound around the latch. We had been officially

banned from prying into the secrets of that building.

Back inside the kitchen, Miss McAllister was as easy-going and laid-back as can be. Mick punched the dough down (he said it was like punching Dad's flabby gut) and it was put into tins in the oven. He had to keep the fire in the stove going, and an hour later his reward was slabs of hot bread dripping with butter.

When it was time to go, Miss McAllister had given Mick an envelope. 'It's an invitation,' she said, smiling. Mick said she looked just as scary smiling as when she was scowling.

'Well, where is this invitation?' I asked.

'Here. Read it.'

And this is what the note said:

*Dear Cassandra, Michael and Wilfred,
Tomorrow, Saturday 15th, at 5 o'clock I am
holding a High Tea to which you are all invited.
It would give me the greatest pleasure if you
would attend. It may be more convenient for you
to stay the night if your parents are happy about
this arrangement.*

*I look forward to the possibility of seeing
you here.*

I remain,

Yours sincerely,

Grizelda McAllister

'You want us to go, don't you?' I said to Mick.

'Yeah.' Mick looked at me gently, like he used to when he was little and he trusted me more than you trusted that the sun will rise. We were getting close again and I wanted to keep it that way.

'Well, no harm in just going to this High Tea thing,' I said. 'But it's plain crazy staying the night. No way should we do that.'

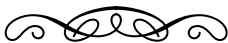
'But Cas, it's our only chance to have a proper snoop around – when the old witch is fast asleep.'

I had a hunch that if I refused Miss McAllister's invitation, Mick would go on his own. And sure enough, the next moment Mick said, with a kind of sour look, 'Well, *you* can stay for the food and then wimp off home with the baby brother, but I'm definitely sleeping overnight there.'

'Okay, then,' I said, giving in. 'Safer that the three of us stay.' I just couldn't let anything dangerous happen to Mick on his own. 'But do you reckon Mum and Dad will let us stay the night?' I was still hoping to stall him.

'I'll get round them,' said Mick confidently.

Something was happening to me, too. I was realising you could die of boredom just as easily as from a dangerous adventure. I knew I would go. I was on a journey. Like being on a fast-moving escalator, I could not step away from it.



Chapter 15

WE LEFT A NOTE ON MICK'S PILLOW FOR MUM AND DAD, giving details of our whereabouts and the real situation. Under normal circumstances Mum kept clear of Mick and Wilf's room. It was such a mess that you had to dive from the door to get to the beds. But if we went missing, Mum would do a room search for clues. Mick had got around Mum about staying with Miss McAllister, no worries. He had also armed himself with a pocket knife. When it came to this adventure, I was as guilty as Mick. I was eaten up with curiosity and I wanted us to solve the mystery ourselves, no adults involved.

It was another overcast afternoon when we stood on Miss McAllister's verandah. A light rain drifted at a slant

across one end of the verandah, making the floorboards dark and slippery. When the old lady opened the door, she looked different. She was dressed in a long brown skirt and a white blouse with lace on the cuffs and high collar. A tartan shawl was draped around her shoulders. She had a gold chain around her wrist and she wore a locket around her neck with the letter G picked out in pearls against a dark blue enamelled background. On the thin hand extended to us in welcome was a beautiful diamond ring that looked out of place on its decrepit owner.

'Come in out of the cold.'

She led us down the hall into the usually austere dining room. Today it was alive. A fire crackled in the fireplace, its glow livening the pallid faces of the ancestors who gazed down at us. The best part was the table.

'Candles!' said Wilf. 'And all that food!' The table was laden with plates of scones, sandwiches, fruit cake, sponge cake, jam tarts, chocolate biscuits, and meringues shaped like swans.

'I daresay you children will demolish a night and a day's work,' said Miss McAllister in her irascible way. There was no sign of sinister intention and yet I was still on my guard. I could tell by the stiff way Mick moved that he was just as tense.

Miss McAllister asked Mick to help pass the hot dishes to me through the hatch: oven-baked potatoes with butter melting over their backs, a meat pie with pastry flowers,

Scotch eggs and hot muffins.

Wilf was asked to say grace.

‘Thanks for what we’re getting and don’t let us stuff ourselves because that’s rude,’ he said.

‘Thank you,’ said Miss McAllister. ‘Please do begin eating.’

She sat at the head of the table. Wilf was on her left with his back to the fire. I sat on her right and Mick was next to me. It felt snug in this room of gentle shadows. Miss McAllister poured tea from a silver teapot into china cups decorated with rose-buds.

‘So this is a High Tea,’ said Mick, scoffing a large slice of sponge cake. ‘I reckon I like the idea.’

‘Only descendants of the Scots know how to make a real High Tea,’ said Miss McAllister.

‘It’s a cross between afternoon tea and dinner, isn’t it?’ I said.

‘Precisely,’ said Miss McAllister, as she took a genteel sip from her cup and gazed at the fruits of her labour.

It was a beguiling moment. Both Mick and I were lulled out of our watchfulness.

‘Such an effort she’s gone to,’ I thought. ‘She’s just eccentric.’ I avoided thinking about the singing in the stables.

The hall clock struck its one chime to mark the half-hour. Miss McAllister, like the White Rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*, pulled out her watch on the chain from a skirt

pocket. We heard the kitchen door slam and a dragging, thumping noise made its way through that room and into the hall – scrape, swoosh, scrape.

‘I have been meaning to tell you. I have a visitor. There’s no time to explain properly, but don’t be alarmed,’ said Miss McAllister. Her face looked sinister again.

No one moved at the table. Wilf’s hair stiffened and stood up like a surprised newborn bird. Mick took something from his pocket. I heard the click of steel as his knife flew open.

Scrape. Swoosh. Scrape. And then that eerie singing. How could we have been so naive? Miss McAllister was a cunning maniac who had planned our deaths like an expert. It was the perfect trap. Here we were, drowsy with good food, far from any easy exit, with death singing its way towards us.

And then it appeared at the doorway – the most terrifying sight I have ever seen. Its head was too big for its twisted body and its arms hung low like an ape’s. The head was long and narrow as if it had been jammed in a door. Faded orange hair grew out of the scalp in dry tufts. Large, pointed ears stood out on either side of the head. The monster’s mouth hung open showing stumpy, yellow teeth. Its nose was too small for its face, like a scar on a large landscape. But it was the eyes that were the most terrifying – two large, owl eyes, one brown and one a milky, slimy white with blindness.

Mick was onto his feet, his chair hurled on its back behind him. 'Who is that?' he shouted at Miss McAllister. 'What's going on? Get it out of here!'

Miss McAllister tilted her head backwards, away from Mick's tirade, but her expression was impassive. 'Look what you are doing to that poor man,' she said.

Her eyes directed ours to the thing that was now cringing in the corner nearest the door as if it was trying to disappear into the walls altogether. Silent tears fell from the eyes, both the seeing one and the blind one. He was dressed for a grand occasion with red bow tie and a pinstriped businessman's suit that was so much too big that the trouser cuffs concertinaed at the ankles. Beneath the folds were black shoes polished to a shine. The small hand that was now lifted across his face as if to protect himself was clutching a collection of limp flowers and weeds.

Mick realised his mistake the moment I did. This was a human being, a guest at the High Tea.

'I'm sorry. I really am sorry. You should have told us.' He pulled his chair upright and sat down heavily.

Wilf stood up and, holding out the plate of sponge cake, slowly approached the whimpering creature in the corner.

'Like some cake, mister? It's better than the shop cake.'

The man was on the alert like a small bird. The hand

holding the flowers was lowered cautiously to his side. One shoulder was still jammed into the corner, but he turned his head and looked quizzically at Wilf with his good eye. Wilf and the man were the same height.

'Go on, have a piece,' said Wilf, thrusting the plate towards him a little.

The man reached for the cake with his free hand, snatched a piece and then took an enormous bite of it. He smiled a cakey smile. Wilf smiled back. By now Miss McAllister was standing.

'You're one of nature's gentlemen, Wilf. Thank you.' She made her way to the man and took him by the arm. 'Sorry, Percy. They didn't know you were coming and they got a fright. Sit down with us, dear.' Her voice had a softness we had never heard before. The two of them walked to Wilf's side of the table and she started the introductions. 'You have already met Wilfred and this is Cassandra.'

I nodded at the gnomish guest and said a smiling 'Hello', not knowing which eye to look at. Percy managed a smile that showed teeth growing at all angles. His face was heavily lined, but when he smiled it took over his whole face and his eyes crinkled shut. He swayed unevenly on his feet and then with a grunt propelled his sad little bunch of flowers across the table at me. They had been meant for me. I winced in the deepest part of my heart. I took hold of the flowers and said, 'They're the most beautiful flowers I've ever been given.'

Percy burst out with relieved and joyous laughter. It was a scale of chuckles, musical and uninhibited. He had forgiven me so easily.

Miss McAllister then introduced Mick, who stood up and said, 'Hello, mate. How's it going?' He reached across the table to shake hands, but only their fingers could meet across the expanse. 'Bit hard to shake a man's hand like this,' Mick said, smiling.

It was a glimpse of what Mick could be as an adult, and I liked it. Percy laughed again and, looking like a child at his first party, sat down next to Wilf.

Mick was determined to stay friendly. The indifference and self-centredness that marked every day of Mick's life was put aside for that afternoon. He helped Miss McAllister back into her chair and took responsibility for getting the High Tea back into full swing. He passed dishes and urged Percy to eat up, making sure Percy's plate was never empty. Percy cooperated by making sure his mouth was never empty. Conversation was not an issue, because it was obvious that Percy could not talk.

Mick was straining to be friendly, but it was Wilf who was perfectly natural with Percy. He chatted away about trivia without any worry that he was getting no spoken responses.

'This is how I make chocolate biscuits last,' demonstrated Wilf, nibbling around the edges of his biscuit.

Percy smiled his ugly smile and tried to copy Wilf.

'And then I suck it like this,' said Wilf, getting chocolate in a smudge all over his face.

Percy did the same.

'I don't think Percy would mind my telling you, Wilfred, that you are the first young friend he has ever had,' said Miss McAllister.

Percy nodded and rumped Wilf's hair with a clumsy hand. This tiny man was the mysterious inhabitant of the stables' attic. Miss McAllister's secretive behaviour had been to protect him. The big questions had been answered, but I was curious as to how Percy had become a part of Miss McAllister's reclusive life. Because Mick and I had 'blotted our copybook' (I had picked up that expression from Miss McAllister), it was not the right time to ask more questions.

When Miss McAllister asked us to help clear the table, Mick told her to stay seated and that he and I would do the dishes as well. We left Wilf to entertain Percy and went into the kitchen on our own. It gave us a chance to talk. An hour later, when we walked back into the dining room, Miss McAllister was sitting very straight in a chair near the fire, an oil lamp next to her on a small table, reading a book with a magnifying glass. Percy, stumpy legs sticking out in front of him, was sitting with Wilf on a rug in front of the fire playing dominoes. Miss McAllister looked up and told us it was time for bed.

We were put in the 'boys' room' to sleep. This was Miss

McAllister's brothers' room and the room we had been barred from on the day of the storm. It smelt of mothballs and was as quiet as a tomb. The ceiling stretched up into a blackness as unreachable as the night sky. There were two beds in here, hard as rocks, with stiffly starched sheets; you would think they would crack with any movement. Musty coarse-haired blankets and a moulting feather eiderdown were piled on each bed. Mick was to sleep in one bed and I had to share the other with Wilf who was too scared to sleep on his own in one of the domestics' rooms.

A lit candle on the old dresser gave out a circle of light that illuminated a framed photograph. It was a young man in army uniform. He was grinning, and I'm sure he had burst out laughing the moment after that photograph was taken. Miss McAllister stood at the doorway holding her own candle. Percy stood behind her peering around one side of her and grinning in that frighteningly friendly way of his.

'Everything to your liking?' Miss McAllister asked. We told her we were fine.

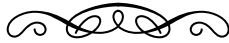
'Who is the happy soldier?' asked Wilf.

'He was Stuart, one of my brothers,' she replied. 'I'll tell you about him one day.'

Percy lurched past Miss McAllister, picked up the photograph, hugged it and replaced it on the dresser.

'Come on, Percy, these children need their sleep,' said Miss McAllister and she snuffed out our candle. The two

of them left the room, shutting the door behind them. The darkness was so complete that our eyes never adjusted and other senses had to compensate. The clock in the hall chimed eleven times; its sounds were reassuring and steady. Wilf's body went limp with sleep and all I remember is thinking that the pillow was too impossibly lumpy to sleep on.



Chapter 16

THE NEXT THING I WAS AWARE OF WAS A TINY DUST-flecked ray of light on my pillow, birds' early song and Miss McAllister rapping on the door.

'I've let you sleep in. It's 6.30 already.'

Breakfast was a bowl of porridge sprinkled with salt and a lump of butter tossed on top.

'My father used to call it *Them*,' said Miss McAllister, ladling the last of the porridge into Wilf's bowl.

Mick got through his porridge. With difficulty, I ate most of mine. Wilf, however, could not stomach it. He was used to chocolate-flavoured cereal. He pushed his spoon around the porridge. Miss McAllister refused to accept his excuse of not being hungry, and she told him he was not

allowed to leave the table until he had eaten it all.

'Think of the starving hordes in China,' she said and stomped out the back door to feed the chooks.

From my position at the sink, where I was washing the breakfast dishes, I watched Wilf try one mouthful and could see by his red face and the contortions in his throat that the food almost went in the wrong direction. As he sat doggedly staring at an increasingly cold bowl of porridge, I knew he was preparing to spend a whole day sitting in the kitchen.

At this point Percy stumbled through the wire door into the kitchen. Gone was last night's dinner suit. Today it was a checked flannel shirt and denim overalls, and in an artistic touch he had knotted a coloured scarf at the neck like a cowboy.

'Hi,' said Mick.

Percy smiled shyly with his broken mouth and twisted face, and his blind eye squinted shut with the cheerful effort of it all.

'Have you had breakfast, Percy?' I asked.

He nodded vigorously.

'Did you have Them too?' asked Wilf sadly.

Percy grinned some more and nodded.

'I hate this stuff. It makes me sick. But I have to stay here till I eat it,' explained Wilf to Percy. 'I'll probably still be here when I'm a hundred and ten.'

'You're wasting your breath,' said Mick to Wilf. 'He doesn't understand all that.'

But Percy limped over to Wilf, patted him on the head and picked up the rejected bowl of porridge. Taking the spoon that was cemented into the stodgy mass, he consumed the lot in a few seconds. He then thrust bowl and spoon onto the table in front of Wilf, only moments before Miss McAllister walked back into the kitchen.

‘Thanks,’ Wilf said looking up at Percy.

‘Good boy,’ said Miss McAllister seeing the empty bowl. ‘You may get down.’

His back turned to Miss McAllister, Percy covered his face with his hands. He was quietly laughing.

‘So what happens on Sundays?’ asked Mick, who had started to use the tea towel I had thrown at him.

‘Nothing at all,’ said Miss McAllister. ‘On the seventh day shalt thou rest.’

‘You mean you go to bed?’ asked Wilf.

‘No, child. I read a little from the Bible, just as Papa would do, and I enjoy my garden. But I do no work.’

‘Boring,’ I said, handing Mick the washed porridge pot.

‘If people never learn to stop, they get ill,’ said Miss McAllister. ‘It’s commonsense to slow down on one day of the week. Come on, let’s get some fresh air.’

The four of us followed the old lady into the warm autumn sun. She had changed. There were no more dark secrets; something heavy had lifted from her. It was a new experience to explore that back garden and know there was

no threat of work. Mick's crooked woodpile stood there, a symbol of his hard labour. The wash-house where I had learnt the meaning of back-breaking work was silent and empty. It felt like a holiday. We had earned a day off. Having worked hard for it, the freedom was so much sweeter.

Beckoning, Percy invited us into the old stables. Miss McAllister declined, saying, 'I know you are all very curious, but you will not enjoy the experience.' She potted off down the side towards the front garden. Nothing could have deterred us. Percy led the way through the maze of junk, singing his nasal, wordless song and sliding and shuffling like a damaged crab. When I saw the flight of almost vertical stairs, I wondered how Percy managed to get up and down. But somehow he scabbled his way to the little landing. He produced a key from his overalls pocket, held it up triumphantly, then turned the key in the keyhole and threw the door open.

What a smell. It was made up of Percy's own body, unwashed clothes, dirty plates, assorted trophies quite obviously won from other people's junk left out for roadside collections, as well as a contented colony of well-fed mice and bush rats. The animals were quite at home in this sanctuary. They treated it as a fun-park, running up vertical challenges like chair and table legs and then plopping down and playfully investigating somewhere else. Percy's room was like an eagle's eyrie – out of reach of the adult world. We were rapt.

Wilf and Mick headed straight for Percy's collection of treasures, which were mostly displayed on roughly constructed shelves along the far side of the room. There were bird feathers and nests, jars of things, magazines, newspapers, rope, wire, a headless doll and other broken toys, a collection of straw and felt hats, and bits of machinery.

I went to the small-paned window to look down on the world Percy saw each day. Everything was laid out like a child's picture story-book – the clean-swept back steps, the wash-house, the vegetable garden in its neat rows, the fruit trees, some ringed with circles of 'windfall' apples, and the chook yard where I watched the rooster boss his hens, stretch his neck and wings and give a lazy crow.

I could clearly see how Miss McAllister had evaded the world. Straight ahead, across the western fence, was the stormwater canal and on the other side of that was a wasteland lacerated with giant powerlines. Beyond was a motorway, running like a strap of licorice flicked across the landscape. The motorway led to the city: you could see a cluster of skyscrapers capped in an orange halo of smog. Looking to the left, over the high stone wall and behind the chook shed, was a laneway too narrow for normal traffic access. Over the fences that lined the far side of the laneway I could see tiny backyards filled with concrete and clothes-lines – just like our place. The back wall of the stables joined with the grim warehouse wall. Apart from the old tree that let us get over the front wall, Miss McAllister and Percy

were as isolated as if living in a castle with a moat.

Percy made little throaty noises to get our attention. He gestured to his bed in a corner of the room. He wanted us to sit down, so we did, and the mattress sagged beneath us. He filled chipped, grimy glasses with water from a blue-enamelled jug and handed them to us. Then he opened a tin with a picture of a young Queen Elizabeth II on the lid and invited us to have a biscuit. They were stale to the point of soggy, but we each took one.

'Some party!' I said brightly.

'Cheers,' said Mick and clinked glasses with everyone.

Percy pulled up a wooden chair and sat staring in delight at every sip we took of his dusty water and every polite nibble of the stale biscuits. When he had satisfied himself that we were enjoying ourselves, he hobbled to a cupboard that had a handle sticking out of the side. The cupboard had a lid which Percy lifted. He leaned into the cupboard for a moment, then gave the handle on the side a furious wind. A squawking brass band waltz filled the air. The cupboard was a phonograph.

Percy, his arms held upwards, began to dance around the room clasping an imaginary partner. He stumbled in small circles, crashing into things around him. He held his chin high and proud, and smiled a ravishing smile at the invisible woman. I stared at the limp strands of ginger hair hanging on his distorted skull and at the hump and the dragging leg. The stomping circles continued until the

phonograph needle ran off the grooves of the record, making a grinding whirr. Percy would not let go of his partner. They danced in the whirring silence.



Chapter 17

IT WAS LATE MORNING WHEN WE LEFT PERCY IN HIS ATTIC room. Miss McAllister was not in the front garden or the kitchen, which was filled with meaty smells. Wilf suggested we try the drawing room. Miss McAllister was sitting in there on the grandfather chair with a leather book open on her lap.

Looking up, she said, 'So. You have returned from your travels. By the way, who will be staying for the Sunday roast?'

'All of us, thanks,' said Mick who had made a split-second decision based on the fact that at midday on Sundays Mum was at aerobics and that usually meant a baked bean lunch.

‘And was Percy’s abode what you expected?’

‘Even better,’ said Wilf and plonked himself on the sofa. Miss McAllister did not seem to mind, so Mick and I sat down next to Wilf.

‘What did you think, Michael?’

‘It’s pretty good up there. A good collection of stuff. Even got a bike part I was needing. Percy let me keep it.’ Mick took it out of a pocket to show Miss McAllister.

‘You’re like my brother Stuart. Always tinkering with things.’

‘What did he become?’ I asked.

‘He became nothing. As soon as he turned eighteen, he went off to the Great War. Father pleaded with him not to go.’

The crepey white hands slipped from the book and twisted distractedly at the stiff black material of the long skirt.

‘And do you know why he went?’ She glared at us, her watery eyes shadowing with anger. ‘He went because that Mrs O’Donahue across the road – the one with the five daughters – was handing out white feathers to any young man who had not volunteered. Five daughters! She never had an idea what it was like to have someone you love go to that war. Oh, yes, she was safe. And our Stuart felt he had to volunteer before she got to him.’ Miss McAllister’s voice dropped to a whisper: ‘And he didn’t stand a chance.’

We were silent for a few moments and then Mick

asked quietly, 'Why didn't Stuart stand a chance, Miss?'

'Two reasons. The Turks up on the hill could pick off our boys like a duck shoot. And Father never stopped believing that Stuart might have had a slightly weakened left leg that put him at a disadvantage. It was polio, you see. No one knew much about polio then. Even Father, who was a doctor, believed it was caused by too much sun on the back of the neck. He made us children spend our summers in those silly hats with flaps at the back to protect our necks. Despite Father's precautions, Stuart contracted polio. I was seven and a half and poor Mother had died the winter before from lung disease. He was eleven years old, I remember, so Father, the maid and I took turns looking after him. We were terribly afraid for him. You can't imagine our joy when after a few weeks he recovered and could still walk and run as well as ever. He was such a happy boy. Happy and mischievous.'

Her face lit up and she leant towards us.

'Do you know, our maid, Lily, brought in to Father's surgery an old lady whose face was almost completely wrapped up in a black shawl. Father could not understand what was the matter with her. So he suggested he do an examination, whereupon' – Miss McAllister slapped her hands on her knees – 'the old lady started giggling and Father, peering closer, saw it was Stuart. Father was such a stern man. Only Stuart could have got away with it.'

'How did he get into the army with a weak left leg?' asked Mick.

‘If father was right about that, it simply wasn’t noticeable. He was superbly fit.’

‘And then?’ Mick would not give up.

Miss McAllister twisted her skirt again. ‘And then he was sent to Gallipoli.’ She looked into a distance we could not see. ‘He took one step up the beach and he was shot in the head. My brother.’

We sat there knowing instinctively that there was no comfort we could give except the sincerity of a moment’s silence.

It was Wilf who spoke first. ‘You had another brother. I remember you said you did.’

‘Dead, too. In the same war. Bernard, the elder, died in the trenches in France.’

Miss McAllister shut her book. It was a Bible. She stood up and walked to an oval table near the French doors. She lay the Bible on the table and went to a writing desk, lifted the lid and took out a small box and an envelope, yellowed with age. She handed me the envelope and told me to read the letter in it. Bernard had sent it to her cousin Sophia’s young son, William. It had been the last letter he was to write. Miss McAllister sat back in her chair, clutched the arms with her bony fingers, and shut her eyes while I read aloud:

Dear old William,

I was awfully pleased to get your very nice

letter. I am glad you haven't forgotten me. What a lovely time you are having at the beach house. It would be splendid to be with you now, instead of this cold and wet and muddy country. I am feeling extra miserable just now with a constant cough and no voice. I can only speak in a whisper.

This is the middle of the afternoon and I am writing in the strangest place. You come off the road down a lot of steps into a dark hole which is for all the world like the inside of a big drain - we call these kind of dugouts 'two-penny tubes'! We have to burn candles all day to see our way about. Our end is partially shut off where I have my bed and my meals and I can just stand up straight in the middle. The rest is the Dressing Station where the sick and the wounded come for medicine and to have their wounds bandaged. The stretcher-bearers carry the seriously wounded men down from the front trenches, about a thousand yards from here, and then we send them on to the ambulance in a Ford motor car.

There are lots of guns around us and they keep barking away. Then the Germans send over various kinds of shells to try and hit our guns, so this is a noisy spot. We all wear funny iron hats, like saucers, to protect our heads from getting

bumps! The mud is very bad in the trenches just now – sometimes as deep as our knees – so everyone wears long gumboots up to the thighs. Great big rats and mice live with us in the dugouts and they are not at all nice companions.

Will you give everyone my love, especially Grizelda, and tell her I will write to her another time. I would like to hear from her every day. Take great care of her, William. She has been the best sister to me in the world.

*With much love to you,
from Uncle Bernard*

Miss McAllister's eyes were squeezed tight and her mouth was sucking in and out. At last she spoke.

'He was blown up by a bomb. And look here.' She opened the box that sat on her lap and took out a dented but elegant fob watch. 'My big brother died, but his silly watch survived.'

'And what happened at home?' I asked.

'The day the first telegram from the government arrived, Father just took to his bed. Cousin Sophia and her William were visiting. Sophia and I were in the drawing room comforting each other, but William was in the garden blowing a toy trumpet and waving a wooden sword. Cook had told him that Stuart would be met at the gates of

heaven by angels blowing trumpets of welcome.

'I think I already knew about Stuart before the telegram. He had told me that if he was killed he'd send me a sign. A week before the telegram came about Stuart's death, the grandfather clock stopped. No one could understand why. Something just felt wrong to me. It turned out that the clock stopped on the very day Stuart died.

'After Bernard died, Father gave up. He didn't want to be here. Most of his patients dropped away. The gardener died and we didn't replace him. Cook left to get married. We couldn't afford Lily, the maid, any more. So I replaced everyone who had departed. Of course, at the time I didn't expect to be left on my own with Father for very long.' Miss McAllister looked hard into our eyes. 'I know you youngsters think me very odd indeed, but I was young once and people said I was quite pretty. I was very proud of my tiny waist. My sweetheart, Tom, could put his two hands around my waist and they would meet. That was considered quite something then.'

'But your name is Miss. Didn't you marry Tom?' I asked.

Miss McAllister reached around the back of her neck, unclasped the locket she wore every day, opened it and passed it to us. In one oval frame was a lock of dark hair; in the other was a photograph of a young man with dreaming eyes, a straight nose and a firm mouth. He looked strong and tender – film-star material.

‘Tom survived the trenches, the bullets, the bombs, the mud and the gas. He came back home and died from the great influenza epidemic. He’d been home only six months.’

‘He died of the flu?’ Wilf asked.

‘Not just any flu, my dear. Father said that when people died from this disease their bodies turned black, rather like descriptions of what happened to people suffering from bubonic plague in the Middle Ages. At any rate, this flu (for want of a better name) was worldwide and more people died from it than died in the war. I’m ashamed to say that when Tom died I lost hope, just as Father had.’

‘But you could have married someone else, eventually,’ I said.

‘It would have been hard to love again after knowing Tom. We went to Sunday School together. Our families were friends. When he was twelve and I was nine he told me he was going to marry me. And that was that.’

Miss McAllister reached across, took the locket from me and re-clasped it round her neck. ‘Besides, after the war many women of my generation never married because there simply weren’t enough men to go around. And Father needed me.’

‘So you and your father locked yourselves away from life.’ I pressed on.

‘Not in a planned way. In order to survive, Father had to sell off a large amount of land around this house. People

we had mixed with died. Others moved away to better areas as this one became subdivided and lost its elan. Life left us marooned, really.'

'But why did you stay like this?' I gestured towards Miss McAllister's antique clothes.

'Just watching you children over the last week, I can see you would find it difficult to understand what made me like I am.'

'How you tick,' said Mick.

'How quaint. Quite right. How I tick. You children are Australians, but you are so different from the way we were. So different. For instance, your parents don't know where you are, do they?'

The three of us stiffened. What was she getting at?

'I thought as much. I'm not upbraiding you. In my day one only mixed with people one had been properly introduced to by family or friends. There were written invitations and calling-cards. Even the telephone was used only with great discretion. The kind of absences from home you have indulged in would have been impossible in my day. I have been trying to understand how your parents think and I simply can't. It seems a terrible thing to say, but I wonder how much they care for you. My father would have seemed very severe to you, but he took his responsibilities seriously. We respected our parents and they expected a lot from us. We lived in ordered times.'

I felt so cut when Miss McAllister suggested that

Mum and Dad did not care. Part of it was my own hurt that our home life was not the Brady Bunch. Neither Mum nor Dad spent much time with us and we were left on our own a lot.

Mick must have been thinking along the same lines and feeling pretty offended, too, because he said, 'With your maids and gardeners and cooks and chauffeurs, no wonder it was an ordered life. My parents happen to have to do without that help and they try their best for us. And anyway, other people changed. They can't have thought it was so perfect and rosy that it shouldn't ever change. That's what Cas is asking. Why did everything here stay the same?'

In answer, Miss McAllister picked up a framed photograph from a table next to her chair. It was a group of people picnicking in the bush. Smiling women were in veiled hats and long dresses. The men wore white shirts, collars, ties and long trousers. Most strange of all, a multi-tiered cake on an elegant cake stand sat on the picnic rug. What an effort it must have been when you had to compete with ants and flies and the Australian heat. Miss McAllister prodded the figures.

'There's Father standing in the middle. The one trying to look so serious and grown up is Bernard. You can see he has his thumb in his watch-chain. That's me in my new hat with a silk ribbon. The boy with his hat pushed back like a larrikin is Stuart; he's grinning at me. He'd been teasing me

about Tom. Tom's not in the photo because he was taking the picture. The woman sitting in the cane chair is my father's sister, Aunt Agnes, and the younger woman with the little boy standing behind the chair is cousin Sophia and her son William. William is sulking because he was told he would have to wait until last to get his cake.'

Miss McAllister handed us the photograph and sat back in a tired sort of way.

'Ten years after that photograph was taken, only two people were still alive – Father and me. When there's no one with whom to share life's journey, one prefers to stay where one is. Others danced the twenties away with raised skirts and the Charleston, but I was not the only one to keep my hems low – although, after a while, those people faded away. Then I chose not to leave the house. I'm not sure when, exactly, that was. Sometime during the second Depression.'

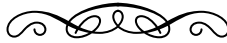
We had been learning about the Great Depression in the 1930s, the suicides and the soup kitchens. 'The second depression?' I asked.

'Of course the 1890s' one was much worse.'

'Oh,' I said and decided to ask someone about that later. As to what had happened to Sophia and little William, I didn't ask. There was too much sadness already.

'Come, now.' Miss McAllister stood up and with her old brusqueness said, 'It's lunchtime and you boys can pick us some beans to go with the roast.'

She led the way to the door, but when her hand rested on the brass door-handle she turned and looked at me. 'Cassandra, please stay and open up this room. Pull back those curtains further. Open the windows. Let some fresh air and sunlight in. I hadn't realised how stuffy it was in here.'



Chapter 18

SCHOOL STARTED AGAIN AFTER THAT WEEK WITH MISS McAllister. The days became shorter and soon the leaves on the liquidambar in the school yard would begin to turn. At night we wore jumpers.

Most days after school, Wilf and I would drop in on Miss McAllister. Mick would fit in a visit either before or after going off with his mates. Miss McAllister was always there, waiting in an offhand kind of way. We would find a tray on the kitchen table with a plate of Anzac biscuits, glasses and a blue china jug of fresh lemon cordial. The jug was draped with a cotton doily, edged with glass beads that clinked against the jug.

Those autumn afternoons were never slack. Mick

usually chopped a bit of wood and we would follow Miss McAllister about the vegie garden tying paper bags over the plants she had left to go to seed. Inside, we sat around the kitchen table with Dot's head lying across our feet, peeling, coring and dicing bowls of fruit and vegetables. Pots of jams and chutneys simmered on the stove and filled the air with a pungent sweetness. There were so many tomatoes from the vegie garden that we ate them like fruit and the rest became home-bottled tomato-sauce. Mick was the sauce maker.

Miss McAllister didn't turn into a chatty person, but her silences felt comfortable. When we wanted to tell her things, she was an interested listener. Not like Mum and Dad who pretended to listen while still thinking about something else.

Besides, Miss McAllister had the time to listen. She had a way of looking at you quick and hard that let you know she was taking in what you were saying and she would ask you questions that showed she wanted to know more. We avoided talking about Dad much, but in a short time Miss McAllister knew all about Mum, her nursing and her never-ending self-development courses, horsey Mr O'Hagen next door, Mr Bellini and his lollies, Mick's precious skateboard, the kind of books I liked reading, Shauna Andrews and the rest of the gang of five at school, and that drifty world of half fantasy, half reality that Wilf lived in.

Mum and Dad were finding it convenient to have us 'looked after' in the afternoons. They were pretty casual about

it. Mum did not have time to worry about where we were. The three of us seemed more contented and more together than usual, so Mum just knew we were okay. Her life was full with work and her various interests, which helped keep her mind off problems she didn't want to dwell on. She was hanging on to her marriage for our sakes. We all knew that. In bad moments she even told us that – or yelled it. She spent a lot of time going to counselling and (I'm still trying to figure out why) she seemed to need to take on all her friends' problems. Maybe their dramas made her lot in life seem better. I don't know. What I do know is that from early on I copped responsibility for the two boys. I think I was about nine when Mum went back to do her nursing course and I was often on my own for hours with Mick and Wilf.

Dad was a different matter. He only worried if his peace was disturbed. He never believed that Mum had reason to be unhappy, because most of the time he was getting his own way. Even when Mum started staying away from home more and more, it did not make him try harder. As long as he had his TV, food and beer, he was happy. Dad's beer gut was so huge from his beer drinking that you would have sworn he was pregnant. Sure we had an occasional outing for pizza. But Mum needed more than that.

During that first week back at school, Mum remembered to ask for Miss McAllister's address. I wrote down the street name (leaving out the number) on a scrap of paper and handed it to Mum, who was in the middle of heating

a TV dinner in the microwave, watching her favourite soap through the kitchen door and giving advice over the phone to a friend from work who had a delinquent son. The bit of paper was absent-mindedly stuck in a drift of letters, bills and junk mail on a kitchen shelf. Miss McAllister's secret life was still safe. Later that night, Mum asked me what Miss McAllister's first name was.

'It's Grizelda. But no one would call her that.'

Mum, absorbed in painting her fingernails, said, 'Adults call each other by their first names nowadays.' And then, blowing on her nails, she added, 'She wouldn't take offence.'

'Why do you want to know, anyway?'

'Because I'm writing her a letter. I don't want her to think I'm just dumping you kids on her. I want her to know I'm grateful.'

This is how the letter went:

Dear Grizelda,

Bob and I want to thank you for your hospitality to our kids. You must be very youthful in your thinking to get on with them so well. It's great knowing they are safe and happy of an afternoon

Thanks again for everything and drop in for a cuppa if you're ever passing by.

Best wishes

Delvine Miller

The next afternoon I gave the note to Miss McAllister. She put on her rimless spectacles and read it quickly. All she said was 'Hmph', and then she opened the stove door and threw the note in the fire.

It must have been the Tuesday after that letter (because Mick was ironing hankies and tea towels) that we heard Percy's tuneless singing coming up the back steps. His misshapen head appeared around the screen door and he grinned at us with his stumpy grin. He shuffled in and dumped a sack on the part of the kitchen table without an ironing cloth. Miss McAllister fished about in the sack with both hands and brought out six packages. The first was a leg of lamb and the rest were butter, powdered milk, sugar, flour and a container of tea. Mick and I were staring at these things on the table and simultaneously realised that we had not been as clever with our detective work as we thought. We had never questioned where Miss McAllister had got supplies like meat and wood from. Percy was Miss McAllister's lifeline.

Over a cup of tea and slabs of boiled fruit cake, Miss McAllister proudly told us her tale of survival and ingenious preservation of privacy. Percy would drag a small cart to the city market once or twice a week. Usually he would leave very early in the morning. This day had begun with heavy rain and he was later than usual, which was why we had discovered Percy at his most important errand. When Mick asked how Miss McAllister paid for these things, the story

became more amazing. Her father had left investments for her, the dividends from which went straight into a bank account. The bank account was managed entirely through cheque books and a minimum of correspondence between the phantom Miss McAllister and each successive bank manager.

‘Of course my cheques have an untarnished reputation. I use cheques to pay for what Percy buys. I keep in touch with the people Percy deals with by notes. The stall owners write back and tell me when I’ve used up my money and owe another cheque.’

‘But you’ve got to have real cash sometimes. How do you manage that?’ I asked.

‘If there’s a little money owed me, Percy brings back change and that’s what I give him to buy small items like postage stamps. Everyone knows Percy and somehow this honour system is explained to newcomers if a stall-owner leaves.’ Miss McAllister paused and her eyes glittered with amusement. ‘My wood supplier is an even more curious tale! One of the stall-owners is a market-gardening family called Lee. Percy brought back their advertising pamphlet and it says they can trace their family back one hundred and fifty years to the time of the Chinese gold prospectors in Ballarat. Percy takes them my surplus garden produce. We have a barter arrangement. Three generations of Lees have kept us supplied with firewood.’

‘And no one has met you face to face?’

'No one ... And it's worked for almost sixty years. None of these people know anything about me except my name.' Miss McAllister looked quite smug.

'Do you mean Percy has been doing this for sixty years? How old is the man?' I asked.

'He came to Father and me when he was just a boy. He has rescued me from the scrutiny of the world. Yes, he would be in his late sixties and deserves the same right to privacy as I have. Don't ask anything more about him.'

I knew it would have to be an extraordinary circumstance to break Miss McAllister's silence about Percy. It was a matter of honour, and Miss McAllister knew more about honour than we did. Percy was looking embarrassed, as if he had understood everything that had been said. He jumped out of his chair, grabbed some butcher's paper that had wrapped the leg of lamb and began tearing and folding it until it became a hat. He handed it to me and I put it on my head.

'Show me how to do that!' said Wilf. For the rest of the afternoon, Percy gave us paper-hat lessons. When we were putting on our coats to walk home, Wilf said to Mick, 'We could make hats for Cas's birthday party next week.'

'I'm too old for birthday parties. I'm having a slumber party on the weekend instead,' I said.

'You'll have to have a special afternoon tea here, then,' said Miss McAllister as she opened the kitchen door. 'How old will you be, Cassandra?'

‘Fifteen, today week, but please don’t go to any trouble.’

‘Will it be another High Tea?’ asked Wilf.

‘We’ll do our best,’ said Miss McAllister, and she added softly, ‘It will be the first birthday celebration this house has seen since Stuart’s eighteenth birthday.’



Chapter 19

ON MY BIRTHDAY, MUM LEFT TO DO AN EARLY SHIFT before I was awake. There was a card on the kitchen table that played 'Happy Birthday' when you opened it. Inside was fifty dollars. Dad cooked me bacon and eggs for breakfast. I thought it was the kindest thing he had ever done, until I came across a note from Mum asking him to do it. Mick said he had been thinking of buying me a CD, but he didn't have enough money to actually buy it. I thanked him for the thought. Wilf gave me a pre-loved china dressing-table box with a chipped lid. 'Bought it at the garage sale down the street. It's to put things in,' he said.

At school that day I had to watch Peter Murphy walking around hand-in-hand with Shauna. Some birthday.

Shauna was such a creep, but she had silky straight hair and thought she looked great with her school uniform hitched up around her navel somewhere.

We went directly to Miss McAllister's in the afternoon. She was waiting for us, sitting in a cane chair on the verandah. That was the first time I noticed she was not wearing the black armband any more.

'Straight to the drawing room and stay there till called,' she said to me. 'Michael and Wilf, follow me to the kitchen.'

I had learnt to interpret her moods, even though the steely look rarely went. Today she was excited.

To fill my time in the drawing room, I moved about looking at the photos of long-gone McAllisters. Then I examined the ornaments – a silver bell, a bottle-green paperweight that you could gaze into like the ocean, china figurines and a box covered in tiny shells. In a tall bookcase with glass doors there were ordered rows of leather-bound books with serious titles: *Things Not Generally Known – Familiarly Explained. A Book for Old and Young*, by John Tims FSA, *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind Addressed to a Lady*, by Mrs Chapone, *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters*, by Dr Gregory, and *A Mother's Advice to Her Absent Daughters*, by Lady Penington. Pretty deadly. I recognised some novels. There was Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, R. L. Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and Dickens' *Oliver Twist*. I had seen all of these on TV.

Then there were a lot of poetry books. I reached up and turned the key to unlock the glass doors. The first book I picked was *Cowper's Poems*. The print was minute and the pages flecked with yellowy-brown spots like the marks on the back of Miss McAllister's hands. I read:

*'INSCRIPTION FOR A STONE. ERECTED AT THE
SAVING OF A GROVE OF OAKS AT CHILLINGDON.
THE SEAT OF T. GIFFORD, ESQ. 1790.*

*Other stones the era tell
When some feeble mortal fell
I stand here to date the birth
Of these hardy sons of earth
Which shall longest brave the sky,
Storm and forests – these oaks or I?
Pass an age or two away
I must moulder and decay;
But the years that crumble me
Shall invigorate the tree.
Spread its branch, dilate its size,
Lift its summit to the skies.
Cherish virtue, honour, truth
So shall thou prolong thy youth.
Wanting these, however fast
Man be fix'd, and form'd to last.
He is lifeless even now,
Stone at heart and cannot grow.'*

It was the first time I realised there must have been conservationists and tree-huggers even two hundred years ago. The part about the ‘stone at heart’ reminded me of Mick.

I returned the book and walked to the oval table where the family Bible lay in its parched leather binding. Inside the cover was a page for the McAllister family tree. We had done family trees in Year 6, so I understood that ‘m’s’ meant married, ‘b’s’ meant births and ‘d’s’ were deaths. An awful lot of ‘d’s’ were young kids. My eye shifted over the generations to the last of the McAllisters – Bernard and young Stuart, and Grizelda, whose name appeared next to her brothers. I gazed at her birthdate, calculated her age, then calculated again. She may as well have been a ghost. What she had told me that first day in the wash-house was true. Miss McAllister was ninety-seven years old.

The door to the hall opened. Wilf, hopping from one leg to another, said, ‘You’ve got to come right now.’ I walked down the hall to a queue consisting of Percy, dressed in his outsized dinner suit, Mick and Miss McAllister waiting outside the dining room door. Wilf led me to the front and Miss McAllister told me to open the door.

I entered a transformed room. Wilf guided my attention: ‘Look at the paper-chain streamers!’ Dozens of streamers were strung and intertwined from wall to wall so we had a low ceiling of rippling colour. Some streamers hung over the family portraits, giving those respectable people a drunken look.

Percy giggled and looked shy.

'It's excellent,' I said. 'Like something out of *Aladdin*.'

'And look at your chair, Cas!' said Wilf pulling at my hand.

At the end of the candlelit table was Father McAllister's carver chair festooned with flowers.

'It's a tradition,' said Wilf. 'All McAllister birthdays have a chair with flowers. We all helped, even Mick.'

'Many Happy Returns, my dear,' said Miss McAllister.

The menu was a repeat of many of the things we had had for our first High Tea, with the addition of a white-iced cake bearing the letter 'C' iced in pink.

Mick had done the icing. 'Just like laying cement,' he said.

The party was the best I could remember. Everyone sang 'Happy Birthday' and 'Why Was She Born So Beautiful'. Percy opened his mouth wide and blared, Miss McAllister's voice was thin and cracked, Wilf sang ear-piercingly high and Mick was totally flat. The wonder of it was that Mick sang at all.

After we had over-eaten and were leaning like drunks across our chairs, Miss McAllister handed me a parcel wrapped in tissue paper.

'These belonged to my mother, Cassandra. It's time they were used again.'

I unwrapped a silver-backed hairbrush, clothes brush

and hand-mirror. The polished silver gleamed softly. I turned the elegant hairbrush in my hands, thinking of the long hair that it had once brushed.

‘A hundred strokes a day with your head hanging down,’ said Miss McAllister, reading my thoughts.

I pictured my cheap plastic brush at home with its flower transfer on the back.

‘I’ve never had anything so beautiful. Thank you. And thank you for a great party.’

‘Say no more. I’m glad you’re happy. Now, Percy has indicated to me that he has a special present waiting for you up in his room. Run along and see what it is.’

Outside, Percy shuffled ahead of me looking back and gesturing to hurry up. Once inside the attic, Percy fussed about putting an old cushion on his one chair. I understood I was to sit down.

‘You’re treating me like royalty, Percy,’ I said.

Percy grinned with yellow-toothed pleasure. From a shelf behind him, he brought down a parcel wrapped in newspaper and handed it to me, standing close to watch my reactions. I unwrapped a tin box. Inside was a tangled mass of jewels – necklaces, bracelets, brooches and earrings – the sort of glass and plastic jewellery a child would think was treasure. Percy had given me a gift fit for a queen.

‘These are lovely, Percy,’ I said.

Percy leant forward and fished about the box with his stubby fingers. He brought out a ring. It was made of a thin

gold-painted tin and was set with a red plastic 'stone'. Percy stumbled to his knees in front of me. He took my right hand and clumsily pushed the bit of tin onto my ring finger.

'He wouldn't know about all that,' I comforted myself, and said lightly to Percy, 'It's a pretty ring. Red is a nice colour, too.'

I stood up to put a bit of distance between me and Percy's adoring gaze.

Percy struggled to his feet. His gaze was still fixed on me. He took hold of the hand with the ring and, before I could do anything, had pulled me to him. His good eye and his white eye were staring into mine. He kissed me on the cheek – a wet, sticky kiss. It felt like an assault. I could not consider his feelings. I put my hand on his shoulders and hurled him away from me with all my strength. He crashed backwards, his hump colliding with some shelves. Bewilderment spread across his face. His treasured junk tumbled around him like fallout from an atom-bomb explosion.

I don't remember much about getting out of that room. My next memory is of being in the laundry and washing my face again and again, trying to rub off the kiss. I remember running home, fire in my lungs, without once stopping, then standing under a hot shower until the water went cold, and crying into my pillow while the images of the ring and the kiss flashed in my mind until there was sleep.



Chapter 20

‘WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED YESTERDAY?’

It was 7 am and Mick was sitting on the end of my bed. I lay there reliving every moment in Percy’s room. Was there anything I could have done to stop all that happening?

‘You’ve upset Percy and you’ve upset Miss McAllister. They’re sad as.’

‘You’re the expert at hurting people, Mick. It’s too bad about Miss McAllister. I’m not going back ever again. I’ve a good reason.’

I rolled over facing the wall and hugged my knees to my chest.

‘Not going back? You don’t mean it.’

‘I do.’

I shut my eyes trying to block out the ugly images I kept seeing on the wall facing me. If I told my story I would have to live through it again.

'You've had some kind of shock. Get it off your chest. You're the one who's always going on about talking things out.'

Mick was more curious than caring, but I had sensed some concern for Percy and Miss McAllister. Percy had broken an important rule and invaded something deeply personal. I had no sympathy for that creep. Miss McAllister was the one I felt sorry for. It wasn't her fault.

'Promise not to tell anyone?'

'Promise.'

'Percy kissed me.'

'What sort of kiss?'

'On the cheek. A sloppy one.'

'You're kidding.'

'I'm not.'

I had got the most difficult part over with. I went on. 'My birthday present was a box of junk jewellery. He must have got it into his head that he was going to marry me, because he took a ring out of the box and put it on my finger. He was kneeling like in the movies and then ...'

'Then what?'

'Then he got up and pulled me close and kissed me.'

'And you got rid of him.'

I just nodded. I had rested my arm across my eyes,

blocking out Mick, blocking out Percy.

‘Forget it, Cas. He’s a harmless looney. Look, Miss McAllister asked me to give you this.’

Mick handed me a bulky parcel wrapped in brown paper. ‘See you after school.’

‘You won’t see me at that place.’

‘C’mon, Cas.’

I knew what would be in the parcel. When Mick walked out of the room, I tore open the paper, and there were the brushes and mirror I had left behind. The silver glinted in the morning light. I leaned across to open the top drawer of my bedside cupboard and I pushed those kind gifts to the very back under some clothes. I did not want to be reminded of Miss McAllister.

It was hard to concentrate at school that day. Shauna did not make it any easier. She had really got her hooks into Peter. They sat next to each other every lesson they could. There is nothing lonelier than having to watch the guy you love going out with someone else. Lucky Shauna! Why did Percy have to be the one to give me my first kiss?

After school I went straight home and did some homework in front of the TV. Mick and Wilf got home at about 6 o’clock, just before Mum and Dad.

‘Percy’s still in bed and Miss McAllister’s gone all quiet. You’d better go over tomorrow,’ said Mick and plonked himself down in the beanbag next to me.

‘No!’ The word raged out of me.

'You're mean, Cas,' said Wilf standing in front of me, all bony knock-knees, obliterating my view of the TV. I shoved him out of the way with my foot.

'Stiff,' I said and picked up the remote control to change the channel.

Mum spent the evening on the phone. Dad fell asleep in front of the TV. I made a food list for my slumber party on Saturday and then went to bed early.

School on Friday was a bit more bearable because we had made it to the end of the week, but you had to survive a double Science in the afternoon. When the bell went, you had earned your weekend. I headed home. No one was there, of course. Mick and Wilf were going to check on Miss McAllister again. At first it was a good feeling having the TV all to myself, but after a while the thrill wore off. Compared with Miss McAllister's place, there was not much to do. I missed the old house, but Percy had spoilt things. After a while, I switched off the TV and went to my room where I lay on my bed staring at the pin-ups on my ceiling. I could hear Mr O'Hagen's radio blaring out race results. The next thing I knew, Mick was prodding me.

'Wake up. It's an emergency.'

'What's going on?'

Mick and Wilf were both standing there.

'It's Percy.'

'Don't talk to me about that creep. Shove off.'

'Do you want to be a murderer?'

‘What are you on about?’

‘He’s going to die,’ said Wilf.

‘He won’t eat or drink and he won’t get out of bed,’ added Mick.

‘It’s just the sulks. I’m not going to kiss and make up, if that’s what you want.’

I pushed past the boys and out of the room. The thought of facing that deformed, lovesick creature made me feel shaky. He would have to snap out of it without my help.

Later that evening I went out with Mum to do late-night shopping for my slumber party.

Next morning, Mick and Wilf planned to check on Percy. Mick’s best mate, Cheese, turned up on our doorstep, skateboard in hand. Mick shook him off with an excuse about being grounded by Dad for not doing his homework. Cheese looked surprised at the new interest Dad was taking in our education, but he left. When the coast was clear, Mick and Wilf set off for Miss McAllister’s.

On Saturdays Dad was always at the car yard. Mum was sleeping in after a big week. I had the place to myself, so I made myself a drink, picked up a magazine and went out to sit on the back steps in the morning sun. The magazine’s cover boasted that it was for the ‘teen generation’ and listed some of the main articles – an interview with a loopy singer, a horoscope prediction for a movie star, ‘Ten Tips to Better Dieting’, and the main article, ‘What Makes a Good Kiss’.

My stomach churned as I thought again of Percy's clumsy kiss. How often did people experience something different from what the magazines suggested they would get? I was about halfway through the magazine when I heard Mick shouting for me.

'I'm out the back!' I yelled.

Mick was breathless when he got to me. 'Cas, Percy really looks like he's going to die. He's real weak. You've got to help.'

'What can I do? I feel a bit sorry for him, but he's not all there. I can't do what you want.'

'That's okay to feel like that. But there's something else.'

'What?'

'If Percy dies, Miss McAllister will probably die, too. She needs Percy to do her shopping for her. He's her lifeline. You said so yourself.'

I hadn't thought of this angle. I mulled it over and came upon another painful point. If we had not invaded Miss McAllister's life and then sniffed out Percy's existence like bloodhounds, none of this would have happened.

'Okay,' I said. 'If you can promise I'll be back for my slumber party by 6.30, I'll try to talk to Percy. And you have to stay with me in the room.'



Chapter 21

MISS McALLISTER WAS SITTING IN THE CHAIR NEXT TO the stove darning a brown sock; it was pulled over her left hand like a puppet. Mick and Wilf had brought me in through the kitchen door. I stood there waiting for a telling-off.

‘You boys can get on with your chores. Michael, the wood needs to be cut a mite smaller to fit into the stove. And Wilf, the hens’ boxes need fresh straw and don’t forget to scatter a bit of lime here and there. The lime sack is in the old stables.’

The boys disappeared outside and Miss McAllister bent her head over her darning.

‘You’ve had a distressing time, my dear. Sit down here near the stove and let’s sort things out.’

Miss McAllister was as uncomfortable as I was. I carried a chair over to the stove, sat down and leant my chin on my hands, staring at tiny flecks of water bubbling onto the stove from the kettle.

'Miss McAllister, I never ...'

The tears came. I didn't want to make a noisy scene, but the effort produced strange gulping sounds. I wanted to explain that I had never meant to hurt Percy, but that he had done something he shouldn't have. I wanted to say that I hated hurting her, that I had missed her and missed coming round. I pressed my face down hard into my hands, but the gulps got noisier.

I felt a bony arm around my shoulders. I rested my head against Miss McAllister and wrapped my arms about her fragile frame. Her black dress was made of a crisp material that crackled as I clutched her. I had never been so close to lavender and camphor.

'It was terrible,' I blubbered.

'I'm so sorry,' said Miss McAllister stroking my hair with her free hand. 'Let me guess. Percy tried to kiss you.'

'More than tried. He did kiss me.'

'I think I'll have to explain something about Percy that you have a right to know.'

I pulled away from Miss McAllister and looked at her anxious face. 'What?' I asked, wiping the back of my hand across my dripping nose.

'Here, use this. And please don't say "What".' Miss

McAllister handed me a dainty handkerchief. I took the hanky and gave my nose a blow that sounded like a horse snorting. Miss McAllister sat back in her chair, smoothed the folds of her skirt with papery hands and said, 'As you already know, I believe strongly in people's right to privacy. If they wish to share something of their lives, so be it. However, others should not do it for them. That becomes gossip.' She looked at me a long time before going on. 'Nevertheless, if you could understand Percy a little better, you might find it in your heart to forgive him. Things can only get back to normal if there is forgiveness. And I don't wish to alarm you, but Percy is quite old and I'm concerned for his health.' Miss McAllister's hands began to fidget nervously in her lap.

'You mean he could die?'

'Yes.'

The cat jumped up onto Miss McAllister's lap and she absent-mindedly stroked it.

'Percy has been living here since just before World War II. My father saved his life by bringing him here.'

'He was sick?'

'Sick, malnourished and appallingly treated. He was part of a freak show.'

'A what?'

'Don't interrupt. I'll explain everything in good time. Perhaps they don't have them any more. That would certainly suggest something has improved out there.'

Miss McAllister explained that freak shows were like travelling circuses, except crowds paid to gape at human beings who were physically deformed in some way. People born with physical or intellectual disabilities were given away, sold or even kidnapped to be part of sideshows at fairs.

She spoke of how one day her father became unusually restless and took a now rare stroll. He found himself on the other side of the creek, where a fair had been set up on the vacant land there. There were the expected sorts of attractions – the fortune-teller, the donkey-rides, the ferris wheel, the coconut-shy stall, the food stalls and the freak show.

A red-faced spruiker with a tweed cap on his head was outside the freak's tent coaxing people to come and have a gawk and a laugh. It was not a malicious desire to scoff at other people's misery that found Dr McAllister paying to walk in, just a dismal curiosity and maybe a need to be distracted momentarily from his permanent state of melancholy.

The tent smelled of hot canvas, unwashed bodies and stale sawdust. In the middle was a circular pit. The public could walk 360 degrees around the exhibits, who sat on their chairs, immobile expressions on their faces. There was the fat lady, whose head in contrast to her jelly body looked like a beady-eyed pin. She sat, the sausage fingers of her pudgy hands intertwined over a vast stomach, staring at a

point in the distance beyond the sightseers. On a high chair sat a midget the size of a large doll. His tiny legs with their shiny shoes stuck out straight as if made of wood. This doll was no pretty little innocent. Trapped in the body of an eighteen-month-old baby – too tiny to ever walk – was a forty-year-old grey-haired man. His small face was etched with bitterness, his mouth a tight line, his eyes small coal-coloured glints of hatred. He was dressed in a miniature pin-striped business suit and he puffed away at a cigar, squeezing his eyes half-shut like a gangster.

Next came the bearded lady. She was billed as being half male and half female, so she was made to wear a frilly blouse over a pair of men's checked trousers. Dr McAllister knew immediately that she was a woman who was suffering from a hormonal imbalance causing excess hair growth. The crowd pointed and sniggered. One young courting pair in a frenzy of excitement laughed and kissed in front of the sad, black-bearded lady.

Further around the pit was the leopard man. He sat straight-backed and stripped to the waist. His skin was mottled and blotched with orange-brown spots the size of lily-pads. Tethered near the leopard man was a five-legged calf.

The highlight of the exhibition was the Hunchback of Notre Dame, subtitled 'The Ugliest Human on Earth'. This was a boy with severe curvature of the spine, long dangling ape-like arms and a nightmare-inspiring head; his scalp

was covered in thick yellow scales from which struggled pitiful tufts of brick-red hair, he was so covered in acne and cysts that ordinary features like nose and ears were hard to distinguish, and he had a blind eye that stared out like a slimy marble and a wary good eye. The boy would have been no more than nine or ten years old and he was the only exhibit that was required to be mobile. Every so often, the spruiker would come inside the tent and prod the hunchback with a white cane. The creature would limp and stagger round and round in circles.

Little children screamed and hid their faces in their mothers' skirts. Older children leant over the railing and jeered. The Ugliest Human on Earth would hold an arm over his face to hide from the jeers. The spruiker would knock his arm down with the cane. The crowd must have its money's worth. They must be able to see the face.

Miss McAllister's father looked into this pit of misery with a doctor's analytical eye. With the exception of the hunchback, all the others were adults. They had submitted to this cruelty and were beyond fighting to change their lives. The boy was different.

'Take ya paw off ya dial, ya looney!' yelled the spruiker, knocking down the boy's arm again. People tittered and the spruiker looked smug as if he had just said the wittiest thing. He caught the eye of a pretty girl and winked at her. She giggled.

'I'll show you somethink,' said the spruiker and he

vaulted the railing, swaggered up to the cowering boy-monster and tore at the boy's shirt. The boy resisted, squealing in fear and moving awkwardly so that the job of stripping him became quite a challenge. Between gritted teeth the spruiker snarled, 'We'll show the ladies and gentlemen what ya tryin' t' hide.' And he grabbed at the back of the boy's shirt and ripped.

The crowd saw a flash of purplish cysts and twisted spine as the boy fell backwards, off-balance. Trying frantically to regain his footing, he twisted and flung his arm sideways. The arm connected with the sneering face of the spruiker, who staggered against the railings. He wiped his sleeve across his nose and looked surprised to see bright red blood. The surprise turned to ugly fury. He lunged at the boy, who was crumpled, face-down on the sawdust, and kicked him with a metal-capped boot. The body sprawled onto its back.

'Fair go!' shouted a country-faced man from the gallery.

'He shouldn't ought to 've done that,' said a woman holding a baby.

'Not in front of the kiddies,' said another man.

The pretty girl left. Dr McAllister had seen enough, too. Despite being seventy-five years old, he clambered across the railings. He knelt down amongst the stinking calf dung in the sawdust and looked up at the surprised spruiker.

'I'm a doctor and I'm advising you not to touch this boy once more or there will be consequences.'

'C'mon, gov.' The spruiker held his hands out in appeal. 'A man's gotta earn a crust.'

The doctor answered only with a stony expression and began an examination of the boy who was gasping for breath.

The spruiker would not give up. 'Look, he brought it on himself. He needs to cooperate.' He looked up and saw he had become the crowd's focus of attention. 'What are ya gaping at? Show's over. Go on, git!'

When the tent had emptied, the people in the pit came to life. The fat lady, the leopard man and the bearded lady crowded around the boy. They were scared to say anything too critical, but their concerned comments were meant to be heard.

'Too young to be in the business,' said the bearded lady in a deep voice.

'Needs a bit of mothering,' said the fat lady.

'He didn't mean to get on your wrong side,' said the leopard man to the spruiker.

The midget, sitting in his high chair, was observing the mayhem with cynical detachment. Pulling a cigar from his mouth, he said in a squeaky doll's voice, 'The only way he's going to get out of this business is if someone else buys him or he goes out in a box.'

Dr McAllister made the most impulsive gesture of his

life. He stood up, pulled his wallet out of the inner pocket of his coat, took out ten pounds and thrust the money at the spruiker.

‘I want this boy.’

‘Now listen, the boy’s worth a lot to me. It’s hard times. You know that.’

Dr McAllister took out another two pounds. ‘If you don’t accept this, I will be forced to call in the authorities.’ He said this knowing that the authorities had their hands full with cases like this and worse.

The ploy worked. The spruiker took hold of the money, shrugged his shoulders and said, ‘Okay. Take him. His name’s Percy. You’ve got a bargain.’

Dr McAllister took his bargain home, planning to keep him only until the boy’s health was restored. His intention was to then hand him on to an institution. Miss McAllister did her best to wash the boy, but he refused to let her put water on his head. He thrashed and bellowed in complete panic. Dr McAllister thought that at some stage in the boy’s childhood someone might have tried to drown him. The doctor’s medical examination revealed that Percy had been blinded in an accident, perhaps by a missile. The McAllisters discovered the probable cause of this too: every time a child visited the house, Percy would shake and hide his face in a way he rarely did with adults. Eventually, through a kind of pantomime, Percy explained that a gang of children had chased him and thrown stones at him. One

of those stones had blinded him.

After a few weeks, the rest and the wholesome diet had strengthened Percy and even cleared up his skin, and he was ready to be handed over to the institution. Two days before that was to happen, Dr McAllister died from a heart attack.

'I'd spent my entire adult life looking after Father,' said Miss McAllister. 'He'd grown so gloomy since the boys had died. He rarely ventured outside the property, which meant I had little reason to go out. The funeral was at the Presbyterian Kirk and that was the last time I have been away from my home. By then, I was beginning to really stand out in my clothes. Quite a number of elderly ladies had withstood the pressures of fashion, but it was unusual to see someone in her middle years attire herself in this way.'

'How did you and Percy work things out?'

'The evening after the funeral, Mr Walters, our chemist, visited me out of concern for my welfare. He was the one who suggested that Percy stay and earn his keep by doing my shopping and wood carting. He sent along his twenty-year-old son, Charles, to escort Percy to the city market. Charles constructed a strong wooden hand-held cart with a harness for Percy to use, and for months he turned up twice-weekly to show Percy the safest, quickest route to the market and how to buy things.'

'Charles sounds like a nice bloke.'

‘Charles was a cheerful, reliable soul – the sort of trusting young man who expected the best of people and usually got it. In Charles’ company, Percy soon became a familiar character making his way along the quiet morning streets. He’d be greeted by the baker, the milkman, the policeman and a few early-risers. And at the market Charles said everyone became Percy’s friend. He was called ‘lovey’ by the fruit stall woman and given a free apple, joked with by the butcher, who always said ‘Early bird catches the worm’ as he handed Percy a sliver of sausage meat. And it was Charles, by the way, who devised the note and cheque system. So there you are. Over these sixty-odd years Percy has become very important to me. And I don’t mean just because he brings home my necessities.’

Miss McAllister slapped her knees with a sort of finality and the cat leapt off her knees.

‘What a shocking story. He must love you so much. And what happened to Charles?’

‘Charles. Well, he went off to the second war.’

‘And died?’

‘No, no. He returned. Married a Queensland lass and moved there. We corresponded for years, but his wife wrote to me about twelve years ago to tell me he had died ... like everyone I once knew. You can’t imagine how strange it is to realise there is no one left living who knew you. It makes you wonder if you really are alive.’

‘We know you.’

'Yes, child, but I mean people who really knew the early me, my father and brothers; the people whose playful voices once floated across from the tennis court on sleepy summer afternoons; Father's faithful patients who would drop by with boiled fruit cakes and jams; the domestics who would tell you their deepest secrets; aunts, uncles, cousins, old school friends.' Miss McAllister stood up suddenly, 'Come on, this maudlin nonsense gets us nowhere. But I have something to show you.'

From a pocket, Miss McAllister took out a crumpled piece of paper and handed it to me. As I unfolded it, I saw it was a photograph torn from a magazine. It was Clark Gable about to kiss Vivien Leigh in a passionate scene from *Gone with the Wind*. His ardent face with its neat black moustache is famous even now. He was leaning over Vivien Leigh and she was leaning back in his arms, half wanting him and half not wanting him.

'What's this about?' I asked.

'I found it under Percy's pillow yesterday. Do you know what it means?'

'It means that's what he wanted to do to me.' I felt a fresh wave of revulsion.

'I hoped you would see more into it, Cassandra. It means Percy wanted to see himself as handsome. You with your long, dark, wavy hair were the heroine; he was the gallant hero. He was a man who dearly wished to love a woman and be loved in return.'

I was stunned at this old lady's perception. I finished for her.

'And when I threw him backwards and ran away, I did what every young person always did to him. I told him he was ugly and unloveable.'

'I think so.'

I didn't know what to say. Somehow, what Percy had done to me seemed like a small thing compared with what he had endured all his life. The two of us sat in silence for a long time. Then I looked over at this old lady who had become my friend.

'What do I do now?'

'Please, somehow show him that you still like him.'



Chapter 22

THE WIRE DOOR CLANGED SHUT BEHIND ME. I LOOKED down from the kitchen steps to see Mick standing by the woodpile examining his biceps. I realised why he was so charmingly willing to be the official wood-chopper.

‘C’mon, Mr Universe. Follow me!’

Mick dropped his arms and looked sheepish at being caught out.

‘So what’s happening?’

‘You sit on the stairs while I talk to Percy.’

‘I thought you wanted me in there with you.’

‘Not any more. I’ve just realised that I’ve gone and hurt the most kicked-about human being I’ve ever heard of. If you were in there with me talking about what happened, it

would ...' I searched for the right word.

'Embarrass him,' said Mick.

'Exactly,' I said, amazed at his occasional flashes of insight.

Mick sat hunched up on that dark flight of stairs while I knocked on Percy's door. For politeness's sake I knocked a second time, and, taking a deep breath, I walked in.

Percy was a humped shape curled up in his bed facing the wall. He was covered in a mound of old blankets. He didn't move at all when I came in, although something about his total stillness told me he was listening. I stood by his bed, unsure of how to begin.

'Percy, I'm really sorry about everything.'

I was stupid enough to think just saying that would fix things. When there was not the slightest response, I didn't know what to do next.

'Please, Percy.'

Still no response. I wandered across to the little dormer window. Down there in the backyard were the last golden splashes of afternoon sun. A couple of large white linen table napkins flapped on the line in the breeze. The vegetable garden was ragged looking, having given its best for summer and autumn. There was Mick's axe leaning up against the woodpile. The leaves on the fruit trees were turning yellow and a few floated to the ground as I watched. In the chook shed, Wilf crouched in a corner cradling a favourite black hen.

I was spying on the world just as Percy would have spied on us, no doubt laughing at Mick's clumsy attempts to chop wood; observing my temper tantrums as I struggled to peg out sheets, skirts, blouses and bloomers on the line; watching little Wilf, dressed like Ned Kelly, make his foray into the chook yard; seeing Miss McAllister's impatience and wariness turn into that brusque friendship she offered us. Her accepting us must have reassured him a bit. And then it was our turn to discover him – the face in the window. Miss McAllister had tried to protect him by locking the stable door. At some point, the two of them must have decided it was worth trusting us. With his shattered, nerve-raw idea of children, it was a second chance to regain his lost youth with us, to have real friends. We drew him out of himself and I blundered into his heart.

'Sorry' was not enough. I took Percy's one and only chair from near the window and carried it to the bed. I sat down and leaning towards the rejecting curve of his back took a deep breath and started to speak.

'Percy, if you're feeling angry with me then that's okay. I haven't been a very good friend to you – I need practice. You're probably thinking you're the loneliest bloke in the world, but I know about being lonely too. I'm going to tell you something about me that no one else knows. I haven't got a best friend. I had one last year, but her family shifted interstate. I don't even think the kids I hang around with at school would be called friends at all. They swap and change

all the time. You never know if you're going to get stabbed in the back or sucked-up to. And because they judge everyone by how you look and what brand of jeans and runners you have, I don't stand a chance.

'I do favours to try to keep in with them, like doing their English homework for them. Even then I usually only get to sit right on the edge of the lunch circle. There are about five girls. They always eat lunch together and they bunch up tight to make it hard for me to join in. The worst one is Shauna Andrews. She's so good-looking it would make you spew.'

I was telling Percy things I had never thought through clearly. He turned his head ever so slightly and I knew he was listening. It was easy talking like this to Percy. He could not tell anyone else and, even if he could, I knew he was not the sort to betray your trust.

'Do you know, once I told the group that I was related to this big rock star. Boy, did they pay attention then! It was the first and last time I got to be really part of the circle. Then one of the kids asked me what this star's real name was – I didn't know he went by a professional name. I blew it and ended up even more on the outside. And it's those five girls who are coming to my slumber party tonight. I don't like even one of them.

'Percy, I know I hurt you by pushing you away. And I dropped the lovely presents and the ring, but I'm not ready to be kissed by anyone yet. What's the point of all that stuff

when I don't even know what being a real friend is about? I can't be your girlfriend, Percy, but I want us to be real friends.'

There was no reaction. I stared at the unmoving back and decided there was not going to be a reconciliation. I didn't blame Percy one bit. He had had his childhood and his eyesight stolen from him by people like me. I started to get up from the chair and leave him to the dignity of his solitude, but at the last moment I saw a movement. Percy still kept his back to me, but a hand slowly appeared over his side and was held towards me. I understood. I reached out. Our hands touched and clasped. We sat there in the darkening room, just holding hands.



Chapter 23

SATURDAY NIGHT'S SLUMBER PARTY WITH THE GANG OF five was as much fun as being guest of honour at a witch's convention. And it was me in the boiling cauldron. That Shauna really was a bitch. She kept putting down everything about my place. She had this way of saying, 'No offence meant, but ...' and then it was open slather and she would say the most incredibly hurtful things. 'No offence meant, but pizza and pavlova is a bit common.' The other four girls, Narelle, Simone, Janine and Kelly, thought everything Shauna said was hilarious. They kept making secret faces at each other. Mum did her best to be bright and chirpy, but Dad embarrassed me no end by drinking too much and slapping Shauna on the backside. We watched videos

and talked until 3 am. Naturally, Shauna was the centre of attention going on and on about Pete Murphy. I was glad (that's an understatement) when they left on Sunday morning.

That afternoon, Wilf and I visited Miss McAllister. Percy was in the kitchen having a cup of tea. When I walked in, he hobbled over and gave me back the ring I had dropped in the attic. I put it on the third finger of my right hand and told him that was where friends wore each other's rings. His grin was so wide I could see every stumpy tooth.

Lining up for Maths class next day, Shauna and the gang laughed at the ring which I had forgotten to take off.

'What are you trying to prove wearing a ring out of a Christmas bon bon? Are you desperate and dateless?' asked Shauna.

'A good friend gave it to me.'

'Look, Cassie's got some new boyfriend. A plastic friendship ring!' shrieked Narelle to the rest of the class.

The gang of five moved away splitting their sides with laughter.

'Did someone really give this to you as a present?' A girl called Tereasa was standing nearby. She had clear, trusting eyes. I had never taken much notice of her in class because she was so quiet.

'Yes. I've made friends with this man who is a bit slow, if you know what I mean. He gave me this for my birthday. It's sort of special,' I said.

‘That’s cute,’ said Tereasa.

‘You understand?’

‘My little sister is intellectually disabled. It’s just a label. My brother and I help out with her a lot. I’ve got that close to Jess, I can’t imagine life without her. It can be hard, but what amazes me is that no matter what I’ve done to upset her she never holds it against me.’

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘I know exactly what you mean. No grudges.’

We smiled at each other and I could not figure out why Shauna had once said that Tereasa was such a bore.

From that day on, Percy would usually be waiting for us in the kitchen when we walked in from school. We would toss our bags in a corner of the room, settle down at the table and pig out on afternoon tea (fresh-from-the-oven bread and jam). Dot would sit close to the table willing us with large brown eyes to feed her. We always did.

One Friday afternoon, Miss McAllister announced that it was going to be a cold and early winter.

‘How do you know?’ asked Wilf.

She held up the little finger of her right hand. ‘More reliable than a barometer. It aches when there’s cold weather coming. Bernard was trying to push me into a creek one time when we were having a picnic. I told him if he kept on pushing, I’d punch his nose. He kept pushing. I swung at him, he ducked, and I missed his nose and hit his head. All he got was a headache and I got a broken finger.’

Sure enough, autumn chilled earlier than usual. It was an early darkening afternoon that the three of us climbed into the garden and saw Miss McAllister, dressed in black and with the armband on her sleeve, hoisting the Australian flag up a flagpole.

'What's with this flag business?' asked Mick.

'This flag business,' said Miss McAllister, panting but still hauling on her rope, 'is to do with my brothers.'

'It's because Anzac Day is coming up, isn't it?' I said quietly.

'Correct.'

Miss McAllister secured the rope on a metal prong, gave her hands a rub and looked up at the flag flapping and falling in the breeze.

'Mum says Anzac Day is just glorifying war,' said Mick. 'She reckons we should march for peace.'

'I hesitate to contradict your good mother, but Anzac Day is about peace as well as remembering those who paid the price of peace with their lives.' Miss McAllister's anger flashed and died down.

Fingering Tom's locket that she always wore, Miss McAllister went on: 'If no one learns the sad lessons of history, then people will keep rushing into wars over and over again.'

I couldn't help wondering at the short-term memories humans have. At school we'd been learning a bit about the two world wars. You'd think no one could be so dumb as

to let a second major war start only twenty-one years after the first one ended. And that first war. It sounded so bad. I thought about Bernard's homesick letter, trying to be cheerful and chatty for the sake of little William. In fact, he must have been feeling lousy – his cough, his exhaustion, the claustrophobia, not being able to straighten up properly in the trenches, ears bombarded with the sounds of explosions, and having to look at bits of bodies and mutilated, sick humans all day long. I'm sure Bernard would have grabbed at the chance to come home alive and never, ever taunt his sister again. And there was Stuart with his shining, lively face, looking proud in the uniform that was to see him to his death.

After we'd gone inside for our usual afternoon tea, I slipped into the boys' room. In the half gloom I could see Stuart looking straight into my eyes from his photograph. He had kind eyes, kind and amused. Everything about him was strong and positive. I remembered another photograph I'd seen in the drawing room. It was of the family before the mother had died. Dr and Mrs McAllister sat straight-backed on chairs in the garden. Mrs McAllister was nursing a baby in a lacy shawl. That would have been Grizelda. A boy who must have been Bernard was standing with his hand on his mother's shoulder. A child of about four with blonde curly hair and wearing a white dress sat on Dr McAllister's lap. I had asked Miss McAllister if she'd had a sister and was told that the child was Stuart and that all

little boys used to be dressed like that. I turned back to Stuart's photo in front of me. The curls had been plastered down, the gold had turned to brown. In only fourteen years the boy in the dress had become the teenager in his serge, brass-buttoned uniform. I returned Stuart's steady gaze. We were looking at each other and yet it was a one-way mirror. Stuart didn't know I was there, calling out to him not to go to war, warning him that one bullet would kill him before he had even begun.



Chapter 24

MISS McALLISTER AND HER BAROMETER FINGER WERE right. Winter came quickly that year. Day after day we woke to icy mornings and leaden skies. Getting up for school in the half-dark was horrible.

School in winter was the pits. There was nothing to do at lunchtimes. The students would sit in huddles on benches on the verandahs, often just out of reach of the slanting, spitting rain. To keep warm we would pull the sleeves of our jumpers over our knuckles, and, hunching with cold, we'd stretch the bottom part of our jumpers over our knees.

At the end of the school day, we'd usually go to Miss McAllister's. Mum was more flat-out than ever. She had started to do self-defence at the Women's Co-op. Dad was

out more and more for 'business' drinks. They were both glad we had somewhere to go. By now, Mick and I were sharing the wood-chopping because Miss McAllister needed a lot more wood. Our hands would be so purple-cold they almost stuck to the axe handle. The reward was Miss McAllister's homely kitchen. The yellowed walls shone a welcome and the wood stove worked overtime.

A winter afternoon at Miss McAllister's meant hot doughy bread spread thick with melting butter and a mug of soup that thawed our hands and heated our bellies. It meant the cat and Dot, wagging her tail like a clockwork toy, greeting us at the back door. It was Percy sitting in a warm corner near the stove, clumsily peeling potatoes into a black pot and singing his tuneless songs. And it was the yarns around the kitchen table. We learnt that the only food Miss McAllister refused to eat was tripe, that her very favourite food was dark chocolate, that she dreamt in colour, and that when she was a teenager her one ambition was to fly in a hot-air balloon. But we did most of the talking. Miss McAllister would sit there, her skeleton hands peeling and dicing vegetables, listening to our victories and woes. We'd all talk at once about our day. Miss McAllister would have to cut in, saying, 'Wilfred's turn' or 'Michael, let Cassandra have a say.'

Mick never talked so much as on those afternoons. He liked graphics and was one of the best in the class on the computer, and there was a girl called Mana, with a thick

dark plait of hair, who sat in front of him in most classes. Mana's name was often casually mentioned in a variety of topics. Most surprising, I discovered that Mick had written a story for English on 'A day in the life of an Australian before World War I' and had got an A-plus with the written comment 'You show an aptitude for historical research'. His English teacher, Mr Craig, was chronically vague. During spelling tests, Mick and a couple of others would put up their hands and ask the teacher to spell the word that had just been dictated. Quite unaware, Mr Craig would spell the word out.

'We had an imaginative way to avoid a spelling test,' said Miss McAllister. 'Our Sixth Class teacher, Mr Phillips, was a Royalist who made us stand to sing "God Save the King" every morning.'

'Sure you don't mean Queen?' asked Wilf.

'Quite sure, thank you. King Edward VII, Queen Victoria's son. Now where was I?'

'Spelling tests and your teacher, Mr Phillips,' said Mick.

'Quite so. It was customary to sing the first verse only, with Mr Phillips standing like a soldier at the front of the room. He was surprised one morning when our class didn't stop at the first verse but went on to sing the second verse and even the third verse. Being a spelling test morning, Mr Phillips was suspicious, but loyalty to the Home Country kept him singing on his feet. It was a great victory for us

because our horrid spelling test was delayed.'

'So you were naughty too!' said Wilf.

'Only for Mr Phillips. The other years, I was fortunate to have teachers who loved teaching.'

'Like Mrs Johnston, our History teacher,' I said and described how she would act out her lessons being the good army and the bad army, the heroes and the villains, the king and the peasants. She would be leaping all over the classroom and you would swear the room was full of these people.

'Remember last year's play when Wilf had to be a knight?' said Mick.

'That's not fair, Mick. If it happened to you, you wouldn't go telling,' cried Wilf.

'I'm not telling on you. I'm remembering. How did it go, Wilf? You had to say, "With this sword ..."'

'With this sword, I defend my honour!' recited Wilf with shy pride.

'Yeah. You had to pull your sword out and say all that, but your sword got stuck. So you shouted it again, "With this sword I defend my honour!", and gave your sword an extra hard yank. The sword sure came out, but your belt broke and your strides came down!'

I didn't actually see Miss McAllister laugh, but the whiskers on her chin were vibrating.

You had to earn your pleasures in that house. Apart from the wood chopping, Mondays we'd be heaving sodden

clothes out of the basket and arranging them on the drying rack that was hoisted above the stove. Tuesdays we still had to help with any leftover ironing. Wilf's main job was staggering down to the chooks with a pot of hot mash. Miss McAllister boiled up the food scraps with oats, and by keeping the chooks' stomachs full and warm she managed to have eggs all through winter.

Wilf's other job was to learn his tables. One day Miss McAllister had caught him using his fingers and toes to do a calculation. She made it her mission to teach Wilf 'some of the three R's'. For half an hour each afternoon the kitchen would sound like a pagan temple – Miss McAllister rapping time on the table with a wooden spoon and Wilf filling the room with the droning chant of tables. Wilf's teacher was full of praise for his sudden spurt of progress in Maths. Mum, putting his school report down on the table at home, had said to Dad, 'I told you he'd grow out of it. He was a late developer and there was nothing we could do about it.'

At Miss McAllister's, Mick and I were expected to do our homework too. Usually we'd do it at the kitchen table, but if concentration was hard we'd work at the dining room table – one at each end – by candlelight. After that, we would usually stay for dinner. This was the first time in our lives someone had made desserts for us. Miss McAllister called them 'puddings' – bread and butter custard, apple pie, hot chocolate pudding, fruit fritters and, the one that we

never forgot, Spotted Dick. I'm not kidding. That's what it was called. The first time she served up this fruity pudding, Miss McAllister said enthusiastically, 'There's nothing I like more than a bit of Spotted Dick!' Mid-mouthful, Mick started laughing and then choking. While I was thumping him on the back, Wilf pushed his bowl away and refused to eat another spoonful.

'Whatever is the matter?' asked Miss McAllister.

But not one of us dared answer.

It was the time after us kids had finished the dishes that we enjoyed most. Sometimes we would play games like draughts, ludo or chess. Percy, who knew his numbers, patiently played endless games of Snakes and Ladders with Wilf. They also played 'Snap'; Percy would thump his hand down and make a noise like a monster which he and Wilf mutually agreed meant 'Snap'. Miss McAllister's favourite game was 'Word Making – Work Taking', a vocabulary game. Miss McAllister was good at it, but on the few occasions Mick or I won, we learnt it wasn't worth it. Miss McAllister liked winning and if she lost she would leave the table and start banging pots around and saying, 'Jobs to do and all you can think of is wasting time'. After a couple of those episodes, Mick and I tried hard to lose.

Sometimes we'd get Miss McAllister to play the piano in the drawing room. The piano was out of tune and the ivories were yellowed and chipped. Miss McAllister played stiff-knuckled, crashing up and down the keys, missing a

note here and there, but she could still belt out a tune. She liked to play 'Annie Laurie' and 'When You Were Sweet Sixteen'. Her singing voice was high. Every so often it would waver, thin out and crack as if it were being transmitted vast distances on shortwave radio. Percy would accompany her in a kind of howl and Wilf and I would join in. Mick never sang, but sometimes he would play a paper comb.

At other times we would sit in front of the stove and let the evening unfold. Wilf liked to play with the things in Stuart's wooden toy-box – blocks, a spinning top and a clockwork dog. And there was always the challenge of dressing up the cat in a child's bonnet and knitted jumper. Those stove-side sessions were when Mick and I learnt by heart 'The Man from Snowy River'. Miss McAllister taught it to us, her eyes shining as she leant forward, jockey-style and saw that ride through to its finish.

On one of those nights around the stove Miss McAllister was reading *Great Expectations* to us. While she read, Mick was practising knot-tying with a piece of rope, Wilf and Percy were making gravity-defying towers with Stuart's blocks and I was dreaming away inside the story. Miss McAllister had come to the scary bit where the young hero meets the everlastingly jilted bride, Miss Haversham. Suddenly, Miss McAllister put her magnifying glass down and the silence made us all look at her.

'This story reminds me of how time passes. How youth is so quickly spent. I have been meaning to show you

something. Do come this way, all of you.'

Miss McAllister stood up and walked to the door that connected with the hallway, where she waited like a tour-guide until we were standing in a semicircle around her. 'Please regard the markings on the door-jamb,' she said.

Wilf was the first to see what she was talking about. 'It's writing and numbers!' he said. 'All in pencil.'

'What you see there,' said Miss McAllister, 'are the names, height measurements and dates taken of all us children from the time we could stand.'

At the very bottom I could just make out the name 'Grizelda' and '1902'. There was a mass of pencilled statistics. At the top of these were the measurements of Bernard and Stuart made in 1914. Bernard was a touch taller than Stuart. Both boys were over 6 feet tall. Knowing from where they would have looked down at me made them more real.

'It's time to add to these measurements,' said Miss McAllister.

She found a tape measure and pencil, rested the *Great Expectations* novel on Wilf's head and drew a pencil mark across the door jamb. Miss McAllister was too short to reach above my head, so Mick and I measured each other. Mick was almost the same height as Bernard when he was Mick's age. Wilf made us measure Percy, who stood as straight as he could, his head slightly sideways.

'You're taller than Wilf, Percy,' said Mick. Percy looked pleased.

It was the day we got measured that I started to come down with a sore throat. I had felt sort of chilled through and a bit achy all day. That night, when I told Miss McAllister I was feeling funny, she made me drink a hot lemon juice with honey and sent us home. As I stepped out into the winter air, I felt I was leaving home behind.



Chapter 25

THAT WAS THE START OF THE WORST FLU I'VE EVER HAD. I had antibiotics and two weeks off school. Mick and Wilf came down with it too, though not as badly as I had it. The newspapers called it the biggest epidemic in ten years.

It was many days before the three of us got back to Miss McAllister's. On that dark, windy afternoon we knocked at the front door and waited a long time without an answer. We checked out the backyard, but it was empty. When we saw Percy at the back door, watery-eyed, snivelling and pointing inside the house, we knew something was wrong.

Mick, Wilf and I bolted up the steps and into the house. The kitchen was freezing, as the stove had not been lit. Percy hobbled through the hall door. We followed,

frightened of what we might be shown.

Miss McAllister had had a longer life than anyone I had ever known. Ninety-seven years was plenty. As we walked down that icy hallway, I wondered how long Miss McAllister might have been dead. I was dreading what a dead body might look like. More than that, I was regretting lost opportunities – for the questions I had never asked and for the friendship I had still wanted to give. I followed the whimpering Percy. Wilf clung to my jumper. Mick stayed well behind. Percy opened the door to Miss McAllister's bedroom. It stank of age.

'I'm not going in,' said Mick.

'Someone has to,' I said. I forced myself to walk in there, Wilf still clinging to my jumper and trying to burrow under my armpit simultaneously. We stood at the foot of Miss McAllister's oak bed. She was lying on her back, her head propped by pillows. Her eyes were shut and her hand lay on top of the bedclothes. It was like a movie death; she could have been arranged. Her white face gleamed in the dimness like a sliver of moon on a cloudy night. It was too late to help and too late to say goodbye. I led Wilf out of the room and handed him to Mick.

'She's gone,' I said.

Mick said nothing.

'I'm going back in to sit a while.'

Mick nodded and put an arm round Wilf. I walked past Percy who was standing in the doorway as if waiting

for Miss McAllister to wake up. I sat in a chair next to the bed. I had this vague idea that if someone hadn't been dead too long, her spirit might still be hanging about.

'Miss McAllister,' I began, looking straight at her whiskery old face, 'you were the best thing that happened to our lives. Mum and Dad work hard. They say they're doing it for us, but we're never together as a family. You were always here for us. You might have been a bit strict, but you were fun, too. And don't worry about Percy. We'll figure something out.'

I had to stop there. I bowed my head and a couple of tears ran down the side of my nose and dripped onto my hands. Just then an icy hand gripped my wrist. I screamed and jerked my head up to see Miss McAllister, eyes open, staring at me.

'Mick!' I screamed.

I tried to pull back, but Miss McAllister held on to me like a drowning person clings to a buoy. The boys were beside me and Percy went down on his knees by the bed.

'She's alive,' I said, staring into her eyes.

'Can you speak?' asked Mick.

She let go of me and gave a weak hand gesture for us to come closer. The three of us leant close to her face.

'Bible,' she whispered and then she gave a rattling cough.

'What does she mean?' Mick asked turning to me.

I knew. I got up and hurried to the living room where

the big family Bible lay on the table. When I got back with it to the bedroom, Miss McAllister's eyes were shut again.

Mick said, 'She wants you to read the 23rd Psalm.'

'Where am I supposed to find it?' I asked.

Mick grabbed the Bible and floundered through it until Wilf pointed out pieces of ribbon sticking out of some of the pages. The Bible almost seemed to open itself at one place. A pressed flower fell onto the bedclothes and disintegrated.

'We've found it!' I said. 'Look. Psalm 23.'

The writing was so small that Mick had to light the candle in the silver candlestick that was on Miss McAllister's dressing table. I sat in the chair with the Bible on my knees. Mick held the candle close. I read:

'The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want ...'

Miss McAllister's eyes opened and she stared into space.

'He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters ...' I read on about not fearing valleys of death, evil or enemies. When I got to a bit which said 'my cup runneth over ...' Miss McAllister's eyes shut again, but her lips were moving. I leaned close and heard her whisper, 'Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.'



Chapter 26

‘WE’LL HAVE TO CALL A DOCTOR,’ I SAID. ‘SHE LIKES HER privacy, but this time that doesn’t count.’

‘But who?’ Mick asked. ‘We can’t take her to Outpatients like Mum does with us.’

We were in Miss McAllister’s kitchen. Mick and I had spent an hour with smoke and grit in our eyes trying to get the stove alight. By the time we had got it going, we’d been through several old newspapers, most of the kindling and an entire packet of matches. The room was still cold, but the chill was off it.

The first thing I did when the stove was alight was boil water for a hot-water bottle and a cup of tea for Miss McAllister. We propped her up on her pillows. Mick held

the cup to her lips and I steadied her wispy-haired head so that she could drink. I could hear the rattle of her breathing. We had made her a jam sandwich, but she shook her head and would not eat. Although she smelt pretty foul, a bath was out of the question.

‘I’ll look for a doctor. Get Percy and Wilf to keep that stove going. You just try to keep her here with us. Read to her. Talk. Anything,’ I said.

I zipped up my jacket and walked out into the wintry day. I didn’t have a clue which direction to take, but I could see a multi-storey building looming like a grey giant a few blocks away. As I walked in that direction the streets got busier. After about twenty minutes I reached the grey building that stood on an island of cement back to back with another building exactly the same. Together they took up half a residential block. Right next door was a children’s play park enclosed like a prison by a high wire fence.

I walked through a gate into the playground and up to two women, heads covered in black scarves, who sat together on a bench. Neither of them spoke much English, but they understood my questions and one of them stood up and pointed to the far side of the high-rise flats.

‘There. Doctore. Good luck.’ She smiled at me.

Around the other side of the flats and across the road was a house with a huge billboard outside:

Medical Centre

Bulk Billing – 24 hours

I walked into a waiting room that was more noisy and crowded than at the hospital Outpatients. Tired, ill-looking men and women leant against the walls or sat, their heads drooping over knees. Parents rocked crying children. The wailing of one child fed the wailing of others like an electric current. Other children played about on the floor with toys. One toddler sat in the middle of this chaos like a sad Buddha, green mucus bulging from his nostrils. I walked to the receptionist's desk and without asking she shoved a form onto the ledge between us.

'Can you read and write English?' she asked.

'I'm not here for myself,' I began to explain. 'It's for an old lady, a friend of mine. I think she's dying from the flu.'

'You need to get her to hospital – and quickly. Why haven't you done that?'

Immediately I saw a whole set of complications I had not considered. I knew Miss McAllister would rather die than go to a hospital. The lack of privacy and independence would kill her; she'd be a spectacle with her Victorian ways. If she was going to live, she had to manage a recovery at home.

'We don't have a car,' I said.

'There are ambulances,' said the receptionist as if I was a moron. 'I'll ring one for you now.' She lifted the receiver.

'NO!' I leaned over the ledge that separated us. 'Please don't do that. She'll die if she goes to hospital. She will.'

‘Young lady, what do you want?’

‘I must have a doctor to visit her at home.’

‘That’s a thing of the past. Look around. We are run off our feet here. Our doctors don’t have time for house visits.’

As the receptionist said this, a doctor walked in.

‘What’s this about house visits?’ she asked.

‘The girl here wants a doctor to visit some old lady who she thinks is dying. She says the old lady won’t want to go to hospital.’

‘Lots of old people feel that way when they have to leave their homes,’ the doctor said kindly. ‘But when they get to hospital, they thrive on the good food and the attention.’

A frail thread of humanity was connecting me to this doctor. I had to move carefully.

‘Listen, doctor, please. This is different. I can’t explain, but if you come you’ll understand. This lady will die if we move her. I promise you.’

Purple rings of tiredness circled the doctor’s eyes. The medical centre had the atmosphere of a military hospital in a war zone. I didn’t like my chances.

‘I tell you, I’m not taking her to hospital.’ I was desperate. ‘She’ll have to die.’

‘Don’t you blackmail me!’ barked the doctor.

I’d pushed too hard. I turned to go.

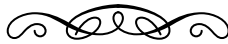
‘I was about to say,’ continued the doctor, ‘that I do know there are cases where people are better off nursed at

home. Now, I'm not promising anything except that I'll visit this old lady. But I can't get there until after my shift which ends at eight o'clock tonight. If, in my professional opinion, she needs hospital attention, then you and she will have to accept that. Understood?'

It was a compromise, but it gave Miss McAllister a fighting chance.

'Yes, I understand,' I said. 'Thanks heaps.'

I left Miss McAllister's address with the receptionist and headed back to her house in the deepening cold of the afternoon.



Chapter 27

WITH SOME SAVAGE PLANT PRUNING AND A BIT OF lubricating oil on the gate hinges, together with some wrenching, Mick and Percy had got the front gate to open ready for the doctor.

‘Why on earth are you using a lantern?’ asked the doctor when she saw Mick holding up his nineteenth-century lighting as he opened the door.

‘Because Miss McAllister doesn’t like electric lights,’ I explained.

Mick, Wilf and I stood around the doctor in the main hall. Briefcase in one hand, the doctor turned from side to side gazing at the gloomy portraits. She shivered and then said sharply, ‘It’s one thing not liking artificial lighting, but

you need to turn a heater on in here.'

'She doesn't like them either,' said Mick. We had all discussed how Miss McAllister's way of life would be endangered if others knew too much.

'Well, it's times like this you just have to overrule an old person. Stubbornness can do them more harm than good. Your parents will have to go out and buy one for her tomorrow. By the way, I'm Doctor Julianna D'Angelo. Am I guessing right that you are the old lady's grandchildren?'

'That would be impossible,' said Wilf.

Dr D'Angelo looked confused, and I quickly said, 'She's sort of a distant connection.' (I thought this was an appropriate time to claim our common ancestry with Adam and Eve.)

'And who has been looking after the old lady?' asked the doctor.

'We have, of course,' said Wilf.

I kicked him on the ankle and drowned out his surprised cry by saying loudly, 'There's an adult boarder who keeps an eye on her, but he's out at the moment.'

I meant Percy, who was out in the stables where Mick had left him tucked up in bed eating toast and hot milk.

'Then I haven't time to meet this boarder. I'll have to see the old lady now. What did you say her name was? And why aren't your parents here?'

'Her name is Miss McAllister, and our parents aren't here because they both have a very busy night,' I said.

The three of us had done our best to get Miss McAllister ready for this visit (short of telling her about the doctor). We had lit a fire in the bedroom fireplace and it had warmed the room up. We had even made some soup by boiling chopped vegetables and chucking in some salt. We fed the soup to Miss McAllister spoonful by spoonful, and after a while she got the strength to give whispered orders to Wilf about the chooks and to Mick and me about keeping the wood dry. A bit later I fed Miss McAllister an egg-flip well laced with sugar and you could hear the strength coming back into her voice.

As soon as Miss McAllister saw the doctor walk in, I knew things were going to be difficult.

'Who's this?' Miss McAllister turned enraged eyes on me as I stood by her bedside.

'We got you a doctor,' I said.

'I don't need a doctor. Anyway, that's not a doctor. Get that imposter out of my room.'

The doctor went straight to the bedside and tried to shake hands. 'I'm Dr D'Angelo. Do you mind if I ask you some questions, Miss McAllister?'

'I do mind. I won't have quacks in this house.'

'Quacks?'

'Yes ... cheats, interlopers, pretenders.' Miss McAllister was silenced by a fit of coughing.

'Miss McAllister, I am a doctor, and I need to ask you some questions and listen to your chest. Could I have your

Medicare number?’

‘What’s she talking about?’ Miss McAllister asked me.

‘Okay, we’ll leave that for the moment,’ said Dr D’Angelo.

‘We’ll leave that whole business and you will kindly leave the room this minute,’ said Miss McAllister pointing a crooked finger at the door.

‘Miss McAllister, I could have you put into a hospital right this minute and then transferred to an old people’s hostel. You’re not in a fit state to be living alone.’

‘You wouldn’t dare.’

‘I would.’

‘Well, then, let’s get on with those questions.’

‘Good. Now I’m afraid I need to know how old you are.’

‘I’ve forgotten.’

The rest of Miss McAllister’s answers to Dr D’Angelo’s questions were equally uncooperative. When the doctor eventually took out her stethoscope, Miss McAllister complained about that: ‘My father didn’t have to use those new-fangled things. He’d put his ear to the patient’s chest and he knew what the matter was. Now that’s a real doctor.’

‘Well, I’m a real doctor, too – and a lot more of my patients survive today because of advances in modern medicine. Roll over.’

Dr D’Angelo listened to Miss McAllister’s back,

tapping all over it with a thud, thud sound. She listened to her chest and then used an instrument with a light to look up Miss McAllister's nose, down her throat and into her ears.

'An outrage!' Miss McAllister kept muttering.

The doctor tried to put a thermometer into Miss McAllister's mouth, but she tightened her lips and said between clenched teeth, 'Never know where that's been.'

Dr D'Angelo had to shove the thermometer under Miss McAllister's armpit. 'If you don't like it there, I know of one other part of the anatomy where it could go,' she said.

After a couple of minutes Dr D'Angelo read the thermometer, eyes squinting, leaning towards the light of the lamp on the dresser. She said to Miss McAllister, 'You've got a fever and you have bronchitis with a patch of pneumonia on that left lung. You're also a bit dehydrated. You need to keep up the fluids.'

Miss McAllister said nothing. She would not look at any of us, but gazed straight up at the ceiling as if something there held her fascinated.

'I'm going to visit you twice more,' said Dr D'Angelo. 'I'm going to give you a penicillin injection now and one tomorrow and the next day.'

No response.

'Roll over on your stomach, please.'

No response.

Dr D'Angelo breathed heavily. She sat her bag up on the dresser, opened it and took out a syringe and a phial of fluid. She filled the syringe and tapped it with her index finger. Holding the needle, point upwards, she said with a nod at me, 'I'll need you, but the boys can go outside.'

The boys left, shutting the door behind them.

'Take the bedclothes down,' said the doctor. I had to tug them out of Miss McAllister's bird-claw hands. She looked betrayed. She lay there in her shroud-style nightie, two colossal feet sticking out at the end. I'd never seen her feet before. The toes were twisted and the toenails were curved and yellow.

'Turn over, please,' said Dr D'Angelo.

Miss McAllister did not move.

'Turn her over,' ordered the doctor.

'I have to, Miss McAllister. We want you to get better,' I said.

Miss McAllister said nothing, but the steely little hairs on her chin vibrated. I pushed her from the shoulder and had her lying on her side, face to the wall.

'Pull her nightie up.'

After a lifetime of neck to ankle clothes, Miss McAllister was expected to bare her backside to two outsiders. Still leaning against her, I lifted the cotton nightie up to waist level. The smell was something shocking.

'Move aside. Just hold onto her shoulders,' said the doctor.

I shifted up and watched the doctor preparing to plunge the needle into Miss McAllister's sad, scrawny bit of bottom. The doctor's face was tense with concentration. I winced as the needle pierced the sagging flesh. At the same moment, Miss McAllister's top leg kicked back and connected with the doctor's face. Dr D'Angelo staggered back, tripped on a rug and crashed backwards into a coat stand. The stand toppled over and the doctor disappeared under a pile of coats and hats. Miss McAllister lay silently on her side with the syringe quivering indignantly in her bottom.



Chapter 28

WHEN WE HELPED DR D'ANGELO OUT THE DOOR, PATTING her arm and carrying her bag for her, the last thing she said was, 'I'll be back.'

The next evening, Mum expected me to go to Wilf's Parent-Teacher interview with her. Weeks before, she had booked tickets for a 'Back to the Sixties Night'. Dad would not go with her and he refused to go to the Parent-Teacher night either. 'Too many bossy females,' he said.

This meant that Mick was the one who had to go to Miss McAllister's. When Dr D'Angelo turned up, she expected Mick to help her.

'The Doc made me hold Miss McAllister's legs for the injection this time,' he said. 'The old girl pongs and she

wouldn't talk to either of us.'

The third afternoon I went across to Miss McAllister's on my own. Mick had taken off somewhere with his mates; 'workers compensation for exposure to dangerous fumes,' he said as he ran out the door at home.

Miss McAllister was tough. Each night we left a jug of lemon juice next to the bed. It was lemon juice, leftovers from home and our vegetable soup that she had to live on. Percy's offerings of stale bread and biscuits were left untouched. Despite a rattling cough, by the third night Miss McAllister was looking better. She must have realised the injections were working, because she behaved like a lamb (a silent one) for the doctor.

As Dr D'Angelo was getting ready to leave, she said, 'Miss McAllister, I'm not at all happy with the conditions under which you struggle to live. I'm giving you an ultimatum. Unless you install adequate heating and lighting, I will arrange for you to be transferred to a nursing home.'

'What happened to democracy?' Miss McAllister asked. Dr D'Angelo didn't bother to answer.

'You have a fortnight to complete the installation. In the meantime here's two days' supply of antibiotics and a script for more. I'm satisfied that you are improving. I'll be back in a fortnight with a social worker.'

'Social worker? What does a social worker do? Organise dance parties?' asked Miss McAllister.

'In a manner of speaking. She'll keep you on your

toes,' said the doctor, scribbling an account and handing it to Miss McAllister. 'And judging by your capacity to kick, you'll find that quite easy.'

Miss McAllister grunted as she took the account. 'I'll pay for this now. Due to my illness, I have not been able to procure my living expenses in my usual manner, but I have a little on standby. Cassandra, lift the pot out of the commode there. Underneath you'll find a bag hooked to the cane.'

Emptying the bowl in the commode had been a job one or the other of us had had to face every day since we'd been looking after Miss McAllister. It was a foul job and we'd never wasted time looking for buried treasure. But sure enough, when I looked closely I saw a cotton bag. It was stuffed with pound notes that predated the decimal system by years.

'Safe as houses, wouldn't you say, Doctor?' Miss McAllister smiled sweetly.

'A hiding place worthy of someone like you,' said Dr D'Angelo.

Miss McAllister paid the doctor with five ten-pound notes and the doctor wrote her a receipt.

I saw the doctor to the front door. When I got back to Miss McAllister, she was sitting up against her pillows, her face in a storm.

'I'd rather die than leave my home. And I'm not going to have a stranger tell me how I'm going to live here either.

Electricity! It's dangerous to the health!

I sat down on the chair next to the bed.

'You're making it impossible for yourself,' I said. 'That doctor means what she says.'

'That doctor wouldn't be meddling in my affairs if it wasn't for you.'

'Look, I couldn't let you die.'

'You had no right to make that decision. A fast death here or a slow death in some institution – it's the same.'

'Well, just fix up the place like the doctor says. Use some of the money in your flour sack.'

'Fires and lanterns were acceptable for thousands of years. What is so superior about all your gadgetry of the last seventy years?'

'It's faster. It's efficient and easy and safe. You'll be less tied down,' I said. 'You'll find you have much more time for leisure.'

Miss McAllister's eyes went all watery. 'What you don't seem to realise is that I like the way I live.'



Chapter 29

A WEEK PASSED WITHOUT MICK AND ME DOING A THING about Miss McAllister's problems. We were out of our depth. Mick wasn't coping at all. It had been fun while Miss McAllister was well, but he could not handle playing nurse. Mick went back to his mates and the skate-board bowl.

I was angry at being left to do the after-school visits on my own. The fun was gone for me, too. I was the enemy. Miss McAllister hardly spoke to me. I fed Dot and the cat, emptied the commode, made sure Miss McAllister got her antibiotics and checked that Percy was bringing her snacks and drinks. I changed her sheets and snuck the dirty ones home to wash in our washing machine. I made sure Miss McAllister had a hot meal every afternoon. She barely

touched her food. All this time neither of us mentioned the looming visit of the doctor and social worker or the electricity problem.

School kept me busy, too. Shauna Andrews got dumped by Peter Murphy. For a whole three days Shauna was so devastated that she stopped snipping her split ends during classes. On the Wednesday, Peter came up to me in the corridor and asked to borrow some Science notes he was missing. Shauna saw us talking and, once Peter had walked away, she chucked an apple at me and called me a 'sneaky slut'. The apple missed me and splattered over the lockers behind me. 'Who's the slut?' I yelled back.

The vice-principal appeared at the exact time I was calling Shauna a slut and returning a piece of apple to her by airmail. Shauna was too wild with jealousy to let a mere vice-principal stop her from saying something unprintable. We both got a lunchtime detention.

But the detention was a sweet time for me. While Shauna sulked in one corner of the school office, I sat across the room daydreaming and re-living every moment of my conversation with Peter, the way he had smiled and touched my arm when he said, 'Thanks a lot.' I was also enjoying the fact that the beautiful Shauna was actually jealous of me.

The same day, our Social Science teacher, Ms Hall, with her military crewcut and bitter face, was going on again about the washing machine liberating women.

'Where has all this free time got us?' I asked. 'Are we any

happier?' I was thinking of Dad on his backside watching TV and Mum never home with us. Miss McAllister was content to live without time-saving devices. Happiness had to be a more complicated thing than Ms Hall made out.

'If you're a slave you can be unaware of how unhappy you actually are,' she said.

'If you think you're happy, aren't you happy?' I asked.

The class was bored and they started on one of their favourite distractions – chucking pellets of eraser round the room. Ms Hall was midway in a lengthy explanation of why it's possible to think you are happy but, in fact, be very unhappy before she noticed the missiles. We spent the rest of the lesson having to pick bits of rubber off the floor while Ms Hall lectured us on our need for 'consciousness raising'.

Home had its dramas that week. On the Thursday, Dad forgot Mum's birthday for the second year in a row, which was quite an achievement considering I'd reminded him a couple of times earlier in the week.

'We're getting too old for presents, anyway,' Dad told Mum as he gave her a kiss and a pat on the bum at breakfast.

Mum started crying. Dad stomped out the door and returned half an hour later with a mock-cream sponge-cake.

'You know I hate mock-cream,' Mum said.

'Do you blame me for forgetting your birthday when

you always manage to make a scene about it?' Dad yelled. Then he left for work, slamming the door behind him.

Mick and I tried to cheer Mum up with our presents: some chocolates from Mick and some hand and body lotion from me. Wilf gave Mum a parcel wrapped in paper he'd kept from his last birthday. The paper was covered in photographs of cars. Mum smiled through her tears and unwrapped a model dinosaur.

By the Friday I was in no mood for Miss McAllister's sulky behaviour. As I picked up yet another uneaten meal to carry back to the kitchen, I said, 'It's time you got out of that bed and got some exercise.'

Miss McAllister turned her head to the wall.

'You've got a week to get your act together. If the doctor and social worker see you like this, you can kiss goodbye to this place,' I said.

'I won't be here.'

'What do you mean?'

'They'll have to carry me out dead.'

'You don't mean that.'

'I do.'

She meant it. It was a full-on hunger strike. Wilf and I spent a whole Saturday afternoon going in and out of her room, trying to tempt her into eating and drinking. Even Wilf's innocent way of chatting endlessly about dinosaurs didn't work. Percy was in a state, just following Wilf and me around like a shadow.

On the Sunday morning I made Mick come. Miss McAllister had a soft spot for Mick. Wearing his red and black basketball singlet with the number 24 front and back, he strolled, all confidence, into the bedroom.

'You're missing an ace day out there,' he said.

I left it to Mick and headed out the back to chop some kindling for the stove. Next thing, Mick was banging the wire screen door behind him as he ran down the steps.

'She's dying. You should have told me,' he said.

I leant on the axe. 'I told you she was giving up. Let's go inside and talk about it.'

Wilf was sitting at the kitchen table playing with some lead soldiers he'd found in a box under Stuart's bed. Percy was supposed to be the general of the enemy army, but he couldn't catch on to the idea of knocking down Wilf's men. Every time Wilf knocked down one of Percy's soldiers, Percy would smile a broken smile and set the fallen man upright again.

'No, Percy! Leave them lying down,' cried Wilf in despair.

Mick and I sat down at the table.

'He doesn't know a thing about war,' said Wilf scornfully.

'Forget about your pretend war. We've got a real war,' I said.

'How come?' asked Wilf.

'We've got to stop Miss McAllister from wanting to

die, and somehow we've got to stop the doctor and social worker from wanting to modernise the place.'

'You haven't a hope in hell of stopping people like that. They've got authority,' said Mick.

'Well, if they win, Miss McAllister will die. We're back to the start again. It's hopeless.' I leant on the table, my head in my hands.

'Why don't you trick them?' said Wilf.

'How do you mean?' I asked.

'I don't know how, but couldn't you let them think Miss McAllister was going to go along with their plans?'

Mick leant across the table and gave Wilf a friendly thump on the shoulder.

'You're coming down out of the clouds, mate! Welcome back to earth.'

'I don't follow either of you,' I said. 'They're going to insist on inspecting the "improvements".'

'That's the challenge,' said Mick, 'and we're going to meet it head on. Wilf, boy, you've given me a reason for living.' And Mick thumped Wilf again – a bit hard, but you could tell Wilf was too pleased with the attention to object.



Chapter 30

WE HAD TWO MAJOR JOBS. THE FIRST WAS GETTING MISS McAllister fit. Mick drew up a series of exercises that got a bit more demanding each day. I had to persuade him that press-ups for day six were a bit much to ask of an old lady. Other than that, his program was pretty sensible. The first two days were a worry. Miss McAllister had to hang on to my arm to walk. But by day three she was creaking around the house unaided. On day five she ventured into the garden, and was fully involved with our plans by day six.

Our other challenge was to find a list of essentials that we'd drawn up. This included a length of bell wire, two twelve-watt globes, a lamp generator for a bike, two table lamps, an electric stove and a fridge.

The larger items on the list had us worried, but luck was with us. We got the lamps from home and we found a three-plate electric stove (with oven) lying on our street's nature strip waiting for the garbage collection. The owner saw us inspecting the stove and offered to load it onto the wheelbarrow we'd borrowed from our place. The offer was on the condition that we promised not to bring the stove back. It took Mick and me more than twenty 'breathers' before we got it to Miss McAllister's.

We didn't have the same luck with a fridge. People were hanging onto their old fridges that week. In the end we asked Mr O'Hagen if we could borrow his small bar fridge that he would stock up with beer once a year when the Melbourne Cup was on. He had a mate called Derek who would visit on that one day and they would drink the contents of the fridge dry.

'It's for a surprise party,' I explained without really lying.

'All in a good cause,' Mr O'Hagen said as he wrapped the fridge in a chenille bedspread and helped us lift it onto our wheelbarrow.

'Hoo-roo,' he said. 'Just as long as it's back for Cup Day.' He stood there waving while Mick and I, each holding a wheelbarrow handle, staggered down the street trying not to let the strain show on our faces.

At school that week Mick had surprised his Science teacher with a re-awakened interest in last term's science

and electricity syllabus. Being a dedicated teacher who had often written on school reports that he was disappointed that Mick's intelligence had failed to be challenged, Mr Schmidt stayed behind after school one afternoon to answer Mick's questions.

By the Thursday before the social worker's Friday visit, we had everything in place, even an unexpected bit of treasure. That week, Dad had at last fallen to the flu bug that had got us weeks before. He was convinced he was going to die. Mum moved onto the couch in the lounge room so that Dad could have the bed to himself. While he lay in a darkened bedroom, we tiptoed about rejoicing in the possession of his mobile phone.

On Thursday evening Mick and I showed Miss McAllister how to use the mobile phone. Half an hour later, when we were in another room, we heard her answer a phone call in the kitchen.

'Are you there?' she shouted. 'Good as New Car Yards?'

Later we learnt that the caller was a salesman trying to contact Dad about an irate customer whose bargain car had broken down a week after he had bought it. We walked in to hear Miss McAllister saying, 'What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his soul? Automobiles are not to be depended upon like the good old horse. Just give the gentleman his money back.' Something else was said and Miss McAllister replied, 'That's my pleasure. I

understand how easy it is to forget simple solutions. Good afternoon.’ She put the phone down and said to us, ‘A nice man. He did sound a bit flustered, though. He said I’d “made his day”.’

Because the social worker was arriving at eleven the next morning, we stayed for the night so that we could complete preparations. Mick and I were busy with technical details in the laundry and the house. This left Percy and Wilf to light a fire in every fireplace in the house. We wanted the social worker to feel comfortably warm anywhere in the house she might go. The drawing room fireplace was a failure; it belched smoke into the room and we heard the heavy-footed thumping of a couple of angry possums dislodged from their long-time residence in the chimney. Luckily, the other fireplaces gave us no problems. By evening, the house glowed with warmth, and Mick and I agreed to get up once each during the night to keep the fires burning.

Miss McAllister spent the day cooking. She was tired and weak and had to sit to mix her ingredients, but her suggested contribution to our scheme was brilliant. Once Mick and I had finished our mission, we made ourselves Miss McAllister’s servants and ran about the kitchen and pantry getting what she needed while she worked at the table.

The most difficult task we’d had in the preceding ten days was to convince Miss McAllister to change her dress fashion for one day. I’d bought some flat black shoes and a

brown woollen skirt that was just below knee-length from the Charity Shop. Miss McAllister got in a rage and said the skirt was indecent. But eventually Mick charmed her into giving us a dress rehearsal. We let her wear one of her blouses with a cameo brooch on the collar and a cardigan. With the short skirt and modern shoes she looked like an ordinary old lady with thin, bird-like legs. Her long skirts actually suited her better.

Percy understood the situation on the eve of the visit, and he refused to go to bed in his loft. Instead he spent the night on the miner's couch in the kitchen, wrapped in a rug. Each time Mick or I got up to stoke the fireplaces, we saw Percy bending over the fuel stove, feeding it more wood.

Friday was an icy, slate-skyled day. Apart from Wilf, we were all suffering from lack of sleep. After I helped Miss McAllister dress in her frumpy new outfit, we ate a quick breakfast. Next we laid the kitchen table with Miss McAllister's heirloom white-lace cloth, her best rose-patterned china and the plates of food that had been cooked the day before. At the last moment, Miss McAllister went into a panic because there were no flowers in the vases. We were sent outside to find greenery and any flowers that were still blooming, and we'd no sooner stuffed these into vases in every room than the doorbell rang.



Chapter 31

WE WERE IN THE KITCHEN WHEN THE BELL RANG. MICK ran out the back door and Percy followed. Wilf and I went with Miss McAllister to the front door. When we opened it, there stood someone looking like a plump circus escapee. She had multicoloured hair – orange, pink and green – cut in a bob. Her eye make-up matched the hair. Her patchwork jumper hung down to just above the knees of her baggy slacks. On her feet she wore red and white striped socks and flat leather sandals with wide straps. Only the attaché case she held in one hand told us who she might be.

The social worker jiggled from foot to foot on the doorstep. ‘It’s Grizelda, isn’t it!’ she said brightly and lurched forward to shake hands with Miss McAllister.

'I am Miss McAllister,' the old lady said, shaking hands in a prim kind of way.

'My name's Felicity Derringer. My friends call me Fliss. You can, too. Dr D'Angelo sends her apologies. She's come down with the dreaded flu too.'

'Do come in, Miss Derringer.'

'Wow!' said Felicity Derringer, as she stepped into the hall and looked about her. 'What a lovely place you've got here.'

'May I introduce you to Cassandra and Wilfred?'

'I've been told about you guys. So you keep an eye on your auntie here, do you?'

'We keep an eye on each other,' I said. 'Miss McAllister sure keeps us in line.'

'Miss McAllister?' asked the social worker. 'You don't call her auntie?'

I realised my slip-up, but Miss McAllister spoke first. 'I have trained the children to talk of me to others with a more respectful title.'

'Quaint,' said Felicity Derringer. Then she went on, 'Not at school on a Friday?'

'Curriculum Day,' I said. I think it was the only full-on lie I had to tell during the visit.

'Please come into the kitchen for a cup of tea and a little something to eat,' said Miss McAllister. She led the way.

'Well, I see you've had the electricity put on,' said

Felicity Derringer looking at an electric lamp lighting the hall. 'And it's certainly comfortably warm in here.'

We followed behind the two women. I was glad Felicity Derringer didn't see the lamp light wane, surge and wane again before it steadied itself.

In the kitchen, another electric lamp glowed on the small table next to the miner's couch.

'Wow,' said the psychedelic Felicity Derringer looking at the kitchen table. If ever there was a High Tea, this was it. There were so many jostling dishes of food, there was scarcely room left on the table. 'So this is a little something.'

Miss McAllister's food psychology was a stroke of genius. You would have to be anorexic to resist Miss McAllister's cooking.

'Do sit down,' said Miss McAllister.

Felicity Derringer started on the Scotch-eggs, moved on to the meat pie with the light, crusty pastry, sampled the savoury fish on rice, tried a few delicate cucumber sandwiches, launched into the scones, jam and cream, hoed into the trifle, devoured half the light-as-air cream sponge, before finally refusing the lemon-meringue pie.

'Can't,' she gasped, pulling at the elastic waist of her slacks. 'I made myself sick on my ninth birthday by eating too much lemon-meringue pie and it has still lost its appeal for me.'

'Just like me and pavlova!' said Wilf.

'How unfortunate,' said Miss McAllister looking

alarmed. I imagine she was thinking of what had gone into Felicity Derringer in the last half hour. Wilf and I guided the social worker across to the miner's couch where she lay down with a sigh. Miss McAllister made a fresh pot of tea. We gave Felicity Derringer a cup and she sipped and burped a little and recovered enough to try Miss McAllister's shortbread biscuits.

'I really shouldn't,' Felicity said, taking two off the plate. At that moment she looked at the lamp on the table next to her. Like the hall lamp had done, the light was dimming almost to nothing from time to time.

'What's the matter?' she asked. It was a dangerous moment.

'I'm sure I don't know,' said Miss McAllister looking to me for help. 'Most curious.'

'It's ... the power workers,' I said. 'They're fixing something today ... I'll be back in a jiff. I just have to check the laundry.' I bolted outside.

Inside the laundry, Mick was sitting on his bike. A rope was attached to the upright bar under the saddle in a perpendicular line to the rafter above. Only the front wheel of the bike was on the ground; the back wheel was off the ground. Percy stood in front of the bike struggling to keep it steady by holding onto the handlebars. It must have been like holding onto the horns of a steer. The bike jumped and veered from side to side. No rodeo ride could have been more hellish, for this one had gone on for at least half an

hour and the end was not in sight. Mick's face was heart-attack red; he was leaning forwards, pedalling with the slow motion of complete exhaustion.

'She gone?' Mick panted, still pedalling.

'She's still eating. She's a guts. We haven't even begun the inspection yet.'

'I can't ... keep ... this up ... much longer.'

'You've got to, Mick. I'll come back in a while.'

Back inside, Felicity Derringer was sampling some Anzac biscuits. Between chomps she said, 'We should get down to business.' She picked up the attaché case, settled it on her knees, opened it and took out a pad and biro. 'I just have to ask you a few questions.'

'Of course,' said Miss McAllister, seating herself on a chair near the couch.

'Now, we're not wanting to intrude. It's just that Dr D'Angelo's report urgently called for some modern conveniences – electricity and basic electrical appliances. I can see you have a mobile phone in here, the electricity is connected, and you have installed a stove and a fridge. But why are you still using that old wood stove, Miss McAllister?'

'I simply don't intend to run up big electricity bills,' said Miss McAllister matter-of-factly.

'That's typical of your generation. You're all so careful. We've got a lot to learn from you oldies about conservation issues.'

‘Quite,’ said Miss McAllister, her chin whiskers beginning to tremble with irritation.

‘Now, Miss McAllister, it’s also part of my job to tell you about the facilities and activities available to you.’ Felicity Derringer told Miss McAllister about Meals-on-Wheels, occupational therapy at the Community House, lawn bowls, and sing-a-longs and outings with the elderly citizens.

Miss McAllister broke in, ‘I am a busy woman. Please come here.’ She showed Felicity Derringer the pantry with its shelves of bottled apples and pears, brandied oranges and apricots, jars of pickled vegetables and chutneys, and its jams like gleaming black and ruby jewels.

‘Wow!’ exclaimed Felicity Derringer.

Miss McAllister then led Felicity Derringer to the kitchen window. They both looked out onto the model vegetable garden, still producing broad beans, cabbages, brussel-sprouts and broccoli in winter. The chooks were pecking away under bare fruit trees.

‘Unreal,’ said Felicity Derringer in a whisper.

‘It’s very real,’ said Miss McAllister. ‘And it comes from being well occupied. I thank you for suggesting I might need therapy, but my best therapy remains around my beloved home.’

‘Miss McAllister, you’re a great role-model,’ said Felicity Derringer. ‘I’d love to pick your brains. Off the record, of course. Would you mind?’

How could Miss McAllister say she minded? Her freedom rested on her appearing to be a well-adjusted human being.

‘Not at all. Do sit down and we’ll have another cup of tea.’

All of us – Wilf, Miss McAllister and I – glanced at the kitchen clock. This extra time would be putting an unbearable strain on Mick and Percy.

‘Better check that laundry again,’ I said and I ducked out.

When I got to Mick, he was trying to pedal and rest his head on the bike’s handlebars at the same time. He looked close to collapse. Percy was grunting at him in a way which I knew was meant to coax Mick into sticking at it.

‘Gone?’ Mick grunted.

‘No way. She loves the place. She’s one of those alternatives who’s found her guru.’

‘Get ... rid of her. I’m ... stuffed.’

‘Hold on, Mick. We can’t lose ... we’re so close.’

Back in the kitchen, Felicity Derringer had launched into the republican debate. Miss McAllister’s eyes were bulging. Up till now she had been adjusting to the existence of Queen Elizabeth II. She began to get agitated when Felicity Derringer spoke about changing the Australian flag and getting rid of the Union Jack up in its corner.

‘My brothers died under that flag for people like you.’

Felicity Derringer swiftly changed the topic of

conversation to seed hybridisation. Miss McAllister had lots to say about her own seed collection methods. 'The vegetables I eat today are the great-grandchildren of the vegetables my father grew.'

'Wow!' said Felicity Derringer again. Then she wanted to know what Miss McAllister thought about sex and violence on TV.

'The less I see of TV the better,' said Miss McAllister.

The final question was about women's rights and the women's movement. Miss McAllister tapped her head with a gnarled finger. 'For both men and women, the prison is in here.'

Finally, Felicity Derringer rose to her feet. 'I could listen to you forever, but I've got another case back at the office. As far as I'm concerned, this case is closed. Thank you for your hospitality.'

The light in the kitchen started wavering dramatically. Miss McAllister thought of the perfect decoy. She walked to the dresser and took down an old chipped plate; she put the remaining half of the sponge cake on it and wrapped the whole thing in a clean tea-towel.

'This is for you, my dear. Keep the plate and tea towel as a memento of this happy visit.'

I knew Miss McAllister too well. She was making sure that Felicity Derringer could not use returning the plate as an excuse for another visit. The three of us walked Felicity Derringer back down the hall to the front door.

‘You’re a gem, Miss McAllister. I’ll have this cake for my supper tonight. I think there must have been a bit of a misunderstanding between you and Dr D’Angelo.’

‘I did think she was a rather overwrought young woman. She was run off her feet, poor thing,’ said Miss McAllister.

‘And you don’t resent the installation of electricity here?’

‘Not at all. I can assure you it won’t interfere in the slightest with my accustomed way of life.’

‘How positive. Really flexible. You have a mind set we could all do with.’ Felicity Derringer paused, then turned to Wilf and me. ‘You’re lucky having such a national treasure in your own family.’

I gave Miss McAllister a smacking great kiss on her wrinkly cheek. ‘We love our Aunty Grizel,’ I said.

Miss McAllister looked horrified.

The light in the hall went out completely for about three seconds, surged back to life, dimmed and surged again.

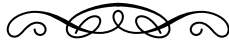
‘Bye, folks!’ said Felicity Derringer as she stepped onto the verandah. ‘And thanks again for the sponge.’

‘Made in the fuel stove. The electric one is quite hopeless with sponges,’ said Miss McAllister.

As soon as the door had closed, Miss McAllister did a little jig. ‘We did it, my dearies! Oh lordy, Mick and Percy!’

Wilf and I ran down the hall with its light flashing

and flickering like drunken morse-code, raced through the kitchen and out to the laundry. Mick was leaning over his bike, the back section swinging wildly from left to right. Percy was still clinging to the handlebars trying to steady the bike. Before I could deliver the good news, the bike crashed to the ground throwing Percy and Mick to the floor with a terrible crash that somehow included buckets and the washboard as well. At the same moment, the dim electric light shining from the kitchen window went out forever.



Chapter 32

NOT LONG AFTER FELICITY DERRINGER LEFT, WE returned Dad's mobile phone and Mum's lamps. The next day we staggered back with Mr O'Hagen's fridge in the wheelbarrow. The electric stove was a problem, until Miss McAllister told us to leave it where it was. She threw a checked cloth over the top and plonked a pot plant on that; she said she would use the oven to store pots and empty jars.

Miss McAllister looked normal again in her long skirts and dresses. Despite a cough that never left her, she was still pretty active. She cooked, did a bit of gardening, pruned her fruit trees and roses, and helped Percy and Wilf clean out the chook shed. Mick and I made sure she had a

good supply of chopped wood. She found time to read and do jigsaw puzzles, too. Any afternoon we dropped in that winter, there would be a jigsaw puzzle lying half-done on the kitchen table. We'd make a space for ourselves amongst the silver teapot, the vase of flowers, the cuttings sitting in jars of water and the family recipe book lying open and blotched with flour. Each of us would have a go at putting in a piece of the jigsaw; you couldn't walk past the table without having a try.

School was still something that had to be survived. The bright spot was that Peter Murphy seemed to be going out of his way to be friendly to me. I walked two feet off the ground. One lunchtime when we were in the library, he said to me, 'You're the first girl I've felt I can really talk to. You're different. You've got ideas. It's like you've seen more of life than I have.'

Typical me, I wondered whether Peter found it easy to talk to me because he was not romantically interested. I moped around for a while hating my nose, the colour of my eyes and anything else about me I didn't like. But eventually I decided I'd rather be special as a friend than not special in any way. It was a start.

One rainy afternoon at the end of July, the activity in Miss McAllister's kitchen got too much for me. Wilf was teaching Percy to make playdough, Mick was trying to

train Dot to balance a ball on her nose like a seal, and Miss McAllister was sorting through a bag for scraps to make a rag rug. I headed for the drawing room and sat in the big chair next to the table where the family Bible lay. I flicked it open at the front page where the family tree ended with Miss McAllister and her brothers. For the second time I looked at Miss McAllister's birth date and this time got a jolt. Her 98th birthday would be in a little over a month – September 6th.

Later on at home, the boys came into my bedroom and we discussed what we would give Miss McAllister for her birthday. For a while we couldn't agree.

'What's hard is that she doesn't want anything. She's sort of contented,' said Mick.

'But we have to let her know she's important to us,' I said.

'I've got it!' said Mick. 'A balloon ride.'

'A balloon ride?' Wilf and I spoke more or less together.

'Yeah. Don't you remember? A while back she said it was the one thing in her life she wished she'd done.'

I did remember and I felt a dark jealousy. How could Mick come up with such a brilliant idea when he usually thought of no one but himself? It should have been my idea. I tried hard to push away the bad feelings.

'It's bloody beautiful, Mick. You're a legend.'

Once I'd got that out, the jealousy was easier to handle

and we spent the next half-hour planning. As usual, Mick nominated me to do the hard slog. The following evening, after a hassle of a search through the phone book, I rang enquiries and got the number of a hot-air balloon business. Three days later we received an envelope from 'A Lot of Hot Air'. It contained two pages of printed material, a map (the launching site was a two-hour drive from the city) and a cover note. The three of us were sitting on my bed as I read the note aloud.

Dear Madam,

Thank you for your enquiries regarding our hot-air ballooning activities.

We are happy to inform you that our flight program extends over both days of each weekend, depending on weather conditions. We provide an early-morning and late-afternoon flight, as these are the times when the weather tends to be more settled.

Please note that it is up to you to be punctual. The early-morning flight requires you to be at the appointed meeting place half an hour before sunrise.

In the accompanying material you will learn a little more about hot-air balloons. Please read all the information carefully.

Yours faithfully,

Jack Van der Sluys

Flight Manager

Mick and Wilf kept grabbing at parts of the letter.

‘Unreal. Twenty metres high!’ said Mick.

‘Up to eight passengers in a wicked basket,’ read Wilf.

‘Why a “wicked basket”?’

‘Wicker basket, dumbbo,’ said Mick. ‘A great big cane thing.’

‘Minimum age, eight years old,’ I said. ‘Miss McAllister definitely qualifies.’

‘Oh, shit.’ Mick’s voice dropped.

‘What’s up?’ I asked.

‘One hundred and fifty dollars. That’s what’s up.’

We were all silent, peering at the figures to double-check that Mick had got it right. I read aloud: ‘Morning flights together with a champagne breakfast, traditional French style – \$150.’

‘She could go without the breakfast,’ said Wilf.

‘That would probably knock off a whole five dollars,’ I said. ‘Going without a glass of wine and a croissant isn’t going to save the day.’

‘Well, that’s it,’ said Mick gloomily and he started to walk out of my room. That got me angry.

‘Hang on. It’s not off. It just means it’s not going to happen straightaway. We’ll work for the money.’

‘How about washing cars like the Scouts do?’ said Wilf, his eyes shining.

‘Why not?’ said Mick and he joined us again to discuss some money-making schemes.

When Dad heard we were going to earn some pocket money, he was as positive as he ever gets. 'Glad to see youse off your butts and learnin' a bit about the real world.' He went back to reading his TV guide before adding, 'Take a bit of the pressure off me, too.'

To get car-wash jobs, we knocked on doors up and down our street and around the corner over five afternoons in one school week. We washed twelve cars and made sixty dollars. The enterprise ended when Wilf accidentally played the hose through the open window of a new car and Mick deserted saying, 'Gotta have some space.' He disappeared for most of the weekend with his skateboard and his mates.

The Bellinis at the corner shop gave me my next job. On the Saturday afternoon Wilf and I had walked into their shop to buy some lollies. We found Mrs Bellini having a kind of breakdown; her apron was over her head and she was bawling her eyes out, three of her tribe of children hanging onto her in fear. Mr Bellini was waving his hands about and shouting. The youngest children, the two-year-old twins, were happily scrabbling through a pile of tins they had just pulled off the shelves.

'Holy Mother!' shouted Mr Bellini. 'Never have twins, Cassie.'

'We'll help pick this stuff up, Mr Bellini,' I said.

'They will just pull it all off again,' said Mr Bellini tugging at this hair.

'No more the twins! No more the children! No more

the shop!' cried Mrs Bellini.

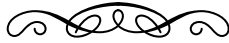
Things were bad. Mr Bellini ran to his wife and put his arms around her. 'A holiday with the sister, mia cara,' he said. 'For a whole weekend.'

And so it was arranged that I would look after the twins in a week's time, from the Friday afternoon until the Monday morning. It was going to be worth a hundred dollars.

I should have been paid in gold. The Friday evening went fine. The twins, Mario and Maria, were worn out from their day's rampage. They went to bed early and I did a great job of tidying up the Bellinis' little house behind the shop. But on Saturday morning the twins had created a silent disaster in their room; the curtains were off the rails and every cupboard and drawer had been emptied onto the floor. While I stood in the doorway looking stupefied, they dived past me and, big smiles on their faces, created chaos wherever they went. I recaptured them, straight-jacketed them into their high-chairs and gave them their porridge, which they preferred to put on each other's heads. The other Bellini children, sitting at the kitchen table, shrugged.

The highlight of the weekend was a trip to the supermarket: Mr Bellini's shop had run out of disposable nappies. I lost the twins in the biscuits aisle and, after getting the whole store in a panic about kidnapped children, I found them sitting in some bushes near the car park sharing a packet of chocolate biscuits.

On the Sunday I put the twins through a physical education program that made *Survivor* look wimpish. It included a kind of death march, both kids in harness, for about four kilometres round the neighbourhood. By Sunday night they were tame with exhaustion. When Mrs Bellini returned at 8 o'clock on Monday morning I got my pay, a big hug and a St Christopher's medal. 'I could have done with this medal over the weekend,' I said.



Chapter 33

MISS McALLISTER'S BIRTHDAY WAS ON THE FRIDAY following my babysitting marathon. I headed straight for her place after school. As I jumped down off the wall into the garden, I saw her leaning on a spade in the front garden, her black skirt all muddy round the hem.

'I thought you'd forgotten me,' she said.

'We'd never forget you, Miss McAllister,' I said.

'Indeed?'

'Well, you'd never get over a shock like that.'

'Get along with you!' Miss McAllister pretended to lunge at me with her spade. 'Go and chop some wood.'

By now my palms had toughened up. I enjoyed chopping a good piece of wood – eyeing the weak spot

and hearing the satisfying split. I picked up the axe. Mid-swing, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Percy bobbing and lurching towards me. When he was close, he thrust out a hand holding a yellow, weedy flower. I thanked him and took the flower, sticking the stem through a hole in my jumper.

'Percy, it's Miss McAllister's birthday today. Wilf and Mick will be over soon with the cake and things. Let's pick some flowers for the birthday chair.'

Percy's good eye lit up. He smiled his broken smile and lumbered off to the stables. He reappeared with secateurs, and ten minutes later we had a basketful of early spring flowers. While Miss McAllister was still out the front, Percy and I decorated the birthday chair in the dining room. Wilf and Mick appeared with a large box which they'd snuck past Miss McAllister without her seeing. Percy and I left the boys to do their bit.

At dusk, Miss McAllister stomped into the kitchen and was surprised to see Mick and Wilf there. Mick told her that we were doing the cooking that night. He steered her out of the kitchen telling her to clean herself up. When she reappeared in the kitchen, she was wearing another clean black skirt and she had pinned her favourite cameo brooch to the collar of her white blouse. We led her to the dining room. Percy shuffled ahead and opened the door. As Miss McAllister stepped into the room, we heard her catch her breath. We all started singing 'Happy Birthday', including

Percy, who sounded like a broken organ.

Miss McAllister touched her hands to her face. 'I'd forgotten. I'd truly forgotten. I should have remembered: it's always when the banksia is out.' She hurried to her chair and stroked the flowers. 'Beautiful,' she said and turned towards the table. 'And even a cake! Who made it?'

'Me,' said Mick trying to sound modest. 'Can you see the "G"?''

'I most certainly can,' said Miss McAllister taking a second look. A huge, meandering 'G' in chocolate icing covered the face of the cake. A solitary candle stood in the middle.

'I thought when the candles cost more than the cake, it's time to have just one,' said Mick.

'How tactful,' said Miss McAllister.

'You're 98!' Wilf burst out with admiration.

'Oh dear. So very much?' said Miss McAllister.

We sat Miss McAllister down and poured her a drink of coca-cola (Mick's choice) then Wilf offered her sliced bread with hundred and thousands (Wilf's contribution). While she sat there with Percy and Wilf for company, Mick and I went back to the kitchen to prepare the main meal, which was hamburgers with the lot. Miss McAllister made a pretty good fist of it. She even ate a fair slab of chocolate cake, even though it was so solid the knife got stuck in it; you could have used that cake as an archery target. Miss McAllister said it was the best meal that had been prepared

for her in living memory. This was both diplomatic and true, as she'd been doing all the cooking since World War I.

While Miss McAllister was contentedly leaning back in her chair, we presented her with an envelope. She took out a card. It had been designed by Wilf and on the front was an ancient woman dressed in black. Miss McAllister gazed closely at it. 'Why have you drawn a witch?'

'It's not a witch. It's you,' said Wilf.

Inside the card, Wilf had printed,

HAPPY BIRTHDAY FOR 99
SO HAVE A WILD PARTY
BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE!

Each of us had signed underneath, including Percy who had left a special scribble.

'What's this?' asked Miss McAllister holding up a piece of paper she'd found in the card.

'Go on. Read it,' I said.

Miss McAllister held it closer to a candle and read aloud, 'This receipt entitles Grizelda McAllister to one balloon ride with the "A Lot of Hot Air" balloon company. We look forward to meeting you ...'

She paused. 'I can't believe it. Do you mean that after all these jets and things, they still have hot-air balloons?'

We all nodded.

'Oh dear, this is awfully kind and thoughtful of you,

but I simply can't do this.'

'Miss McAllister,' said Mick leaning across the table towards her, 'we'll have blown our money if you don't go.'

'Blown your money,' she repeated slowly. 'I can't do that to you. But how could I possibly get to this place?'

'It's cool, Miss McAllister. We have it sewn up,' said Mick.

She touched her cameo nervously. 'Sewn up?'

'Hardly nobody is going to see you, Miss McAllister,' said Wilf, who knew that the real worry was public exposure.

It took a lot of persuasion, but when Miss McAllister saw that we planned to travel late at night, she accepted graciously. In fact, she had her things packed and ready two weeks before the flight.



Chapter 34

THE BALLOON RIDE WAS BOOKED FOR THE FOURTH Saturday in September. Dad had gone out bush to collect a car and Mum was doing three shifts more or less back to back. It fitted perfectly with our plans. The three of us arrived at Miss McAllister's around seven on the Friday evening. At 10.30 pm we set off for the railway station, an anxious Percy standing at the big front gate. Miss McAllister swept into our world wearing an ankle-length black wool cape over her usual outfit. She had on a black broad-brimmed hat with a large scarf draped over it and tied beneath her chin. I carried her hatbox and a leather case strapped tight with an old belt. Wilf carried the tent, which was in a special bag. Mick had a backpack holding the rest of our things,

which included the sleeping bags we'd been using since our early days when Mum had to dump us on friends when she did night shifts. Mick strode ahead by about five metres, supposedly as a kind of advance guard. But I knew Mick wouldn't be seen dead walking with us.

It was cold and the streets were empty. Miss McAllister looked about her like a sleepwalker dreaming. I guessed that favourite houses and trees were missing. It must have been a foreign land with misty memories weaving about her, reminding her that she was another Rip Van Winkel. Maybe worse than Rip Van Winkel, because there was not a single person left alive who had known her. Suddenly she stopped and sat down on a bus-stop seat.

'I don't know this place. Never been here before.' Her hands trembled and her breathing came in short gasps. 'I have to go back.' She looked wildly homeward.

Mick had seen Miss McAllister sit down. He walked back to us and sussed out the situation straightaway. He lowered the backpack to the ground and took out Dad's stainless steel work thermos that we'd borrowed. Soon Miss McAllister was drinking a cup of hot tea heavily laced with Dad's brandy which we'd also 'borrowed'.

We knew the situation was too delicate for us to try persuading Miss McAllister. We just had to wait. She warmed her hands around the cup, sipped her tea slowly and looked ahead, deep in thought. We said nothing.

Finally she spoke. 'All my life I have lived with fear. I

never expected to live so long.' She paused. 'Frankly, it seems a waste to have given someone like me such a long run.' She looked up at us. 'You children make a lot of mistakes, but you take big deep swigs out of the cup of life. And just this once I will drink deep with you. Some more of that lovely tea, please.'

From the moment she had finished her second cup of tea, Miss McAllister never wavered. She handed the cup back to Mick, stood up, gave her skirts a quick brush with her hands and walked with us into the night. On the way to the station we met only three people. The first man had that detached look city people have in their eyes – not focusing on anyone; he walked straight past Miss McAllister without showing any surprise or interest in her. The other two people – girlfriend and boyfriend both dressed in black – were smooching along, arms wrapped around each other. As they passed Miss McAllister, the boy said, 'Everyone's goin' Gothic', and they went on with their smooching.

At the station I bought the tickets, while Mick and Wilf led Miss McAllister to the furthest end of the platform away from a small group of people who were fighting the cold of the night, breathing out steam and stomping about pulling their coat collars up around their ears. A few minutes later, the 11.15 pm train pulled in and we entered the warm carriage.

We sat Miss McAllister on the back seat; Mick and I sat on each side of her and Wilf sat on my knee. The only

other person in the carriage was a middle-aged man. He was asleep with his head leaning at an uncomfortable angle against the window. The fluorescent lighting made Miss McAllister look even paler and older. I started to wonder if we'd done the right thing taking her out of her natural habitat, freaking her out with too many new experiences. For all of the hour and a bit Miss McAllister peered into the night with its artificial glow of suburban lights growing less and less. She didn't speak and we left her to her thoughts – they must have been racing. At one station further along the train stopped and the man woke up with a jolt and stumbled out. There were six more stops to Wooralla where we got off.

Outside the station, we found a sleeping town. Across the road was a brick building with 'Mattheson's Grain Store' painted on the window. We had made it to the country. Near Mattheson's was a taxi rank and close by was a bench. This part of the journey was the least well planned. Just as Wilf was beginning to get whingey, a taxi pulled in. I bent down to speak to the driver.

'Where you goin'?' the man asked.

'Wooralla. Box 17, Main Road,' I said. 'I've been told it's only fifteen minutes out.'

'Wanted to get back to the suburbs, but go on, get in.'

This was one tired taxi driver. He stowed our luggage in the boot and didn't even glance at Miss McAllister as Mick and Wilf helped her into the back seat. It was as if

he had seen it all and nothing interested him. He went fast along narrow, winding roads. Soon we had stopped and next thing we were standing alone in the dark, our gear all around us. It was so quiet, like nothing I'd ever experienced. Not a dead quiet, because you could hear the wind in the grass and running water somewhere. Back home it was never quiet enough to hear that.

We had arranged by telephone with the balloon man, Mr Jack Van der Sluys, to pitch a tent on his land. Mick had a three-man tent belonging to one of his mates. We had brought along a torch and we used that to find our way through the front gate and onto a bit of flat paddock where we decided to pitch the tent. The trouble was, neither Mick, Wilf nor I had ever pitched a tent. Mick took charge and gave Wilf and me Hitler-style orders. We ran about until the thing looked like it was up, then Mick crawled in to inspect it and it collapsed on him. He had to fight his way out as if it was a giant ball of playdough.

In the end, Miss McAllister took charge. We were supposed to be looking after this 98-year-old lady who had just left home for the first time in decades, but she was the one who showed us how to put the tent up. Then she sent us out to get wood for a campfire and water from the nearby creek for a billy she had packed. Getting a fire going was nothing for Miss McAllister. As the billy began to boil, we put in tea-leaves and Miss McAllister threw in some gum leaves. 'The bushman's way,' she explained.

So we sat under a starry sky and drank our tea. Later we damped down the fire and crept behind different trees and laughed at each other's splashing noises. Miss McAllister coped with the toilet arrangements as if she did it that way every day of her life. Finally, without changing our clothes, we all crawled into our sleeping bags. We had given Miss McAllister Dad's down-filled sleeping bag (which we'd also 'borrowed') and she said it was luxury.

'Nighty night,' said Wilf.

'Night,' I said.

'Bless you all,' said Miss McAllister.

'You, too,' said Mick.

'Children!' said Miss McAllister.

'Yes?' we all answered.

'I have a confession to make.'

'What?' I asked, a bit worried.

'Motor carriages are wonderfully comfortable.'



Chapter 35

‘HELLO IN THE TENT! IT’S “A LOT OF HOT AIR”!’ A hearty male voice ripped into my sleep. When I opened my eyes, it was still dark. The tent ponged of Wilf (who always had a dirty-sock smell wafting about him) and Miss McAllister (who always smelt old). I sat up and stuck my head through the tent flaps. A burly shape stood next to a four-wheel drive.

‘Hello yourself. It’s still night,’ I said.

‘Jack Van der Sluys. Your pilot.’ He slapped his gloved hands together to keep them warm as he introduced himself.

‘I’m Cassie, the one who wrote to you. The others are still trying to sleep. You’d better come back later.’

‘Sorry, love, but it’s time to pile aboard. We have to be up at the balloon before sunrise.’

‘Sure you aren’t a bit too early?’

‘Sure. It’s 5 am.’

With a thick head, I shook Mick and Wilf and started searching among the rubble for my runners. Miss McAllister, pale and bristly, was now fully awake. She sat up straight and tidied her bun, jammed her hat on top, refastened her cape, got her boots on and was first out of the tent.

‘Ho-ly cow,’ said Jack Van der Sluys slowly and softly as he looked at Miss McAllister in her long skirt and cape. ‘Looks like you’re ready for the opera, Granny.’

‘As long as this isn’t the grand finale,’ she said.

Jack grinned and held out his hand. ‘Jack’s the name. Mrs McAllister, isn’t it?’

‘Miss. How do you do?’ She shook his hand. She turned to Wilf who was hobbling around with the laces of his runners undone. He still didn’t know how to tie his own laces. Miss McAllister started giving Mick instructions about teaching Wilf to tie laces.

Jack said to me in a whisper, ‘Very ... er ... old-fashioned.’ There was a question mark in his voice.

‘Yeah,’ was all I said.

‘Is it ... er ... um ... dementia? Alzheimers?’

‘She’s just herself. She’s okay.’

‘Fine. Fine,’ said Jack still bewildered. ‘Follow me, everyone.’

We crunched across the grey-white grass snap-frozen with frost to Jack's vehicle. Soon we were bumping along a dirt road. Miss McAllister was in the back wedged between Mick and Wilf and I sat next to Jack in the front. The cabin was full of grease and oil fumes. A two-way radio hung from a bracket and greasy tools lay underfoot. Even Jack Van der Sluys' smile lines looked like there was engine grease in the creases.

'This is a nice treat to give your grandma,' Jack shouted above the noise of the engine.

'Like I said in my letter, it's been her life-long dream.'

'Well, we've got a good day for it. We'll be up for sure.'

'You mean we could have come all this way and the balloon wouldn't have gone up?'

'Yep. If there are strong winds it's damn mad to go up. If there's no wind at all, you've got problems, too. And if it's a really hot day, the balloon can't get a lift.'

'How come?'

'The air inside the balloon has to be hotter than the outside air. This time of year is a good time to fly.'

The sky was lightening by the time we'd drawn up outside a weatherboard cottage looking tiny on a stretch of flat land. Jack helped Miss McAllister out of the vehicle.

'I do hope I'm not too old for this,' said Miss McAllister. 'I've already had more novelty in the last twelve hours than in my entire lifetime.'

‘You mean roughing it in a tent?’ asked Jack as he steered her towards the front door.

‘Oh, not that. That’s nothing. I did lots of that as a young child on relatives’ farms. I mean a trip in an electric train and two rides in a motor carriage.’

The rugged-faced Jack scratched his head. He looked a confident man, sort of easy with people, but you could tell he was confused.

‘Well, that’s great you’ve had a bit of excitement, but you’re definitely not too old for a balloon ride with me. You don’t look a day over ...’ He broke off and then said, ‘It’s not age that matters, it’s weight.’

‘Weight?’

‘Yes. Our passenger balloon needs four or five people.’

‘There will be others?’ Miss McAllister was alarmed.

‘There’s a group of five businessmen coming from the city. They should be here now, in fact,’ said Jack looking at his watch. ‘Your grandkids will be ground crew. Come in now and meet my wife. She’s my partner, too.’

‘You said nothing of others to me, Cassandra.’ There was ice and panic in Miss McAllister’s voice.

Miss McAllister had no control of the situation and she knew it. I felt lousy about her being exposed to more strangers, but there was nothing I could do about it. It had never occurred to me that there would be others.

Sandy Van der Sluys stood in that one room that was kitchen, office and meeting room. She was wearing eyeball-

searing, cherry-red overalls. A mobile phone at one hip and a walkie-talkie at the other hip hung off her belt like guns in a holster.

'Hi there!' she said brightly as we trooped in. When she saw Miss McAllister in her museum outfit, her professional smile got stuck. Looking at Miss McAllister's face in the stark fluorescent lighting you could see every wrinkle and crevice and each sprouting whisker.

'Nice cup of hot tea, everybody?' asked Jack filling in the awkward moment.

'Muffins!' screeched Sandy. 'I've left them in the oven.' And she escaped to the stove.

'Sit down, everyone. We've time for tea and muffins before the other guests arrive,' said Jack.

We sat on chairs around a pine table. Jack produced a collection of colourful mugs, each with a different design of a hot-air balloon. He poured the tea from a china pot decorated with a balloon and field mice looking over the edge of the basket.

'Charming,' said Miss McAllister looking at her cup. Like someone facing an unavoidable fate, she had resigned herself bravely. She was too far from home to do anything about it. Besides, she couldn't throw a tantrum in front of Jack and Sandy.

'Look at the posters, Cassie!' said Wilf.

Glossy posters of brilliant-coloured hot-air balloons hung around the walls. Wilf pointed out that almost every

object in the room had a balloon motif – the place-mats, plates, a clock, the rug on the floor. And there was a shelf crammed with children's books all with hot-air balloon themes.

'I reckon we must be in the wrong place. We brought Miss McAllister here for a balloon ride,' joked Mick.

'This is just to remind you that you've reached your destination,' said Jack.

'Can't get these to rise properly,' said Sandy carrying a tray of hot muffins to the table. 'I've tried every brand of flour.' Anyone could tell she was talking for the sake of it, trying not to stare at Miss McAllister.

'Bicarbonate of soda,' said Miss McAllister.

'Bicarb?'

'Just a teaspoon. Works wonders.'

Sandy sat at the table with her eyes fixed on Miss McAllister's face. I knew she was trying not to look at the beard. And I knew from experience that the more you tried not to, the more you had to look.

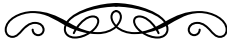
'Works wonders?'

'Yes. And do you sift your flour three times?'

'I've never sifted flour.'

While us kids performed a magical disappearing trick with the muffins, a friendship began. Ninety-eight years of knowing how to 'do things properly' bridged the gap. Sandy and Miss McAllister were still discussing cooking secrets when some minutes later Jack stood up and said,

'Well, we'll have to start setting up. The others said they'd be here by now.'



Chapter 36

IN THE LEAD-COLOURED DAWN, WE HELPED WITH FROZEN fingers to unfold the balloon and lay it out – all twenty metres of it – across the ground. Jack told us that when inflated it would be the height of three houses. Overhead, the stars had faded. A needle of sunlight pierced and coloured what we could now see was a wide valley ringed by hills.

‘Got a bit lost? You’ll be here in ten minutes? That’s fine.’ Sandy put away her mobile.

‘We’ll start inflating,’ said Jack.

The balloon was flat on the ground with the strings attached to a basket lying on its side. Sandy held the bottom end of the balloon open. Jack turned on a large fan which was powered by a petrol motor. The rest of us watched the

resuscitation of this giant piece of fabric.

'I thought you had to have hot air?' shouted Mick to Jack over the chugs and whirrs of motor and fan.

'We have to fill the balloon with air before we can heat it.'

'What do you heat it with?' asked Wilf.

'The gas tanks above the gondola.' Jack pointed to gas cylinders that hung from a metal bracket above the basket.

'Gondola,' said Miss McAllister to herself. 'What a poetic name for a basket.'

The nylon fabric began to come alive. It flapped and plopped and finally filled out, a billowing sail of rainbow-coloured bands.

'Now the envelope is full, we turn on the jet,' explained Jack. 'Stand back, everyone.'

Flames shot out of the cylinders and after a few minutes the balloon began to lift a little from its horizontal position.

Sandy glanced at her wristwatch. 'The others are cutting it fine.'

Ten minutes later, like the resurrection of a mammoth, the balloon had lifted itself to its vertical position. The only thing keeping it anchored to earth were the ropes extending from the gondola to the bullbar of the four-wheel drive.

Jack was already in the pilot's section of the gondola when Mick, Wilf and I helped lift Miss McAllister into the larger passenger part. Underneath the black, crackling

material of her dress and its stiff petticoat I could feel Miss McAllister's bones. It was like lifting a bird. I was afraid we might hurt her. I think we did, because she winced and said, 'Steady now.'

'Say cheese!' called Sandy as she held up a camera to photograph Miss McAllister.

Clutching the side of the gondola with white knuckles, Miss McAllister refused to say 'Cheese'.

'If these are my last moments on earth, I'm certainly not willing to be remembered for saying such a ridiculous word.'

So Sandy took a photo of Miss McAllister with her hat pulled obstinately low over her head, looking as cheery as Napoleon. Sandy's mobile rang again and she answered it. She called to Jack, 'It's the men from Maddison and Maddison. They've got a flat tyre, would you believe it!'

'We can't wait,' Jack shouted back and then he called to me, 'Come on. You and your brothers will have to come. Sandy! You'll have to be ground crew.'

I found the foothold in the gondola and was up, over and in before Jack could change his mind. Mick landed in the basket at the same time and we both leaned over to haul Wilf in, who wailed, 'I'm too young to die!'

'He's just joking.' I smiled at Jack.

'Shut up, you little turd,' muttered Mick.

'Okay, let her go!' Jack yelled. Sandy let loose the ropes and Jack pulled them aboard.

'Balloon aloft!' called Sandy in a triumphant way.

We rose gently, but the ascent was faster than I realised. One moment you could call out to Sandy, who was still clicking away with her camera, and the next moment she was a red dot down on the ground.

It surprised me how noisy it was. The roar of the gas flames meant we had to talk loudly to be heard.

'How high are we?' I called to Jack.

'Five hundred feet up.'

'How come you talk in feet?'

'Aviation measurement never changed.'

'How high could we go?'

'As high as the stratosphere.'

'Shit!' said Mick.

Miss McAllister had stopped gripping the side of the gondola so hard. She looked like she was having some sort of spiritual experience. We left her to it – gazing and gazing as if forcing herself to remember everything. From time to time she coughed. Wilf spent the first five minutes of the flight crouched on the gondola's floor. I nudged him with my foot.

'You're an embarrassment. Get up, will you?'

'Let the gutless wonder stay there,' said Mick.

Miss McAllister became aware of Wilf, and she leant down and took his hand.

'Come, child, you're safe with me.' Wilf clung to her hand with both of his and gingerly he stood up.

‘I’m scared it’ll pop or blow up or crash or something.’

‘Well, if that is going to happen, I’ll jump out and you can ride on my back. These long skirts of mine will catch the air like a hot-air balloon.’

‘You’re an inventor,’ said Wilf. ‘How come you know about parachutes when you’ve been locked away like Sleeping Beauty?’

‘Is that what the others say?’ She grinned in that lightning quick way which left you unsure if it had really happened.

‘No, I say that. That’s who you remind me of.’

‘Well, I rather like that.’ And changing the subject, Miss McAllister pointed to the ground where a farmer on a motorbike was rounding up sheep with the help of his dog.

Seconds later I saw the balloon had drifted low over some powerlines, low enough to see a rabbit scamper out of a clump of grass.

‘What are you going to do about that?’ asked Mick pointing at the powerlines.

Jack smiled calmly and turned on the gas again. The surge of flame did not seem to make any difference. The balloon hung over the black wires for an age, until it began to respond to the extra heat and, with agonising slowness, lifted away. Mick let out a lung full of air in a savage hiss. I grinned at him to let him know I had caught him out nearly wetting himself.

'That's the spirit,' called Miss McAllister to no one in particular. 'Good show!'

'Yippee,' yelled Wilf.

'I'd like to go low again,' said Miss McAllister.

'Sure thing,' said Jack.

The balloon floated along until we came down over the tops of some trees. I could see the branches too closely. Like the time before, Jack gave a couple of blasts of flame and the balloon took a long time to lift. It was precision timing. Jack knew how to calculate the delay in response. At what seemed a definite last moment, the balloon floated up into safety where we hovered like a technicolour eagle over the valley.

'You're a plucky woman,' said Jack.

'I've got nothing to lose,' said Miss McAllister.

'Yes, you do,' said Wilf looking up at her. 'Your friends. Us.' He spread his arms wide.

Despite the warm sun shining down on us all, Miss McAllister gave another watery cough and then one of those special smiles flickered across her face.

'You mean her grandchildren,' Jack corrected Wilf.

'They are my children, my grandchildren and my friends,' said Miss McAllister.

Jack turned the gas jets off again. Apart from a bit of radio static as Jack and Sandy kept in occasional contact with each other, we floated in silence. Sunlight warmed my back. We skimmed the world, looking down at miniature

farmhouses, sheep and cattle. Up in the sky we watched a hawk hover, circle and lift. Every so often Jack gave the gas another couple of blasts and we lifted higher again. On we went, from one side of the valley to the other. We dreamed and drifted and dreamed. You didn't feel yourself going higher or lower. It wasn't like an elevator. It was much more gentle than that.

'I've got the hang of how the flame gives the extra heat to go up, but how do you change direction?' I asked Jack.

'By using the different wind currents at different altitudes.'

'And you do that by raising or lowering the balloon?'

'Correct.'

'Like sailing,' said Mick.

'A good analogy,' said Jack.

'What if an aeroplane comes along?' asked Wilf. 'How do you get out of the way?'

'Powered aircraft have to give way to unpowered,' said Jack.

'What if another balloon comes along?' Wilf asked again.

'Cut out those dumb questions,' said Mick. 'As if!'

'Your brother is doing some good thinking,' said Jack. 'There are situations where you can have lots of balloons up in the air at the one time, like balloon races.'

'How do they avoid each other?' I asked.

'The upper balloon has to give way,' answered Jack. He glanced at his watch. 'I reckon it's time for breakfast. We've been up here for almost an hour and a half.'

It had seemed shorter. Jack radioed down his landing details to Sandy, whose matchbox-sized vehicle you could see beetling along the road beneath us. Then Jack gave us landing instructions, like bending our knees before we touched the ground.

'Farewell,' called Miss McAllister to the sky.

Jack piloted the balloon over a large empty paddock. By using short bursts of flame to steady the descent, we came down gently. I was the first to spot Sandy driving towards us along a dirt road that skirted the paddock. Moments later, the gondola bumped onto the ground. Jack turned the gas off and the balloon deflated, the colourful silk rippling along the grass like mermaids' hair.

By the time we had climbed out and helped Miss McAllister out, Sandy had driven into the paddock, parked and walked over to join us. We helped fold up the balloon like an enormous bedsheet and stuff it into a large bag which was then stored inside the gondola. Next, everyone except Miss McAllister lifted the gondola onto the trailer behind Sandy's vehicle.

'Now for breakfast,' said Sandy. She and Jack handed us baskets, boxes, cushions and rugs from out of the vehicle. The grown-ups had a glass of champagne. Us kids had orange juice with a dash of champagne, and we all ate

croissants, ham, cheese and cakes. Then I stood up to toast Miss McAllister.

‘You’re the best thing that’s happened to us. Happy Birthday and many happy returns!’

‘I love you, too!’ said Wilf.

‘Speech! Speech!’ called Mick.

Miss McAllister stood up. ‘Thank you very much, indeed, for striving so hard to get me this magic carpet ride I’ve had today.’ Her voice shook a bit. ‘And my most sincere thanks to Mr and Mrs Van der Sluys for their kindness and for so generously allowing the children to accompany me on the balloon flight.’

‘Hooray! Great speech!’ shouted Mick.

‘Hold your tongue, Michael. I haven’t finished,’ said Miss McAllister. ‘In some ways, I feel I’ve reached the pinnacle of my life. Up there in the balloon I looked down on the world and everything was so very tiny and far away. My little sadnesses and disappointments were down there, too. Far away. I looked around me in the gondola and there were you young people of whom I have become so fond. I cannot express what your companionship has meant to me over these months. Thank you.’



Chapter 37

IT WAS TYPICAL OF US NOT TO HAVE FIGURED OUT HOW WE were going to get Miss McAllister back home. It had taken all our planning and energy to get her into that balloon. As it turned out, Jack offered to drive us home in his four-wheel drive. He said he had business to attend to in the city and that he might as well stay the Sunday night with a friend down there. Looking back, I can see it was kindness more than business that made him give us a lift. It was the best thing for Miss McAllister, because she was tired and coughing quite a lot.

Going with Jack was much quicker than the way we had come. In the car Miss McAllister quickly fell asleep. The modern world of expressways, shopping centres and

fast-food outlets passed her by. The world didn't see Miss McAllister and she didn't see the world.

Jack was a gentleman. He didn't ask us any probing questions. I think he had figured out a lot of the story for himself. We woke Miss McAllister just as we parked outside her house. Jack opened the car door for her and escorted her (us trailing after) through the gate into the garden and to the front door. I glimpsed Percy's anxious face peering through the curtains, then it vanished. Jack saw nothing.

'I can never thank you enough, Mr Van der Sluys,' Miss McAllister said to Jack.

'Miss McAllister, the pleasure has been all mine,' said Jack.

Then Miss McAllister gave each of us kids a prickly kiss on the cheek. Wilf beamed, Mick rubbed his off, and I bent over the tiny old lady and hugged her. Her eyes had gone all watery.

Jack dropped us and our gear off at home. He got out of the vehicle and shook our hands. 'You guys restore my faith in human nature,' he said. When he got back in his vehicle and was taking off, he called out the window, 'Sandy and I will send you copies of those photos!'

The Monday and Tuesday after the balloon flight we didn't visit Miss McAllister; we were too tired. On the Wednesday, Peter Murphy asked me to stay back at the library after school; he said he needed help with a major English assignment. I took one look at the assignment and

saw it was not very major; that was good news. He'd also not really tried very hard, so at least I could give some advice. Peter had made up an excuse to talk to me. We were sitting there in the library, Peter laughing with his head thrown back at some of the goofy mistakes I was pointing out.

'I like the way you use your brain,' he said. 'You're different from most of the girls in class.'

'How's that?'

'Well, *you* tell *me*. I bet you spend your weekends a bit differently. Like, what did you do last weekend?'

'Went hot-air ballooning.'

'Like I said! And how did you get the money for a hobby like that?'

I started telling Peter about my babysitting the Bellini twins, the porridge on the head incident and losing them in the supermarket. Peter was laughing even more than before. From there on it was easy. Did we talk! Peter was intelligent, funny, kind and a good listener. I learnt things about Peter, too. You would have thought going through Primary together we would know each other's lives pretty well, but we didn't. The Koori in Peter came on his dad's side. His dad was an artist. From the sounds of him, Peter and his dad were similar types of people – gentle, quiet, intelligent. Peter's mum was the extrovert. I could remember her from Primary, waiting after school for Peter with an old pram stuffed with kids and another couple of kids hanging onto her floaty, hippy skirts. She had long straight brown

hair and angel-blue eyes. What I hadn't known then was that she was a singer. She busked at the craft markets where Peter's dad sold his paintings.

'How come I never knew all this?' I asked.

'I can't get rid of the feeling you have a secret life, too, Cas,' Peter said.

'You're right,' I said, smiling. 'You'll find out about it one day.' Somehow I just knew there was plenty of time ahead.

On the Thursday, Mick had an after-school detention and I had to take Wilf for a dental-hospital appointment. Friday afternoon Mum had arranged for us to have haircuts – the economy sort where you get your hair washed in the kitchen sink at one of Mum's girlfriend's houses. When we got back home that evening, there was a small package from the post-office on the table. It was addressed to the three of us, Mick, Wilf and me. It had to be the photos Sandy had taken.

'Fan mail for the lot of youse,' said Dad, a tinny in one hand. He picked the parcel up. 'What's this about "A Lot of Hot Air" balloon company?'

'Give it here,' said Mick. 'It's ours. Not yours.'

'Steady on. A man can be curious if he wants to.' Dad held the package above Mick's head. 'All I get is bills. No one writes to *me*.'

In a way, it didn't matter if Dad found out about the balloon flight. We had achieved that. But letting that jerk

see Miss McAllister was another thing. Dad was the kind of man who would call in a TV investigation team – and not just for the money, either.

‘It’s for a school project, Dad,’ I said.

‘Likely,’ said Dad. ‘Not for the three of youse.’

At that point, Wilf, who had quietly climbed onto a kitchen chair, snatched the package from Dad’s raised hand and bolted out the door. We heard the front door slam. Dad looked at his empty hand in shock. Then he snarled and went to go after Wilf, but he caught his foot on the same chair Wilf had used, and crashed to the ground. Mum went to help him, but he shoved her away. Mick and I made our break. We found Wilf down at the park, sitting on a swing and clutching our parcel to his chest.

‘You’re a hero, mate,’ said Mick, ruffling Wilf’s hair.

‘Let’s have a look, Wilfie,’ I said.

Wilf opened the thick envelope and took out the photos. The first was a surprise. Sandy had snapped the three of us lifting Miss McAllister (who was like a weird black mannequin) into the gondola. The second was of Miss McAllister standing in the gondola looking grim; you could see Jack behind her pulling on the bar above his head that operated the gas jet. There was a shot of Mick and me clambering into the gondola. And there was a tear-jerker shot of Mick and me hauling Wilfie into the basket. It was a close-up and Wilf had his face turned towards Sandy as if pleading for help. It could have been an abduction scene.

There was another shot of all of us in the balloon as it was lifting off the ground: Jack was grinning and operating the gas jets; Mick was acting cool, as if he went hot-air ballooning every day of his life; I was trying to smile; Miss McAllister looked like she had changed her mind about the whole deal; and next to her you could see Wilf's hands clutching the basket and tufts of hair above two huge owl eyes peering over the basket. Next was a shot of the balloon quite high up, all the rainbow colours against the blue sky; you could see only four pin-sized heads (one in a black hat) because the fifth passenger was on the floor. Sandy had taken quite a few photos of us floating up there.

The last photos were of the picnic scene. One of the best shots was of Miss McAllister standing there making her speech. You can see her eyes are bluish and smiling. Wisps of white hair have escaped from under her hat. All the lines on her face meet upwards. Despite the whiskers, she is pretty. No, not pretty. Beautiful.

We all agreed that the next morning, being a Saturday, was a good time to visit Miss McAllister again and show her the photos. We put the photos back in their packaging, hid the package under a couple of old bricks and a bit of tin up in a corner of the playground and hoped it wouldn't rain that night.

We snuck through my bedroom window into our house. Mum knew we'd probably come through my room and she had left a note on my dressing table to say Dad was

asleep in bed. We all went to bed ourselves, woke up early the next morning and cleared off before Dad was awake.

After collecting our photos from the park hiding place, we were down at Miss McAllister's soon after 7.30 in the morning. We took our usual route down the side to the kitchen door at the back. The wire screen door was shut, but the wooden door was wide open. We walked straight into the kitchen. The friendly warmth of the room wrapped itself around us. At this hour of the morning the kitchen had a pumpkin-coloured glow. The kettle hissed and spat on the blackened stove. Everything was orderly, but when we called no one answered. Dot lay under the kitchen table thumping a welcome with her tail and whimpering at the same time.

'Something's the matter,' said Wilf.

'Shut up,' I said, irritated.

'Yes, shut it,' said Mick. 'You go check her bedroom, Cas. She's probably still in bed.'

'She gets up earlier than this,' said Wilf.

None of us wanted to go into Miss McAllister's bedroom, so we all went together. We felt relieved when we saw her bed neatly made.

'There, I told you,' said Mick. 'She's probably in some corner of the garden or down with the chooks.'

We went down to the poultry shed, but Miss McAllister wasn't there either. We called on Percy next, but he wasn't up in his attic and his little handcart was gone, which meant

he was at the market. We checked out the rest of the back garden, the laundry and then went into the house again. The clock ticked away while we opened each door.

The boy's room was as we had left it last time we slept there. No one was in the maids' rooms. Next we searched the bathroom, the white-sheeted parents' room, the study, the dining-room and lastly the drawing room with its fossilised memories. No Miss McAllister.

'We haven't had a proper look in the front garden,' I said.

'We came through that way,' said Mick.

'Only by the side path.'

We opened the front door and walked down the stone steps with the dips in them. The garden was just shouting out Spring. Flowering plants climbed and tangled with each other, looping over bushes, rambling along the verandah eaves. Miss McAllister's favourite rose, Lamarque, growing down one side of the verandah was a creamy waterfall. Soft fairy mounds of pink and blue forget-me-nots grew along the borders of the paths. This is where she would be, picking flowers or weeding.

This is where we found her. She was lying behind a giant bush of pink camellias, all crumpled on the grass, her hat knocked off, her hair all messed, her cane basket tipped over and the flowers she had cut scattered. We ran to her. Her eyes were shut. Mick and I were too scared to touch her, but Wilf picked up her bony hand.

'She's warm!' he said.

I put my fingers over her wrist to take her pulse. I felt a fluttering and at the same moment Miss McAllister opened her eyes and looked around at each of us. We sat on the ground around her.

'We're all here, Miss McAllister. We'll look after you,' I said. I took off my cotton jumper and made a pillow out of it for her.

She tried to speak, but one side of her mouth wasn't working properly. When she spoke, it was soft and husky, like she could not get enough air in. We bent close to hear.

'Wond'ful childin,' was what we made out. Then, 'Happy to die. Want you to be happy, too.'

'No, Miss McAllister. You're not going to die,' I said. 'It's quite amazing what medical science can do now. You just don't know.' I wanted to say more, to be reassuring, but something was blocking my throat.

'We'll get an ambulance,' said Wilf.

Miss McAllister gave a tiny smile and slowly lifted one hand to touch Wilf's cheek.

'Always my good boy,' she said.

'You're not going away. You can't. We need you,' said Wilf.

Miss McAllister shut and opened her eyelids like a 'yes'. 'Time to go,' she said.

'Wait,' I cried. 'Not yet. There are things I haven't told you. We do need you. All of us.'

I was running out of time to explain about Mum and Dad, the drink, the fights, the emptiness. How could I ever explain that emptiness? Mum crying because Dad would always louse up her birthday. Us wanting to get out of the house on Christmas Day because we knew Dad would get drunk. Mum hardly ever there after school, always at work or on the phone or doing some self-development course, but not there for us. Home was a boarding-house; you ate and slept there but no one fed your spirit. Not like Miss McAllister did.

With a rush of understanding, I realised that all my book-reading years I had been looking for Miss McAllister. I remembered how once in Year 7 Mrs Guerney, the librarian, had been helping me choose a book.

‘What sort of book do you want, Cassie?’

‘A cosy story,’ I had said.

‘What a perfect way of putting it!’ She smiled. ‘I know exactly what you mean.’

Miss McAllister had been the secure, cosy corner of my world. She had taken us on like a challenge. She’d knocked our rough corners off and shown us another life. For Mick and Wilf and me, real fun wasn’t videos and takeaway pizzas any more; it was about doing and being together. Real fun was flowers on your chair for birthdays; being around the kitchen table cutting up fruit for jam-making or taking it in turns to be a human-beater for cake and biscuit mixes and all the while talking your head off,

knowing someone was properly listening. It was learning how to make and do things for yourself. Miss McAllister had been in control of her life and we had learnt to be more in control of our lives. Real fun was chopping wood, collecting eggs, learning about how things grow and having to get out there and help them grow no matter what the weather. It was hot bread on a winter's afternoon; it was Miss McAllister's stories of the past. Best of all, it was knowing Miss McAllister would always be there waiting for us. And now she was dying. She was definitely dying. It was too late to say all this.

'Thank you,' was all I could say. 'Thank you ... for everything.'

Miss McAllister seemed to gather strength, 'Cassie dear ... told me enough ... brave and tough, lass. Keep searching.'

'Will you be our guardian angel, Miss McAllister?' asked Wilf.

'Be delighted,' slurred Miss McAllister, and smiled weakly as if it were a great honour.

'Aren't you going to tell us off about something?' asked Mick. 'You haven't finished with me yet. I'm still half bad.'

Miss McAllister lifted a finger to point at him. 'Watch your manners ... keep your standards up.' She feebly lifted her hand and touched his cheek. 'You'll be alright, dear Michael,' she added like a kind of prophecy. Her hand dropped to her side again and her eyes shut. I grabbed her

wrist. The pulse was the same as before. Next thing Wilf was holding a photo right close up to her face. It was the one where Miss McAllister had refused to say 'Cheese'.

'Look, Miss McAllister! That's you looking angry in the balloon.'

Miss McAllister's eyes opened again and she focused on the photograph. 'What a beautiful hat,' she said softly.

We all laughed at her joke. I never knew a person could joke as she was dying. I had never thought you could laugh when someone you love is dying right there in front of you. But you can. Miss McAllister shut her eyes again.

'Is there something we can do for you?' I asked.

'Read to me ... the Good Book.'

'The family Bible,' I said. 'She means that.'

I ran to the house to get it. When I got back to the others in the garden, Mick nodded to me as if to say she was still alive. I crouched on the grass with the heavy book.

'What'll I read her?' I asked Mick.

'How the hell would I know?'

I opened up the book at one of the pages marked with a piece of ribbon. A column of writing had a pencil mark running down three places in the margin. I started reading those bits.

'Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am become as sounding brass, or tinkling cymbal.

'And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand

all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing.

'Love never faileth; but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away.

'For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

'And now abideth faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.'

I read it okay until the last bit about seeing 'through a glass darkly'. The words were a bit weird, but the meaning was clear. On this side of death, we understand things only in a fuzzy way, but we'll understand everything properly after we die. I started to choke up after that. Miss McAllister was on a journey and we had to wait behind. I only just managed to read out the last two lines about love.

Miss McAllister opened her eyes and looked around at us in a kind of goodbye way. She was trying to speak and we had to lean close.

'Percy ... look after Percy.'

'Don't worry, Miss McAllister. We'll look after him,' I said. My tears were splashing down onto Miss McAllister's hand that I was holding. Mick was really agitated. He was holding his head in his hands saying, 'Shit. Shit. Shit,' over and over again.

Miss McAllister's eyes had shut again and this time it looked like it was for good.

'She's gone, Mick,' I said.

'No!' he shouted. 'I didn't tell her!' Mick started shaking Miss McAllister by the shoulders. 'I've got to tell her. She's got to hear. I LOVE YOU!' And the words tore out of him as if being cut with a knife.

And then an amazing thing happened. Miss McAllister opened her eyes again and smiling at the three of us she whispered, 'Love is all that matters.' After that she shut her eyes and really died. I knew because the little fluttering in her wrist went wild then stopped and stuff came out of her mouth.

Mick went off his head. He knelt there in the grass and screamed the longest 'No' you've ever heard. His voice cracked and it was like a man and a boy screaming together. His mouth was a dark hole. When that 'No' stopped, another one followed.

It was scary. The last time I could remember Mick crying was when he was four years old. He had never let anyone see him cry again. Now his tears would not stop. He started pumping at Miss McAllister's heart like we had learnt in First Aid. More stuff came out of Miss McAllister's mouth. I tried to stop him, but he was a wild thing.

All that screaming must have been heard by Percy pulling his cart back from the market. He came puffing and limping his way round the path. When he saw Miss

McAllister, he just knew. He bellowed like something at the abattoirs and flung himself down by her. Mick drew back, suddenly aware of Percy. Percy cradled her floppy doll's head in his lap and rocked and cried, rocked and cried. When he drew breath it came in shudders. The tears came out of his good eye and out of his blind eye. Mick leant across and put his arms around Percy. He stroked Percy's head like a baby.

'She's happy now, mate,' sobbed Mick. 'We're the ones who have to stick together.' And then the two of them cried in each other's arms.

Wilf didn't cry until quite a long time later. Instead, he picked up Miss McAllister's basket and was gone for a time. When he returned, the basket was full of flowers and he sat by us making flower chains. I picked up the flowers Miss McAllister had dropped and began making chains, too. After a bit, Mick and Percy started helping. Wilf took a completed chain and gently lay it across Miss McAllister's hair. Then we all helped to cover her in flower chains. We sat with Miss McAllister, taking turns to hold her hands, rearranging her flowers and remembering.

We talked about that first day when we snuck into her house – how the 'ghost' dragged Mick out by his ear. We laughed about Mick and his wood-chopping – being shown up by an almost century-old lady. And all that rigmarole with the washing, Miss McAllister rushing round in a state finding bits of timber to keep the copper boiling. Wilf in

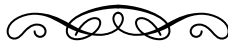
his Ned Kelly suit, going to collect the eggs. Me ironing the backside out of Miss McAllister's gigantic undies. Discovering Percy, the mystery face at the stables' window. Then there was our secret plot to outwit the authorities; how we conned them into thinking that Miss McAllister had joined the world and gone electric. And, of course, the balloon ride. We had given Miss McAllister her dream.

It was warm and peaceful in the garden. We cried, laughed and remembered some more. It felt good to keep Miss McAllister company, except we weren't really doing that. She had gone. You just knew she wasn't there any more. But we stayed there with her body. Tiny birds flitted about us, in and out of the bushes. Later on, a butterfly flew down, brushed Miss McAllister's cheek and floated off into the blue sky.



Postscript

MICK WAS THE FIRST TO NOTICE. THAT DAY, THE grandfather clock stopped – at seventeen minutes past eight, the moment we lost our best friend. Just like it had stopped when Stuart died.



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