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The Forgotten Garden

Kate Morton

1

London, 1913

It was dark where she was crouched but the little girl did as she'd been told. The lady had said to wait, it wasn't safe yet, they had to be as quiet as larder mice. It was a game, just like hide and seek.

From behind the wooden barrels the little girl listened. Made a picture in her mind the way Papa had taught her. Men, near and far, sailors she supposed, shouted to one another. Rough, loud voices, full of the sea and its salt. In the distance: bloated ships' horns, tin whistles, splashing oars and, far above, grey gulls cawing, wings flattened to absorb the ripening sunlight.

The lady would be back, she'd said so, but the little girl hoped it would be soon. She'd been waiting a long time, so long that the sun had drifted across the sky and was now warming her knees through her new dress. She listened for the lady's skirts, swishing against the wooden deck. Her heels clipping, hurrying, always hurrying, in a way the girl's own mamma never did. The little girl wondered, in the vague, unconcerned manner of much-loved children, where Mamma was. When she would be coming. And she wondered about the lady. She knew who she was, she'd heard Grandmamma talking about her. The lady was called the Authoress and she lived in the little cottage on the far side of the estate, beyond the maze. The little girl wasn't supposed to know. She had been forbidden to play in the bramble maze. Mamma and Grandmamma had told her it was dangerous to go near the cliff. But sometimes, when no one was looking, she liked to do forbidden things.

Dust motes, hundreds of them, danced in the sliver of sunlight that had appeared between two barrels. The little girl smiled and the lady, the cliff, the maze, Mamma left her thoughts. She held out a finger, tried to catch a speck upon it. Laughed at the way the motes came so close before skirting away.

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The noises beyond her hiding spot were changing now. The little girl could hear the hubbub of movement, voices laced with excitement. She leaned into the veil of light and pressed her face against the cool wood of the barrels. With one eye she looked upon the decks.

Legs and shoes and petticoat hems. The tails of coloured paper streamers flicking this way and that. Wily gulls hunting the decks for crumbs.

A lurch, and the huge boat groaned, long and low from deep within its belly. Vibrations passed through the deck boards and into the little girl's fingertips. A moment of suspension and she found herself holding her breath, palms flat beside her, then the boat heaved and pushed itself away from the dock. The horn bellowed and there was a wave of cheering, cries of 'Bon Voyage!' They were on their way. To America, a place called New York, where Papa had been born. She'd heard them whispering about it for some time, Mamma telling Papa they should go as soon as possible, that they could afford to wait no longer.

The little girl laughed again; the boat was gliding through the water like a giant whale, like Moby-Dick in the story her father often read to her. Mamma didn't like it when he read such stories. She said they were too frightening and would put ideas in her head that couldn't be got out. Papa always gave Mamma a kiss on the forehead when she said that sort of thing, told her she was right and that he'd be more careful in future. But he still told the little girl stories of the great whale. And others – the ones that were the little girl's favourite, from the fairytale book, about eyeless crones, and orphaned maidens, and long journeys across the sea. He just made sure that Mamma didn't know, that it remained their secret.

The little girl understood they had to have secrets from Mamma. Mamma wasn't well, had been sickly since before the little girl was born. Grandmamma was always bidding her be good, minding her that if Mamma were to get upset something terrible might happen and it would be all her fault. The little girl loved her mother and didn't want to make her sad, didn't want something terrible to happen, so she kept things secret. Like the fairy stories, and playing near the maze, and the time Papa had taken her to visit the Authoress in the cottage on the far side of the estate.

'A-ha!' A voice by her ear. 'Found you!' The barrel was heaved aside and the little girl squinted up into the sun. Blinked until the owner of the voice moved to block the light. It was a big boy, eight or nine, she guessed. 'You're not Sally,' he said.

The little girl shook her head.

'Who are you?'

She wasn't meant to tell anybody her name. It was a game they were playing, she and the lady.

'Well?'

'It's a secret.'

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His nose wrinkled, freckles drew together. ‘What for?’

She shrugged. She wasn’t supposed to speak of the lady, Papa was always minding her so.

‘Where’s Sally then?’ The boy was grown impatient. He looked left and right. ‘She ran this way, I’m sure of it.’

A whoop of laughter from further down the deck and the scramble of fleeing footsteps. The boy’s face lit up. ‘Quick!’ he said as he started to run. ‘She’s getting away.’

The little girl leaned her head around the barrel and watched him weaving in and out of the crowd in keen pursuit of a flurry of white petticoats.

Her toes itched to join them.

But the lady had said to wait.

The boy was getting further away. Ducking around a portly man with a waxed moustache, causing him to scowl so that his features scurried towards the centre of his face like a family of startled crabs.

The little girl laughed.

Maybe it was all part of the same game. The lady reminded her more of a child than of the other grown-ups she knew. Perhaps she was playing too.

The little girl slid from behind the barrel and stood slowly. Her left foot had gone to sleep and now had pins and needles. She waited a moment for feeling to return, watched as the boy turned the corner and disappeared.

Then, without another thought, she set off after him. Feet pounding, heart singing in her chest.

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Brisbane, 1930

In the end they held Nell's birthday party in the Foresters' building, up on Latrobe Terrace. Hugh had suggested the new dance hall, up on Given Terrace, but Nell, echoing her mother, had said it was silly to go to unnecessary expense, especially with times as tough as they were. Hugh conceded, but contented himself by insisting she send away to Sydney for the special lace he knew she wanted for her dress. Lil had put the idea in his head before she passed away. She'd leaned over and taken his hand, then shown him the newspaper advertisement, with its Pitt Street address, and told him how fine the lace was, how much it would mean to Nellie, that it might seem extravagant but it could be reworked into the wedding gown when the time came. Then she'd smiled at him, and she was sixteen years old again and he was smitten.

Lil and Nell had been working on the birthday dress for a couple of weeks by then. In the evenings, when Nell was home from the newspaper shop and tea was finished, and the younger girls were bickering lethargically on the verandas, and the mosquitoes were so thick in the muggy night air you thought you'd go mad from the drone, Nell would take down her stitching basket and pull up a seat beside her mother's sickbed. He would hear them sometimes, laughing about something that had happened in the newspaper shop: an argument Max Fitzsimmons had had with this customer or that, Mrs Blackwell's latest medical complaint, the antics of Nancy Brown's twins. He would linger by the door, filling his pipe with tobacco and listening as Nell lowered her voice, flushed with pleasure as she recounted something Danny had said. Some promise he'd made about the house he was going to buy her when they were wed, the car he had his eye on that his father thought he could get for a song, the latest Mixmaster from McWhirters' department store.

Hugh liked Danny; he couldn't wish more for Nell, which was just as well seeing as the pair had been inseparable since they'd met. Watching them together reminded Hugh of his early years with Lil. Happy as larks they'd been, back when the future still stretched, unmarked, before them. And it had been a good marriage. They'd had their testing times, early on before they'd had their girls, but one way or another things had always worked out . . .

His pipe full, his excuse to loiter ended, Hugh would move on. He'd find a place for himself at the quiet end of the front veranda, a dark place where he could sit in peace, or as near to peace as was possible in a house full of rowdy daughters, each more excitable than the other. Just him and his fly-swat on the window ledge should the mozzies get too close. And then he'd follow his thoughts as they turned invariably toward the secret he'd been keeping all these years.

For the time was almost upon him, he could feel that. The pressure, long kept at bay, had recently begun to build. She was nearly twenty-one, a grown woman ready to

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embark on her own life, engaged to be married no less. She had a right to know the truth.

He knew what Lil would say to that, which is why he didn't tell her. The last thing he wanted was for Lil to worry, to spend her final days trying to talk him out of it, as she'd done so often in the past.

Sometimes, as he wondered about the words he'd find to make his confession, Hugh caught himself wishing it on one of the other girls instead. He cursed himself then for acknowledging he had a favourite, even to himself.

But Nellie had always been special, so unlike the others. Spirited, more imaginative. More like Lil, he often thought, though of course that made no sense.

*

They'd strung ribbons along the rafters – white to match her dress and red to match her hair. The old wooden hall might not have had the spit and polish of the newer brick buildings about town, but it scrubbed up all right. At the back, near the stage, Nell's four younger sisters had arranged a table for birthday gifts and a decent pile had begun to take shape. Some of the ladies from church had got together to make the supper, and Ethel Mortimer was giving the piano a workout, romantic dance tunes from the war.

Young men and women clustered at first in nervous knots around the walls, but as the music and the more outgoing lads warmed up, they began to split into pairs and take to the floor. The little sisters looked on longingly until sequestered to help carry trays of sandwiches from the kitchen to the supper table.

When time came for the speeches, cheeks were glowing and shoes were scuffed from dancing. Marcie McDonald, the minister's wife, tapped on her glass and everybody turned to Hugh, who was unfolding a small piece of paper from his breast pocket. He cleared his throat and ran a hand over his comb-striped hair. Public speaking had never been his caper. He was the sort of man who kept himself to himself, minded his own opinions and happily let the more vocal fellows do the talking. Still, a daughter came of age but once and it was his duty to announce her. He'd always been a stickler for duty, a rule follower. For the most part anyway.

He smiled as one of his mates from the wharf shouted a heckle, then he cupped the paper in his palm and took a deep breath. One by one, he read off the points on his list, scribbled in tiny black handwriting: how proud of Nell he and her mother had always been; how blessed they'd felt when she arrived; how fond they were of Danny. Lil had been especially happy, he said, to learn of the engagement before she passed away.

At mention of his wife's recent death, Hugh's eyes began to smart and he fell silent. He paused for a while and allowed his gaze to roam the faces of his friends and his daughters, to fix a moment on Nell, who was smiling as Danny whispered something in her ear. As a cloud seemed to cross his brow, folk wondered if some

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important announcement was coming, but the moment passed. His expression lightened and he returned the piece of paper to his pocket. It was about time he had another man in the family, he said with a smile, it'd even things up a bit.

The ladies in the kitchen swept into action then, administering sandwiches and cups of tea to the guests, but Hugh loitered a while, letting people brush past him, accepting the pats on the shoulder, the calls of 'Well done, mate', a cup and saucer thrust into his hand by one of the ladies. The speech had gone well, yet he couldn't relax. His heart had stepped up its beat and he was sweating though it wasn't hot.

He knew why, of course. The night's duties were not yet over. When he noticed Nell slip alone through the side door, on to the little landing, he saw his opportunity. He cleared his throat and set his teacup in a space on the gift table, then he disappeared from the warm hum of the room into the cool night air.

Nell was standing by the silver-green trunk of a lone eucalypt. Once, Hugh thought, the whole ridge would've been covered by them, and the gullies either side. Must've been a sight, that crowd of ghostly trunks on nights when the moon was full.

There. He was putting things off. Even now he was trying to shirk his responsibility, was being weak.

A pair of black bats coasted silently across the night sky and he made his way down the rickety wooden steps, across the dew-damp grass.

Nell must have heard him coming – sensed him perhaps – for she turned and smiled as he drew close.

She was thinking about Ma, she said, as he reached her side, wondering which of the stars she was watching from.

Hugh could've wept when she said it. Damned if she didn't have to bring Lil into it right now. Make him aware that she was observing, angry with him for what he was about to do. He could hear Lil's voice, all the old arguments . . .

But it was his decision to make and he'd made it. It was he, after all, who'd started the whole thing. Unwitting though he might have been, he'd taken the step that set them on this path and he was responsible for putting things right. Secrets had a way of making themselves known and it was better, surely, that she learned the truth from him.

He took Nell's hands in his and placed a kiss on the top of each. Squeezed them tight, her soft smooth fingers against his work-hardened palms.

His daughter. His first.

She smiled at him, radiant in her delicate lace-trimmed dress.

He smiled back.

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Then he led her to sit by him on a fallen gum trunk, smooth and white, and he leaned to whisper in her ear. Transferred the secret he and her mother had kept for seventeen years. Waited for the flicker of recognition, the minute shift in expression as she registered what he was telling her. Watched as the bottom fell out of her world and the person she had been vanished in an instant.

3

Brisbane, 2005

Cassandra hadn't left the hospital in days, though the doctor held out little hope her grandmother would regain lucidity. It wasn't likely, he said, not at her age, not with that amount of morphine in her system.

The night nurse was there again, so Cassandra knew it was no longer day. The precise time she couldn't guess. It was hard to tell in here: the foyer lights were constantly on, a television could always be heard though never seen, trolleys tracked up and down the halls no matter what the hour. An irony that a place relying so heavily on routine should operate so resolutely outside time's usual rhythms.

Nonetheless, Cassandra waited. Watching, comforting, as Nell drowned in a sea of memories, came up for air again and again in earlier times of life. She couldn't bear to think her grandmother might defy the odds and find her way back to the present, only to discover herself floating on the outer edge of life, alone.

The nurse swapped the drip's empty bag for a fat bladder, turned a dial on the machine behind the bed, then set about straightening the bedclothes.

'She hasn't had anything to drink,' Cassandra said, voice strange to her own ears. 'Not all day.'

The nurse looked up, surprised at being spoken to. She peered over her glasses at the chair where Cassandra sat, a crumpled blue-green hospital blanket on her lap. 'Gave me a fright,' she said. 'You been here all day, have you? Probably for the best. Won't be long now.'

Cassandra ignored the implications of this statement. 'Should we give her something to drink? She must be thirsty.'

The nurse folded the sheets over and tucked them matter of factly beneath Nell's thin arms. 'She'll be right. The drip here takes care of all that.' She checked something on

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Nell's chart, spoke without looking up. 'There's tea-making facilities down the hall if you need them.'

The nurse left and Cassandra saw that Nell's eyes were open, staring. 'Who are you?' came the frail voice.

'It's me, Cassandra.'

Confusion. 'Do I know you?'

The doctor had predicted this but it still stung. 'Yes, Nell.'

Nell looked at her, eyes watery grey. She blinked uncertainly. 'I can't remember . . .'

'Shhh . . . It's all right.'

'Who am I?'

'Your name is Nell Andrews,' Cassandra said, taking her hand. 'You're ninety-five years old. You live in an old house in Paddington.'

Nell's lips were trembling – she was concentrating, trying to make sense of the words.

Cassandra plucked a tissue from the bedside table and reached to gently wipe the line of saliva on Nell's chin. 'You have a stall at the antique centre on Latrobe Terrace,' she continued softly. 'You and I share it, we sell old things.'

'I do know you,' said Nell faintly. 'You're Lesley's girl.'

Cassandra blinked, surprised. They rarely spoke of her mother, not in all the time Cassandra was growing up and not in the ten years she'd been back, living in the flat beneath Nell's house. It was an unspoken agreement between them not to revisit a past they each, for different reasons, preferred to forget.

Nell started. Her panicked eyes scanned Cassandra's face. 'Where's the boy? Not here, I hope. Is he here? I don't want him touching my things. Ruining them.'

Cassandra's head grew faint.

'My things are precious. Don't let him near them.'

Some words appeared, Cassandra tripped over them. 'No . . . No, I won't. Don't worry, Nell. He's not here.'

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Later, when her grandmother had slipped into unconsciousness again, Cassandra wondered at the mind's cruel ability to toss up flecks of the past. Why, as she neared

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her life's end, her grandmother's head should ring with the voices of people long since gone. Was it always this way? Did those with passage booked on death's silent ship always scan the dock for faces of the long-departed?

Cassandra must have slept then, because the next thing she knew the hospital's mood had changed again. They'd been drawn further into the tunnel of night. The hall lights were dimmed and the sounds of sleep were everywhere around her. She was slumped in the chair, her neck stiff and her ankle cold where it had escaped the flimsy blanket. It was late, she knew, and she was tired. What had woken her?

Nell. Her breathing was loud. She was awake. Cassandra moved quickly to the bed, perched again on its side. In the half-light Nell's eyes were glassy, pale and smudged like paint-stained water. Her voice, a fine thread, was almost frayed through. At first Cassandra couldn't hear her, thought only that her lips were moving around lost words uttered long ago. Then she realised Nell was speaking.

'The lady,' she was saying. 'The lady said to wait . . .'

Cassandra stroked Nell's warm forehead, brushed back soft strands of hair that had once gleamed like spun silver. The lady again. 'She won't mind,' she said. 'The lady won't mind if you go.'

Nell's lips tightened, then quivered. 'I'm not supposed to move. She said to wait, here on the boat.' Her voice was a whisper. 'The lady . . . the Authoress . . . Don't tell anyone.'

'Shhh,' said Cassandra. 'I won't tell anyone, Nell. I won't tell the lady. You can go.'

'She said she'd come for me, but I moved. I didn't stay where I was told.'

Her grandmother's breathing was laboured now, she was succumbing to panic.

'Please don't worry, Nell, please. Everything's OK. I promise.'

Nell's head dropped to the side. 'I can't go . . . I wasn't supposed to . . . The lady . . .'

Cassandra pressed the button to call for help but no light came on above the bed. She hesitated, listened for hurried footsteps in the hall. Nell's eyelids were fluttering, she was slipping away.

'I'll get a nurse—'

'No!' Nell reached out blindly, tried to grasp hold of Cassandra. 'Don't leave me!' She was crying. Silent tears, damp and glistening on her paling skin.

Cassandra bit her lip. 'It's all right, Grandma. I'm getting help. I'll be back soon, I promise.'

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4

Brisbane, 2005

The house seemed to know its mistress was gone and if it didn't exactly grieve for her, it settled into an obstinate silence. Nell had never been one for people or for parties (and the kitchen mice were louder than the granddaughter), so the house had grown accustomed to a quiet existence with neither fuss nor noise. It was a rude shock, then, when the people arrived without word or warning, began milling about the house and garden, slopping tea and dropping crumbs. Hunched into the hillside behind the huge antique centre on the ridge, the house suffered stoically this latest indignity.

The aunts had organized it all, of course. Cassandra would've been just as happy to have gone without, to have honoured her grandmother privately, but the aunts would hear none of it. Certainly Nell should have a wake, they said. The family would want to pay their respects, as would Nell's friends. And besides, it was only proper.

Cassandra was no match for such ingenuous certitude. Once upon a time she would have put up an argument, but not now. Besides the aunts were an unstoppable force, each had an energy that belied her great age (even the youngest, Aunt Hettie, wasn't a day under eighty). So Cassandra had let her misgivings fall away, resisted the urge to point out Nell's resolute lack of friends, and set about performing the tasks she'd been allotted: arranging teacups and saucers, finding cake forks, clearing some of Nell's bric-a-brac so that the cousins might have somewhere to sit. Letting the aunts bustle around her with all due pomp and self-importance.

They weren't really Cassandra's aunts, of course. They were Nell's younger sisters, Cassandra's mother's aunts. But Lesley had never had much use for them, and the aunts had promptly taken Cassandra under their wing in her stead.

Cassandra had half thought her mother might attend the funeral, might arrive at the crematorium just as proceedings got underway, looking thirty years younger than she really was, inviting admiring glances as she always had. Beautiful and young and impossibly insouciant.

But she hadn't. There would be a card, Cassandra supposed, with a picture on the front only vaguely suited to its purpose. Large swirling handwriting that drew attention to itself and, at the bottom, copious kisses. The sort that were easily dispensed, one pen line scarred by another.

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Cassandra dunked her hands into the sink and moved the contents about some more.

'Well, I think that went splendidly,' said Phyllis, the eldest after Nell and the bossiest by far. 'Nell would've liked it.'

Cassandra glanced sideways.

'That is,' Phyllis continued, pausing a jot as she dried, 'she would've once she'd finished insisting she hadn't wanted one in the first place.' Her mood turned suddenly maternal. 'And how about you? How've you been keeping?'

'I'm all right.'

'You look thin. Are you eating?'

'Three times a day.'

'You could do with some fattening up. You'll come for tea tomorrow night, I'll invite the family, make my cottage pie.'

Cassandra didn't argue.

Phyllis glanced warily about the old kitchen, took in the sagging range hood. 'You're not frightened here by yourself?'

'No, not frightened—'

'Lonely, though,' said Phyllis, nose wrinkling with extravagant sympathy. 'Course you are. Only natural, you and Nell were good company for each other, weren't you?' She didn't wait for confirmation, rather laid a sun-spotted hand on Cassandra's forearm and pressed on with the pep talk. 'You're going to be all right, though, and I'll tell you why. It's always sad to lose someone you care for, but it's never so bad when it's an oldie. It's as it should be. Much worse when it's a young—' She stopped mid-sentence, her shoulders tensed and her cheeks reddened.

'Yes,' said Cassandra quickly, 'of course it is.' She stopped washing cups and leaned to look through the kitchen window into the backyard. Suds slipped down her fingers, over the gold band she still wore. 'I should get out and do some weeding. The nasturtium'll be across the path if I'm not careful.'

Phyllis clutched gratefully the new string of purpose. 'I'll send Trevor round to help.' Her gnarled fingers tightened their grip on Cassandra's arm. 'Next Saturday all right?'

Aunt Dot appeared then, shuffling in from the lounge with another tray of dirty teacups. She rattled them onto the bench and pressed the back of a plump hand to her forehead.

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'Finally,' she said, blinking at Cassandra and Phyllis through impossibly thick glasses. 'That's the last of them.' She waddled into the kitchen proper and peered inside a circular cake container. 'I've worked up quite a hunger.'

'Oh Dot,' said Phyllis, relishing the opportunity to channel discomfort into admonition, 'you've just eaten.'

'An hour ago.'

'With your gall bladder? I thought you'd be watching your weight.'

'I am,' said Dot, straightening and cinching her sizeable waist with both hands. 'I've lost half a stone since Christmas.' She refastened the plastic lid and met Phyllis's dubious gaze. 'I have.'

Cassandra suppressed a smile as she continued to wash the cups. Phyllis and Dot were each as round as the other, all the aunts were. They got it from their mum, and she from her mum before. Nell was the only one who'd escaped the family curse, who took after her lanky Irish dad. They'd always been a sight together, tall, thin Nell with her round, dumpling sisters.

Phyllis and Dot were still bickering and Cassandra knew from experience that if she didn't provide a distraction the argument would escalate until one (or both) tossed down a tea towel and stormed off home in high dudgeon. She'd seen it happen before yet had never quite grown accustomed to the way certain phrases, eye contact that lasted a mite too long, could relaunch a disagreement started many years before. As an only child, Cassandra found the well-worn paths of sibling interaction fascinating and horrifying in equal parts. It was fortunate the other aunts had already been shepherded away by respective family members and weren't able to add their two cents' worth.

Cassandra cleared her throat. 'You know, there's something I've been meaning to ask.' She lifted her volume a little, she'd almost won their attention. 'About Nell. Something she said in the hospital.'

Phyllis and Dot both turned, cheeks similarly flushed. The mention of their sister seemed to settle them. Remind them why they were gathered here, drying teacups. 'Something about Nell?' said Phyllis.

Cassandra nodded. 'In the hospital, towards the end, she spoke about a woman. The lady, she called her, the Authoress. She seemed to think they were on some kind of boat?'

Phyllis's lips tightened. 'Her mind was wandering, she didn't know what she was saying. Probably a character from some television show she'd been watching. Wasn't there some series she used to like, set on a boat?'

'Oh Phyll,' said Dot, shaking her head.

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'I'm sure I remember her talking about it . . .'

'Come on, Phyll,' said Dot. 'Nellie's gone. There's no need for all of this.'

Phyllis folded her arms across her chest and huffed uncertainly.

'We should tell her,' said Dot gently. 'It won't do any harm. Not now.'

'Tell me what?' Cassandra looked between them. Her question had been asked to pre-empt another family row; she hadn't expected to uncover this strange hint of secrecy. The aunts were so focused on one another, they seemed to have forgotten she was there. 'Tell me what?' she pressed.

Dot raised her eyebrows at Phyllis. 'Better to have it come from us than for her to find out some other way.'

Phyllis nodded almost imperceptibly, met Dot's gaze and smiled grimly. Their shared knowledge made them allies again.

'All right, Cass. You'd better come and sit down,' she said finally. 'Put the kettle on, will you, Dotty love? Make us all a nice cuppa?'

Cassandra followed Phyllis into the sitting room and took a seat on Nell's sofa. Phyllis eased her wide rear onto the other side and worried a thread loose. 'Hard to know where to start. Been so long since I thought about it all.'

Cassandra was perplexed. All of what?

'What I'm about to tell you is our family's big secret. Every family's got one, you can be sure of that. Some are just bigger than others.' She frowned in the direction of the kitchen. 'Now what's taking Dot so long? Slow as a wet week, she is.'

'What is it, Phyll?'

She sighed. 'Promised myself I'd never tell anyone else. The whole thing has caused so much division in our family already. Would that Dad had kept it to himself. Thought he was doing the right thing though, poor bugger.'

'What did he do?'

If Phyllis heard, she made no acknowledgement. This was her story and she was going to tell it her way and in her own sweet time. 'We were a happy family. We hadn't much of anything but we were happy enough. Ma and Pa and we girls. Nellie was the eldest, as you know, then a gap of a decade or so on account of the Great War, then the rest of us.' She smiled. 'You wouldn't credit it, but Nellie was the life and soul of the family back then. We all adored her – thought of her as a mother of sorts, we younger ones did, especially after Ma got sick. Nell looked after Ma so carefully.'

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Cassandra could imagine Nell doing that, but as for her prickly grandmother being the life and soul of the family . . .

'What happened?'

'For a long time none of us ever knew. That's the way Nell wanted it. Everything changed in our family and none of us knew why. Our big sister turned into somebody else, seemed to stop loving us. Not overnight, it wasn't as dramatic as all that. She just withdrew, bit by bit, extricated herself from the lot of us. Such a mystery, it was, so hurtful, and Pa wouldn't be drawn on the subject no matter how we needled him.

'It was my husband, God rest him, who finally put us on the right path. Not intentionally, mind – it wasn't like he set out to discover Nell's secret. Fancied himself a bit of a history buff, that's all. Decided to put together a family tree once our Trevor was born. Same year as your mum, 1947 that was.' She paused and eyed Cassandra shrewdly, as if waiting to see whether she had somehow intuited what was coming. She had not.

'One day he came into my kitchen, I remember it clear as day, and said he couldn't find any mention of Nellie's birth in the registry. "Well of course not," I said, "Nellie was born up in Maryborough, before the family pulled up sticks and moved to Brisbane." Doug nodded then and said that's what he'd thought, but when he'd sent away for details from Maryborough they told him none existed.' Phyllis looked meaningfully at Cassandra. 'That is, Nell didn't exist. At least not officially.'

Cassandra looked up as Dot came in from the kitchen and handed her a teacup. 'I don't understand.'

'Of course you don't, pet,' said Dot, sitting herself in the armchair beside Phyllis. 'And for a long time, neither did we.' She shook her head and sighed. 'Not until we spoke to June. At Trevor's wedding, that was, wasn't it Phylly?'

Phyllis nodded. 'Yes, 1975. I was that mad at Nell. We'd only recently lost Pa and here was my eldest boy getting married, Nellie's nephew, and she didn't even bother to show. Took herself off on holiday instead. That's what got me talking that way with June. I don't mind saying I was having a good old whinge about Nell.'

Cassandra was confused, she'd never been great at keeping track of the aunts' extensive web of friends and family. 'Who's June?'

'One of our cousins,' said Dot, 'on Ma's side. You'd have met her at some point, surely? She was a year or so older than Nell and the two of them thick as thieves when they were girls.'

'Must've been close,' said Phyllis, with a sniff. 'June was the only one Nell told when it happened.'

'When what happened?' said Cassandra.

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Dot leaned forward. 'Pa told Nell —'

'Pa told Nell something he never should've,' said Phyllis quickly. 'Thought he was doing the right thing, poor man. Regretted it the rest of his life, things were never the same between them.'

'And he was always partial to Nell.'

'He loved us all,' snapped Phyllis.

'Oh, Phyll,' said Dot, rolling her eyes. 'Can't admit it even now. Nell was his favourite, pure and simple. Ironic, as it turns out.'

Phyllis didn't respond, so Dot, pleased to take the reins, continued. 'It happened on the night of her twenty-first birthday,' she said. 'After her party —'

'It wasn't after the party,' said Phyllis, 'it was during.' She turned towards Cassandra. 'I expect he thought it was the perfect time to tell her, beginning of her new life and all that. She was engaged to be married, you know. Not your grandpa, another fellow.'

'Really?' Cassandra was surprised. 'She never said anything.'

'Love of her life, you ask me. Local boy, not like Al.'

Phyllis spoke the name with a lick of distaste. That the aunts had disapproved of Nell's American husband was no secret. It wasn't personal, rather the shared disdain of a citizenry resenting the influx of GIs who'd arrived in Second World War Brisbane with more money and smarter uniforms, only to abscond with a fair whack of the city's women folk. 'So what happened? Why didn't she marry him?'

'She called it off a few months after the party,' said Phyllis. 'Such an upset. We were all of us so fond of Danny, and it broke his heart, poor fellow. He married someone else eventually, just before the second war. Not that it brought him much happiness. He never came back from fighting the Japs.'

'Did her father tell Nell not to marry him?' said Cassandra. 'Is that what he told her that night? Not to marry Danny?'

'Hardly,' Dot scoffed, 'Pa thought the sun shone out of Danny. None of our husbands ever matched up.'

'Then why did she break it off?'

'She wouldn't say, wouldn't even tell him. Nearly drove us round the bend trying to figure it out,' said Phyllis. 'All we knew was that Nell wouldn't talk to Pa, and she wouldn't talk to Danny.'

'All we knew until Phylly spoke to June,' said Dot.

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'Near on forty-five years later.'

'What did June say?' said Cassandra. 'What happened at the party?'

Phyllis took a sip of tea and raised her eyebrows at Cassandra. 'Pa told Nell she wasn't his and Ma's.'

'She was adopted?'

The aunts exchanged a glance. 'Not exactly,' said Phyllis.

'More like she was found,' said Dot.

'Taken.'

'Kept.'

Cassandra frowned. 'Found where?'

'On the Maryborough wharf,' said Dot. 'Where the big ships used to come in from Europe. They don't now, of course, there's much bigger ports, and most people fly these days —'

'Pa found her,' Phyllis interjected. 'When she was just a wee thing. It was right before the Great War started. Folks were leaving Europe in droves and we were only too happy to take them here in Australia. Pa was the port master at the time, it was his job to see to it that those that were travelling were all who they said they were, had arrived where they meant to. Some of them had no English to speak of.

'As I understand it, one afternoon there was something of a kerfuffle. A ship came into port after a shocking journey from England. Typhoid infections, sunstroke, they'd had the lot, and when the ship arrived there were extra bags and persons unaccounted for. It was all a mighty headache. Pa managed to get it sorted, of course – he was always good at keeping things in order – but he waited around longer than usual to be sure and let the night watchman know all that had happened, explain why there were extra bags in the office. It was while he was waiting that he noticed there was still someone left on the docks. A little girl, barely four years old, sitting on top of a child's suitcase.'

'No one else for miles,' said Dot, shaking her head. 'She was all alone.'

'Pa tried to find out who she was, of course, but she wouldn't tell him. Said she didn't know, she couldn't remember. And there was no name tag attached to the suitcase, nothing inside that would help either, not as far as he could tell. It was late, though, and getting dark, and the weather was turning bad. Pa knew she must be hungry, so eventually he decided there was nothing for it but to take her home with him. What else could he do? Couldn't just leave her there on the rainy docks all night, could he?'

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Cassandra shook her head, trying to reconcile the tired and lonely little girl of Phylly's story with the Nell she knew.

'As June tells it, next day he went back to work expecting frantic relatives, police, an investigation —'

'But there was nothing,' said Dot. 'Day after day there was nothing, no one said anything.'

'It was as if she'd left no trace. They tried to find out who she was, of course, but with so many people arriving each day . . . There was so much paperwork. So easy for something to slip through the cracks.'

'Or someone.'

Phyllis sighed. 'So they kept her.'

'What else could they do?'

'And they let her think she was one of theirs.'

'One of us.'

'Until she turned twenty-one,' said Phyllis. 'And Pa decided she should know the truth. That she was a foundling with nothing more to identify her than a child's suitcase.'

Cassandra sat silently, trying to absorb this information. She wrapped her fingers around her warm teacup. 'She must have felt so alone.'

'Too right,' said Dot. 'All that way by herself. Weeks and weeks on that big ship, winding up on an empty dock.'

'And all the time after.'

'What do you mean?' Dot said, frowning.

Cassandra pressed her lips together. What did she mean? It had come to her in a wave. The certainty of her grandmother's loneliness. As if in that moment she had glimpsed an important aspect of Nell that she'd never known before. Rather, she suddenly understood an aspect of Nell she'd known very well. Her isolation, her independence, her prickliness. 'She must have felt so alone when she realised she wasn't who she'd thought she was.'

'Yes,' said Phyllis, surprised. 'Must admit, I didn't see that at first. When June told me, I couldn't see that it changed things all that much. I couldn't for the life of me understand why Nell had let it affect her so badly. Ma and Pa loved her well and we younger ones worshipped our big sister; she couldn't have hoped for a better family.' She leaned against the sofa's arm, head on hand, and rubbed her left temple wearily.

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'As time's gone on, though, I've come to realize – that happens, doesn't it? I've come to see that the things we take for granted are important. You know, family, blood, the past . . . They're the things that make us who we are and Pa took them from Nell. He didn't mean to, but he did.'

'Nell must've been relieved that you finally knew, though,' said Cassandra. 'It must've made it easier in some way.'

Pyllis and Dot exchanged a glance.

'You did tell her you'd found out?'

Phyllis frowned. 'I almost did a number of times, but when it came down to it I just couldn't find the words. I couldn't do it to Nell. She'd gone so long without breathing a word of it to any of us, she'd rebuilt her entire life around the secret, worked so hard at keeping it to herself. It seemed . . . I don't know . . . almost cruel to tear down those walls. Like taking the wool out from under her a second time.' She shook her head. 'Then again, perhaps that's all claptrap. Nell could be fierce when she wanted to, perhaps I just didn't have the courage for it.'

'It's nothing to do with courage or its lack,' said Dot firmly. 'We all agreed it was for the best, Phylly. Nell wanted it that way.'

'I suppose you're right,' said Phyllis. 'All the same, one does wonder. It's not like there weren't opportunities, the day Doug took the suitcase back for one.'

'Just before Pa died,' Dot explained to Cassandra, 'he had Phylly's husband drop the suitcase over to Nell. Not a word as to what it was, mind. That was Pa, as bad as Nell for keeping secrets. He'd had it hidden away all those years, you know. Everything still inside, just as when he found her.'

'Funny,' said Phyllis. 'As soon as I saw the suitcase that day I thought of June's story. I knew it must be the one Pa had found with Nell on the wharf all those years ago, yet in all the time it had been at the back of Pa's storeroom I'd never given it a thought. Didn't connect it with Nell and her origins. If I ever considered it at all, it was to wonder what Ma and Pa had ever wanted with such a funny-looking case. White leather with silver buckles. Tiny it was, child-size . . .'

And although Phylly continued to describe the suitcase, she needn't have bothered, for Cassandra knew exactly how it looked.

What was more, she knew what it contained.

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