



BELINDA MURRELL

The GOLDEN TOWER



FOLLOW THE CAT TO A
MAGICAL LAND . . .



1

TIME'S WINGED CHARIOT



It seemed like just another ordinary Tuesday when Sophie met Baccio. Grey. Damp. Dreary. She would never have guessed that her life was about to change forever.

Sophie was staying for the holidays in England with her grandmother. Nanna lived in a whitewashed farm cottage at Brocklea, down a narrow country lane on the Kentish Downs. The quaint, thatched cottage, blooming with rambling roses, looked like something out of a fairytale. It was surrounded by velvety, soft lawns, and garden beds brimming with hollyhocks, columbines and peonies. Beyond the blackberry hedge were fields of grazing cows.

Sophie was sitting at the timber kitchen table in front of the Aga stove with Nanna, drinking tea and eating warm spinach-and-cheese quiche. A vase of cream-coloured roses filled the kitchen with their sweet scent. Juno, Nanna's blue-eyed Himalayan cat, prowled around Sophie's legs, begging for a pat. Sophie picked her up onto her lap.

‘Hello, puss,’ she said. ‘Would you like some cheese?’

Juno miaowed in answer, eagerly nibbling the offered sliver of cheese.

‘Juno *loves* having you here,’ Nanna said. ‘And so do I.’

Sophie stroked Juno’s silky white fur. ‘Mum called this morning. She said Oxford is *beautiful*. Archie says the college reminds him of Hogwarts – all sandstone turrets and gargoyles. He half expects to see wizards zooming around on broomsticks.’

‘How’s Archie enjoying his camp?’ asked Nanna, putting her teacup down.

Sophie couldn’t help pulling a face while thinking of her brother. Archie was three years younger, but off on a grand adventure without her. ‘He loves it. They’ve been studying philosophy and mock law trials and robotics, with lots of debating about social issues. I guess they’ll have solved all the problems of the world by now.’

‘Mmm. It’s a huge opportunity for your brother, doing summer camp at Oxford University,’ said Nanna. ‘It was an incredible honour to be chosen.’

Archie wasn’t like most ten-year-old boys. He spent his time building mechanical devices, code-breaking and asking incessant questions. While he sometimes drove Sophie crazy with his messy inventions and unusual obsessions, she was also very protective of him.

‘He’s the youngest one there,’ said Sophie proudly. ‘The other kids are also super-smart, from all around the world.’

Nanna twisted the gold medallion hanging on a chain around her neck. ‘Well, I’m so happy because it means I get to spend three weeks with my precious granddaughter.’

Australia is a long way away and I don't get to see you often enough.'

Sophie didn't reply. She couldn't help feeling jealous about Mum and Archie being in Oxford. Sometimes it was hard to have a brother like Archie. Mum and Dad tried not to make a fuss about it, but Sophie couldn't help feeling dumb in comparison. Teachers and relatives would hint at the remarkable difference between the siblings. 'Archie's so brilliant and Sophie's so . . .'

So what? Sophie thought. So ordinary? So stupid? So awkward? Why did Archie get all the smart genes in our family?

Sophie swallowed a lump in her throat that wasn't cheesy spinach quiche. Nanna reached over and took Sophie's hand, as though she could read her mind.

'Archie *is* very clever, but you, my darling girl, have your own special talents. You're creative, imaginative, curious and very determined when you want to be. Not to mention, a remarkably gifted artist.'

Art had always been Sophie's favourite subject. She loved the feeling of getting lost in a drawing and making another world appear on the paper, like magic. Time seemed to disappear while she sketched and painted.

It was her other subjects that caused the trouble.

A flash came to her of sitting in the classroom, the teacher writing on the whiteboard and the familiar feel of her racing heart and sweaty palms. It was awful.

'I can draw pretty pictures but that doesn't help me at school,' said Sophie.

'I think you'll find you're as brilliant as your brother, but in a different way,' said Nanna. 'A more special way.'

‘Thanks, Nanna.’ Sophie didn’t believe her, but she gave her grandmother a watery smile.

Nanna pushed her chair back and stood up. She tucked her medallion inside her shirt and smoothed her silver hair. ‘I have a patient to see at two o’clock. What are you going to do this afternoon?’

Nanna was a physiotherapist and saw her patients in the back room, overlooking the garden.

Sophie licked a blob of creamy quiche off her fingertip. ‘I thought I’d go for a walk down to the Roman ruins, or maybe do some sketching? I promised Mum I’d paint a picture of your gorgeous cottage to take home with us.’

‘Why don’t you go exploring, darling?’ said Nanna with a twinkle in her brown eyes. ‘You never know what adventures await you down the lane.’

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It was cool outside. Overhead, the sky pressed down, dark and ominous, threatening another downpour. Sophie pulled on a green cardigan and her black lace-up boots. Her brown hair was tied back in a messy ponytail. She shoved her hands into the pocket of her jeans and meandered out the front gate and down the rutted country lane.

Sophie kicked a pile of soggy leaf mulch. *So much for an English summer holiday*, she thought. *It’s probably warmer back home in Sydney. Mum and Archie are having fun in Oxford, and I’m stuck here in Brocklea with no friends and nothing to do.*

On either side of her, tall hedgerows reached for the sky. A garbage truck rumbled down the lane towards her, its driver waving a cheery hello. Sophie had to press into the wet foliage to let the vehicle past and was enveloped in a cloud of rotting garbage stink. The truck trundled through a puddle, spraying mud everywhere.

Great, thought Sophie, wiping her jeans with her hands. *I bet Indigo and Jack aren't being sprayed by mud in Mooloolaba.*

Sophie tramped on. The lane widened and the hedgerow was replaced by a post-and-rail fence. Sophie climbed the stile into the neighbour's field, following the narrow track. Red cows stopped their chewing and glared at her.

She had hiked this way with Nanna yesterday. Nanna had been excited to show her the ancient ruins of a Roman villa. It had been built against the base of a grassy hillside, overlooking the River Darent. Sophie loved scrambling around the mossy ruins, thinking of the people who had lived there nearly two thousand years ago. She wondered what it must have been like to be a child growing up in Roman times. Did they have the same fun as children do now? What did they play?

Nanna had pointed out the rocky foundations of the old rooms – the atrium with its shallow pool, the dining hall, the hot and cold baths and the bedchambers. The ruins hadn't looked like much when Sophie first saw them, but the villa's layout appeared like magic once Nanna explained what everything was. Sophie had seen the ancient villa appearing in her mind's eye, rebuilt like new, children running out the front tossing a leather ball.

‘This wing was the bathhouse, with hot and cold pools,’ Nanna had explained. ‘Amazing to think they had central heating all those years ago.’

Sophie had imagined each room of the house and how it might have been furnished. Simple wooden benches and stools, low tables and reclining couches scattered with bright feather cushions. There would have been artwork, like the pictures in her textbook – intricate mosaic floors, marble statues and colourful frescoes of mythological creatures.

‘It was built by a very wealthy Roman family, in about 80 CE,’ said Nanna. ‘There was a separate shrine built behind the villa which was supposedly located where two ley lines converge. A magical place.’

‘Ley lines?’ asked Sophie curiously. ‘What are they?’

Nanna had looked up at the hill rising above the ruins, as though gazing back into the distant past.

‘Ley lines are straight pathways that link ancient sacred sites, temples and spiritual monuments – like Stonehenge – all over the world,’ said Nanna. ‘The spot where two ley lines cross is a place of immense power and magic.’

Sophie had felt a shiver run up her spine.

‘What sort of magic?’ asked Sophie. She’d felt sceptical about ancient ley lines. It sounded too much like hocus-pocus to her.

‘Well, crystals are supposed to connect to the spiritual power of the ley lines,’ Nanna had explained. ‘So an old folktale says that if you hold a crystal or a special talisman on a chain over a ley line, then ask an important question, the ley line will answer you.’

‘How can a ley line answer a question?’ Sophie had asked in disbelief.

Nanna had unclipped the medallion she wore around her neck. She’d dangled it from her fingertips. It was intricately engraved with a rearing horse.

‘So, in your mind you ask yourself a question, something that is really meaningful to you,’ said Nanna. ‘If the answer is no, the pendant will hang still, but if the answer is yes, it will start to spin.’

The golden pendant had hung down straight, not spinning, gleaming in the soft evening light.

‘Would you like a go?’ offered Nanna.

‘I guess.’ Sophie had shrugged. ‘I don’t know what to ask, though.’

She’d held the necklace by the top of the chain. It hung still. Questions flashed through her mind. *What could I ask it? Will I ever get good marks at school? Will I ever discover my own special talent? Will Indigo ever leave me alone?*

Sophie had thought back over the last few weeks at school. She’d remembered Indigo taunting her. Calling her a scared little mouse. Stupid. Dumb. And worse things too. Sophie’s throat had choked closed. The more Indigo had teased her, the more she’d shrunk up inside. Some days, she’d pretended to be ill just so she could miss school and stay curled up in bed. Actually, she had felt sick. Like she had a big, heavy rock in her stomach, weighing her down. She hated it. She hated feeling this way.

Will I ever feel strong and brave and happy again?

The pendant had started to sway. Sophie had watched it, transfixed. The pendant spun around and around and

around, faster and faster. A flutter of hope welled up. *Could it mean things will get better?*

‘I think the ley line has answered you yes,’ said Nanna.

Nanna had swept Sophie’s brown hair away from her face. ‘I know things have been tough for you lately, but trust me that hard times don’t last forever. You need to keep going when everything seems against you, not run away and hide. Facing your problems helps you grow stronger.’

Sophie had shaken her head. It was easy for Nanna to say. What challenges would Nanna ever need to face?

‘You are so much braver than you know, darling.’

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Sophie thought back to this morning, when her phone had pinged with a message. It was from Indigo. There were no words. It was a picture of a little brown mouse scuttling along. The next image was a big hobnailed boot about to squash the timid rodent. Sophie felt sick. Why did Indigo’s taunts affect her so much? Why couldn’t she think of a retort that would shut Indigo up?

Sophie scrubbed away tears. *Don’t think about it. Don’t think about it.*

She poked the damp ground with the toe of her boot. Nanna had said that the farmer had ploughed up all sorts of interesting relics in the field beyond – mosaic tiles, shards of pottery and a tiny statue of Bellona, the Roman goddess of war. Sophie searched among the rubble, hoping to find something special. *Wouldn’t it be cool to find an old Roman coin or a brooch?*

‘Miaow.’

The sound startled her out of her reverie.

A massive ginger cat was sitting on the low stone wall, his tiger-striped fur misted with rain. He looked scruffy, with a raggedy ear, as though he'd been in a fight or two, but well fed. He wasn't a stray.

'Hello, puss,' said Sophie. 'Where do you come from?'

The cat lashed his tail back and forth. He lifted his nose in the air disdainfully.

Sophie loved cats. They were clever, peaceful and regal. All attributes she would like to share.

The cat growled.

'Aren't you getting wet?' asked Sophie.

Of course, he didn't reply, simply turning and stalking towards the hillside. He stopped and looked at her as though expecting Sophie to follow him. It started raining again, a sudden heavy shower. At the base of the hillside was a line of dripping trees. The cat raced for shelter. Sophie ran after him.

Water trickled down her chin. Her hair, T-shirt and cardigan were soaked. Sophie shivered with cold. She should have worn a coat.

The cat pushed through the undergrowth and looked back again, checking she was still following. Sophie huddled under the trees.

The cat disappeared. One moment he was there, his ginger coat stark against the green grass. The next he was gone.

Sophie blinked. Where could he be? She pushed through the shrubbery.

At first there seemed to be nowhere that the creature could have gone. A faint mewling came from ahead,

muffled as though from a distance away. Intrigued, Sophie took a closer look and realised that there was a narrow cleft in the rock face. She listened. The mewling was coming from inside the hill.

‘Puss?’ called Sophie. ‘Puss? Where are you?’

A yowl sounded from the cleft.

‘Puss, are you hurt? Come out.’ Sophie crouched down, calling into the shadow.

‘Miaow.’ The call was loud and insistent.

Sophie’s stomach churned with worry. What if the cat was trapped? What if he’d snagged his leg in a crevice or fallen down a hole? He could be stuck in there for days. He might starve to death and no one would know where he was. Sophie hesitated. The darkness was deep and impenetrable.

She pulled out her phone and flicked on the torch. She shone its light into the crack. Shadows danced in its flimsy light, revealing rocks, twisted roots and soil.

‘Miaow.’ The animal sounded cross, as though impatient at her dithering.

‘Good puss,’ called Sophie. ‘Come out, and I’ll take you home to have a snack.’

There was silence.

Sophie picked at a root protruding from the rock face. Should she go home? Nanna had promised to bake hot scones with clotted cream and homemade strawberry jam. The thought of afternoon tea, Nanna’s kitchen and the warm stove filled her with longing. But what if the cat died, trapped in the darkness? Perhaps Nanna would know who owned him, and she could call the vet or the fire brigade?

A bloodcurdling screech came from the darkness.

That cat must be horribly injured, Sophie thought. I'll have to try to find it.

Holding her phone up for light, she looked again. The cleft was wider at the base. Wide enough to take a small person.

Sophie crawled tentatively into the cave mouth. Sharp flints gouged into her palms. The entrance was like a tunnel, but after a metre the roof soared above, opening into a large cave or cellar. The air smelled of musty earth and rotting leaves. There was no sign of the cat.

Shining the torch around, Sophie realised the space had been built by people, with its rectangular shape, flat ceiling and straight, brick walls with several alcoves. A marble statue was wedged in one. Colour shimmered on the floor in the light of Sophie's phone. Under her feet was a multicoloured pattern. She leaned down to take a closer look, using her foot to sweep away the dirt.

The whole floor was decorated with mosaic tiles to form a series of pictures. In one corner was a winged chariot pulled by four prancing black horses. Their necks arched, manes tossed and nostrils flared. They looked almost alive.

Wow! This must be a Roman room, thought Sophie. These mosaics have been here for nearly two thousand years. Perhaps it's the old shrine that Nanna mentioned?

She looked up nervously as though the ceiling might crash down on her, crushing her beneath the weight of the whole hillside above. She huffed.

Don't be ridiculous, she told herself sternly. This room has been standing for centuries. I think it might last another day.

The centre of the floor was a circle filled with seven hexagons, decorated with plants and flowers. In the middle was a flying horse, its muscles seeming to quiver with life and power. Other hexagons depicted mythical creatures – a flute-playing faun, a mighty centaur and a winged Cupid riding a lion. Between each creature were three human faces of different ages – a child, a beautiful young woman and an old crone. In each corner, a flying chariot was pulled by horses. The lines from an Andrew Marvell poem, which Nanna had read with her, sprang into Sophie’s head:

*But at my back I always hear
Time’s winged chariot hurrying near.*

Sophie could imagine her art teacher analysing that symbolism. The mosaic represented time and life rushing by.

A sudden hiss from the darkness reminded her why she was here. The cat! His eyes gleamed green from the reflected light of her phone. They looked sinister in the dim light. He yowled.

‘There you are, puss,’ said Sophie. ‘I wondered where you’d got to.’

Sophie crept towards the cat. The green eyes retreated into the shadows. Sophie followed.

‘Come on, puss,’ she crooned. ‘Let’s take you home.’

There was a warning growl, then a lightning strike of claws.

‘Ow,’ shrieked Sophie, dropping her phone. ‘*Dratted* cat.’

The phone bounced and smashed, plunging the room into blackness. Sophie felt a wave of panic. Now she was trapped. She was stuck in a cave, in the darkness, under a

hill with no way of getting out. She could be here for days or weeks or . . .

‘Stop it!’ Sophie told herself. ‘Get a grip.’

She touched her stinging ankle with her hand. There was a trickle of something warm and sticky. Sophie rubbed her forehead.

What should she do now? It was impossible to see anything in the pitch darkness. She scrabbled around on the floor, hoping to find her phone. Instead, she felt something squishy. *Yuk*. She edged her way forward using her feet to try to feel for her phone. Nothing.

She heard the faint sound of leaves rustling and edged towards the noise. Perhaps she could find her way out of the shrine and go home to get a torch?

Her eyes adjusted to the darkness. A rush of relief flooded through her. There was a faint glimmer of light. It must lead outside. As Sophie stumbled towards it, she could see the shadow of the ginger cat slinking through the gap. There was a last flash of green eyes and he was gone.

That cat is serious trouble, thought Sophie. I'll be glad if I never see him again.