

Wollombi, NSW, Australia, 1847

'It's blood—bad blood—that's causing it. A new pinafore and some education ain't going to change nothing. Still the same soul tucked beneath. You can teach a wild dog to come when it's called, but you wouldn't turn your back, not once it's bloodied.'

Mellie sat hot and cross-legged on the dirt of the scullery floor wedged between the washboard and the mangle, hands over her ears, trying to block out Cook's words. Quite why she kept finding herself on the edge of the millpond at sunrise, with nothing for company but a blanket of mist and the cries of the curlews, she didn't understand.

Twisting this way and that, she plucked at her soggy night-gown, searching for the bad blood Cook kept ranting about. No sign of any stains on her skin or her nightgown, bad or otherwise.

'Why does she keep going down there? That's what I'd like to know.' Fanny pushed up her sleeves and threw another bundle of kindling under the main copper.

'Only thing a scullery maid needs worry about is how to clean. Get to it.'

'She ought to have learnt her lesson by now.'

'She's drawn to the place.' Cook's beady eyes skewered Mellie. 'If you keep going down there you'll be taken. Small, plain and bony or large, round and plump, he don't care so long as he gets tender young flesh.'

Mellie crawled closer to the copper and rubbed at the goose bumps on her arms. The more she tried to remember how she ended up at the millpond, the more the nothingness grew, as though someone had singed a great hole in her memory. She'd tried to explain that she didn't do it on purpose, didn't know how she'd got there. But Cook never believed a word, called it a flight of fancy, whatever that might be.

'Did you hear what I said?' Cook reeled Mellie to her feet and gave her a bone-rattling shake. 'You'll be taken.'

'Taken where?' Mellie's words squeaked, high pitched and quivering.

'To his lair. He'll drag you down into the murky depths and ...' Cook clapped her hands. 'Gone.' The loud, horrible slap bounced off the weatherboard walls. 'Never to be seen again.'

Mellie stuck her fingers in her ears and crawled back into the corner.

'You can't say that,' Fanny hissed. 'It's not true.'

'True enough, if it keeps her out of the millpond. Saves her drowning.'

Cook reached under the mangle and hauled Mellie out of her hidey-hole. 'Come on, missy. Go and get yourself dressed then bring that gown back here. It needs to go in the copper.'

All Mellie wanted was to go home. But there was no home. They'd burnt all her clothes, all the furniture, the bedding, every-thing in the little slab cottage down by the brook. And she still couldn't get a straight answer from Mrs Pearson or anyone else about Da.

She stomped through the kitchen to the sleep-out. The last thing she remembered before the fever got her was running through the bush, dogged by crashing footsteps, sweat blinding her eyes, her

heart galloping. She'd dodged and weaved, then her feet went out from under her and her lungs filled with a gut-wrenching stench. Damp and rancid, with an underlying stink of mouldering sludge.

She made it back home before the fever took hold, and then life became a horrible sweaty, itchy blur until two weeks later when she'd woken in the sleep-out with Mrs Pearson daubing a foul chalky lotion all over her.

Turned out she'd caught the pox, the wretched chicken pox, though how she'd managed that she'd no idea. The chickens had gone long ago into the blank hole of nothingness along with Da and everything else. Mrs Pearson blamed the fever, and said some things were best forgotten.

She dragged her pinafore over her head, scooped up her night-gown and tucked it under her arm. If she was careful, she could sneak through the back door, drop it outside the scullery and disappear before she suffered another of Cook's rants.

She ducked underneath the wisteria cave, glanced through the yellowing leaves to the millpond, balled up her nightgown, lobbed it at the scullery door and took off.

'Mellie! What are you doing out there? Come inside.'

'I'm on my way to do my schoolwork, Mrs Pearson.' She crossed her fingers against the lie.

'In that case, show me how you're getting on.'

'I'm going to practise in the copybook.' No matter how hard she tried she'd never be able to imitate the perfect copperplate Lydia and Bea, the daughters of the house, produced with nothing more than a flick of their fine, thin wrists. And the chicken pox was no excuse; Mrs Pearson said she had to do her schoolwork now the fever had gone because she was so far behind.

'Follow me.' Mrs Pearson led the way into the cool darkness of Dr Pearson's study, the room where he talked to people who were sick, where he doled out foul-looking tonics from a squeaky cupboard crammed into the corner by the front door.

Now she'd got over the towering piles of leather-bound books, the ghostly faded pictures and the strange mixture of smells—carbolic, ink, dust, eucalyptus and pipe tobacco—she quite liked the room. Especially the books, not that she'd discovered one she could read. She liked to rub her fingers over the soft leather covers and the bumpy gold letters. Lydia said they weren't fit for young girls so Mellie'd sneaked a peek when no one was looking. One book, by a man whose name she couldn't wrap her tongue around, was full of creatures and their skeletons. Worse still was another, packed with drawings of people's insides, of bits she didn't dare think about. Enough to make a person wonder what Dr Pearson was up to.

'Sit down, Mellie. I wish to speak to you.'

That didn't sound good. She rocked on the edge of the chair. 'Sit up straight, hands in your lap while I'm talking.'

She shifted back, trying to escape Mrs Pearson's poking, prodding stare, the spindles of the chair grating against her back.

'This wandering. It must stop. I realise it's difficult for you, forced to remain inside the house, but you've been sick, quite sick, and we don't want you to infect anyone else.'

Her finger reached for the last remaining sore on her forehead, the only one that hadn't scabbed over. Mrs Pearson promised that once the nasty crusty craters fell off, she wouldn't be a danger to anyone else. She picked at it, maybe if she pulled it off ...

'Don't pick. Do you remember what I said?'

Mellie bobbed her head. 'I can go outside when the scabs fall off.'

'Then can you please tell me what you were doing down at the millpond?'

'Nothing.' Her mouth dried. Nothing she remembered. Perhaps the black hole would lighten if she looked around in daylight.

'Don't lie, Mellie. Cook keeps finding you down there, and in your nightgown.'

Mellie glanced around the room, her face getting hotter by the moment, not knowing what to say. She clenched her handkerchief in her fist.

'Do you remember being in the scullery?'

Mellie nodded again. And she still hadn't had breakfast.

'So why do you keep going to the millpond?'

She lifted her shoulders. 'I don't know.' And then that flickering image drifted before her eyes. The mist creeping over the hills, the soggy grass beneath her feet and the glassy eyes of the old white mare watching her every move. 'Oh!' She leapt up.

'What is it, dear?' Mrs Pearson grasped at her hand. 'Sit back down.'

'I thought it was a dream. There's a white horse down there.' She snorted into her handkerchief. 'The millpond smells horrid. Damp and mouldy. I don't mean to go down there.'

'I'm sure there's a simple answer. I'll talk with Dr Pearson again.'

Not more poking and prodding—she couldn't still be sick, surely not. She raised the back of her hand to her forehead. No sign of a fever. 'What's wrong with me?'

'Well, if you're not going there intentionally, Dr Pearson believes you must be sleepwalking. It's understandable after everything that's happened. It's your mind's way of working through the matters troubling you but the water is deep and dangerous. We don't want you to come to any harm.'

More like she'd come to harm at Cook's hand or the horrible creature that lurked in the murky depths. 'Cook's told me. I'll be taken, snatched away.'

'Poppycock and nonsense.'

'I want Da.' Her voice wobbled, then a great wave of sorrow stole her breath, almost drowning her. She covered her face to hide her trembling bottom lip. 'Where's Da? Can I go home when I'm better?'

'Oh, my dear.' Mrs Pearson reached for her hand again, her gaze fixed on some spot beyond the window.

A griping took hold of her and she jerked away, clutching at her stomach.

'Do you not remember anything before the chicken pox?' She and Da in the little house down by the brook where they'd lived ever since Ma and baby John went. Not the best, but Da had plans, big plans. The picture flickered and faded, overtaken by a puddle of miserableness. 'Is Da back yet?'

'No, my dear, he isn't.'

Why? What had she done? Surely he wouldn't up and leave her. Mrs Pearson sat wringing her hands as though she needed to wash them. 'I thought you understood. Dr Pearson brought you here because no one would take you while you had the chicken pox.'

She probably ought to thank the Pearsons but she wasn't sure she was grateful. Bumping her feet against the rung of the chair, in time with the pendulum on the carriage clock, she tried again.

'When's Da coming home?'

'I don't know, my dear.' Mrs Pearson straightened up, her eyes skittered back to the window then her face brightened. 'It might be better if you leave with the girls. I'll ask Dr Pearson.'

Leave? 'You said I could stay.' Her voice hitched embarrassingly on the words and her throat scratched. She couldn't go home. Everything had gone up in flames.

'This isn't a punishment. It's a holiday. Let me explain. I'm sure you're going to be very excited.'

In all honesty, she couldn't think of anything that would make her excited unless someone stopped Cook's mouth and Fanny's slit-eyed glances and swept away the mess of the last weeks.

'Every Easter, Ella and Grace come from Maitland to spend a few days here and then all the girls go off on a holiday. Wouldn't you like to go with them? A holiday would be lovely.'

A holiday. What was a holiday? And no. No, it wouldn't be lovely, whatever it was. Not if it meant going away. She was only beginning to get the hang of the doctor's house on the hill. 'I want to stay here.' Mostly. Cook's horrible mouth aside. 'Da won't be able to find me if I go away, and what about my chicken poxes?'

'You won't be contagious for much longer and those nasty sores will heal with fresh air and sunshine. Another upheaval in such a short time will be difficult, but it'll be for the best. You'll have a wonderful time with Anthea. She'll welcome you with open arms. Trust me.'

Mellie hadn't much faith in trust. She smothered a scoff.

'Anthea lives at a place called Bow Wow, less than a day's ride from here. She's a fascinating woman, a palaeontologist of some repute.'

'A palaeo what?'

'Someone who collects fossils.'

Fossils? 'What are they?'

'People call them curios—bones, shells, stone imprints of animals and plants.'

The illustrations in Dr Pearson's books reared before her eyes. Someone who collected bones. Da had a kangaroo skull tacked on the wall outside the cottage door where he hung his oilskin. Big holes where the eyes used to be and huge, horrible teeth. Where was Da? She covered her face with her hands, the pain too much to bear. She wanted to go home.

'Anthea is a scientist. A scientist who tries to find out how things were in ancient times by studying the remains of the past.'

This was getting worse by the moment. Da was the only remains of the past she'd like to see but it didn't seem as though that was going to happen any time soon.

Mellie's eyes dived to the book on the shelf, the very one with the skeletons she'd taken down and studied. A shudder traced her shoulders and she shot to her feet. Perhaps that's what Cook meant when she said she'd be taken. 'I don't want to go.' The high-ceilinged room shrank around her. 'I promise I'll behave. I won't be no trouble.'

'Come along, Mellie. This isn't like you. Let me show you something.' Mrs Pearson walked over behind the desk and took down one of the pictures. 'This is a daguerreotype. A new way to record images. It was taken a couple of years ago by a man named George Goodman. Here's Anthea, and her husband Benjamin, Bea and Lydia and her friend Ella, and other visitors. They're having a lovely time.'

A group of people stood in front of a huge rock face, in the middle a man and a woman arm in arm, and two other people with a pack horse, and in between a group of girls, their long skirts brushing the grass and parasols held above their heads.

'Mellie, you're a brave girl. Lydia and Bea will be going, and Ella and Grace.

Ella. She shuddered. Lydia's best friend, all pink cheeks and airs and graces. She'd bossed her around ever since she'd arrived and her sister, Grace, was even worse. Every time Grace caught sight of her, she stuck her hands in her armpits and danced around like a headless chook shrieking bawk-bawk. And now Bea had taken to doing it too. 'You said this was my home. I won't wander, I promise. I don't want to be bloodied by the bunyip.'

'Bunyip! Bloodied!' Mrs Pearson leapt to her feet, her shadow towering over her like the giant beast Cook reckoned inhabited the millpond, waiting, just waiting, to snatch young girls away. 'Go to your room and organise your belongings. I'm going to have words with Cook. This is the very reason you must go with the girls. There'll be no more nonsense.' Mrs Pearson threw open the study door. 'Cook, Fanny, where are you? I want to talk to you.'

'I won't go to the millpond again. I promise.'

'It's got nothing to do with the millpond but everything to do with Cook's drivel and your overactive imagination.'

Mellie gaped at Mrs Pearson's disappearing back, taking long, cooling breaths until all the unanswered questions stopped bouncing around inside her head.