By Jennifer Gray ★ Illustrated by Elisa Paganelli

The Travels of ERMINE

(who is very determined)







Dear Sylvia,

Thank you very much for offering to have Ermine to stay on her world travels. Since I adopted her she has turned out to be a very determined young lady with a great sense of adventure. I'm sure she and Butterfly will get on like a house on fire! Ermine also likes to help out, so if you need anything fixing she is definitely the one to ask. She will be arriving at half past eleven on Tuesday morning. I've told her to meet you at the Opera House.

With best wishes,

Maria Grand Duchess Maria Von Schnitzel



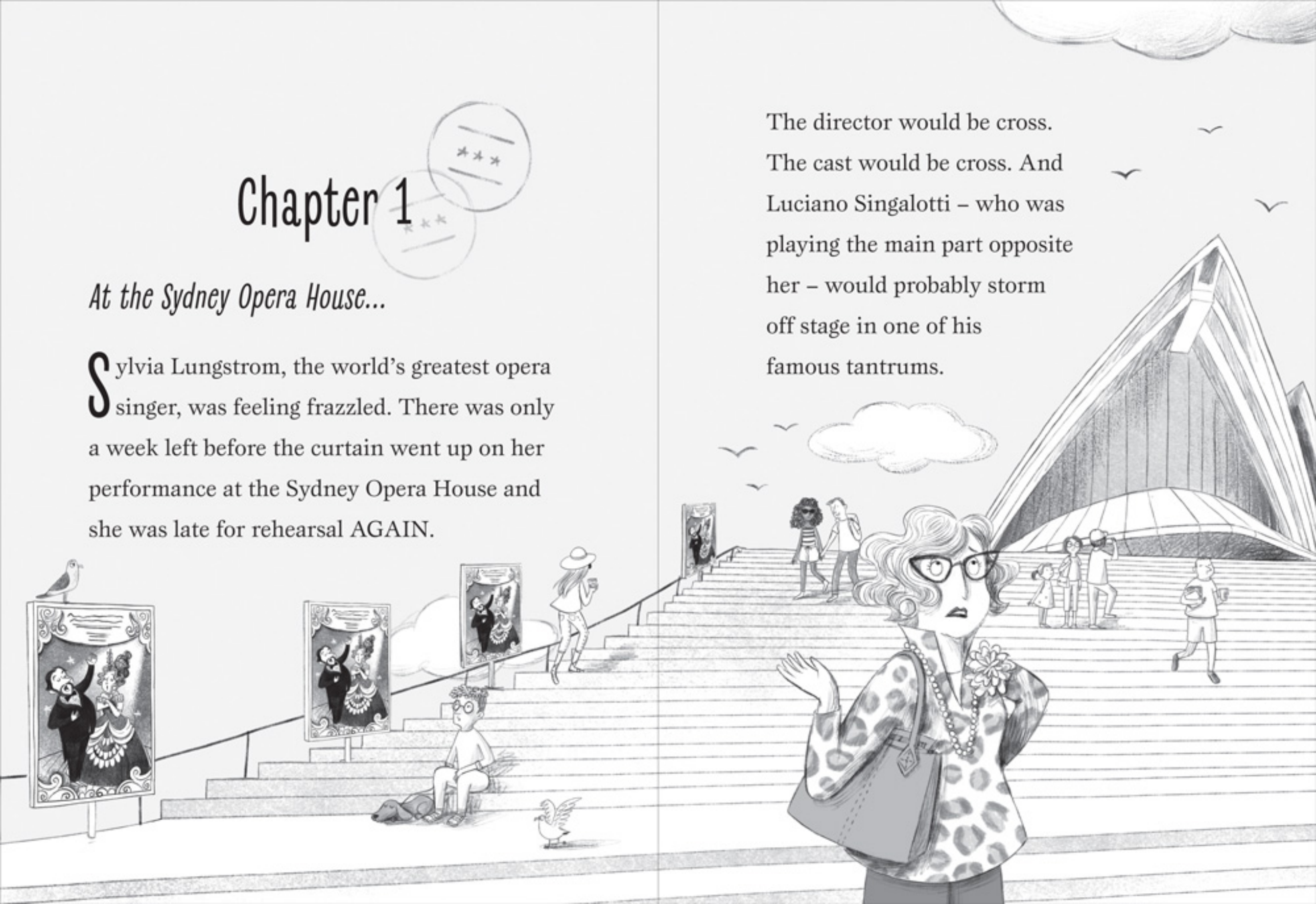
Dame Sylvia Lungstrom
C/o Sydney Opera House
Sydney
New South Wales
Australia

Chapter 1

At the Sydney Opera House...

Sylvia Lungstrom, the world's greatest opera singer, was feeling frazzled. There was only a week left before the curtain went up on her performance at the Sydney Opera House and she was late for rehearsal AGAIN.

The director would be cross. The cast would be cross. And Luciano Singalotti – who was playing the main part opposite her – would probably storm off stage in one of his famous tantrums.



Sylvia was never normally late. But having her eight-year-old granddaughter, Butterfly, to stay for the summer holidays made life much more complicated – especially as Butterfly thought opera sounded like a bunch of hyenas stuck in a dustbin.

Thank goodness she had phoned her old friend, Maria, for advice on what to do, thought Sylvia. And what a stroke of luck that Maria had suggested that Ermine should come and stay as part of her world travels. It would be a wonderful surprise for Butterfly to have a friend to play with, particularly one as unusual as Ermine! Sylvia smiled to herself. She could hardly wait to see the look on her granddaughter's face when their guest arrived.

But meanwhile she had a rehearsal to go to.

"Please hurry up, Butterfly!" Sylvia begged. The Opera House stood looking over the harbour. It was built on a great platform, like an ancient temple, and Sylvia and Butterfly had only reached the first level. There was still another big set of steps to go before they got to the stage door.

"I don't want to!" Butterfly dragged up the steps behind her grandmother. She was a slip of a girl with a gentle face and big, dark eyes. Right now though, she didn't look gentle at all. She looked positively ferocious. Her face wore a big scowl and her thick, cropped hair poked out in all directions from under a baseball cap, which she had on back to front.

The baseball cap was denim, like her dungarees and sneakers. She was also wearing odd socks. "I want to climb the bridge."

Sydney Harbour Bridge was probably the city's best-known landmark apart from the Opera House. It formed a great arch over the harbour and Butterfly had set her heart on climbing all the way up to the top of it and all the way down the other side on the famous bridge climb.

"We'll do that later," Sylvia promised.

"But I want to do it now!" Butterfly sat down on the concrete.

"Butterfly…" Sylvia pleaded. "I'm late for rehearsal as it is. I need to practise."

"No, you don't," Butterfly said. "You just need to sing something decent, like Winifred Winnit does." Her face brightened. "Her performing wallabies are AWESOME!"

Winifred Winnit was a children's entertainer famous for songs such as "Kevin the Kangaroo"

and "Kiss Me, Koala". To Sylvia's trained ear, it was clear that Winifred Winnit could barely sing a note. But everyone in Australia, including Butterfly, absolutely adored her. Winifred and her wallabies had won the biggest talent show on Australian TV for two years in a row and were hotly tipped to win this year's competition too, which was due to take place in just two days' time:



Sylvia had thought it would be fun to get tickets. But since she'd learned about

Ermine's visit, she'd had an even better idea…

Just then she heard a faint pattering behind her.

"Excuse me," said a voice. "I'm looking for Sylvia Lungstrom. Do you know where I can find her? Only this place is enormous and I don't know where to go!"

A brown, furry animal with a long, black-tipped bushy tail, two coal-black eyes, white whiskers and a pink nose stood beside Butterfly. The creature was about as high as Butterfly's knee and was wearing a blue pinafore dress and a straw hat.



A camera was slung over its shoulder and in one paw it carried a small bag marked TOOL KIT.

"Ermine!" Sylvia cried with relief. "You're early!"

"Sylvia!" Ermine squeaked. "It's you!" She removed a photograph from her pocket and examined it. "You look just like your picture, except without the horns."

"I only wear those onstage," Sylvia explained. She bent down and regarded Ermine closely. "And you look just like your picture too, except your fur is a different colour."

"It's white in the winter," Ermine told her. "But in the summer it turns brown. We stoats are very clever like that."

"You certainly are!" Sylvia said. "By the way, this is my granddaughter, Butterfly."

Ermine held out a paw. "Hello," she said politely. "I'm Ermine." Then, "Did you fall over or do you just like sitting on the floor?"



Butterfly gawped at her. "You can talk!" she said. She'd forgotten all about her tantrum.

"Yes, but I can't sing," Ermine said sadly. "At least not as well as your grandmother can." She clasped her paws together and looked up at the Opera House in awe. The roofs of the beautiful building towered above them like a set of billowing sails. "I can't wait to go to the opera and hear you sing, Sylvia," Ermine sighed. "I can wear my feathered hat!"

"Your what?" Butterfly said, getting up.

"My feathered hat," Ermine repeated. "The Duchess gave it to me. She adopted me when I was a kitten. She's taught me all sorts of useful things, like how to fix a bicycle chain and when to wear a feathered hat."





"Where *is* your feathered hat, Ermine?" Sylvia asked.

"With the rest of my luggage," Ermine said. "The taxi driver's bringing it. Look, there she is."

The taxi driver came towards them carrying a stack of small, brightly coloured suitcases.

"You can put them in my dressing room," Sylvia told the taxi driver. She glanced at her watch. "Now I really must get going. Butterfly, you take Ermine to the cafe and get her something to eat…" She paused. "And while you're there, you can work on your act."

"What act?" Butterfly asked.

Sylvia's eyes twinkled. "The one you're going to do for *Australia's Most Awesome Animal Show*. I've entered you both in the talent competition."

"Really?" Butterfly gasped.

"Really." Sylvia smiled. "As long as Ermine agrees."

"Please, Ermine!" Butterfly begged. "I've always wanted to do something like that!"

Ermine didn't have to think about it for long. A talent show? It sounded exactly the sort of

thing she'd be good at. She nodded. "Of course I will. The photographs will look brilliant in my scrapbook! The Duchess said I have to fill it up so I have a record of my travels."

"Yesssssssss!" Butterfly high-fived Ermine's paw and gave Sylvia a big hug. Then she bounded down the steps towards the harbour.

"Wait for me!" Ermine chased after her, the sun warming her fur. As she looked out over the blue water she had the feeling this was the start of a **really big ADVENTURE!**



Chapter 2

Beside the pool at Winifred Winnit's luxury house...

Winifred Winnit was lying on a sunbed under an umbrella, sipping a cocktail from a tall glass. Her face was covered in green mud and she had a piece of cucumber over each eye.

On the bed beside her reclined her pet Tasmanian devil – a creature about the size of a small dog, with dark fur, a broad muzzle and very sharp teeth. It had a gold collar around its neck and a pair of reflecting