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THE IMPOSSIBLE SECRET OF LILLIAN VELVET
is a GUPPY BOOK

First published in Australia and the US in 2023

First published in the UK in 2024 by
Guppy Books,
Bracken Hill,
Cotswold Road,
Oxford OX2 9JG

Text copyright © Jaclyn Moriarty, 2024
Illustrations © Karl James Mountford, 2024

978-1-916558-168

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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GUPPY PUBLISHING LTD Reg. No. 11565833

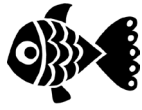
A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 10/17½pt Janson by Falcon Oast Graphic Art Ltd www.falcon.uk.com
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Books Ltd

The Impossible Secret of Lillian Velvet

Jaclyn Moriarty

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The Slightly Alarming Tale of the Whispering Wars

The Stolen Prince of Cloudburst

The Astonishing Chronicles of Oscar from Elsewhere

To my Mum,
who is funny, lovely, tells brilliant stories, and
makes every child she meets feel special.

(and to Charlie and Nigel, with love)





Part 1



REPORT #1

Gainsleigh Harbour, Kingdoms and Empires – twenty years ago

This was the time of the Whispering Wars.

Late one winter's night, Jacob and Ildi Mettlestone, fitter than their grey hair might suggest, waited at the docks. They wore overcoats, hats and sensible shoes. Suitcases stood at their feet.

Their twelve children were gathered around them. Of these, eleven were daughters and one, a son. The eldest, Isabelle, was a grown woman, while the youngest, Patrick, was a child of twelve. The rest were fairly evenly spaced between.

It was very cold. Some stamped their feet to keep warm, others jumped up and down on the spot.

'In half an hour,' Jacob told the group, 'your mother and I will be collected by a fishing vessel. A week from today, word will come that the vessel was intercepted by Shadow Mages, and that . . .'

He cleared his throat, his gaze drifting across the harbour to the boats that bobbed and swayed in their own tethered shadows. The silence continued.

‘And that we were killed,’ Ildi finished, briskly.

At this, a series of gasps, snorts, giggles and crinkled brows ran through the huddled group – and somebody began to sob.

‘This is necessary?’ Isabelle, the eldest, demanded. She exchanged troubled glances with the other grown-up sisters. Although she herself still resided in Gainsleigh – travelling frequently for work – these others had moved away, scattering across the Kingdoms and Empires. Their parents had summonsed them home for this meeting – in the midst of the Whispering Wars! – so they’d known something was up. But pretending to be dead? This struck the sisters as excessively up.

The younger siblings, however, still lived at home. The Whispering Wars had only faintly touched them – sugar and chocolate could be tricky to find, and newspapers favoured big, bold headlines and exclamation marks. That was it really. These siblings assumed their parents’ announcement to be a joke, a nonsense, or – in the case of Emma, who was fourteen and prone to melodrama – the greatest tragedy of all time.

‘Yes, we are sure it’s necessary,’ Ildi replied, raising her voice over Emma’s sobbing. ‘Look, we won’t *actually* be killed,’ she added, giving this daughter a firm kick with the side of her shoe. (Emma had thrown herself onto the wharf, curled into a ball like an echidna, and was shrieking, ‘Killed? No! My darling parents! Killed? No!’)

‘Hush, Emma,’ Jacob begged, turning away from the harbour at last. ‘Please. We must avoid attention. You see, children, your

mother and I have captured an extremely powerful enemy.'

'The enemy is captured?' Isabelle frowned. 'In that case . . .'

'The enemy is captured, yes – but not yet fully secured,' her mother clarified. 'At present, you are all in grave danger. The enemy is determined to exact revenge on us, and would not hesitate to harm or capture our children to this end.'

Jacob thrust his hands into his coat pockets. 'We must go into deep hiding,' he explained. '*All* must believe that we are dead. There will be death notices in the papers. A coronial inquest. A funeral.'

Crunch. One of the grown-up daughters, Franny – boots, jodhpurs and an oversized flannel shirt – had bitten the top off a carrot. Chewing carrots helped Franny think.

'This will all take time,' she pointed out.

Her parents turned to her, apologetic. They understood her concern. Franny, the third eldest, had moved the farthest of all the children, to a town called Spindrift, where she was mayor. Spindrift was near the epicentre of the Whispering Wars: Franny's town needed her back as soon as possible.

Briefly, the parents outlined their plan. Franny chewed on her carrot, listening. The other adult sisters added questions of their own.

'We'll return to Gainsleigh the moment the enemy is secured,' Jacob promised. 'We'll telegram the instant we know.'

'So it might not be long?' Patrick, the youngest, checked. 'You might telegram tomorrow?' He was the family optimist.

There was a brief pause.

Then: ‘It could be soon,’ Ildi agreed, reaching to straighten her son’s coat collar. ‘Tomorrow is . . . unlikely . . . but yes, it could happen at any time.’

More discussion. Some of the Mettlestones grew bored with the details and began to drift away, along the wharves. Soon, only the three eldest sisters remained. Their questions were insightful and probing. This made their parents proud.

The youngest siblings, Patrick and Emma, skimmed pebbles across the dark water. Two very organised sisters, Nancy and Claire, argued about whether one had borrowed the other’s scarf without asking. The twins, Maya and Lisbeth – both sailors with plans to acquire a boat of their own one day – studied the crafts in dock, observing design flaws. Alys, the musical sister, sat on a bench, tapping out rhythms on the seatback. (Her passion was percussion.) Sophy, the animal lover, crouched by an injured seagull, while Sue, a farmer, studied the kelp that floated on the harbour, wondering if it might make useful fertiliser.

Eventually, all the children wandered back. They were quiet now, looking out to sea for the boat that would collect their parents.

Mist on the water. The scuttling of a rat. The sound of distant singing from a late-night pub.

‘This is going to hit your friends hard,’ Isabelle pointed out suddenly. ‘Or do they know it’s a ruse?’

Both parents sighed in unison. ‘It’s very distressing,’ Ildi

admitted. ‘But the *only* people who may know we are alive are you: our twelve children. You must keep the secret. No partners can know. No friends. Not even your own children, should you have any. They must be told that their grandparents died before they were born.’

At this, a kind of horror seemed to grip the gathering.

Emma straightened. The melodrama fell from her face like a dropped coat. ‘Use your wish, Father,’ she commanded.

There was a startled silence. Their father’s wish was never mentioned.

Although Jacob Mettlestone resembled a regular person in every way, he was in fact a Wheat Sprite. All land-based Sprites possess a unique gift: they can make a single wish in their lifetime.

‘Oh, darling child,’ Jacob replied, his voice low and sorrowful. ‘I used my wish many years ago.’

Emma slumped – they all did.

‘I’m sure we don’t need to remind you to keep *that* secret too,’ Ildi said sharply, and her children murmured: ‘Of course not.’

It was universally assumed that Jacob had a wish up his sleeve. This gave him a tactical advantage over enemies in his work – not to mention, a certain panache. (It had also helped with discipline when the children were small.) That he would reveal the truth about the wish now was yet another clue that the matter was serious indeed.

‘Anyhow, you’ll be back *long* before any of us has a child,’

Patrick declared. ‘Long before *I* do, anyway. I’m twelve! A mere child myself! Some might say.’

Into the soft laughter that followed this assertion came the long, low note of a foghorn. A fishing vessel crept into the harbour. In turn, the Mettlestone parents embraced their twelve children.

They gathered up their suitcases. They embarked.

Part 2



1

On my tenth birthday, my grandmother gave me a jar of gold coins.

Earlier that morning, a peculiar noise had woken me. It was a steady, slurping crunching sound and it was coming from the kitchen. After a while, the sound stopped. Silence fell.

I dozed until it was time to wake up; then I put on my dressing gown, came out to the living room and sat at the table.

'Many happy returns,' my grandmother said, pushing a jar of gold coins towards me.

I hefted the jar with both hands, feeling its weight, and its sunlit warmth, and read the label.

ALWAYS FRESH

Est. 1977

Dill Pickles

The edges of this label were peeling, and it was shadowed with water stains. I remembered the slurping, crunching sounds I'd heard earlier.

'Grandmother!' I exclaimed.

She must have eaten a jar of pickles, tipped out the pickle juice,

washed the jar, and filled it with these gold coins! It was the effort of this that thrilled me, more even than the coins themselves. As far as I knew, my grandmother didn't even like pickles!

'Eat your toast, child,' Grandmother replied, 'and I will tell you the plans.'

While she talked, I unscrewed the lid of the jar and dug out a coin. In my country, which is called Australia, there are both gold and silver coins. The gold coins represent one or two dollars.

I only wanted to study the coin's engravings, out of curiosity, but Grandmother said, 'Child!' in a sharp voice, 'I am speaking!' and I dropped the coin.

It fell to the floorboards with a clang. Then it spun in place, ringing noisily, before tipping over: *clunk*. I glanced down at it.

I frowned.

It was quite blank.

'Child,' Grandmother repeated, more calmly. 'Have you understood?'

It was then that the words she'd been speaking fell sideways with a *clunk* inside my mind. Grandmother intended to go out. For the first time in my life, on this, the day of my tenth birthday, she was leaving me home alone.

'I have secured employment,' she explained, sounding a little proud. *Secured employment* meant she'd found a job. 'Each day, from this day, you will take your lessons here, unsupervised. Upon my return, in the evenings, I will check your schoolwork. I expect it to be of highest quality. Once you have completed your

schoolwork, you may practise piano. You might also . . .' She stood, nudged the fallen coin with her slippered foot and then crouching, picked it up and handed it to me. 'You might also begin supper preparations. Yes,' she decided. 'At five p.m. each day, you may begin supper preparations.'

After that, she cleared the breakfast table, washed the dishes, and disappeared down the hallway to her room.

2

Before I continue, I must say this: I know that I sound strange.

I do not sound like other ten-year-old girls in my country, and possibly even in the world. Here is how I know this:

One Tuesday, back when I was eight, my grandmother was teaching me my lessons. She set me a series of geography questions then rose to make herself a cup of tea.

A moment later, though, she returned from the kitchen and sat down again.

'After lunch,' she said, 'we will walk to the corner store and purchase milk. The carton in the refrigerator has soured.'

'Very well, Grandmother,' I agreed. 'I am sorry about your tea.'

'Continue with your lesson,' Grandmother instructed. 'Do not concern yourself with my tea.'

After lunch, however, Grandmother said, 'I feel rather fatigued. I am going to rest for an hour. Complete your comprehension exercise, child.' She went into her bedroom and closed the door.

Through the window I could see that the day was pleasant. The sky was blue. Our plum tree was flowering.

I completed my comprehension exercise, using full sentences.

I looked at the clock. Grandmother had been sleeping for thirty minutes. Another thirty minutes of her nap remained.

Crossing the room to the coat rack, I reached into the pocket of Grandmother's jacket and took out her purse. The key was in the front door. I stood on my toe tips and turned it.

Then I walked down the hill to the corner store.

Grandmother and I live on Carmichael Street, a steep road just outside the small town of Bomaderry. Ours is the house with the letterbox shaped like a hairdryer. One side of the street is lined with houses; the other has fields with cows or horses. Bomaderry is two hours south of Sydney, and we often hear highway traffic – trucks and tourists – from the M1. Although Grandmother orders our groceries online, when we need something small, such as milk or paper towel, we walk to the corner store.

Two girls around my own age – eight at that time – were sitting on the step of this store, eating raspberry popsicles.

'Good afternoon,' I said. 'Isn't it a lovely day?'

The girls stared up at me.

As I stepped around them, one spoke. 'Good afternoon,' she replied softly.

I bought a carton of milk and stepped around the two girls again. Their popsicles had stained their chins and their lips raspberry.

I paused.

'May I ask why you are not at school?' I enquired. Most children were in classrooms at this time of the day.

'It's school holidays,' one of the girls answered, blinking.

'Of course,' I said. 'Have you interesting plans for your holidays?'

The girls glanced at each other. 'How old are you?' one asked.

'Eight.'

'You don't talk like an eight-year-old,' the first girl informed me.

'No, you don't,' her friend agreed.

I was cradling the milk in my arms, as one might hold a baby, and the carton was cold against my arms.

'I don't?'

They both shook their heads.

I thought for a moment.

'I suppose this is because I live with my grandmother,' I told them. 'I never see other children of my own age, as Grandmother home-schools me. She worries that schools in this region are too small. In fact, I only know about other children from reading classic children's books. My favourite is *Mary Poppins Comes Back*.'

The two girls gazed at me. 'Really?' one said.

Encouraged, I continued.

'Really. When I was much younger, my grandmother used to go out to work three afternoons a week and the kindly woman next door – Fiona was her name – took care of me in her home. I

did like those days. I remember watching a television programme with Fiona. It was called *Peppa Pig.* Terrific fun. It did not teach me how other children speak, though, it only taught me how pigs speak. Unfortunately, Fiona moved away. Her husband Carl was offered employment in Sydney, as a management consultant, just as their rent here was increased beyond their means. I missed Fiona dreadfully for a while. However, I have grown accustomed to her absence.'

There was an even longer pause while my new friends considered all this.

'You should get a TV,' one of the girls suggested.

'And an iPad,' the other added.

These seemed interesting ideas.

'Where does one acquire these?' I asked.

The girls looked at each other. 'At a shop,' one said. 'Or order it online,' the other added.

'Have I enough money?' I opened Grandmother's purse. There were three notes, each worth ten dollars.

One of the girls nodded firmly: 'Yes, you do,' while her friend squinted doubtfully.

'Well, perhaps I will buy a television and an iPad tomorrow,' I said, 'but I had best get home now. Grandmother may have awoken from her nap and she will wish for a cup of tea. She will be delighted that I have purchased milk. The one in our refrigerator has soured. It has been such a pleasure talking to you both.'

I began to walk away.

'Bye,' one of the girls called.

Then the other shouted, 'What's your name?'

I turned around. Nobody had ever asked me for my name before, as far as I could recall.

'Thank you for asking!' I called back, very happily.

(Later, remembering this, I felt embarrassed. *Why didn't you just tell them your NAME?* I scolded myself. *Lillian Velvet!* I could have even asked *their* names.)

Grandmother had not been delighted that I'd purchased milk. In fact, she'd been very angry. After that, she never left the key in the door again, so I never went out to find a shop to buy a TV or an iPad. Of course, I soon realised – from the brochures that appeared in our mailbox now and then – that I could as well have afforded a TV and iPad with thirty dollars, as I could have taken a rocket ship to the moon.

Anyway, that is how I know I do not sound like other ten-year-olds.

Or I suppose I don't. I suppose nothing has changed since I was eight.

Except that now, on my tenth birthday, everything *had* changed.

Grandmother had given me a jar of gold coins, got herself a job, and was going to leave me home alone.