Helping your children choose books they will love

I reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

Ghost of a Chance

Written by

Rhiannon Lassiter

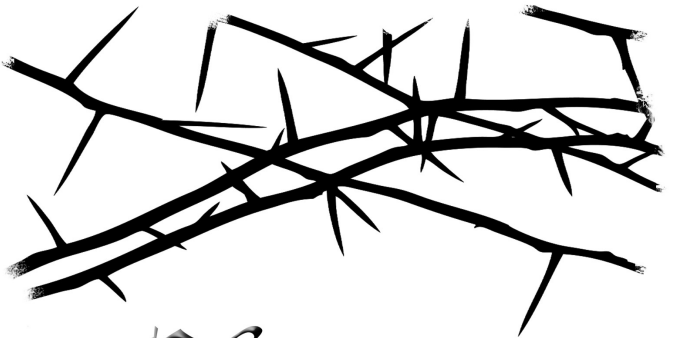
Published by

Oxford University Press

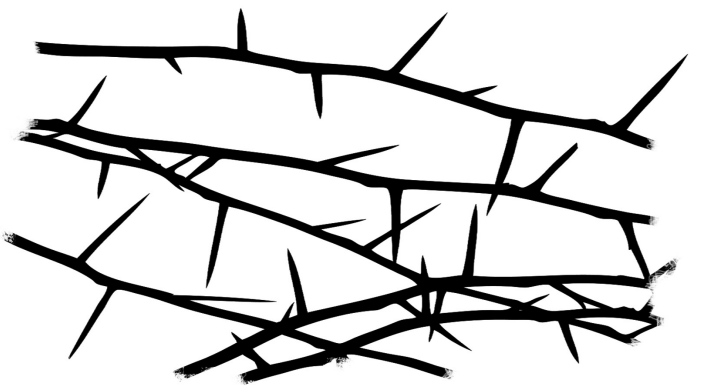
All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk



Ghost OF A Chance



Also by Rhiannon Lassiter

Bad Blood

Borderland
Outland
Shadowland

FOR YOUNGER READERS
Super Zeroes
Super Zeroes on Planet X

RHIANNON LASSITER

Ghost of a Chance



OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP
Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide in

Oxford New York

Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in

Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press
in the UK and in certain other countries

© Rhiannon Lassiter 2011

The moral rights of the author have been asserted

Database right Oxford University Press (maker)

First published in 2011

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press,
or as expressly permitted by law, or under terms agreed with the appropriate
reprographics rights organization. Enquiries concerning reproduction
outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department,
Oxford University Press, at the address above

You must not circulate this book in any other binding or cover
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

ISBN: 978-0-19-275562-9
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed in COUNTRY
Paper used in the production of this book is a natural,
recyclable product made from wood grown in sustainable forests.
The manufacturing process conforms to the environmental
regulations of the country of origin.

Dedicatation

Contents

	Prelude	1
1.	April Fool	5
2.	Black Sheep	19
3.	The Thirteenth Guest	35
4.	Invisible Girl	52
5.	Magpies and Cuckoos	67
6.	Corpus Delicti	84
7.	Footprints in the Snow	104
8.	Seeing is Believing	125
9.	Haunting Season	139
10.	Notes on a Murder	158
11.	Velvet Ropes	168
12.	Open House	182
13.	Through a Glass, Darkly	187
14.	A Value of X	209
15.	Ghost Walk	228
16.	Cry Havoc!	248
17.	The Murder Room	266
18.	Missing Persons	288
19.	Murder Mystery	304
20.	A Matter of Life and Death	322
21.	Mouldering in the Grave	339
22.	Death of a Ghost	348
23.	The Cruellest Month	356

Prelude



Sixteen years ago

The crying was a small plaintive noise lost beneath the dawn chorus of birdcalls. By the time the early morning mist had faded there was no sound except the water lapping at the shoreline and slopping at the sides of the small rowing boat adrift on the lake.

The first searchers shouted when they saw the boat, raising binoculars and shading their eyes to see if anyone was in it. When someone claimed to have seen a shape slumped in the bows the voices became more urgent. Another half hour passed before someone found the key to the boathouse and a second boat set out across the lake. On the shore the watchers held their breaths as it drew closer to the drifting boat. One of the searchers reached into the bows and lifted out a sopping mass, limp and dripping in his hands. It was clothing, abandoned in the bottom of the leaking boat.

It didn't take long to identify the clothes as belonging to the missing woman. Her family were among the searchers, whose ranks were growing by the hour. The two boats were bailed out and replacement oars found for the drifting one so that the search could continue by water as well as on land.

Boots squelched along the banks as the walkers set off in two separate groups, one walking clockwise, the other anticlockwise around the lakeshore until they found something—or met on the other side. Small twitterings preceded them as their passage through the clumps of reeds disturbed thrushes and sparrows. Out on the water the boats rowed up and down, pausing at intervals while the occupants fished with boat-hooks among the dark clots of weed below the surface. By now they all knew they were looking for a body.

Grey clouds above were reflected in the ruffled water of the lake and the air was damp. In the centre of the lake the island was a tangled clump of bushes and trees, casting dark shadows where they overhung the water. The island shore was unreachable although the boats made more than one attempt. Each time they were driven back by tree branches or by the screams of peafowl.

The peacock feathers glimmered in the bad light, the long extravagant tails hanging like curtains from tree branches where the birds perched. The smaller browner peahens were harder to spot until they whirred out of their nests and launched themselves at the boat, screaming protests.

The searchers pulled back, skirting the island warily, shining torches into the wet leaves and murmuring to each other as the oars rose and fell, carrying the boats sliding across the lake to meet each other halfway.

By then the crying had started again, beginning as a small mew of sound but rising quickly to a wail. The sound drifted out across the water past the floating boats all the way to the shore. It was heard but not noticed. Between the birdcalls and the sounds of wind and water it was a tiny thread of noise, not enough to summon attention.

Among the searchers Keith Stratton scrubbed at his closely

cropped hair, feeling a headache coming on. His wife had given birth to twins last month and broken sleep and squalling babies had made him tired and sluggish at work. Now he was beginning to think he was cracking up because he could still hear those high-pitched cries for attention in the back of his mind.

The boats separated, ploughing back across the water. The searchers were losing faith, suggesting that the lake be dredged or divers called out because they had found nothing. The groups of walkers had met and crossed over, working their way back around the two sides of the lake.

But while one boat kept going the other stopped; in the back Keith was shaking his head and pointing at the island. Slowly, reluctantly, the boat moved into the shadow of the trees. The bushes were not so thick on this side of the island and instead a jumble of rocks rose out of the water; behind them a stony outcrop and a high cave mouth, far out of reach.

The boat rocked as the rescuers debated. A swimmer might be able to reach the rocks and climb up to the cave, but the approach was perilous and choked with plant matter, long blade-like leaves frothing out from slender stems with dense spikes of flowers. At the back of the boat Keith wasn't listening to the others, his head was half-cocked, listening attentively as he studied the shoreline, his eyes roving across the green tangle of plants.

He missed it the first time, thinking the woven wicker strands were a nest, but the crying led him to it and a few strokes of the oars brought the boat alongside so that he could reach out and grasp the basket. It had been lodged between the plant stalks, the water lapping at the dense wicker cocoon. Inside the basket a woollen shawl, still mostly dry, was wrapped around a baby.

As Keith lifted it into the boat the baby's cries intensified, alarmed by the movement and the surprised faces staring down.

They had spent the day searching for a missing woman and now none of them knew what to make of their find.

'Like Moses in the bulrushes,' Keith Stratton said eventually. Then, as the baby's mouth opened in another desperate wail, he added: 'I think we better get this chap somewhere warm.'

The baby was a newborn, possibly premature, and weighing only six pounds five ounces. Whisked away into the local hospital it proved to have early symptoms of exposure and malnourishment. In the incubator it began to revive and the rescuers watched it through the glass, Keith shrugging off praise in an abruptly black mood he blamed on a headache.

The mystery of the missing woman and the unexpected arrival of the baby preoccupied the rest of the searchers as they eventually drifted away. Meanwhile the hospital staff had made another discovery. Despite basket and bulrushes, Moses would not be a suitable name. The baby was a girl.

1
April Fool



Tuesday, April 1st

Eva Chance shivered out of sleep to the sound of peacocks screaming outside her bedroom window. The room was cold and her skin felt damp and clammy against the icy sheets.

Huddling under the blankets she curled into a tight ball, huffing her breath into her little cave of space to warm it up. Her whole body was tense and she was shivering so hard her bones ached. She'd dreamt of small dark spaces and lurking shadows and the closeness of the bed seemed suffocating. Throwing back the blankets and drawing the bed curtains she stumbled to the window. The grey light of dawn wasn't enough to banish the heavy feeling of dread she'd carried out of her nightmare.

The Crimson Room was outwardly luxurious. When Eva was ten she'd fallen in love with the four-poster bed and its moth-eaten curtains of blood-red damask. She longed to watch the dawn from the window seat and have as her dressing table the little desk Lady Jane Grey might once have used. But the charms of the room didn't include central heating and it had been a long time since a fire had burned in the marble fireplace.

She forced her frozen feet into three pairs of woollen socks

and fumbled herself into a ragbag assortment of clothes—all inherited: a man's cotton shirt with the sleeves rolled up, grey corduroy dungarees, a shapeless mud-coloured knitted jumper with holes in the elbows, and faded green wellington boots. The whole effect, as considered in the full-length silver-framed mirror, was an undersized scarecrow and Eva didn't waste her time on a second glance.

Leaving the Crimson Room, she walked along the first floor passageway; coconut matting lay on top of the faded ancestral carpets, a pale ribbon leading the way to the main staircase, indicating the public route through the House. Eva kept to the matting until halfway down the staircase where she swung herself up on to the banisters and slid the rest of the way down, landing with a flying leap in the front hall.

On the other side of the hall stood a grandfather clock, a massive dark pillar with rings of concentric dials on the front and a glass-fronted case behind which pulleys rose and fell and gears turned, measuring out each ponderous second of the endless days in the House.

The hour hand had nearly reached seven and the minute hand stood at a quarter to the hour; a sweeping second hand tocked around the time dial with little jerks. But it was the next dial out that drew Eva's attention: the calendar dial where two more clock hands marked the day and the month: indicating the first day of April.

Eva stared at the clock. The terrors of the night must have clouded her mind to make her forget what day it was. April Fool's Day. Sixteen years since her mother had died. Sixteen years since Eva had been born.

Eva let herself out through the front door and into the pale grey dawn. She stood in the House's shadow on the ragged half circle

of weed-choked gravel that had once been an elegant driveway.

The House looked back at her with five rows of windows, their glassy stare shadowed here and there by shutters or broken into a maze of cracks. Across the golden stonework skeletal strands of Virginia creeper crawled up the ladder of mortar-lines and darker patches seeped slowly down from the sagging heights of the roof. Ivy-wrapped and lichen covered, the House squatted in the ten acres of gardens, landscaped long ago and gone to seed. Mist coiled out of the lake and hung heavy across the gardens and it was hard to imagine there was a world outside. Eva couldn't remember the last time she'd passed the rusting metal gates at the end of the weed-choked driveway. The boundaries of the House and its gardens were the borders of her world.

Recently the days had blurred into each other until this morning when she'd woken up and realized that April had arrived.

'Happy birthday, Evangeline Chance,' she said. 'You might as well spend it breaking mirrors and walking under ladders because there's no way your life could be any more cursed.'

The House was always referred to with a capital letter. It was very like a capital letter H if you ignored the rambling length of the stables beyond the west court and the dots and commas of summerhouses and colonnades that punctuated the overgrown gardens. It was listed in the books of the stately homes of England alongside an effusive but self-betraying description of the gardens (overgrown and unkempt), the Folly (closed for renovation), the (former) Orangery and the historic furniture and tapestries (minor pieces by unknown craftsmen).

Built in the sixteenth century by grandeur-loving Elizabethans the House had swelled to monstrous proportions, been allowed

to fall into decay, and repaired anew by successive generations of Chances.

In the twenty-first century the House was an ageing tyrant. Resenting the loss of its servants the House rebelled with leaking attics, crumbling plasterwork, and a legion of mice and black beetles. The formal gardens had lost their pretence of domestication and ranged wildly across their dividing walls and hedges in fairytale thickets of roses and curtains of ivy. The long lake was choked with weeds and algae formed a thick green carpet across the surface of the water.

The House had been Eva's home for sixteen years and each year she'd watched it decay further, draining her grandfather's savings and every penny of the income it got from grants or tourism, always needing more work and more time spent on it. Eva loved and hated the House by turns. Her grandfather had taught her the waltz in the ballroom and had given her fencing lessons in the long gallery, watched by disapproving portraits of her ancestors. She'd read her way through the library and dusted an endless procession of oddments and ornaments. Every corner of the house held some sort of memory: good or bad.

'Our family fortunes have always been mixed,' her grandfather had told her. 'Chance is a good name for us.'

But it seemed to Eva that all her life things had been getting steadily worse. Grandfather was old now and tired. Since his heart attack last year he'd stopped talking about the future, stopped talking about anything, locked up in the library and scuffling among piles of papers late into the night.

Eva drifted aimlessly back into the House. The long corridors and empty rooms felt crowded and airless, thronged with a company

of shadows. She felt watched by every painting; every mirror, every stuffed owl or carved lion or gnarled knot of woodwork seemed to bore into her with a slow malicious stare.

It didn't help to tell herself she was imagining it. People had been telling her that all her life about anything and everything that seemed real to her. Ever since she was very small Eva had known that Grandfather was the person she could trust to believe her when she told him things—things that were incredible to anyone else.

When she was five she'd made a friend, a slightly older boy with an embarrassed way of hiding his face to disguise the way his mouth was twisted up. He didn't talk much but he'd solemnly joined her when she was playing with an ark of wooden animals, helping her arrange them in pairs. They'd been friends for several weeks before Eva thought to wonder who the boy was and why she only ever saw him in the old nursery on the second floor of the east wing. While her aunts had brushed her off and ignored her questions, Grandfather had actually listened to her story and when she'd finished he'd taken her into the hall where the huge family tree chart hung, listing each branching generation of the family in illuminated letters. Tracing his way up the branches of the tree, he lifted Eva up to see the crabbed writing that spelt a name.

'St John Stanton Chance,' he'd read out. 'Born 1701, died 1707. I think that's your friend. Family histories say he had a harelip, that's the twisted mouth you mentioned. Very easily correctable now, but not at the time he lived, poor chap. Play with him if you want, but I wouldn't mention it to any of your aunts again.'

Since Grandfather had said it was all right to play with 'Sinje' she'd not worried about it when the aunts talked about 'Eva's little imaginary friend'. The friendship had drifted apart anyway

when she'd got a bit too old for the toys in the nursery and the last time she'd seen him she'd noticed that Sinje looked awfully small compared to her.

But Eva's imagination wasn't always her friend. She couldn't walk down the grand staircase without every sense she had twanging like a badly tuned violin. The crimson carpet was darker on the last three stairs and there was a smell like a butcher's shop that no amount of cleaning ever seemed to remove. Sometimes Eva had seen that darker patch spread outwards with a lacquered stickiness across the flagstones of the hall. Nowadays she could walk down the other stairs if she had to but she still jumped the last three steps or swung herself over the banisters.

Maybe things would have been different if she hadn't been so alone, she thought, skirting the edge of the stairs and wandering towards the kitchens. But her imagination hadn't helped her make friends either. From school reports she'd learned she was introverted, reclusive, and unwilling to socialize—three ways of saying the same thing. Also that she 'made up stories' which was a polite way of saying she told lies. Ultimately the teachers agreed with the aunts that Eva's imagination was too vivid and Eva had stopped trying in creative writing or art when her best efforts generally earned her an unclassified mark and a visit to the school counsellor. Over the years, her attendance record had slipped lower and lower as she tried to escape the jeering comments of the local schoolchildren who regarded her as their own personal freak show.

The world outside the House felt surprisingly difficult to navigate, as if she had grown up *in* the past, rather than simply surrounded by it. The House didn't have television and the only music she knew was classical recordings on vinyl discs. Conversations about anime or hip-hop or iPods were like

listening to an alien language. She only knew what the internet was because of the computers in the school library and there were barely any books in the House that had been published since 1950.

Eva knew she was a freak but she couldn't help it that the past was more real to her than the present day. Sometimes, listening to distant strains of music in the ballroom and hearing the swish of taffeta and lace, she convinced herself she was lucky to have such a gift. Other times, slinking past a hidden priest's hole while ghostly fingers scrabbled at the hidden catch or jolting out of sleep to hear voices whispering in her room, she thought her imagination was an awful curse.

The past few months, Eva had felt nervous every time she opened a shut door or pulled curtains back from a window. Stairs were treacherous and knives seemed sharper; drawers stuck suddenly and then burst free in a hail of unexpected and often unpleasant items. Inexplicable noises came from the water pipes or the floorboards or set the windows rattling in their frames. Heavy footsteps followed her along the endless corridors, slowing down or speeding up with her own.

Fresh vegetables wilted when they were brought into the house, linen that had been washed and ironed became crumpled and smirched by a strange tarry residue, small items vanished and larger ones shifted position so that she was continually losing things or walking into furniture. And everywhere there was dust, as if the stuff was coming out of the walls or falling out of the air in an endless gritty rain.

Something was very wrong. Perhaps it was Grandfather approaching the boundary between life and death that made the House feel even more haunted. But if it was Grandfather the ghosts were waiting for—why did she feel eyes following her everywhere she went?

* * *

As the mist shredded to reveal a pale blue sky, Eva left the House by the kitchen door and picked over the stripped vegetable garden and hauled in a sack of logs from the woodpile. The ancient kitchen range and the wheezing boiler were slowly taking the chill off inside the House but Eva didn't have time to appreciate the warmth. Even though it was her birthday there would be no celebration. Instead she had to prepare for an invasion of aunts.

The aunts always descended on April the first. Perhaps originally it had been to remember Eva's mother or to mark Eva's birthday but over the years their visits had become increasingly focused on the imminent tourist season and they would arrive full of suggestions and plans to squeeze some tiny income from their mouldering inheritance. Eva resented them counting the silverware or running their fingers over the mantelpieces or rearranging small items of furniture. They might have houses of their own but as far as the aunts were concerned this was their home—and they didn't think Eva or her grandfather could be trusted to look after it.

There were sounds in the library of someone moving about. Grandfather was awake and had cloistered himself with his books and papers again. He hadn't even wished her a happy birthday. But then Eva's birthday wasn't exactly a happy occasion for him anyway and Eva would rather he didn't remember it, since the circumstances of her birth brought back such bad memories. She walked quietly past the library on her way to put fresh flowers in the aunts' rooms.

By tradition the family rooms were on the second floor; out of bounds to tourists. The aunts would claim the same rooms they'd had as young women and as Eva bustled about with flowers

and vases, she noticed that the rooms seemed to have taken on a certain flavour of each aunt in anticipation of their arrival. There were more Egyptian cat statuettes in Aunt Cora's Rose Room than there had been the last time she'd cleaned it. And she was certain there hadn't been quite so many maps of the British Empire decorating the walls of the Raleigh Room favoured by Aunt Helen. Small objects often seemed to wander about in the House, migrating from room to room with exploratory zeal, and Eva tried to ignore it, putting fresh flowers in the Violet Room for Aunt Joyce beside a set of ceremonial disembowelling knives.

Even then she wasn't done with work and she had no idea what the aunts expected to eat for dinner. They would dine in style, she knew that, and the thought set her running back to the Dining Hall to polish the silver. There might be nothing to eat except watercress and nasturtium leaves but at least the silverware would shine proudly on the mahogany table.

Aunt Cora was the first of the aunts to arrive. Eva watched the taxi nudging slowly up the drive from the dining room windows. Aunt Cora didn't visit often, preferring her own small cottage with its chintzy armchairs and cabinets bursting with china kittens to the mouldering bulk of the House. She scrambled out of the taxi in a jumble of knitwear, a small dumpy woman with white fluffy hair like a dandelion clock. She fluttered around behind the taxi driver as he unloaded her suitcase. Pointing at the back seat of the car she hovered nervously as the driver brought out her most precious possession—a squalling wicker basket from which a golden brown paw took a hopeful swipe at the taxi driver's nose. He held it at arm's length before putting it down carefully next to the luggage. Aunt Cora carefully counted out the fare and must have added a tip she could barely afford because the driver seemed pleased as he got back into the car;

which Eva knew wasn't a normal reaction to travelling with Rameses—Aunt Cora's bad-tempered Abyssinian cat.

As Aunt Cora let herself in the front of the House, Eva retreated up the back stairs. When she was little Eva had been fond of her aunt whose visits were accompanied with gifts of home-baked biscuits and books of Bible stories. It was only as she'd got older that the Bible stories seemed to become more pointed and the biscuits more stale. Aunt Cora had a way of looking at Eva as though she was a half-tamed animal, who might turn and snap, and it made Eva feel twitchy and half-wild.

Taking her furniture polish and feather dusters to the Long Gallery Eva worked her way along the ranks of her ancestors' portraits and tried to meet their eyes.

'It's not my fault the House is so run down,' she told them. 'You shouldn't have spent all your money on banquets and horses and jewelled shoes.' She eyed a particularly overdressed ancestress whose pouchy neck was collared with ropes of pearls and whose hands were dripping with diamonds. 'It's no good blaming me, Grandfather told me you lost all your jewellery playing cards. And you,' she moved on to another dyspeptic-looking Chance, 'you spent all your money on opium.' She wagged a finger at the rest of the assembled Chances: 'Not one of you bothered to hide any treasure behind the secret doors.'

As she spoke the shadows seemed to lengthen in the room and the atmosphere thickened oppressively. Eva shrugged an apologetic shoulder at the portraits and sidled to the nearest window, opening it wide and taking in a long gulp of the fresh air. As she leant out of the window she saw a silver Bentley rolling confidently up the drive. It drew up exactly in front of the House and a uniformed chauffeur opened the doors for Aunt Helen and her husband.

Aunt Helen had married money, 'old money' people said

sarcastically, since Richard Fairfax was thirty years older than his wife. He had a north country estate, houses in London and France, and multiple investments in the stock market. Eva secretly suspected that he had only rescued Aunt Helen from single state because he wanted an heir. He and Aunt Helen seemed completely indifferent to each other and competed to lavish rewards on their only son: Felix.

Aunt Helen and Richard Fairfax emerged from the car, turning to look at the façade of the House with critical eyes. Neither of them spotted Eva, raising their gaze higher to look up at the bowing roof. A minute later they were both scurrying out of the way as a red Jaguar came speeding up the drive, spitting gravel chips in all directions. It braked with a squeal and Felix unfolded himself from the low-slung driver's seat.

Felix Fairfax was tall, which helped him to look down on people. He had Aunt Helen's equine and slightly hooked nose, combined with Uncle Richard's calculating look—as if assessing the price of everything. Felix managed to look at people as if he thought they weren't worth much compared to him. Eva ducked back from the window as the Fairfaxes entered the House together, leaving the luggage to the chauffeur to bring inside.

She hadn't prepared a room for Felix, hadn't expected him to show up. But of course Grandfather was ninety now and Felix would be wondering when he could expect to come into his inheritance. Eva spat out of the window and watched with satisfaction as the glob of mucus splattered on the roof of the sports car. As if it wasn't enough that Felix would inherit his father's vast fortune, he was also Grandfather's heir, the solitary male of the next generation and inheritor of the House and grounds.

Eva could easily imagine Felix's portrait hanging in the Long

Gallery. He might not have the Chance name but he had every inch of the haughty arrogance, driven home with a supercilious smile. Watching the Fairfaxes' chauffeur walking back and forth with suitcases, Eva felt sorry for the man. Not only would he have to carry the luggage up two floors, he'd also been stuck with the task of parking both cars. But the Fairfaxes were probably so used to having staff at their beck and call they didn't notice his efforts—any more than they ever thanked Eva for getting their rooms ready. The chauffeur had only just driven off in the red Jaguar when a hooting horn signalled the arrival of the last aunt.

Aunt Joyce's car was a yellow Beetle. Like Aunt Joyce it was loud and garish and pushy. It took up position slap bang in front of the House and Aunt Joyce and her partner got out. Aunt Joyce lived in Chelsea where she owned her own business as a jewellery designer and flitted between fashionable boutiques and popular clubs. She never went anywhere without an escort. Today's man was like the others, tall, dark, and handsome, wearing an Armani suit. Aunt Joyce wore a green and white striped coat over a lushly pink dress with black polka dots. It wasn't until Joyce and her escort had vanished under the portico of the House that Eva worked out what the colours reminded her of—a slice of watermelon, with the male escort buzzing around like a wasp.

Eva could hear people moving around inside the House, the influx of guests was creating a low hum of background noise. Presumably the aunts were taking turns to talk to Grandfather and, all over the House, luggage was being unpacked and rooms inspected. Living people produced a very different atmosphere from the one that usually permeated the House. Eva wasn't fond of her relations but she had to admit that their noisy arrival had caused her haunted feeling to recede—swept aside by her irritation and resentment of the invasion.

Skirting along the shadows of the House. Eva made her way to the library to check on her grandfather. Each time she went to look in on him she felt a touch of dread, fearing that he might have crossed the bar in her absence and she would find him cold and still.

The library door stood half open and through it she heard raised voices from inside the room, an abrupt contrast to the hush that usually pervaded the book-lined walls. Aunt Helen was speaking, her words clipped short with anger, as she laid down the law.

'I simply don't understand how you could have let the House decay like this, Father. It doesn't look as though you've spent a single penny on it since last summer and I told you then the roof was bowing and the attics were riddled with dry rot.'

'Father's not been well and he's had all the worry of Eva . . . ' that was Aunt Cora, her defence as ineffectual as a partridge before Aunt Helen's shotgun approach to debate.

'I always said it was a mistake for him to bring up that girl here. A pleasant home could have been found for her but Father insisted and she's been nothing but trouble,' Helen decreed in a way she'd never have dared if Grandfather was fit to withstand her. 'Regardless of the situation with the girl, the House needs to be maintained. At this rate Felix will inherit a ruin—and we'll have to spend a fortune to make it habitable.'

'Felix hasn't inherited yet.' That was Aunt Joyce's voice, a husky drawl of disdain. 'Maybe you and Richard should come up with some real cash now instead of lavishing it all on that young oaf of yours.'

'Oh, as opposed to the gigolos you spend yours on?' Aunt Helen shot back.

'Enough argument,' Grandfather's voice was weary. 'If you

want a full account of the finances or to discuss my will, Helen, you'll need to speak to the house agent or my lawyer. I've asked them both to with me this afternoon. They'll explain, as I've tried to, that money doesn't go very far in a property of this size and Felix will have to take his inheritance as he finds it.'

'I'm familiar with the demands of this House,' Aunt Helen said freezingly. 'I grew up here, after all. And Richard's estate is three times the size. I think I know what sort of work is involved in caring for a country house.'

'Oh please.' Eva didn't need to see her aunt Joyce to know she was rolling her eyes. 'As if playing lady of the manor in front of a staff of six people is anything like work. I know from my jewellery business how complicated finances can get and how suspicious the inland revenue are of anyone of our class.'

'This is a very difficult House to manage,' Aunt Cora's whispery voice piped up again. 'It has problems one doesn't normally encounter . . . ' Her voice trailed away as Aunt Helen barrelled onwards.

'I suppose this house agent and your lawyer will stay for dinner. I've hired a local firm to do the catering. I anticipated that you wouldn't have arranged anything.'

'That was very thoughtful, Helen,' Grandfather said but outside in the corridor Eva ground her teeth and wished her aunt was a little less thoughtful. If she tried to come to his defence the aunts would simply tell her this was grown-up business and that they were only trying to help. They barely listened to Grandfather and this was his House. Eva's voice counted for nothing at all.