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*the*  
FORGOTTEN  
GARDEN

*a novel*

KATE MORTON

Author of *The Distant Hours*



"Morton excels at creating absorbing mystery. This tale, like the maze in the garden of the title, is a fine place to lose yourself."

—*People* (\*\*\*\*)

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# PART ONE





# ONE



LONDON, 1913

It was dark where she was crouched but the little girl did as she'd been told. The lady had said to wait, it wasn't safe yet, they had to be as quiet as larder mice. It was a game, just like hide-and-seek.

From behind the wooden barrels the little girl listened. Made a picture in her mind the way Papa had taught her. Men, near and far, sailors she supposed, shouted to one another. Rough, loud voices, full of the sea and its salt. In the distance: bloated ships' horns, tin whistles, splashing oars and, far above, grey gulls cawing, wings flattened to absorb the ripening sunlight.

The lady would be back, she'd said so, but the little girl hoped it would be soon. She'd been waiting a long time, so long that the sun had drifted across the sky and was now warming her knees through her new dress. She listened for the lady's skirts, swishing against the wooden deck. Her heels clipping, hurrying, always hurrying, in a way the little girl's own mamma never did. The little girl wondered, in the vague, unconcerned manner of much-loved children, where Mamma was. When she would be coming. And she wondered about the lady. She knew who she was, she'd heard Grandmamma talking about her. The lady was called the Authoress and she lived in the little cottage on the far side of the estate, beyond the maze. The little girl wasn't supposed to know. She had been forbidden to play in the bramble maze. Mamma and Grandmamma had told her it was dangerous to go near the cliff. But sometimes, when no one was looking, she liked to do forbidden things.

Dust motes, hundreds of them, danced in the sliver of sunlight that had appeared between two barrels. The little girl smiled and the lady, the cliff, the maze, Mamma left her thoughts. She held out a finger, tried to catch a speck upon it. Laughed at the way the motes came so close before skirting away.

The noises beyond her hiding spot were changing now. The little girl could hear the hubbub of movement, voices laced with excitement. She leaned into the veil of light and pressed her face against the cool wood of the barrels. With one eye she looked upon the decks.

Legs and shoes and petticoat hems. The tails of colored paper streamers flicking this way and that. Wily gulls hunting the decks for crumbs.

A lurch and the huge boat groaned, long and low from deep within its belly. Vibrations passed through the deck boards and into the little girl's fingertips. A moment of suspension and she found herself holding her breath, palms flat beside her, then the boat heaved and pushed itself away from the dock. The horn bellowed and there was a wave of cheering, cries of "Bon voyage!" They were on their way. To America, a place called New York, where Papa had been born. She'd heard them whispering about it for some time, Mamma telling Papa they should go as soon as possible, that they could afford to wait no longer.

The little girl laughed again; the boat was gliding through the water like a giant whale, like Moby Dick in the story her father often read to her. Mamma didn't like it when he read such stories. She said they were too frightening and would put ideas in her head that couldn't be got out. Papa always gave Mamma a kiss on the forehead when she said that sort of thing, told her she was right and that he'd be more careful in the future. But he still told the little girl stories of the great whale. And others—the ones that were the little girl's favorite, from the fairy-tale book, about eyeless crones, and orphaned maidens, and long journeys across the sea. He just made sure that Mamma didn't know, that it remained their secret.

The little girl understood they had to have secrets from Mamma. Mamma wasn't well, had been sickly since before the little girl was born. Grandmamma was always bidding her be good, warning her that if Mamma were to get upset something terrible might happen and it would be all her fault. The little girl loved her mother and didn't want to make her sad, didn't want something terrible to happen, so she kept things secret. Like the fairy stories, and playing near the maze, and the times Papa had taken her to visit the Authoress in the cottage on the far side of the estate.

"Aha!" A voice by her ear. "Found you!" The barrel was heaved aside and the little girl squinted up into the sun. Blinked until the owner of the voice moved to block the light. It was a big boy, eight or nine, she guessed. "You're not Sally," he said.

The little girl shook her head.

"Who are you?"

She wasn't meant to tell anybody her name. It was a game they were playing, she and the lady.

"Well?"

"It's a secret."

His nose wrinkled, freckles drew together. "What for?"

She shrugged. She wasn't supposed to speak of the lady, Papa was always telling her so.

"Where's Sally, then?" The boy was growing impatient. He looked left and right. "She ran this way, I'm sure of it."

A whoop of laughter from further down the deck and the scramble of fleeing footsteps. The boy's face lit up. "Quick!" he said as he started to run. "She's getting away."

The little girl leaned her head around the barrel and watched him weaving in and out of the crowd in keen pursuit of a flurry of white petticoats.

Her toes itched to join them.

But the lady had said to wait.

The boy was getting further away. Ducking around a portly man



with a waxed moustache, causing him to scowl so that his features scurried towards the center of his face like a family of startled crabs.

The little girl laughed.

Maybe it was all part of the same game. The lady reminded her more of a child than of the other grown-ups she knew. Perhaps she was playing, too.

The little girl slid from behind the barrel and stood slowly. Her left foot had gone to sleep and now had pins and needles. She waited a moment for feeling to return, watched as the boy turned the corner and disappeared.

Then, without another thought, she set off after him. Feet pounding, heart singing in her chest.

## TWO



BRISBANE, 1930

IN the end they held Nell's birthday party in the Foresters' building, up on Latrobe Terrace. Hugh had suggested the new dance hall in town, but Nell, echoing her mother, had said it was silly to go to unnecessary expense, especially with times as tough as they were. Hugh conceded, but contented himself by insisting she send away to Sydney for the special lace he knew she wanted for her dress. Lil had put the idea in his head before she passed away. She'd leaned over and taken his hand, then shown him the newspaper advertisement, with its Pitt Street address, and told him how fine the lace was, how much it would mean to Nellie, that it might seem extravagant but it could be reworked into the wedding gown when the time came. Then she'd smiled at him, and she was sixteen years old again and he was smitten.

Lil and Nell had been working on the birthday dress for a couple of weeks by then. In the evenings, when Nell was home from the newspaper shop and tea was finished, and the younger girls were bickering lethargically on the verandas, and the mosquitoes were so thick in the muggy night air you thought you'd go mad from the drone, Nell would take down her sewing basket and pull up a seat beside her mother's sickbed. He would hear them sometimes, laughing about something that had happened in the newspaper shop: an argument Max Fitzsimmons had had with this customer or that, Mrs. Blackwell's latest medical complaint, the antics of Nancy Brown's twins. He would linger by the door, filling his pipe with tobacco and listening as Nell lowered her voice, flushed with pleasure as she recounted something Danny had

said. Some promise he'd made about the house he was going to buy her when they were wed, the car he had his eye on that his father thought he could get for a song, the latest Mixmaster from McWhirter's department store.

Hugh liked Danny; he couldn't wish more for Nell, which was just as well seeing as the pair had been inseparable since they'd met. Watching them together reminded Hugh of his early years with Lil. Happy as larks they'd been, back when the future still stretched, unmarked, before them. And it had been a good marriage. They'd had their testing times, early on before they'd had the girls, but one way or another things had always worked out . . .

His pipe full, his excuse to loiter ended, Hugh would move on. He'd find a place for himself at the quiet end of the front veranda, a dark place where he could sit in peace, or as near to peace as was possible in a house full of rowdy daughters, each more excitable than the last. Just him and his flyswatter on the window ledge should the mosquitoes get too close. And then he'd follow his thoughts as they turned invariably towards the secret he'd been keeping all these years.

For the time was almost upon him, he could feel that. The pressure, long kept at bay, had recently begun to build. She was nearly twenty-one, a grown woman ready to embark on her own life, engaged to be married no less. She had a right to know the truth.

He knew what Lil would say to that, which was why he didn't tell her. The last thing he wanted was for Lil to worry, to spend her final days trying to talk him out of it, as she'd done so often in the past.

Sometimes, as he wondered about the words he'd find to make his confession, Hugh caught himself wishing it on one of the other girls instead. He cursed himself then for acknowledging he had a favorite, even to himself.

But Nellie had always been special, so unlike the others. Spirited, more imaginative. More like Lil, he often thought, though of course that made no sense.



THEY'D STRUNG ribbons along the rafters—white to match her dress and red to match her hair. The old wooden hall might not have had the spit and polish of the newer brick buildings about town, but it scrubbed up all right. At the back, near the stage, Nell's four younger sisters had arranged a table for birthday gifts and a decent pile had begun to take shape. Some of the ladies from church had got together to make the supper, and Ethel Mortimer was giving the piano a workout, romantic dance tunes from the war.

Young men and women clustered at first in nervous knots around the walls, but as the music and the more outgoing lads warmed up, they began to split into pairs and take to the floor. The little sisters looked on longingly until sequestered to help carry trays of sandwiches from the kitchen to the supper table.

When the time came for the speeches, cheeks were glowing and shoes were scuffed from dancing. Marcie McDonald, the minister's wife, tapped on her glass and everybody turned to Hugh, who was unfolding a small piece of paper from his breast pocket. He cleared his throat and ran a hand over his comb-striped hair. Public speaking had never been his caper. He was the sort of man who kept himself to himself, minded his own opinions and happily let the more vocal fellows do the talking. Still, a daughter came of age but once and it was his duty to announce her. He'd always been a stickler for duty, a rule follower. For the most part anyway.

He smiled as one of his mates from the wharf shouted a heckle, then he cupped the paper in his palm and took a deep breath. One by one, he read off the points on his list, scribbled in tiny black handwriting: how proud of Nell he and her mother had always been; how blessed they'd felt when she arrived; how fond they were of Danny. Lil had been especially happy, he said, to learn of the engagement before she passed away.

At this mention of his wife's recent death, Hugh's eyes began to

smart and he fell silent. He paused for a while and allowed his gaze to roam the faces of his friends and his daughters, to fix a moment on Nell, who was smiling as Danny whispered something in her ear. As a cloud seemed to cross his brow, folk wondered if some important announcement was coming, but the moment passed. His expression lightened and he returned the piece of paper to his pocket. It was about time he had another man in the family, he said with a smile, it'd even things up a bit.

The ladies in the kitchen swept into action then, administering sandwiches and cups of tea to the guests, but Hugh loitered a while, letting people brush past him, accepting the pats on the shoulder, the calls of "Well done, mate," a cup and saucer thrust into his hand by one of the ladies. The speech had gone well, yet he couldn't relax. His heart had stepped up its beat and he was sweating though it wasn't hot.

He knew why, of course. The night's duties were not yet over. When he noticed Nell slip alone through the side door, on to the little landing, he saw his opportunity. He cleared his throat and set his tea-cup in a space on the gift table, then he disappeared from the warm hum of the room into the cool night air.

Nell was standing by the silver-green trunk of a lone eucalypt. Once, Hugh thought, the whole ridge would've been covered by them, and the gullies on either side. Must've been a sight, that crowd of ghostly trunks on nights when the moon was full.

There. He was putting things off. Even now he was trying to shirk his responsibility, was being weak.

A pair of black bats coasted silently across the night sky and he made his way down the rickety wooden steps, across the dew-damp grass.

Nell must have heard him coming—sensed him perhaps—for she turned and smiled as he drew close.

She was thinking about Ma, she said as he reached her side, wondering which of the stars she was watching from.

## *The Forgotten Garden*

Hugh could've wept when she said it. Damned if she didn't have to bring Lil into it right now. Make him aware that she was observing, angry with him for what he was about to do. He could hear Lil's voice, all the old arguments . . .

But it was his decision to make and he'd made it. It was he, after all, who'd started the whole thing. Unwitting though he might have been, he'd taken the step that set them on this path and he was responsible for putting things right. Secrets had a way of making themselves known and it was better, surely, that she learned the truth from him.

He took Nell's hands in his and placed a kiss on the top of each. Squeezed them tight, her soft smooth fingers against his work-hardened palms.

His daughter. His first.

She smiled at him, radiant in her delicate lace-trimmed dress.

He smiled back.

Then he led her to sit by him on a fallen gum trunk, smooth and white, and he leaned to whisper in her ear. Transferred the secret he and her mother had kept for seventeen years. Waited for the flicker of recognition, the minute shift in expression as she registered what he was telling her. Watched as the bottom fell out of her world and the person she had been vanished in an instant.

## THREE



BRISBANE, 2005

CASSANDRA hadn't left the hospital in days, though the doctor held out little hope her grandmother would regain lucidity. It wasn't likely, he said, not at her age, not with that amount of morphine in her system.

The night nurse was there again, so Cassandra knew it was no longer day. The precise time she couldn't guess. It was hard to tell in here: the foyer lights were constantly on, a television could always be heard though never seen, carts tracked up and down the halls no matter what the hour. An irony that a place relying so heavily on routine should operate so resolutely outside time's usual rhythms.

Nonetheless, Cassandra waited. Watching, comforting, as Nell drowned in a sea of memories, came up for air again and again in earlier times of life. She couldn't bear to think her grandmother might defy the odds and find her way back to the present, only to discover herself floating on the outer edge of life, alone.

The nurse swapped the IV's empty bag for a fat bladder, turned a dial on the machine behind the bed, then set about straightening the bedclothes.

"She hasn't had anything to drink," Cassandra said, her voice sounding strange to her own ears. "Not all day."

The nurse looked up, surprised at being spoken to. She peered over her glasses at the chair where Cassandra sat, a crumpled blue-green hospital blanket on her lap. "Gave me a fright," she said. "You been here all day, have you? Probably for the best. Won't be long now."

Cassandra ignored the implication of this statement. "Should we give her something to drink? She must be thirsty."

The nurse folded the sheets over and tucked them matter-of-factly beneath Nell's thin arms. "She'll be all right. The drip here takes care of that." She checked something on Nell's chart, spoke without looking up. "There's tea-making facilities down the hall if you need them."

The nurse left and Cassandra saw that Nell's eyes were less open, staring. "Who are you?" came the frail voice.

"It's me, Cassandra."

Confusion. "Do I know you?"

The doctor had predicted this but it still stung. "Yes, Nell."

Nell looked at her, eyes watery grey. She blinked uncertainly. "I can't remember . . ."

"Shhh . . . It's all right."

"Who am I?"

"Your name is Nell Andrews," Cassandra said, taking her hand. "You're ninety-five years old. You live in an old house in Paddington."

Nell's lips were trembling—she was concentrating, trying to make sense of the words.

Cassandra plucked a tissue from the bedside table and reached to gently wipe the line of saliva on Nell's chin. "You have a stall at the antique center on Latrobe Terrace," she continued softly. "You and I share it. We sell old things."

"I do know you," said Nell faintly. "You're Lesley's girl."

Cassandra blinked, surprised. They rarely spoke of her mother, not in all the time Cassandra was growing up and not in the ten years she'd been back, living in the flat beneath Nell's house. It was an unspoken agreement between them not to revisit a past they each, for different reasons, preferred to forget.

Nell started. Her panicked eyes scanned Cassandra's face. "Where's the boy? Not here, I hope. Is he here? I don't want him touching my things. Ruining them."



Cassandra's head grew faint.

"My things are precious. Don't let him near them."

Some words appeared, Cassandra tripped over them. "No . . . No, I won't. Don't worry, Nell. He's not here."



LATER, WHEN her grandmother had slipped into unconsciousness again, Cassandra wondered at the mind's cruel ability to toss up flecks of the past. Why, as she neared her life's end, her grandmother's head should ring with the voices of people long since gone. Was it always this way? Did those with passage booked on death's silent ship always scan the dock for faces of the long-departed?

Cassandra must have slept then, because the next thing she knew the hospital's mood had changed again. They'd been drawn further into the tunnel of night. The hall lights were dimmed and the sounds of sleep were everywhere around her. She was slumped in the chair, her neck stiff and her ankle cold where it had escaped the flimsy blanket. It was late, she knew, and she was tired. What had woken her?

Nell. Her breathing was loud. She was awake. Cassandra moved quickly to the bed, perched again on its side. In the half-light Nell's eyes were glassy, pale and smudged like paint-stained water. Her voice, a fine thread, was almost frayed through. At first Cassandra couldn't hear her, thought only that her lips were moving around lost words uttered long ago. Then she realized Nell was speaking.

"The lady," she was saying. "The lady said to wait . . ."

Cassandra stroked Nell's warm forehead, brushed back soft strands of hair that had once gleamed like spun silver. The lady again. "She won't mind," she said. "The lady won't mind if you go."

Nell's lips tightened, then quivered. "I'm not supposed to move. She said to wait, here on the boat." Her voice was a whisper. "The lady . . . the Authoress . . . Don't tell anyone."

"Shhh," said Cassandra. "I won't tell anyone, Nell. I won't tell the lady. You can go."