Holly Blue:
an historical novel
and exegesis

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Abstract

My exegesis and artefact are intended to be read together. Although they stand as individual pieces of work, they have been written with the intention that they will ‘speak’ to each other in a symbiotic way. I recommend that the artefact be read first as this reflects the way the works were produced, giving the reader an authentic experience of this PhD by artefact and exegesis journey.

The artefact comprises a neo-Victorian novel of some 80,000 words. It is set in both London and Melbourne in the year 1885. The novel is narrated in the first person by the main protagonist who is a fraudulent spiritualist medium. Some of the central themes of the novel are: nineteenth century femininity; spiritualism; madness and the meaning of friendship. A large section of the novel is set in the Kew Asylum.

The exegesis is in three parts. The first part looks in detail at the areas that were most important while writing the first draft of the novel, utilising practice led research. These areas are: a discussion of the neo-Victorian genre; an exploration of how historical fiction writers incorporate research into their writing, and the difficulty of narrating a novel from the point-of-view of an unreliable and unlikable narrator.

In the second part, the focus is on nineteenth century madness at both an experiential level, such as visiting museums, and a theoretical one, through academic research. The last section of the exegesis is devoted to the central research question of this project: the significance of clothing in the artefact and the importance of this as a writerly tool for the neo-Victorian novelist. Although clothing is only a minor theme in the novel, it comprises the major research focus of the exegesis.

The research on clothing focuses specifically on three areas of most relevance to the artefact: clothing and class, clothing in the asylum, and the Victorian corset. This research is underpinned throughout by a feminist research methodology.
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Declaration by Candidate

I certify that the thesis entitled ‘Holly Blue: an historical novel and exegesis’ submitted for the degree of PhD contains no material that has been accepted for any other degree of diploma; to the best of my knowledge contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; and is not based on joint research or publications. The exegesis has been proofread.

Full name: ____________________________________________________________

Signed: _____________________________________________________________

Date: _______________________________________________________________
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Preface

This PhD began modestly with a few words in a writer’s journal. Over time it evolved into an exegesis and an eighty thousand-word artefact that takes the form of a neo-Victorian novel. Before I began writing the novel, I did a great deal of general historical research about the nineteenth century. As a first-time writer of an historical novel, this research was significant. It necessitated much reading, as well as experiential research, such as visiting museums, collections and places of relevance to the novel.

Practice led research, with its focus on research that arises from the creative art of writing, allowed me the freedom to shape the research as the novel evolved. My research unfolded according to the dictates of the work itself, rather than something that was externally imposed upon it.

The findings from this detailed research and reflections on the possible shape of the intended novel were kept in a journal. I then used this journal as a springboard and inspiration for my reading, which broadly covered three areas. These areas were relevant academic literature; reading widely in the neo-Victorian fiction genre; and other writer’s reflections on their research and writing processes, which offered many valuable insights for my own work.

The first draft of my novel was written when I had conducted approximately 75% of the historical research that I deemed necessary before beginning. The remaining 25% was done at the end of the first draft and was much more specific - such as looking up Victorian terminology, checking dates etc.

During the writing of this first draft, I found several research areas that I thought would be appropriate topics for my exegesis. They all arose as a direct result of writing the first draft and, as such, are a significant part of my writerly journey. Again, the first tentative explorations of these areas were recorded in my journal. These reflections were then deepened by my reading, and form the first two sections of the exegesis.

The experiential historical research I undertook for the novel led me to discover
what would become the major focus, or part three, of the exegesis. While viewing a collection of historical costumes, I became fascinated by ‘human patina’, such as stains and rips in the fabric, that are inherent in second-hand clothing. I found that I was able to read a piece of clothing like text, giving me a rich resource for multifaceted character creation in my novel. I also realised that if clothing was so redolent with meaning, then surely it was an essential tool for the fiction writer. This discovery was the beginning of my subsequent exploration of nineteenth century women’s clothing in the neo-Victorian novel that became the major focus for the exegesis.

Whilst I was thrilled to have finally discovered this topic, I continued to see the areas I had previously explored as being no less valid to my research journey and subsequently my artefact. So for this reason, I chose to devote the first two sections of the exegesis to these various findings.

Clothing, while not a major theme in the artefact, is nonetheless significant. My neo-Victorian novel, set in London and Melbourne, is about a fraudulent spiritualist medium who ends up incarcerated in an asylum. The themes of spiritualism and madness are the most explicit themes in my work. I initially favoured both of these themes in my reading; but by allowing my writing practice to lead my research, I was taken to an unexpected place. I see my interest in nineteenth century women’s clothing as something unplanned and fortuitous, a discovery to be celebrated.

In the third section of my exegesis, I focus generally on these findings and more specifically on the areas regarding clothing that were most relevant to my novel. These areas are: clothing and class, clothing in the asylum and the corset.

Up to this point, all my research had been what I would term as writerly. This means that it was undertaken to give me information that I could use to produce a historically accurate narrative and write descriptive prose in my novel. Although all of this information was vital for a readable novel and worthy of inclusion in the exegesis, it was not an intellectual or academic enough interpretation in itself. So the next step was to deepen my analysis of clothing as it pertains to the neo-Victorian novel in general and my artefact in particular, through academic research.

To this end I read widely about the many theories around women’s clothing. I chose to use a feminist methodology to underpin this knowledge gathering as this allowed me to cross many disciplines and use myself freely in the research. It was also most relevant to my artefact, as my story is narrated by a female character who struggles
within the strict confines of femininity as defined by the nineteenth century patriarchy. This academic reading added yet another, and arguably the deepest, layer of meaning to my novel, imbuing it with metaphor and imagery that would not have been possible before.

Although both the artefact and exegesis are able to stand alone as works within their own right, it would be my preference for the novel to be read first. This reflects most accurately the way this PhD was produced and as such reads more authentically.
‘Holly Blue: 
an historical novel’
My father was a lepidopterist and I was his most prized butterfly.

Among the many specimens in his glass cabinets was a petite *Holly Blue*; a beautiful butterfly with black spots on its wings and a silvery blue body. Although Father’s specimen had its wings open, a *Holly Blue* would nearly always rest with them tightly closed, concealing the vivid blue upper-wings, which were visible only during flight.

This butterfly was my favourite, so Father renamed it *Empress Elizabeth*, after me, his only child. But when he died, I could no longer deny the truth. I was not a butterfly at all. In fact, I was more like a common brown moth of the kind crushed in their dozens by children every day or battered to death with newspapers by over-zealous housemaids. He was mistaken.

I buried both my parents in my twenty-ninth year. They were taken swiftly by the pox after only a few days of suffering. I was spared, but left entirely alone in a world that suddenly seemed to have little meaning.

A week after their funerals, I had to dismantle the butterfly and moth collection that Father had been so proud of, because I could not afford the rent on my parents’ house at Muswell Hill. I tried to sell father’s collection but could not find a buyer.

Many of his specimens were well preserved behind glass in numerous wooden cabinets and these I donated to the *Museum of Natural History* along with most of Father’s notebooks. The curator had been particularly impressed with his fine collection of *Death’s Head* moths. They were chilling creatures and I was glad to be rid of them, but I wished I could have kept the rest of the collection.

Father had not been able to afford the expense of a glass-fronted cabinet to display all the lepidopteron that he had accumulated. The lesser specimens were fixed directly to the wall, their furry dun-coloured bodies unceremoniously pierced with a dressmaker’s pin. Over the years, as these specimens were exposed to the weak morning sun that filtered through the grimy window above my father’s desk, the butterflies had slowly been bleached of all colour. Their once vibrant-coloured wings had faded to a dull brown so that they resembled common cabbage moths, rather than the majestic creatures
they had once been. Some were so ancient they crumbled with the merest touch, leaving on my fingers a fine grey powder, which was a combination of their desiccated bodies and the dust that had collected on them over the years.

After all the glass cabinets had gone, I carefully took each butterfly down and put it in a biscuit tin lined with tissue. I could not bring myself to throw any of them away. The *Empress Elizabeth*, a perfect specimen I had taken from a cabinet, was placed in a trinket box made from a horse’s hoof, where Mother had kept her few rings.

When they had all finally been removed and their pitiful remains sealed inside their tin coffin, I stood back and looked at my father’s now empty walls. The pearly white wallpaper had yellowed significantly over time, and the butterflies had left their ghostly winged shapes all over the wall. I cried long and hard then, for the loss of my parents was suddenly fierce in my heart and my future seemed horribly bleak. I had never felt so alone.

Life with my parents had been very insular. I had made few acquaintances and no one I could call a true friend. My only relatives were a cousin, who had not been in touch for many years, and an uncle in Australia. The only people I really knew were lepidopterists who had been father’s colleagues, older gentlemen who were uninterested in me.

What I really longed for was a circle of female friends and the possibility of one day becoming a wife and mother. Shall I tell you how many times a second a butterfly beats its wings? Astound you with the fact that some butterflies can swim? That there is almost a mile of silk in a silk moth’s cocoon? These things and many more I knew, but they did me little good, for I had never enjoyed the companionship of other women, much less the warmth of a gentleman’s embrace, and I feared that I would always remain childless and alone.

My mother had not been able to prepare me for society, as she was an invalid who rarely spoke. Her quiet life was lived in a darkened bedchamber. After my birth she lapsed into melancholia and was never the same again. There had been talk of sending her to an asylum, but Father would not hear of it. Mother was not violent or difficult to handle and our maid-of-all-work helped me to attend to her needs when I was old enough to do so. My days were spent as her nursemaid and father’s assistant, and without them my life was an empty, lonely void that I did not know how to fill.

I believed that Father had loved Mother. When I was very young, he would read to her in the evenings. Sometimes I sat and listened too. She rarely responded to the
words, although sometimes she would smile, but at other times she shed silent tears for hours on end. I could not bear to see it.

When I was older and Father's eyesight was failing, I took over the task. Father had often read to her from Dickens, but I read Mother stories of romance and adventure that I borrowed from the lending library. They were all written by women. Father would not have approved if he had known, but he no longer visited her in the evenings. Mother seemed to enjoy the change in literature, and I certainly did, as those books were my only experience of how a woman might live her life, outside her close family circle. The lives of the heroines in the books both excited and frightened me in equal measure.

Just days after my parents’ death, I was called to an unknown solicitor’s office regarding my inheritance. It surprised me to learn that Father’s affairs were not being handled by the genial Mr. Timothy, a solicitor who was an old family friend. My inheritance took the form of a very small amount of cash deposited with a bank. It was far less than I was expecting. The money left to me by my father would scarcely be enough to last a few months, even living an exceptionally modest lifestyle. It was clear that unless I could find a way to make an income, I was headed for the workhouse.

I owned nothing of great value. The furnishings in my parents’ house were modest and would not be worth much. There was a collection of china dogs that had belonged to my Grandmother, which might fetch something, and Mother’s simple jewellery that I would have preferred not to sell; but the only thing I would never be parted from was my blue enameled butterfly brooch.

The brooch was made especially to resemble the Empress Elizabeth, with jet-studded wings and a tiny sapphire for each eye. Father gave it to me on my sixteenth birthday and on the back was engraved: To Empress Elizabeth, all my love Father. I had worn it pinned to my bodice every day since.

After I discovered how little money there was, I decided to read the ledgers that Father had kept so diligently during his lifetime, so that I might understand what had gone wrong. They were full of figures carefully printed in his neat hand and kept under lock and key in his desk.

It had taken me some time to find the key, which he had concealed in a tin of tobacco that lived on the mantle. I had nearly thrown it away when clearing out his things, but the tin rattled as I tossed it aside and my suspicions were roused. It had a false bottom that was made from a piece of an old hat box and the key lay hidden beneath.
I did not like father’s desk. As a child, I had been afraid of its carved claw legs, which made it look like a living thing. I had never touched the desk before and was nervous unlocking the top drawer, not because the desk seemed alive anymore, but because of what father might have needed to hide. At first I was relieved to find only the ledgers, an empty pot of ink and a miniature of Mother, painted when she was very young.

In the ledgers, Father had recorded all the money that had come into our modest household and, more importantly, all that had gone out again. It was not my intention to make a great study of their contents, business affairs had not interested me at all until after my parents’ death, but it soon became clear that something was very amiss in these books of figures, and before long I found out what it was.

For many years, Father had been making a considerable monthly payment to a Mr. T. Smith, who resided at an address in London that I was unfamiliar with. This sum came to quite a staggering amount and for me, a woman alone in the world with no way to earn a living, it was a small fortune. I decided immediately to pay this man a visit.

The address in Father’s ledger led me to a shabby boarded-up house that backed onto a stinking alley in Islington. At the back of the house was a small yard where I found an old man tending a luxuriant patch of cress growing in night soil. I felt bilious and fearful, but I asked the man what he knew of Mr. T. Smith. The old man said he had not heard of him and spat at me when I would not buy his cress.

A feeling of acute sadness stayed with me for a number of weeks after this experience. I had taken a small cheap room at the top of a butcher’s shop and was woken most mornings to the sound of a saw cutting bone. It set my teeth on edge but was not enough to make me leave my bed during this low time.

My need to earn a living was urgent, but I knew that it would be no easy task to find suitable employment. I had not been given a proper, rounded education, although I considered myself to be reasonably literate. Father had taught me to read and write very well, and I had an excellent understanding of Latin, but little else.

After I had acquired these skills, my afternoons were spent with him in his study, copying down notes into books and categorising his ever-growing collection of specimens. In the mornings I helped Mother wash and dress her hair, and then gave orders to the baker and grocer and many others who called at our door. It was a simple life.
I enjoyed working with Father because I knew no different and liked to help him, but it was clear that he was preparing me to take over his role when he died and devote my life to science. Although I would never have told him so, I had no wish to follow in his footsteps. A woman could not make a living publishing scientific papers as he had done, and I had none of his passion for the subject.

After much thought and worry, I decided to seek a post as a governess. I was fond of children, although inexperienced with them, food and shelter would be provided and I might even hope to make a friend among the other staff, especially if the house was large.

It took me only a few weeks to discover that a woman with my education and no knowledge of French or music would not find employment in even the most modest of homes. I was devastated because it seemed like my only chance. Before I reached my thirtieth year, I would be destitute.

A quick marriage would have saved me from starvation and loneliness, but I knew there was little chance of that. Even if I had the opportunity to meet gentlemen, I probably would not have attracted a husband, for I lived in an age where physical beauty was second only to great wealth as the most prized of feminine charms. I had neither.

If a lady possessed a pale, clear complexion, a curvaceous figure with a waist scarcely wide enough to comfortably contain the internal organs and silken tresses that more resembled a wig than any real mortal thing, then she could be assured of finding a husband who would care and provide for her. Alas, it was not to be so for me.

My hair was dusty-brown, completely without sheen despite the application of a regular vinegar rinse, and so exceedingly fine that it could only be worn pulled back into a drab and tight little bundle, which was fastened at the nape of my neck by a great quantity of hairpins designed to give it extra bulk.

My face was long, my cheeks too plump, and my nose most unbecoming; but my rotund figure was my greatest flaw. I was not tall either, standing barely five foot in my stocking feet. So my appearance and lack of income, combined with my ignorance of the feminine arts such as petit point, playing pianoforte and the painting of attractive rural scenes in watercolours, made me a most unmarriageable prospect.

But I did have one blessing and that was my eyes. When people called at my parents’ house, I was often complimented on them. They were large and fringed with a good quantity of dark lashes, but it was their colour that was the extraordinary thing. To a person meeting me for the first time it would appear that my eyes were a clear, sea
green, and this was indeed the case, but what made them so unusual was that one eye was a much deeper, cloudier shade of green than the other.

Although this difference was indiscernible to most people, it produced a most unusual effect. I was a mere child the first time I was told that my eyes were mesmerising. Since then they had been called entrancing, mysterious and even bewitching. But I never imagined that my eyes would be part of my salvation.

During the long winter following my parents’ death, I filled the evenings at free public orations. My room was bitterly cold and a large number of people in a hall generated a lot of heat. One night I attended a séance in Cheapside. I was not particularly interested in the new fashion for Spiritualism and as a person of reasonably sound mind, I believed it must surely be impossible to communicate with the dead, but the queue of people outside the hall held the promise of a toasty night.

It soon became clear that the medium was a complete fraud. She began by producing spirit raps that were quite obviously coming from some source off stage. Then there was the strong smell of lavender scent and the voice of an old sea captain searching for his drowned son, again coming directly from the wings.

The inevitable moving of inanimate objects followed this, and although I was sitting far back in the stalls, the wires attached to the objects were still visible. The medium seemed to have a fondness for flying fruit, and it caused much hilarity among the audience when an apple came loose from its moorings and hit the head of an elderly gentleman in the front row. He stood up, shook his stick angrily and threw the apple back to her, where it smashed wetly upon the stage. The medium stood to retrieve it, slipped on one of the pieces and landed on her posterior with a thump. Before she knew it, her séance had turned into a vaudevillian act.

I felt rather sorry for her. She was young and obviously inexperienced. Had I been in her place, I would probably have fled backstage, but she held her head high as the crowd started yelling out abuse.

‘Show us yer melons,’ called a boy from a row near me.

This comment was met with much hearty laughter and knee slapping by those sitting around him. ‘I’ve got a lovely banana,’ shouted another, ‘and wait till you see me chestnuts.’
This raucous alehouse talk was getting very irksome, and I was glad when an older woman dressed in a vivid green gown came out from the wings and managed to silence them.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, we must have complete quiet if we are to expect Miss Swan to produce a full-figure materialisation this evening,’ she said.

The boys were immediately quiet, which puzzled me at the time.

‘Thank you,’ said the woman. ‘I feel sure tonight shall bring most satisfactory results.’

Miss Swan wasted no time getting into the wooden cabinet as soon as it was wheeled onto the stage by a couple of burly looking fellows with tattooed forearms. Across the front of the cabinet was a faded red velvet curtain. The men pulled the curtain closed for a moment, then opened it again to much applause. Miss Swan was sitting demurely on a chair inside the cabinet, but the curtain was only opened partially, leaving a good couple of feet on either side of her where I noticed that all manner of items could be easily secreted.

The burly fellows then made a show of tying the medium’s wrists and ankles to the chairs arms and legs. I could not help but observe the rapt way that the audience watched as the two brutes tied the girl to her chair, nor the way she gasped pitifully as if in pain. The woman in green then pulled the curtain shut with a dramatic flourish and turned to face the expectant audience.

‘I now ask that you all join with me in silent prayer, for it is our combined strength and faith that will give Miss Swan the power to produce a successful materialisation this evening.’

The audience immediately became still, and within a few minutes noises began to come from the cabinet – a clicking sound and muffled bumps. Then a ghostly figure appeared from between the curtains wearing a flimsy, luminous white gown made from sheer fabric far more suited to a petticoat than an outer garment. The woman had the lithe figure of a girl but with womanly swellings almost certainly exaggerated by a bust improver.

The silence was heavy with anticipation. I could hear the steady breathing of the person sitting to my right and the tick of a fob watch. If the roof collapsed upon their very heads, I doubt the men in the audience would have noticed, so entranced were they by the scantily dressed young woman as she flitted about the stage moaning and humming softly.
After some time, she then walked between the aisles, stopping at the seats of several gentlemen and offering her white-gloved hand to some of them. One man kissed it with a loud smacking sound and a group of boys snickered.

I was rather losing interest in the whole affair at this stage and began instead to take notice of my own physical discomforts. Not the least of these was my feet. I was wearing new, ill-fitting boots made from cheap, coarse leather that were making my toes throb painfully. So, noting that there were only ladies on either side of me, I reached down and unlaced my boots. Then I slipped them off for just one glorious moment, wriggling my poor cramped toes to give them some relief.

It was this one simple action that changed the course of my life. My toe gave a loud crack, and the sound was such that everyone around me turned their heads in my direction. This cracking had happened infrequently since childhood and was not something I had ever given much thought to, but I was suddenly struck with an intriguing idea.

I left the hall immediately and took a cab straight home. The fire had gone out in my absence and my room was freezing cold, but I did not pause to rekindle it. My hands shook as I lit a candle and placed it on the mantel. Then I sat upon my bed, pulled off my boots as fast as I could and found that if I moved my toe very slowly and in a particular way, I was able to reproduce at will the glorious, startling sound that had turned heads in the hall.

My joy at this discovery made me dance around the room like a mad woman until someone below rapped on their ceiling and yelled curses, for this skill combined with my unusual eyes might save me.

I would become a medium.
The very next day I spent an extravagant amount of what little money I had on a pair of boots that were the finest quality. Overnight my feet had become my most prized asset and I realised that I must treat them with the respect and reverence they deserved. No bunions or calluses would mar my tender white skin ever again. I resolved to rub mutton fat into them every night to keep them soft and wear only woolen stockings so they would never feel cold.

The skills of a medium were surprisingly easy to master. With the help of a few books on magical trickery and the rest of winter's icy evenings spent at public séances, I soon began to develop a routine of my own. My toe was the most important feature of course, as well as a few fairly straightforward tricks that I practiced until I could execute them perfectly. I also purchased a hollow telescopic reaching rod from a magic shop that was easily concealed in a pocket. The highlight of my show would be blowing into the rod to produce a materialisation, which was nothing more than an inflatable silk doll daubed with luminous paint.

I got some handbills printed as cheaply as I could, then posted them on lampposts and shop windows all over London, and I swapped Mother's garnet ring for the services of a chimney sweep. He was instructed to leave a handbill in the drawing rooms of the fine homes he entered. They were tucked into the front of his coat for his dark descent, so they would not become soiled. I liked to imagine ladies in expensive gowns finding them and having no idea how they had reached their unlikely destination. Perhaps the mysticism of that alone might make them consider inviting me to conduct a private séance in their home, which, I had discovered, was how a medium could make a great deal of money.

I arranged for a hall not far from my room. It was shabby and dark but on a good busy street. Then the night arrived for my first public séance far too quickly. Although there were only a dozen people in the audience, I was filled with such dread that I did not know how I should get myself onto the stage, let alone perform. From the wings I could smell gas from the footlights, sour bodies and cheap scent, and I felt sick. The audience were chattering and laughing and it seemed unlikely I could hold their interest. I took a large draft of brandy from the flask in my purse.
just before i was about to go on, a young girl with cropped hair came backstage and asked me if i could contact her dead brother. she stared into my eyes and told me i had the look of a true medium, and then she offered me a silver coin. the girl had no shoes and i would not take the coin from her, but i was suddenly struck by the enormity and the immorality of what i was doing. i realised that up until this point i had allowed myself to think that i was only play-acting, when the truth was far more sinister. i burned with shame as i imagined father watching me with disapproval and sadness, and i took off my butterfly brooch. i could not wear it while on stage.

once i began the act that i had practiced so often, it went surprisingly well. i made it clear from the start that i would not interact with the audience or answer their questions, as i was not confident with that yet. my powers, i said, required great silence. the séance began with the lights fully lit and i called for the spirits to gather around me. then i then slipped my foot out of my shoe and clicked my toe to produce sounds from the spirit world. the lights were put out when it came time for the materialisation so i could blow into my reaching rod without being seen.

after the performance was over, i placed a hat at the edge of the stage then waited in the wings until the hall was empty before collecting my takings. i did not want to look anyone in the eye. i made only a modest amount of money, but it was enough to cover the rent of the hall and buy me a hot meal the next day.

my audience grew quickly, although i got no requests for private sittings, and after a couple of months of weekly public séances, i was able to fill the local church hall to about half its capacity. the money i made usually just covered my food, lodgings and the rent of the hall, but on a bad week it was not enough. still, i was far from destitute and for this i was truly grateful, but when i imagined a life completely alone and making only enough to keep body and soul together, darkness would descend on me. the nights were long, filled with grief and shame and the great emptiness that came with knowing my existence did not matter to a single soul.

i doubted that my modest show would be enough to keep audiences coming to watch me for much longer. although i made a point of regularly adding new things to my routine, i did not fool myself that i was particularly talented at sleight-of-hand trickery. apart from the sound of my toe and my eyes, which were only seen by those sitting at the very front, the show was fairly rudimentary and somewhat lacking in other-worldliness.
A month or so after I started giving séances, I began to get the uneasy feeling that I was being watched. It occurred to me that perhaps I had truly conjured up a ghost, but I did not allow myself to get carried away by such fanciful thoughts.

The impression that I was being followed was most acute immediately after I left the hall. It was my practice to leave from the back, my face well hidden by a hat and veil. Sometimes when I sensed a presence behind me I would whirl about quickly, determined to face my pursuer, but there was never anyone to be seen. I could only assume it was a beggar who wanted my takings, and after a week or so of this, I resorted to travelling home in a cab; a practice I sorely resented for it ate into my earnings.

This feeling of being observed continued to bother me. It became more frequent and I could not pin it down to just one place as I had at first. I felt watched in the streets, in shops and in the coffee palace I sometimes frequented. Occasionally I even felt watched in my own lodgings and had taken to leaving the curtains drawn during the day. It was most disconcerting.

Before long the number of people attending my séances began to dwindle, as I suspected it would. Without the production of a full-figure materialisation, a medium did not last long in London. And of course, the materialisations that could make gentlemen dig most deeply into their pockets were those of scantily dressed, shapely young maidens. Even with artful draperies, a wig and the best whalebone money would buy; I could not hope to be acceptable.

My luminous silk figures became more extravagant as I became confident with them, but no matter how life-like, a mere doll would not satisfy a gentleman who longed to touch a fleshy arm or squeeze the hand of a chaste ghost-girl. I needed an accomplice.

Meanwhile, my audience numbers continued to decline, until I was no longer making enough money to cover my expenses. The situation was desperate. Then just as I was despairing of ever earning another penny, a street urchin attempted to steal my purse and my life changed yet again.

It happened as I was waiting to cross Piccadilly Street one rainy day. I was distracted by my parasol, which was becoming increasingly sodden and affording me little protection. As I felt my purse being tugged, I threw the parasol to the ground and grabbed my assailant by the wrist.

‘Thief!’ I cried.

‘You’re a fine one to talk,’ she replied.
I was confused by this, but then the urchin did something very unexpected. She smiled at me. And I noticed the exceptional loveliness of her eyes, the delicate line of her jaw and the perfect symmetry of her fine features, although the brilliancy of her good looks was diminished by a great quantity of soot and grime. It immediately came to me that this girl was exactly what I needed. She had been sent to me, like a gift, and I resolved then and there to train her to become the most spectacular materialised spirit in all of London. Could I trust her? Probably not. But by this stage I knew that she was my last chance. My manner towards her immediately changed.

‘How old are you, my dear?’

‘Sixteen.’

I tentatively loosened my grip on her wrist but she made no move to run away. ‘And where do you live?’

‘No where.’

‘Your parents?’

‘Got none.’

‘What’s your name?’

‘Polly.’

She was barefoot and wearing a filthy coat made of crudely stitched together scraps of fabric. Her hair was so dirty it had turned the matt grey of cold ashes, but I knew that soap would make it golden again and in this I was not wrong. The girl’s rosebud lips were distorted by a number of large red sores and her blue eyes were dull with the ache of hunger, but despite all of this, her beauty was still startling.

‘My dear,’ I said, opening my purse. ‘I do believe that you have a far greater need of my few pennies than me.’

I offered her all I had. She did not take them straight away, as I would have expected, instead she crossed her arms and the sleeves of her coat rode up almost to her elbows. I could not keep my eyes from her wrists, which were blindingly white compared to the black of her hands and exceptionally slender and graceful.

She scowled at me suspiciously. ‘Why you giving me money then?’

‘To buy something to eat, of course.’

The girl shrugged, but her eyes did not leave my face for a moment.

I decided the best course of action was just to clearly state my motives.

‘I shall be completely honest with you. I’m after a . . . girl (the word accomplice seemed somehow terribly sordid) to help me with my work. I could not pay much at first
but perhaps in time . . . and it goes without saying that your board and lodgings would be taken care of.’

‘I know who you are, you’re one of them spiritualists. My friend saw you up at the hall.’

‘Really?’ I was surprised. ‘And are you interested in the Spiritualism movement yourself?’

‘I think it’s a load of old bollocks.’

I could not help but smile at this. ‘But don’t dismiss it entirely, there’s money to be made in it.’

‘I get money when I need it. I’m good at having it away with purses and getting me hands into a gentleman’s pocket quick smart. I ain’t never been caught before today.’

This piece of proudly offered information about her dexterity made me more than a little excited, and I was even more determined that she should come back to my room and hear my plans.

‘My dear girl, I believe you’ll be very interested in the business proposition that I should like to discuss with you.’

‘I’d stay with you then, would I?’

‘That would certainly be the plan.’ Although I was not sure how I would broach this topic to my landlady.

‘And would I be your servant or your companion?’ she asked with a wry smile, which seemed somehow strangely familiar.

‘Well, I suppose you would be my accom . . . my protégé,’ I said, thrilled with the word that had suddenly come to me.

Polly giggled. ‘I dunno what that is but it sounds all right.’

‘Excellent. We shall begin just as soon as possible.’

And so the task of turning her into a fully formed spirit girl began in earnest.
Polly arrived at my lodgings the next day with her few possessions tied up in a sugar bag. I had managed to come to an arrangement with the landlady whereby she was permitted to sleep in the tiny garret directly above my room for a nominal fee. It was currently being used to store fabric, which belonged to the landlady’s daughter who was a seamstress. I was able to use some of the softer, better quality fabrics; velvets and the like, to add a little extra padding to the worn straw pallet the landlady had reluctantly supplied. The garret was by no means luxurious, but it would be warm and dry.

Polly put her bag down on the thin carpet square beside my bed. ‘Nice place you got here,’ she said.

I was not used to speaking with strangers and found myself rather tongue-tied and uncomfortable now she was actually in my room.

‘Oh, it’s not much. I hope . . . I hope that one day, well, that we shall have much better.’

She grinned.

‘Would you like some food or a bath? I can get hot water.’

‘That’d be lovely. I ain’t had a bath in ages.’

I went to the washhouse and drew her a deep bath, then I shook a liberal quantity of bath salts into the steaming water. Polly followed me inside. When I turned around to face her she had removed her chemise and was naked to the waist. The only person I had ever seen without clothes was Mother. Polly’s breasts seemed impossibly round and high. I blushed deeply.

‘I’ll leave you . . . please, take your time.’

‘Thanks. You’re a kind lady.’

I went back to my room to see if any of Polly’s tattered clothes might be salvageable. As I tentatively untied the filthy bag that contained all her worldly possessions, a small wooden box fell out onto the floor. I picked it up and cradled it in my palm. The box was a square of good quality timber, polished to a high shine. I lifted it to my nose and could faintly smell beeswax.
It was locked. I am ashamed to admit that I looked for the key among Polly’s things, and if I had found it, I would have opened the box to see what was inside. But there was no key.

I felt very uneasy. The box itself was of little value, but for a girl like Polly it would represent a hot meal. I could only imagine that inside lay stolen jewels or money. I reassured myself that Mother’s wedding ring and the mourning locket were well hidden in a tea canister that had a secret compartment, and my butterfly brooch pinned safely to my bodice.

When Polly came back dressed in a smocked cotton nightgown I had given her to wear, the first thing I noticed was the tiny brass key that hung around her neck on a piece of frayed string.

‘Did you enjoy your bath?’ I asked.

‘More than you could ever know,’ she said, stretching her long arms out behind her back.

‘May I ask what that little key is for?’

Polly tucked it down the front of her nightgown so it was out of sight. She looked fearful and suddenly much younger than the sixteen years she claimed to be.

‘It’s mine. Don’t you touch it!’

‘Why would I do that? The key belongs to you. I’m only curious, that’s all.’

‘It’s private.’

I patted her arm. ‘Of course, of course, we shall talk no more of the matter.’

But I could not put it from my mind.

It took me only a week to teach Polly the tricks of the trade that I had already mastered. She had not exaggerated when she told me that she was quick. Her sleight of hand, undoubtedly sharpened by life on the streets, was an invaluable gift.

There could be no doubt that her skill in the area of trickery was of a far superior nature to mine. In fact, she even thought of several new things that we were able to add to the act. I could not believe how lucky I had been to find her and it seemed that my fortune, and indeed hers, was assured.

Polly’s company soon turned out to be a marvellous thing too. I told myself it did not matter that she had been a thief, for what choice did she have on the streets? She had been forced to support herself anyway she could, just as I had. In this we had something in common. It was a joy to have someone I could sit beside in the evenings.
There were vast differences between us of course, but she made me laugh and I enjoyed
being with her. The sensation of being watched vanished, and I could not help but
wonder if I had imagined it, but most important of all, I no longer felt alone.

The other part of Polly’s training was turning her into someone who could pass
as a lady. This was much more of a challenge. The area that we had the most difficulty
with was her speech. As a materialised spirit she could speak like a commoner, in fact, I
was aware that some gentlemen may well prefer it, but at times she would have to be
lady-like. It was my great hope that we would only need to work in public halls for a little
while before we were booked for lucrative, intimate séances in wealthy peoples’ homes.

Progress with Polly’s inflection continued to be slow but she was very proficient
at moans, groans, sobs and sighs. Her blood-curdling scream was the most chilling I had
ever heard. So, it was not long before I felt confident enough to hold my first public
séance at a new hall in a different part of London, and within no time at all I was booked
for a string of shows.

As far as her appearance was concerned, I had not been mistaken on that fateful
day. Polly’s beauty was indisputable, even to the most critical eye. When let loose, her hair
tumbled to her waist in thick curls. Polly’s eyes were the sweetest most innocent blue, her
rosebud lips were plump and moist and her hourglass figure, which needed only feather-
weight stays to mould it to perfection, was one that would send even the most
conservative man into raptures and inspire rash financial generosity.

On stage Polly became Emily Rose, my spirit control, who could be relied upon to
produce spectacular full-figure materialisations of the most enchanting kind. Emily Rose
grieved for her lost love, a handsome soldier who she had left behind in the mortal world
when she died of consumption. She longed for him to come to her and was bereft
without the feel of his embrace, the soft touch of his lips, his warm caresses; although
other gentlemen could, of course, sometimes assuage this longing.

Polly’s desire for her soldier was obvious as she swept about the stage barefoot,
wearing a luminous white gown made of sheer fabric and a beautiful black wig, which
made her look exotic and ensured she would not be recognised on the streets.

She would often mistake delighted gentlemen in the audience for her lover. Polly
would let her hand linger for a moment on his face, look longingly into his eyes, then
turn away sorrowfully when she realised her mistake. However, should the gentleman
look especially generous or amorous, she would allow him to touch her arms and her
waist, perhaps even her shapely hips, so he could see that a spirit girl's flesh felt just like any other woman's.

Speech was rarely necessary. Most of the time Polly simply cried, letting out the most ragged and heart-wrenching sobs which always caused the ladies in the audience to take out their handkerchiefs and dab at their eyes.

Sometimes someone would address a question to her: *What is it like on the other side? Is my mother there with you?* And she would give a carefully practised reply or simply resort to moaning if she did not feel able to respond convincingly.

When we were performing, I felt like an actress, and I could almost imagine that all we were doing was providing entertainment, but whenever a grieving audience member asked a question, the truth of it was like a slap and father's disappointed face swam before me. I had tried to talk to Polly about my concerns.

‘I don’t know why you’re bothered,’ she had replied, ‘they get what they paid for and go home happy, what’s the problem?’

‘I just sometimes think it is wrong’

‘So how else are you and me going to feed ourselves then? You want me to go out and sell my body, is that it?’

My cheeks burned. ‘Polly no, of course not. I’d never let you do that.’

‘Anyway, you’re doing them a favour. We both are.’

Deception came easily to Polly and she did not seem to be troubled by her conscience. It also soon became clear that I would need to keep a tight rein on her behaviour.

After our third public séance, Polly pulled me aside and proudly showed me a gentleman’s black leather purse.

‘He was looking in me eyes, all lusty like, and I slipped me hand into his pocket and took his purse, quick as you like.’

I was horrified. ‘Polly, good gracious, we’re not petty thieves. Do you have any idea what you’ve done? You could be imprisoned for doing something like that, or worse.’

She seemed to find this amusing. ‘But I aint never been caught before and its such a lark.’

‘I don’t want to visit you at Newgate,’ I grasped both of her hands. ‘I couldn’t bear it.’
‘So you’re an innocent then are you?’ she asked me. ‘Never done nothing illegal in your life?’

‘Well no – but we must do that to survive.’

Polly laughed and pulled her hands away. ‘This is easier.’ Then she squatted down and emptied the contents of the purse on the floor. A sovereign fell out and rolled towards the door. ‘Look, there’s at least five quid here.’

‘Listen to me, when the gentleman discovers his loss, whom shall he blame?’

Polly grinned. ‘Well it won’t be me because I was rubbing his wet lips with me finger the whole time and he aint going to forget that in a hurry. He’ll just think some pickpocket nabbed it on his way out the hall.’

We got away with it, and Polly gave me her solemn promise not to repeat the sordid performance, but it left me yet again with a feeling of great unease.

Within a few short months working public halls, we began to get bookings to hold private séances at some of the best homes in London. They were much easier to do than working in halls and we soon gave up the public séances altogether. These private sittings were also far more lucrative and before long, Polly and I were able to move into a terrace house where we had all four upstairs rooms to ourselves. There was even a modest drawing room of sorts, with two easy chairs, a Brussels carpet and a ruby chimney glass.

By this time I had become very fond of Polly. We spent many happy hours looking in shops and taking tea at some of the finest establishments in all of London. As for our business arrangement, Polly and I had an amicable agreement whereby I paid her a quarter of all I earned and gave her free board and lodgings. I also took great pleasure in indulging her desire for gowns and shoes and accessories of all kinds. One of the gifts she liked best was a pair of silk gloves so fine they fitted inside a walnut shell. Polly exclaimed over their beauty for days. I remember this time with some fondness, despite the terrible taint of all that came to pass soon after.

One night as we sat in front of our well-stoked fire sipping sherry, I asked Polly if she had ever imagined what it might be like to have a sister. We had spent the whole day shopping and had laughed ourselves silly trying on ridiculous hats.

‘I think it would be a most wondrous thing,’ I said, ‘but of course friendship is very valuable, too.’

‘I’d never want a sister,’ she said in a harsh voice.

‘Why ever not?’
She shrugged and turned away.

I said no more about sisters. Clearly there were things about Polly that I did not know, things that were none of my business. She never spoke of her past and I respected that.

‘Well, I’m very fond of you and enjoy your company greatly,’ I said. ‘I hope you don’t mind me saying so.’

‘I like you too Elizabeth,’ she said, gazing into the flames. ‘Of course I do. We’re the best of mates.’

I wanted to believe this more than anything in the world, but for some reason I did not. After this conversation, I could not shake the feeling that the happiness I had found would not last, given its foundation of lies, and in this I was soon proved to be correct. One August evening, quite as suddenly as it had begun, our success was finished, replaced instead by a shame from which we could never recover.

As well as their purses, Polly also had an eye for the gentlemen themselves. Those of the highest classes she found the most enticing. Polly often went out late in the evenings while I stayed at home, and it was my constant worry that some fellow or other would spirit her off and I would lose her. I reassured myself, however, that it was extremely unlikely, for the most a gentleman would offer a person of Polly’s class was a brief encounter. I had a great deal of sympathy for her in this respect, but was also secretly relieved. The thought of life on my own again sent a terrible shudder through me.

I knew that Polly had her eye, quite inappropriately, on a wealthy married gentleman called Mr Cosgrove, who made very regular appearances at almost all of our society séances. What I did not know was that Polly had inflamed Mr Cosgrove’s desires to such an extent that they had already consummated their relationship.

I had noticed, I admit, that Polly had taken to coming home late and sometimes in a rather disheveled state. Although I missed her company some evenings, I had no desire to leave our comfortable rooms on a cold night when we returned from a séance. My joy was to be found in a soft bed made cozy with hot bricks and a penny novel to read.

But before long, Mrs Cosgrove became aware that her husband’s affections lay elsewhere, and soon found her husband in a most compromising position with Polly. I had read that a gentleman once overtaken with passion will take scant care to cover his
tracks, and this had indeed been the case on the night that Mrs Cosgrove discovered them in the barn on their very own property.

Polly told me none of this until it was far too late. It seems she quickly escaped, believing herself to be unrecognised, and all further relations with Mr Cosgrove immediately ceased. Several weeks elapsed, and it appeared that she had got away with it. By this time she was infatuated with some other gentleman, the incident in the barn put well behind her.

We were booked to hold a particularly important séance at a villa by the sea in Brighton. The cream of London society would be there. Polly and I took extra trouble with our preparations for the night. We had perfected several new tricks and were looking forward to showing off our skills.

The séance went exceedingly well, until it was time for Polly to make her appearance as Emily Rose in her diaphanous gown, which was cut especially immodestly for the occasion. She had made but one short circuit of the room, moaning and sobbing admirably, when there was a loud shriek from one of the ladies. Before we knew what was happening, a woman had rushed forward, grabbed Polly by the hair then thrown her wig to the ground. The gasoliers were lit and it immediately became painfully clear that the screeching spirit-girl was as much flesh and blood as everyone else in the room.

Mrs Cosgrove had recognised Polly as the girl who had been caught with her husband and wanted to make sure that the whole world knew about it. We were finished.
It did not take long for the scandal to spread through London society. Within a week, I could not show my sorry face in public for fear I would be recognised and shamed. At first I had been so angry with Polly that I wished we had never met, but that soon abated, for even though she had brought everything to a sudden end, without her there would have been no beginning.

We would have to leave London, that much was clear, but I did not know where we could go. The world of spiritualists was a tightly knit circle, and I feared that news of our fraudulence would have travelled far and wide. My fears were soon proved to be correct.

I wrote letters to spiritualist societies in towns as far North as Manchester and as far south as Cornwall, offering my services as a materialisation medium. In desperation, I even sent a letter to the spiritualist society in Edinburgh, although I had no wish to live in a place considered by many to be even colder and damper than London. The reply to my letters always began something like this: *Dear Madam, your impudence is astounding.*

I need not continue, for the rest is all too obvious. It seemed that a spiritualist who was at our ill-fated séance had written a savage article about Polly and me, which had been published widely in various journals.

It was a sorry situation indeed, for we now found ourselves without income and with our savings rapidly dwindling. Or, more accurately, I had rapidly dwindling savings and Polly had none, for she had spent every penny she earned on fripperies and fancies.

One night over our modest supper, Polly burst into tears and told me that she was terrified I would turn her back out on the streets.

‘I would never do that,’ I said vehemently. ‘Never.’

‘Only I’ve got nothing to offer you now we can’t do the show.’

‘Oh but you’re wrong Polly. You give me your dear friendship and it means the world to me.’

Polly wiped her tears with the hem of her skirt. ‘Truly?’

‘Truly.’

‘And you’re the best friend I ever had. I’d be that sad without you.’

‘You’re my best friend too,’ I said. ‘Actually, there’s something I want to give you.’
I took Mother’s wedding ring out of the silver dish on the sideboard. ‘Will you wear this around your neck as a token of my feelings? It belonged to my Mother.’

‘I don’t want that bleeding thing,’ she said in a cold voice that I had never heard before.

Tears sprang to my eyes then. I put the ring on my own finger.

‘Sorry, Elizabeth, I don’t want to cause no offence. It’s just that you should keep it. That’s what your Ma would’ve wanted.

I looked up at her. Of course she was right.

I suppose that we could have waited in London until things calmed down and another scandal captured the imagination of the spiritualists, as it inevitably would. Maybe if we had been exceptionally frugal we would have survived for a while. Or perhaps we could have moved to another town in England and become different people altogether, just as if we were a couple of lowly criminals trying to escape justice. But all this was unnecessary because an unexpected opportunity presented itself while I was fruitlessly scanning the newspaper for a possible means of employment. They needed women in Australia, and the government was prepared to pay a hefty part of the cost of passage to any single women prepared to make the journey. Women were scarce, so it seemed, and much in demand.

Father’s brother, Uncle George, had made his way to the shores of that new land some years ago. He had plans to make his fortune on the goldfields working beside the ticket-of-leave convicts and had been considered very brave at the time. From the little I had heard in a roundabout way through my father since then, it appeared that Uncle George had been most successful and was now a man of not inconsiderable wealth.

When clearing out father’s things, I had found a recent letter from him. I did not bother to read it but the return address on the envelope stuck in my mind because it matched my father’s Christian name—Gordon. Uncle George lived at number one Gordon Place in the city of Melbourne, which was on the southern tip of the enormous continent of Australia. It occurred to me that should I decide to travel to Melbourne, then I would not be entirely alone. For surely my uncle would offer what assistance he could to his own flesh and blood, no matter that it had been many years since I had seen him.

At first the idea seemed foolish, for who in their right mind would want to make such a lengthy and arduous journey to an unknown land populated almost entirely by
felons and their families. Nevertheless, for some reason the idea of travelling to this new colony would not leave me. I even obtained a Melbourne newspaper from the library. It was many months out of date but it mattered very little, because what I read in it was exactly what I was looking for.

It was an article about the benefits of living in the city called Melbourne: *where the summers are tolerable and the winters not unlike the home country. In this place that is quite the cultural heart of Australia, there is a great enthusiasm for spiritualism that some say eclipses even that of the great circles of London.*

I read the rest of the article but did not take much of it in, for at that very moment I had decided our future. Polly needed little persuasion. I simply told her about the scarcity of women and she was soon convinced we were doing the right thing.

Our passage was organised almost immediately and with great efficiency by the Women's Immigration Society. To receive a fully assisted passage, Polly and I had been required to register as servants, for it seemed that servants were a rarity in the colony and much sought after by families of wealth.

We were given a rudimentary health check then offered a free berth in the segregated area for single women. As I could read and write, I was deemed to be a superior servant, meaning that I would be expected to take a position of lady’s maid rather than scullery maid or cook, not that it would make a great deal of difference to me.

I had no intention that either of us would become servants once we reached the shores of the new land. We were told that when we arrived at our destination we would be directed to immediate employment, but Polly and I would simply slip away unnoticed and head straight for Gordon Place. I did not allow myself to worry about how we might do this or that my uncle might not welcome a little known relative from home arriving virtually penniless on his doorstep, as it was our only option.

A great deal of my money was used to purchase everything we needed for our journey such as strong shoes, heavy coats and flannel petticoats. Polly had become so used to nice things that she refused to wear these unattractive garments, but I knew she would change her mind once we were on board. Even though it was the height of summer, the seasons would change while we were at sea. I had read that it was not uncommon to see icebergs, and that sometimes the southerly wind on deck was so bitter it could turn your fingertips black.

All of my possessions fitted quite neatly into one tea chest, which was all we were permitted to take. The only items of sentimental value I allowed myself were the
mourning locket, a fox stole of my mother’s and a couple of father’s most important specimens, including my beautiful Empress Elizabeth in its trinket box. The chest was stored in the hold. I would not see it again until we reached land.

The things we needed on board were carried in a cheesecloth bag. As well as all the essentials, I packed several novels and a deck of cards to help while away the hours. My precious butterfly brooch would stay pinned to my chemise as it always had.

When the day came to set sail on our ship, The Lady of the Sea, Polly and I stood in the long queue of servant women waiting to board. Those that were leaving loved ones cried long and hard but the rest of us were silent. Everyone looked fearful.

All the stories I had read about pirates and stowaways and shipwrecks came back to me, and I felt very afraid. A shiny lake of slick blackness surrounded the ship, and the smell of oil hung in the air. Polly said that she was frightened.

‘There’s no need to be.’ I took her hand. ‘Once we’re on board, all will be well.’

She looked up at the ship, which was listing severely to one side. ‘It’s so big. Why don’t it sink?’

I wished that I knew the answer to her question but I did not. ‘Of course it won’t sink. It’s a fine ship.’

‘Queen Mary went down without a trace last year,’ said a woman with a badly scarred face who was standing in front of us. ‘Hundreds of lives lost.’

I put my hand to my chest and felt for the brooch through the fabric of my bodice.

Behind me was a girl about Polly’s age with a face hardened by work. Her arms were firmly crossed over her bulging stomach and I wondered if she was with child. The girl’s face was shiny with perspiration and her breathing was laboured. Our medical examinations had been perfunctory, but I did not know how such a thing could be missed. I spoke to the girl later, once we had begun our journey, and she told me that she had laced herself so tightly for the examination, she merely looked plump. She lost the babe before we had even been at sea a week.

When we had finally boarded, we were taken down into the belly of the huge ship where an officious Matron barked orders at us like we were in the military. Our bunks were cramped and sour-smelling, piled one on top of the other with only a single light blanket each and a thin ticking mattress. I unpacked my drinking mug and metal plate and placed them at the end of my bed.
Polly took out her little polished wooden box and held it in her hand like a good luck charm. She still wore the key around her neck, but I had long since stopped worrying about what might be inside the box.

As the ship pulled away from the dock into the open sea, its great horn sounded an ugly blast. A girl in the bunk above me began to sing a lullaby and soon others joined in. I felt a tear slide down my cheek.

Before long, most of the women, myself included, became bilious and the cabin was soon filled with the stench of sickness. It was a horrible irony that the only relief was to be found on the freezing deck where the wind hit your face like a stinging slap, when all you wanted was to lie down and sleep.

I spent the long days of my sickness wrapped up in all the heavy garments I had brought, my face turned to the horizon. At night I got what little sleep I could when my stomach stopped churning. How I longed for the journey to end.

There were many others suffering just as I was, but we were too ill to find much solace in company. Besides, we soon all longed to be alone, for the nearness of so many others in the cramped quarters below quickly became overwhelming.

Some of the women were well enough to sew or knit or play cards, and for the educated classes there was a much-read ship’s newspaper written in pen and ink.

I heard various women complain about the food rations, mostly the younger ones, but it was many weeks before I could take more than brown soup and a little dry bread so the lack of good food did not concern me.

Polly was spared. She did not suffer one moment of sickness and seemed very happy and bright. During my difficult days and nights she was kind to me, always bringing what ever I might need and making sure I had a mug of fresh water. Once she even brought me an orange, which made the other women very jealous.

‘Where did she get such a thing?’ asked one of them with a sneer.

I shook my head and offered her the orange, as I could not bear to smell it.

‘They send the pretty ones off to get the water,’ said another woman.

‘And they come back with much more besides.’

They seemed to find this very amusing, but I could not see the fun in it. I was very concerned that Polly might fall in love with a sailor. The thought of being alone in the new colony made me feel more ill than my stomach ever could.

Fortunately I did not have to worry about Polly meeting a male passenger, as there were no men allowed in the women’s quarters. Sometimes a cocky fellow would
come in and claim to have a sister or cousin on board, but they could never be found and
the men were soon hauled back to their section, which was right down the other end of
the boat.

Finally when I had gained a sense of balance and was able to move about
without the constant onset of biliousness, I soon realised that I had been right about the
source of Polly’s happiness. A young officer had taken her eye, and she spent most of
her time trying to contrive ways to leave the women’s quarters so that she could be alone
with him.

The poop deck, where I spent most of my miserable days, was reserved for single
women only, but it was also where the officers controlled the ship. Even the captain
himself was often seen there. Needless to say, there were many dalliances between the
officers and the women.

I had heard it said that they gave women brandy to seduce them. It may well have
been true because often women disappeared overnight, appearing in the morning looking
more than a little dishevelled and smelling strongly of liquor.

Polly’s infatuation was a great concern for me because she seemed so very taken
with him; but after I met the man in question, I no longer worried that he might want to
claim her as his own. He had a cruel, mocking face and I could see in his eyes that he did
not really care for her. I tried to warn her of this, so that she could end it before he did,
but Polly would not listen, claiming that I was old-fashioned and did not know how to
have fun.

The change in weather on board ship was as I had expected. We seemed to go
from freezing cold to searing heat almost overnight, and by the time we were due to dock
the heat was fierce.

We smelled Australia before we saw it; a dry, smoky, papery smell that was
entirely foreign, and we all crowded on deck to catch the first glimpse of the land that
was to be our new home. For the first time since the journey began, I felt a cautious
glimmer of hope for our future. Polly and I hugged each other and then jumped up and
down like a couple of excited schoolgirls.

By this time, the Officer was acting as if he had never even made Polly’s
acquaintance. She was a strong girl and took this very stoically. I told her to hold her
head high as we left the boat and to look him in the eye, even if her gaze was not
returned. Instead she made a special trip to the poop deck so she could spit on his boots
while several other officers looked on. Although I was shocked by such brazen behaviour, I could not help but smile and admire her bravado.

But the smile would not have lasted long if I had known of the horror that lay ahead for me at the hands of Polly’s next lover.
When the time finally came to leave the ship, I found that I had become rather fond of several women who had been my constant companions during the long months of the voyage. There was one woman in particular called Margaret, who was to become a governess in the colony. She was well educated and had a kind nature. Like me, her parents had recently passed away.

I found that my time with Polly had made me much easier in the company of others, and I enjoyed many hours of conversation with Margaret. I told her all I knew of butterflies and moths and she taught me about the great romantic poets, a topic on which she was extremely knowledgeable. We embraced fondly when we said goodbye.

Margaret had informed me that as soon as we disembarked, we would be met by a wild crowd of potential employers, all vying to pick the best women off the ship to become their servants. Her own employer would be among them. She was to wear a pink shawl about her shoulders so he would recognise her.

Any women that did not instantly get selected for work would be taken to reception homes or depots, where apparently the conditions were very poor, until an employer could be found. If they still had not been claimed after several months, the women were then turned out onto the street to survive as best they could.

I had not given a lot of thought to leaving the boat, for the journey had always seemed like it would never end. Now the time had come, I realised that escaping from the authorities would not be as easy as I had imagined. But we would manage it somehow, for I knew that if I did not spirit Polly away as quickly as I could, some man would get his hands on her and I would never see her again.

When the time finally came, we were all rounded up by Matron, then counted and checked off her list before being herded down the gangplank. I hung onto Polly’s arm, as I felt dizzy and sick. It seemed that I now needed to get my land-legs in much the same way as I had needed to acquire sea legs at the beginning of our voyage. Several of the other women looked ill, one was retching into a bucket. There were so many people waiting on the dock they appeared to be a solid mass. I could not get a sense of the land at all.
Passengers from the first class section of the boat were coming down another gangplank with dogs on leads and birds in cages. I wondered how the poor creatures had withstood the journey. Most of the ladies were wearing plain, practical clothing, not the finery they had worn when they boarded the ship three months earlier.

As soon as we left the gangplank, rough hands began to pull at us as greedy employers sought to pluck out the best and youngest girls. I held onto Polly as hard as I possibly could, and was not surprised when a burly man with abundant red whiskers tried to snatch her from me. Fortunately Polly screamed. It startled the man momentarily and he released his grip long enough for us to make our escape.

Then, without a moment’s hesitation, we started to push our way blindly through the immense crowd of people, not knowing what direction we were going in or where we were headed. We both had our small bags of belongings over one arm and we held hands with a vice-like grip. I bashed into the side of a barrow and hurt my leg, but I did not stop until the crowds finally began to thin and were just ordinary people going about their business with no interest in the ship at all. Only then was I sure that it was safe.

We leaned against a fence to catch our breath.

‘Our luggage is lost,’ I said.

‘We can go back.’

‘No, we would never get away with it.’

‘But my brushes!’ said Polly, who was particularly attached to a silver-backed set of brushes that were engraved with her name. ‘I can’t live without them.’

I smiled. ‘Oh Polly, how much you’ve changed. When I met you, your hair hadn’t been brushed for many months. Do you remember how long it took us to get the knots out?’

She nodded. ‘It near killed me.’

‘You’ll have another fine set of brushes one day soon. I promise you.’

It pained me to leave the Empress Elizabeth, Mother’s fox stole and the mourning locket, but I still had my butterfly brooch pinned close to my chest and some well-worn clothes in my bag. I also had a little money in a pocket tied about my waist. We would not starve yet.

The first thing that struck me about Melbourne was how busy it was. The place was bustling with life, and there were many more people around than I had expected. The second thing was the intense, dry heat. Although it was barely spring, the sun stung my eyes and I could feel it burn the back of my neck. But most surprising was the vile
smell. Australia was a newly discovered place and I assumed it would be more sanitary than home. It was not. Our nostrils were assailed with the odour of a sun-warmed town entirely without covered sewers; a ripe smell to rival even the most unsavory of London’s back alleyways.

We found ourselves in what appeared to be the middle of the town, near a grand bluestone post office with a fine clock, which would not have been out of place on the Strand. In fact, the buildings were all similar to home; they were just newer and not blackened by soot. Many of them were still under construction. Melbourne was like a scaled down version of London. A model made for a child that was still being completed.

In other ways though, it could not have been more different. The streets all ran off each other at sensible right angles, something that could only happen in a brand new town that had been carefully planned. The main through-fares, which were crammed with horse buses, bullock wagons and water carts, had been cobbled with wooden blocks, so that the clatter of horse’s hooves sounded completely foreign. Everything was covered with a thick layer of dry, brown dust.

Polly was gazing all around, her eyes darting quickly from one thing to the next. ‘Sometimes I think it’s just like we was at home, then I see something that’s not quite right,’ she said.

I nodded, squinting at her. The light seemed to be so much stronger. Even the most ordinary things, a pile of watering cans outside an ironmonger’s, sparkled like they were something special.

Polly pointed to a barrow parked across the wide road. ‘Look Elizabeth, strawberries. I’d give anything for a nice fresh bit of fruit.’

We linked arms and braved the traffic. I could not help but stare at a nicely – dressed lady driving a pony and trap by herself, and nearly got myself run down. Polly was staring just as hard as me. We looked at each other and shook our heads in disbelief.

The man with the barrow had a black glass eye and stood taller than any man I’d ever seen. ‘Afternoon ladies,’ he said. ‘Trollope’s Victoria strawberries, the best money can buy.’

‘They must be good if the Queen eats them,’ said Polly.

The giant gave us a condescending smile, and then licked his lips with a cracked yellow tongue.

I put my shoulders back and looked up at him. ‘And how much are they?’

‘Only tuppence for a baker’s dozen.’
I pulled out my purse and extracted a coin. ‘Would you be so kind as to direct us to Gordon Place?’

I wanted to seek out my uncle immediately so that he could advise us of the best way to obtain lodgings for the night, although I secretly hoped that he might be able to accommodate us for a time at Gordon Place, which had taken on rather grandiose proportions in my imagination.

The man smirked, then he pointed across the road towards a waiting omnibus. ‘Catch that and get off after two stops. Takes yer right nearby.’

‘Thank you.’

‘No, thank you Madam.’ Then he bowed deeply, showing his scabrous oily scalp.

I took Polly’s arm and we moved swiftly away.

‘They’re lovely,’ she said, cramming strawberries into her mouth, ‘just lovely.’

Uncooked fruit was not healthy and I did not usually eat it, but this time I made an exception. Polly was right, the strawberries were sweet and the most delicious I had ever tasted. We finished them very greedily, and then climbed aboard the crowded omnibus.

‘It’s a ha’pence,’ grumbled the cabbie, ‘each.’

I put the coins in a jam jar that was suspended from the roof by a piece of string and he grunted in acknowledgement.

The only seats available were upstairs, which although rather draughty, offered us an excellent view. For the first time since we had come ashore, I had a good look at the people.

There were a number of beggars in broad brimmed hats pushing their possessions along in rough wheelbarrows, and they were dressed as one would expect, but all the other men seemed quite careless in their attire. The gentlemen of business wore frock coats and top hats, but the hats were often oddly shaped and in many cases the frock coats had seen far better days. They seemed not to care a jot about this however, and had an air of conviviality about them that was quite unlike home.

It was not at all what I expected. I had been told life in the colonies was difficult, even arduous, but these men in Melbourne swaggered about as if they did not have a care in the world.

The dresses the ladies wore were a little out of date, but not as much as I would have expected. However, there was one striking difference from London. The ladies wore bright colours that one would only expect to see on women who were not ladies at all.
The streets were awash with crimson and peacock blue, emerald green and canary yellow. My first strong impression was that this must be a rather jolly place to live.

I turned my attention to the landscape. The majority of the trees were unusual silvery things that looked barely alive, yet they filled the air with a strong, tangy smell that reminded me of the liniment father used once when he had the quinsy. There was very little in the way of wild flowers, just clumps of giant-sized grass here and there looking desperately in need of a drink. I saw a pot of blue pansies outside a haberdasher’s and experienced my first twinge of homesickness.

The abundant tropical birds had plumage even more colourful than the Melbourne ladies’ dress. You would expect such spectacular creatures to have a pretty song but instead they had a piercing squawk. We had been exclaiming over the striking beauty of a green and red parrot when it let out a shrill cry. Polly and I both laughed in surprise and an elderly lady smiled at us.

‘You haven’t heard anything yet,’ she said, ‘wait till you hear the laughing jackass.’

‘What a name,’ I said.

‘Suits it perfectly, noisy little devil.’

‘Aren’t there poisonous spiders?’ asked Polly.

‘As big as a boxer’s fist, my love.’

‘And snakes twenty foot long,’ added a woman nursing a babe.

Polly shivered.

‘I’m sure they will leave us alone if we keep out of their way,’ I said.

Several people chuckled at this.

At the second stop we got off the omnibus as directed. I could see no building or street with the name Gordon Place, so I went into a draper’s shop to seek directions. The shop, with its stacked rolls of fabric and cards of lace, was reassuringly familiar. I asked the man behind the counter how I might get to number one Gordon Place. He gave me a rather confused look.

‘May I enquire what a lady like you would want to go there for?’ he asked.

I frowned, which intended to convey the fact that it was none of his business, and told him that I was visiting a relative, but his comment gave me a very uneasy feeling.

‘It’s not far Madam, turn left, walk for about ten minutes and it’s just over Lonsdale street. You can’t miss it.’
We walked briskly in the direction the man had advised but were soon distracted by the smoky smell of meat roasting on a brazier. A sign on the cart advertised hot tripe and kidneys and my hunger was suddenly sharp.

‘I’m starving,’ said Polly, rubbing her belly. ‘Aren’t you, Elizabeth?’

I nodded. I was famished.

We had passed a number of establishments that called themselves Oyster Salons, but Polly did not care for oysters. Then suddenly I caught sight of a place called The Sixpenny Restaurant. Even we could afford that.

Inside it was rather gloomy and airless with very few customers, but soup, stewed lamb and pastry could be got for just a sixpence. We sat down at a table with an oily cloth and ordered immediately. The monotony of the plain food aboard ship had never whetted my appetite even when I was well, but I could hardly wait to eat our first meal in Melbourne. It had been three long months since I had tasted pastry, and I longed to feel the buttery richness of it in my mouth.

A young girl with dirty hands delivered the food. I glanced down at my meal and my appetite vanished. There was an enormous dead fly in my bowl of stew. It was at least three times bigger than any fly I had ever seen before. I pointed it out to the girl and she laughed.

‘Add a bit of flavor that will.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Just got off the boat have ya?’

‘I fail to see what that has to do with anything. It’s a disgrace to your establishment to serve a meal with a fly on it.’

The girl took the stew away and removed the fly. Needless to say I could only pick at the food after that, and was very keen for Polly to finish so we could make our way to Gordon Place. I did not touch the pastry.

Polly had a much stronger constitution than me. She ate every morsel that was on her plate, even using her finger to transfer the last of the gravy to her mouth, but I did not say anything about bad manners, as I might have normally. It gave me joy to see her eating with such relish.

Back out on the street, we hurried past grim alehouses that advertised bare-knuckled fighters and shops flooded with light. We saw newsboys selling penny papers; peddlers; preachers, bootblacks and toothless beggars playing tuneless music. There were dark-skinned people dressed in rags, with children who were practically naked, and I had
never seen more Chinese in one place. Men and women alike had long pigtails hanging down their backs and many wore silk jackets that were skilfully embroidered. One man was beating a golden gong. It made a terrible racket and I was not surprised to see no coins in his upturned hat.

When we reached the end of the street, we prepared to cross as the draper had instructed, but a gust of wind blew a blinding sheet of dust across the road so we could not see to the other side. I could taste grit in my mouth. Polly rubbed her eyes.

We waited for the dust cloud to clear then crossed the road cautiously. Number one Gordon Place loomed up in front of us. It was a grand enough looking building, perhaps in need of a little maintenance, but when I saw some very low-looking characters hanging around outside, I began to feel fearful. One man appeared to be passed out under a tree. His clothes were filthy and there was a stain down the front of his trousers.

Once inside the building my hopes were completely dashed. It smelled of sweat and worse, the walls were covered in filth, and out of the corner of my eye I saw a large rodent dash across the floor. Dozens of men in various states of intemperance were sleeping on wooden benches that were laid end to end and covered every square inch of the large reception area. How the rest of the place looked I could only imagine. I certainly did not wish to see. The rancid stink of unwashed bodies was worse than onboard ship.

With a heavy heart, I took Polly’s hand and made my way to the desk where a male attendant sat hunched over a torn newspaper. Glass crunched underfoot as I walked. He grinned lewdly when he saw me, then fixed his eyes on Polly and did not move them, except to allow them to sweep slowly up and down her body. I wanted to slap him.

‘Hullo, hullo, what’s a couple of grand ladies like yourselves doing here then?’ I resisted the urge to turn and run. Somewhere inside I still had a glimmer of hope, although goodness knows why.

‘I think that there has been some mistake. Is this number one Gordon Place?’

‘The very same.’

‘And it is not a private establishment?’

The attendant gestured to the unfortunates lying about the place. ‘Don’t look too private to me. This here’s a benevolent home for wayward gents.’

He laughed to himself and then gave Polly a wink. ‘No place for a lady.’

‘I believed my uncle was residing here, but I must have been mistaken.’
‘Who’s that then?’
‘Mr George Stopford.’

He frowned for a moment. ‘Righto, I remember old Georgie, dead keen on the races. Rumour has it he made a fortune on the goldfields.’

‘And?’
‘Well he lost it all at the track and ended up here, didn’t he, like they always do.’

Polly gasped dramatically at this news. I was not really surprised, for I had guessed what had happened to Uncle George the moment we laid eyes upon this place. Nevertheless, I was not a woman to shirk her family duty.

‘Well, perhaps you could inform him that a relative is here to visit. He might be cheered by some news from home.’

‘I won’t be doing that. Old Georgie’s been dead these past two years or more.’

‘I see.’

‘Oh Elizabeth, we’re all alone with nowhere to go,’ sobbed Polly.

I turned to her and spoke rather sharply. ‘Polly, please collect yourself. We shall find lodgings by and by.’

‘Just got off the boat eh? Maybe I can help,’ said the attendant, folding his newspaper into neat quarters. ‘I’ve a friend looking to take in a couple of lady boarders of sober habits.’

The attendant seemed to think this was funny, and had I not been in such desperate circumstances I would have turned on my heel and walked out.

‘Where exactly does your friend live?’

‘It ain’t far from here, this side of the river anyway. Greeves Street, in a place called Fitzroy.’

As I saw it, Polly and I could wander the streets, hoping for something to turn up and perhaps still be reading advertisements as darkness fell, or we could accept this man’s offer. If it turned out to be a very bad place, we could spend just one night then find somewhere better in the morning.

‘You can get a wagonette from just outside here. I’ll tell the cabbie where to stop.’

‘Thank you,’ I said. ‘That is most kind.’

The wagonette lurched precariously as we traversed the cobbled back streets of Melbourne. Before long we came to an area with a lot of factories and broken down old houses, not unlike London’s slums, but more spread out. There were many ragged
children about, who all looked like pickpockets, and ruddy-faced workingmen, the worse
for drink.

The air was thick with the festering stench of tanneries and suffocating black
smoke belched from every chimney pot. I covered my nose with my hand, wishing the
cabbie would hurry on, but he came to a sudden stop.

‘Is there some problem?’ I asked.

‘No Miss.’

‘Please carry on then.’

‘But this is the address what the man gave me.’

‘Here?’

‘Yes Miss.’

‘It can’t be right,’ said Polly. ‘Surely not.’

In the window of a rundown terrace house just a few feet away from the
wagonette, was a drooping sign advertising rooms to let.

‘I’m afraid it is.’

A woman wearing a great deal of rouge and an obvious hairpiece appeared from
nowhere and leaned into the wagonette. The cabby shooed her away.

‘That’ll be one bob, Miss,’ he said.

It seemed like a great deal of money for a cab ride, but I pulled out my purse and
paid what he asked. I was struck by how little money I actually had. On board ship it had
seemed a reasonable amount, but I realised that I was fooling myself. It would not last
long at all.

The house in Greeves Street was just two-stories high, made of plain, unadorned
brickwork with a serviceable tin roof. The brickwork had been given a rough coat of
cream paint, but rust from the ageing roof had run in streaks down the front and
dripped over the stone windowsills, making the house look like it was crying. I tried not
to let this unfortunate illusion distress me, but it was difficult not to feel that the crying
house was not a place where I would find happiness.

We walked towards the verandah along a brick path where weeds burst through
every crack in a green profusion. The verandah itself had a definite list to the right, and
when I stood upon it, I felt rather like I did during some of the more unsettling
moments aboard The Lady of the Sea.

‘I don’t like the look of this place,’ said Polly.

‘I am sure it will be quite pleasant inside,’ I lied.
A middle-aged woman with a severe stoop opened the door to the house. She introduced herself as Mrs Parsons, the landlady, and after we exchanged brief pleasantries, she told me much about her deceased husband and poor health. She said that her stoop had caused chest problems and she had a fruity, nocturnal cough; something that was to cause me many sleepless nights during my relatively short stay at Greeves Street.

‘You didn’t pick up any nasty diseases on the ship, did you?’
‘I can assure you that we’re both quite well.’
Polly coughed and I frowned at her.

‘Only I don’t want the tropical fever brought into the house. I had an Aunt who died of it. Dear me, such a terrible death it was. You wouldn’t wish it on your worst enemy.’

She then ushered us into a narrow dark hallway. The unmistakable smell told me that there were many generations of rodent families dwelling beneath the floorboards.

‘I won’t have the windows opened,’ she said. ‘Let’s in all the muck from outside.’
I smiled. ‘Of course.’

‘And no gentleman callers.’

‘Certainly not.’

The furnishings in the house were very shabby, particularly the rugs and lace curtains. I imagined that if they were given a good beating they would disintegrate. There was a strong smell of burned milk.

I paid for one night’s lodgings and we were shown to an upstairs room. Fortunately, it was not nearly as dull as I feared. The room faced north and was greatly cheered by the sunshine that still brightened it, despite the lateness of the day. Although it was plainly furnished with just a pine dresser and a straight-backed chair, there was an elaborate wrought iron four-poster bed in the centre of the room that was hung with green velvet draperies. It seemed far too extravagant for a rented room, and I was not surprised to discover that it was the bed my landlady and her late husband had occupied. I remarked that it was very handsome.

Mrs Parsons nodded. ‘My Percy drew his last breath in that bed after a dreadful case of dysentery, poor soul.’

I tried to put this fact from my mind, for surely none of us would ever sleep in any strange bed if we knew what tragic and indelicate events had come to pass in it, but it was not easy that first night as Polly and I lay back to back on the mattress.
I was glad that we could only afford one room. The warmth of her body and the
even sound of breathing was a great comfort.

‘Will we be all right, Elizabeth?’ she asked.
‘Of course we will.’
‘Have we done the right thing?’

I said yes, although I felt far from sure, and for the first time since I had met
Polly, I wished for someone who I could confide my fears to.

The next day, after soon realising that it was impossible to find better lodgings at
the same price, we decided to stay at Greeves Street. Mrs Parsons, who I later discovered
had been entirely without tenants for many months, was not a difficult woman to live
with and uncommonly grateful for the rent I paid her once a week. Even when she had
partaken generously from the brandy bottle and was only partly sensible, which
happened often, she was never anything but pleasant.

Her cooking, however, left much to be desired. Mrs Parsons could only afford
cheap cuts of mutton, which tasted acceptable when they were freshly roasted, but she
boiled them for hours on a rough colonial stove in her kitchen where the walls were
covered in coal dust and grease. She was also fond of her kitchen mincer. For days on
end we ate nothing but grey shreds of leathery, left over meat, served with cheap brown
bread and orange butter that tasted suspiciously like carrot peelings.

Sometimes Polly and I would make our way to The Jolly Ploughman, a public house
in the next street where they did pig’s trotters and a particularly good currant pudding, or
we would buy two penny’s worth of broken biscuits from a nearby factory, but we
couldn’t afford to do this often. We needed to make money fast, and it seemed like the
perfect opportunity had landed at my feet when Mrs Parson’s made mention of a cousin
of hers who was a member of the spiritualist church.

This lady, a Miss Harriet Swinson, was a regular sitter at séances and apparently
greatly taken by the workings of the spirit world. When I told Mrs Parsons that I was a
medium and would very much like to meet her relation, she laughed.

‘Only fools believe in all that nonsense and carry-on,’ she said, tapping the side
of her head knowingly.

I gave a shocked gasp. ‘But Mrs Parsons, surely you don’t mean to say that you’re
not a believer?’

‘I’ve got a brain in my head, and I don’t believe in all that rot.’

I told her most respectfully that I believed she was wrong.
I had noticed the proliferation of inexpensive china and other keepsakes with the image of the Queen on them that were scattered around her house.

‘After all,’ I continued, ‘even our Queen has been known to try and contact her poor beloved Alfie, God bless his soul. I have heard that she’s had some of the greatest mediums in all of England sit with her. Surely the Queen wouldn’t do such a thing if it was all nonsense?’

She looked horrified. ‘Most certainly not. Our dear Queen would only do what’s proper and right.’

I nodded and said no more. A tiny seed of doubt had been planted, and that was all that I needed for the moment, for I had a plan.
I am not proud of the next part of my story. In fact, I am reluctant to set it down at all, but I must do so for this to be a true account of all that occurred. Perhaps it will help if I say that my actions, although entirely inexcusable, were motivated by sheer desperation. By this time I had only enough money left to pay rent for two more weeks. I could think of no other way that Polly and I might survive.

The night in question, I waited until Mrs Parsons had supped a goodly amount of brandy and had fallen, insensible, onto her bed fully clothed, as was her habit. It was necessary to wait until she was asleep, because Mrs Parsons rarely left the house during the day. Polly and I then began the underhand and loathsome task of collecting information. We intended to conduct a séance to convince our landlady I could contact spirits, with the hope she would pass this information to her cousin.

I am ashamed to say that we began by searching through the contents of Mrs Parson's writing desk. She was rather proud of this desk with its inlaid wooden panels and barley-twist legs. On top of it stood an inkwell made of silver plate, which I imagined was rarely used. I knew the desk, or at least the contents of it, were very important to her because the inkwell was the only thing she polished with any regularity. It gleamed most oddly in the gloom and dreariness of the parlour.

Polly had insisted that we search the desk first. 'That's where you'll find love letters from her old man, if he wrote her any,' she said, 'and lots of other bits and bobs.'

I was shocked. 'I can't do it. Reading someone's private letters . . . what have we come to?'

'You listen to me Elizabeth,' said Polly grabbing my arm, 'we aint got no choice. And besides, she'll never know the difference.'

Within just a few minutes of searching, Polly had found several letters in a concealed drawer underneath the desk. I did not want to look at them.

In the past we had sometimes got information from servants about the sitters at our séances. That had always been Polly's job as I wanted no part of it. With Father ever in my heart, I made a vow to myself that I would never reveal any scandalous information Polly was given at a séance. I had kept to this religiously, editing out anything that might cause hurt.
She thrust the letters at me. ‘Read them.’

‘No. I won’t do it.’

‘Well I would except no one bothered to teach me when I was a girl, not like some.’

I looked up at her but could not read her expression. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Just read them, quickly!’

I went upstairs to make sure Mrs Parsons was soundly asleep, and then I reluctantly began to read the first letter in the pile. It was an intimate letter full of loving sentimentality that Mr Parsons had obviously written to his wife during their courtship. Its contents would not have been out of place in a romantic novel.

I only read one letter. It contained all the information I required and there was no need to delve into their affairs any further. I felt terribly ashamed to have sunk so low. We put the letters back in the drawer, tied together with a length of faded red ribbon and carefully placed exactly where they had been.

Polly then went on to search the kitchen and the rest of the parlour, while I undertook the rather more risky task of exploring Mrs Parson’s room while she was asleep. But once I entered the room holding a candle, I realised my fears were utterly unfounded. Mrs Parsons was so soundly asleep, I could have sounded a bugle in her ear and she would not have stirred.

Her bedchamber was plainly furnished and contained only a single wooden bed, a wardrobe, a dressing table with a frilled skirt and a towel horse. There were no hairbrushes or trinkets of any kind on the dressing table, just a green cracked washbasin and a jug that did not match it. The only picture in the room hung above the bed. It was a childlike seaside scene made of shells and dried flowers.

I crept over to the large oak wardrobe in the corner of the room. On the front was a mirror that was so aged and spotted with dirt, I could barely see my reflection. I turned the rusty key in the lock and both doors swung open in a rush as if the wardrobe itself could barely wait to display its contents to me. Later I realised that this phenomenon was merely due to a missing floorboard, but at the time it made me feel quite afraid.

I was surprised to find that the entire wardrobe was devoted to the possessions of the late Mr Parsons, a man who was apparently very slovenly in his personal habits. Although there were several dried oranges studded with cloves hanging inside, they did little to mask the strong unpleasant odour of aged cheese and workingmen’s boots.
Many of Mr Parson’s clothes were in a foul state with food stains and the like on his jackets and mud splashed about the hems of his trousers. In the pocket of his greatcoat, a garment that was so stiff from lack of washing it could have stood up straight on the floor by itself, I found a vulgar postcard of a girl with an impossibly enormous chest.

I abandoned my search entirely soon afterwards, when I found a long yellow toenail clipping in another pocket. Besides, the letter had provided all that I needed for a successful séance.

I did not sleep easy when I went to bed. In the middle of the night Polly murmured. She normally slept very solidly so I thought that she was awake.

‘I feel terribly guilty,’ I whispered. ‘Do you?’

But there was no reply.

The next morning as Mrs Parsons was serving us a breakfast of bread and lean dripping, she asked me if I had slept well.

‘I’m afraid not. I had the most unpleasant feeling that there was a presence in the room. I swear I hardly slept a wink the whole night through.’

She frowned. ‘A presence? What do you mean by that then?’

‘Elizabeth feels things what are not of this world. She’s a sensitive,’ said Polly, enthusiastically.

‘Well you both know my thoughts on that topic, so how’s about I just keep quiet.’

I looked down at the stained tablecloth. ‘It was the strangest thing, but all night I could hear a wretched sounding voice whispering the words: Tessie Darling over and over again. It disturbed my rest most dreadfully.’

A butter knife clattered to the floor and Mrs Parsons had to steady herself on the back of Polly’s chair. ‘The voice, what did it say?’

‘Just the name . . . and that he was quite bereft without his true love. A poor lost soul I’m afraid. Quite unable to pass over to the next world because of his attachment to someone here on the earthly plain. We must remember him in our prayers.’

‘Gawd.’ Mrs. Parsons pressed a grubby handkerchief to her mouth. ‘It’s him, it’s Percy.’

‘Percy?’ I said. ‘Who’s Percy?’

‘My husband. Percy is my poor departed husband.’

‘Well I don’t think he’s departed very far, that seems to be the problem.’
Polly stifled a giggle when I said this. I gave her a stern look. One of her great weaknesses was that she often fell prey to fits of girlish giggles at the most inappropriate times.

‘Gawd,’ Mrs. Parsons repeated. ‘But what am I to do?’

Polly turned around and patted her arm reassuringly. ‘You’re real lucky having Elizabeth here. If there’s anyone what can sort your Percy out, then it’s her.’

Mrs. Parsons took a long drink from the brandy bottle that was sitting on the sideboard and it seemed to bring her entirely to her senses.

‘I don’t know that I believe in all that rubbish. Just because you’ve got some voice in your head that says my name, well it don’t really prove nothing.’

‘Yes it does,’ said Polly and looked at me.

I cleared my throat. ‘You are quite correct Mrs. Parsons. In itself it proves absolutely nothing, but if you would be so kind as to indulge me just a little, perhaps we could sit together and try to make contact with your Percy.’

Polly nodded vigorously. ‘Wouldn’t you like to know how he’s getting along then?’

‘Well yes, I suppose so. But I’m not paying you, if that’s what you’re after and there’s no free lodgings. I’m hard up enough as it is.’

‘I don’t want anything. My motives are only to help poor lost souls and bring some measure of comfort to loved ones who are left behind.’

Mrs. Parsons considered this for a moment. ‘I suppose it can’t do no harm.’

‘No harm at all,’ I reassured her. ‘In fact, I feel sure it will do us all the world of good.’

‘Right then. Let’s get it over with,’ she said grimly, as if steeling herself for the extraction of a tooth.

‘We cannot begin before it’s dark as the spirits are greatly sensitive to the light and will not appear.’

This well-known and widely believed ‘fact’ worked greatly to my advantage. The skills Polly and I had developed were distinctly rusty, which made it quite probable we would make costly mistakes. A less than perfect séance would seem much more believable in the dark. Besides, by the time night fell, Mrs. Parsons would be well under the spell of strong liquor which, in my experience, made even the most hardened non-believer more susceptible to spirits of all kinds.

After Mrs. Parsons had gone back into the kitchen, I told Polly that it was imperative we prepare well for the night’s performance.
She waved her hand dismissively. ‘That lovesick old crone will be dead easy to fool. You aint hardly going to need me.’

‘But of course I’ll need you. We’re a team. Besides, we must think of it as excellent practise. In no time at all we will be sitting for a far more discerning audience and we must be ready.’

‘I spose.’

Weightier persuasion was clearly in order. ‘Just think of the beautiful gowns and the fine hats you can buy as soon as we’ve made a little money. Why, I can just picture you in that hat you showed me in the milliner’s window the other day. What dead creature did it have curled around the brim?’

‘It aint right to call it a dead creature. They might have been creatures once but now they’re just good trimming and a well trimmed hat is the height of fashion, you ask any lady and she’ll tell you that.’

Unlike most of my sex, I had never liked the idea of wearing anything that once drew breath. I had packed Mother’s fox fur in my trunk with the sole intention of giving it to Polly when she came of age, but of course that would never happen now. It made me smile to imagine some wretched woman living in a dilapidated tin shed on the outskirts of town, stirring a pot of kangaroo tail soup with the fox warming her back.

I smiled. ‘I’m sure you know far more on the subject of fashion than me.’

Polly nodded. She had a great interest in clothing. Her only gown, a cheaply made beige-coloured velveteen, was not a gown to be proud of, but Polly brushed it clean every night and hung it carefully over the end of the bed as if it were a hand-made silk.

I admired her for it because it was not an easy task to keep one’s gown clean in Melbourne. Although there was not the rain and mud to contend with, the dry dust meant that all manner of unlikely things stuck to hems, and it was not unusual to come home to find you were transporting bits of cork, bottle tops, cigar ends or even pieces of orange peel. Much to my disgust, I even once discovered the desiccated skeleton of a mouse in the hem of one of my petticoats.

After much deliberation, I decided that spirit writing would be the best way to conjure up Mr Parsons. Partly because I had purchased two cheap slates a few days earlier, but also because if Mrs Parson’s memory of the night’s events were fogged, and this I suspected might be the case, the words on the slate would serve as a potent and everlasting reminder of her departed husband’s devotion.
After we had eaten a modest supper and the table had been cleared, I declared that the time was right to begin the séance. In fact, I went on to say that the spirit of Mr Percy Parsons was positively clamouring to be heard.

‘His voice is but a whisper,’ I said, ‘but oh how urgent it is.’

Mrs Parsons held herself stiffly and her lips were pursed, but for some reason I got the strong impression that she was softening to the idea.

‘We must stay sitting down and hold hands so that we form a circle,’ I said.

It was fortunate that the table was very small, as it was not always possible to hold a séance with only three people. There was nothing that made sitters less receptive than having to strain their arms to reach the hand of the person beside them.

‘How long’s this going to take then?’ said Mrs Parsons.

‘Who’s to say how long the departed need to make themselves known?’

‘Well I don’t want to be sitting here all night for nothing. I’ve got a load of mending to do.’

‘Your husband’s been dead keen to come through the whole time we’ve been here,’ said Polly, barely suppressing a yawn. ‘It’ll be a quick one tonight.’

I frowned at her. I would have to remind Polly not to use the word dead during a séance, no matter what the context, and to say instead that loved ones have merely passed over to another plain and are still very much with us, albeit in an ectoplasmic state.

‘I do believe that we’re ready to begin,’ I said.

We joined hands. Mrs Parson’s was damp and the knuckles were swollen. Polly’s felt icy cold.

I blew out the candles on the table, then waited for a few minutes to let the atmosphere build of its own accord, as was my custom.

‘I don’t want to be in bed late because the tinker’s coming early tomorrow with my kettle.’

‘Mrs Parsons, I’m afraid that I must insist on complete silence. The spirits will not come through if there is even the slightest disturbance.’

She emitted a long slow sigh.

I waited only a moment before I spoke again. ‘Is there anyone on the other side who wishes to speak with us?’

The only sound in the room was Mrs Parson’s congested breathing.

‘Is there anybody who wishes to speak with us,’ I repeated, remembering that I had already claimed her husband’s voice was urgent in my head.
‘If there is anybody there, please give us a sign.’

I then slipped my foot out of my shoe and flexed the joint of my big toe so that it made a modest cracking sound. As I was somewhat out of practice, the sound was not as loud as I would have wished, but it still sounded effective, not unlike a disembodied rap coming from the walls of the house.

I felt Mrs Parson's hand twitch as she jumped.

‘Percy Parsons, is that you?’ I asked, then again I flexed my toe.

It made a most resounding sound this time, and I heard Mrs. Parson's sharp intake of breath.

‘I need to know how you wish to communicate Percy Parsons. Would you like to speak through me?’

My toe cracked again. It was beginning to feel very uncomfortable. One more was really all I could manage.

‘I have a slate. Would you like to communicate through automatic writing?’

I flexed my toe, infinitely grateful that it would be the last for the night. Then I placed Mrs Parson's hand on Polly's to keep the circle, picked up the slate and pushed my chair away from the table a little.

Under normal circumstances, I would have made a great show of every snippet of information I received, and it would take a considerable length of time to get as much as I required, but on this occasion it was neither necessary nor warranted. So I simply breathed heavily as I wrote, like it was costing me dearly.

After about five minutes, I let the slate clatter to the floor. Then I claimed to be utterly exhausted, and asked that the candles be lit. This was meant to be Polly's job, but as she did not move, Mrs Parsons lit them herself. Polly had fallen asleep. I gave her a gentle kick under the table to rouse her and she lifted her head from her chest with a dazed look upon her face. I pushed away my thoughts of annoyance and disappointment, for I knew that once she became Emily Rose again she would not let me down.

I reached to the floor to pick up the slate and exchange it for the one I had already written on that was hidden under the table. In London I had owned an impressive locked slate and had perfected the art of invisible writing with a gold pen. Hopefully in time I would have such sophisticated equipment again.

Mrs. Parsons was anything but sleepy. Her eyes were brighter than I had ever seen them before. The dullness of grief seemed to have left them altogether, and for the first time I noticed that they were a pleasing shade of pale blue.
‘Do you really think it was him?’ she said, grasping my arm with a surprising strength. ‘Was it really my darling Percy, come to speak with his poor wife?’

‘Most certainly,’ I assured her. ‘But why not read what he has said to you so that you can be sure.’

I pressed the slate into Mrs. Parson’s shaking hands. She devoured the words then looked at me, her eyes shining. ‘It’s him, my darling Percy, speaking our very own words of love.’

‘Well perhaps he may be able to rest now that he’s assured you how much he loves you. It’s often enough to make them move on,’ I said, looking down at the veins on the back of my hands.

‘I knew you had the gift, I just knew it.’

I raised my eyebrows a little but said nothing, only giving a gentle benevolent smile as befits a spirit medium.

‘It’s those eyes of yours, they’re bewitching. Anyone would only have to look into your eyes to see that you’re a sensitive.’

‘Really?’ I said.

‘My word yes, and you must meet my cousin, Miss Swinson, just as soon as possible. Go on, say you will.’

I touched her hands where they gripped the slate. ‘Mrs. Parsons, I’d be absolutely delighted.’
Mrs Parsons arranged for me to meet her cousin with the greatest of haste. Scarcely two days had passed before I found myself standing outside a bluestone building of majestic proportions that housed The Victorian Spiritualists Society.

Polly stayed at Greeves Street. There was a good reason for this. When conducting a series of séances with the same group of sitters, as I hoped would be the case with members of the spiritualist society, it was best to build up a strong sense of audience anticipation. Full spirit materialisations would be hinted at but never actually produced until we had used up our entire repertoire of illusions.

To help with these illusions, I needed Polly to pose as a sitter. In London, she would sometimes turn up unexpectedly at a séance in a horse and four, complete with chaperone, which we hired at considerable expense. She could enunciate in a passably well-bred voice that she had been invited by a certain Lady so and so. The name was unimportant, although I no longer left it up to Polly's imagination since the time she claimed to have been invited by Lady Godiva.

Insisting that she had been invited by a lady, meant that Polly was invariably welcome at any séance she cared to attend. Once she was admitted to the circle, Polly acted the part of a timid girl, far too delicate and sensitive to indulge in idle chitchat, for I feared that any real conversation would soon reveal her humble origins.

I lifted the heavy brass ring on the door of the Spiritualists Society and knocked. After a few minutes, an old man leaning heavily on an ivory walking cane opened the door.

‘Good afternoon madam,’ he said. ‘What is your business?’

‘I'm here to see a Miss. Swinson. I believe she's expecting me.’

‘Certainly. This way please.’

I followed him up a poorly illuminated staircase that smelled strongly of gas. It took the man some time to get to the first floor, which gave me an opportunity to study the modest portraits of kindly looking men and women hanging on the wall. I presumed they were prominent spiritualists. They all seemed to radiate an air of calm and benevolence, befitting great respect. I could not look them in the eye without feeling a hot rush of shame.
At the top of the stairs, I was shown into a large attractive room. Although it was rather poorly furnished, with just a few wooden chairs and desks and an old cane settee, it had large windows that looked out onto a busy street. The room was flooded with light and the leadlight panels at the side of the windows produced a marvellous and somewhat otherworldly show of red, green and gold patterns on the floor.

I made my way to the window to admire the view, but it was not quite what I had expected. Although the window did have a pleasant outlook onto a busy street in a good part of town, where the ladies were fashionably dressed and no gentleman was without a hat, it also looked directly onto one of Melbourne’s many unsavoury laneways. These laneways were often foul with rubbish and slops and this one was no exception. I watched as an intoxicated young man relieved himself all over his dirty boots.

‘Good afternoon,’ came a voice from behind me.

I turned to face a lady about my own age with a plump face and rich russet hair. She held out her gloved hand.

‘Good afternoon, Miss Maudsley. I’m Miss Swinson.’

I smiled. ‘Delighted to make your acquaintance.’

‘Thank you so much for coming.’

‘Not at all.’ I took the lady’s hand and pressed it lightly for a moment. ‘It’s a pleasure. Your cousin has spoken most highly of you.’

This was not entirely true. The only thing Mrs. Parsons had said about her relative was that she was overly fond of sweetmeats, and in this I thought that we might have something in common.

‘And she has spoken most highly of you and your considerable talents Miss Maudsley.’

‘Do please call me Elizabeth.’

‘Elizabeth then. And I’m Harriet.’

‘Your cousin is most kind. I fear my talents are modest.’

‘Oh no. I do believe you’re quite wrong. My cousin has let herself go terribly since her husband passed over. To be perfectly frank, she has always been a woman of, well, how shall I put it?’

‘Intemperate habits?’

‘Exactly. But it has been much worse of late. I do fear for her health.’

‘That is to be expected.’
Harriet nodded. ‘Her enthusiasm after your communication with Percy was most infectious. We do hope you will sit for us Elizabeth?’

‘I would be very flattered.’

‘Excellent.’ Harriet smiled. ‘That’s excellent. I hear you’re quite recently arrived to the colony. How do you like it?’

‘Well enough, thank you. Although the heat is rather dreadful at times.’

‘Dear me, I fear you have not seen anything yet. A few weeks from now we shall all be most uncomfortable. I tend to stay indoors for much of the summer feeling rather wretched.’

‘That sounds awful. So how are you involved with the society, Harriet?’

‘I’m just a very enthusiastic sitter, and sometimes I help out in the reading room if they are busy. We have a very extensive selection of titles. Would you like to see? You are most welcome to borrow something if you wish.’

I thanked Harriet then followed her through to a cramped room at the back of the building, which was lined with soaring mahogany bookcases and lit only with the dull glow of green desk lights. There was only one person in the reading room, a gentleman with graying hair, neatly parted and combed to the side but rather thin on top, who was collapsed over a book in a way that suggested he was asleep.

‘That’s Mr Gilbert Banks, one of our long-standing members,’ whispered Harriet.

The man gave a start, looked up and grinned at us in a rather bewildered way. He wore a well-groomed beard and subtly waxed moustache, but his face was petite, almost feminine.

‘Good afternoon Miss Swinson,’ he said, rising clumsily from his seat.

His spectacles had been perched on his forehead and they slipped down over his eyes of their own accord. I could not help but smile.

‘Hello, Mr Banks. I do hope we’re not disturbing you?’

‘Not at all. I’m glad of such a charming interruption.’

Harriet blushed then turned to me. ‘Mr. Banks is employed at the Kew Lunatic Asylum.’

‘That must be very difficult work,’ I said.

‘It’s often difficult, but amply rewarding,’ he replied, adjusting his black bootlace tie, which was off centre as a result of his slumber.

‘A friend of mine went quite mad after her last confinement and ended up at Kew,’ said Harriet. ‘Mother and I went to see her. Oh, it was dreadful, really it was.’
Mr. Banks nodded sympathetically, then glanced at me. He was a very earnest looking man but at the same time there was boyish playfulness in his eyes.

‘How many lunatics are housed at the asylum?’ I asked.

‘About eight hundred at present. I believe it’s the largest asylum in the southern hemisphere.’

‘Really? Well that cannot say anything good about life in Melbourne, can it now?’

He laughed. ‘I don’t believe I’ve ever thought about it in quite that way, but perhaps you’re right.’

I felt rather pleased that I had made him laugh, but then we were enveloped in silence. I glanced down at my hands and noticed that my gloves had lost a button.

Mr Banks cleared his throat. ‘Might I ask what brings you to our humble reading room on such a glorious day?’ he said.

Harriet answered for me. ‘Miss Maudsley is a renowned medium come all the way from London. We’re most fortunate to have her visit us.’

‘You’re too kind. My talents are modest.’

‘Dear me no, that’s not true at all.’

‘And will we get an opportunity to witness your powers as a medium?’ said Mr. Banks.

‘We certainly will,’ Harriet enthused. ‘I shan’t let her leave us until she has promised to hold a séance just as soon as possible.’

I turned to Harriet and smiled. ‘Thank you so much. I would be most delighted.’

After leaving the society, I found myself in need of a walk. I felt more than a little nervous about the forthcoming séance, and wished to have as much preparation time as possible. I had managed to postpone it for two weeks, claiming prior commitments, although that hardly seemed long enough to prepare for what might be my one and only chance.

As well as being concerned about my performance, the guilt had returned with full force. I had met two kind people and had lied blatantly to them both. Normally at a séance I would not know a single sitter, and I liked to keep it that way.

I walked slowly, deep in thought, and soon found myself in Bourke Street, one of the busiest streets in Melbourne that contained many shops and hotels. Two men in slop coats and a crimson-faced woman had collapsed in the gutter near a wine stall. The woman had her skirt up around her knees and her petticoats showing. Without thinking,
I pulled the woman’s skirt down so her thin, bruised legs could not be seen. Her eyes sprung open. They were murky and troubled.

I hurried on my way, surprised at my actions, for it was not safe for a woman on her own to help a beggar or a drunk and I had never done anything like it before. Perhaps it was atonement of sorts. I fancied that I could feel father’s smile in my heart.

After a few minutes more, I turned down an unfamiliar side street and found myself in a pleasant cobbled square where there were several wooden benches. They were nicely shaded by trees and uninhabited by anyone sleeping off the effects of the wine cart. On a patch of stubbly grass in the middle of the square was a small bronze statue of the Queen. It was sitting on top of a funereal-looking gray marble plinth.

Unfortunately, the Queen’s head appeared to be a favourite resting place for Melbourne’s large population of pigeons, and their white droppings had dribbled unceremoniously down her face. I considered taking out my pocket-handkerchief and wiping the foul muck out of her eyes, but I had no water and really the task was far beyond one small square piece of cloth. So I sat on one of the benches for a little while with the dappled sun on my face, fighting off the urge to close my eyes. The walk had bestowed its beneficial effect upon me and I was feeling calmer at the prospect of my first séance in this new land.

I had been successful in the past and there was no reason why I would not be so again. It was foolish to allow myself such indulgent self-doubt. My tricks would be practiced until they were once again razor-sharp, and Emily Rose would be the most beautiful materialised spirit ever seen in the colony. I was an actress, that was all, and I must not forget it.

I alighted from the omnibus at Fitzroy and walked the short distance to Greeves Street. In my cheerful frame of mind, I found that I was almost looking forward to my meat-tea, as Mrs Parson’s called it, no matter how modest it might be. My walk had induced a hearty appetite. But as soon as I opened the front door of her house, I sensed that something had changed.

The first thing that struck me was the smell. There was still the stink of rodents, but there was a fresher smell too, as if the house had been recently aired. This possibility was so unlikely that I dismissed it entirely. I was therefore completely unprepared for the sight that struck me as I walked into the dining room, a previously uninspiring, malodorous place where nourishment was taken purely for its own sake.
The table had been beautifully laid, as if very important guests were expected. There was a neatly pressed, clean tablecloth and a pink glass vase containing fragrant flowers. Three places had been set with silver cutlery, fine bone china plates and snowy white napkins that were threaded through ivory napkin-rings; but the biggest surprise of all was Mrs Parsons herself, who came into the room wearing a freshly laundered gown with a spotless white apron on top. Her hair, which was twisted neatly into a tight bun, had been recently washed and her face had such a glow about it I wondered if she had been rubbing her cheeks with geranium petals. What was this strange turn of events?

‘Miss Elizabeth, my dear,’ she said with warm and apparently genuine enthusiasm. ‘Welcome home.’

‘Oh,’ I said, for I found that I could say no more.

‘Did you meet with my cousin?’

‘Yes, thank-you. We’ve arranged a séance in two weeks time.’

‘That’s wonderful news, just wonderful. Now come and sit yourself down, I’ll call Polly,’ she rubbed her hands together. ‘We’re having a right treat tonight.’

And indeed we were. Instead of mutton there was beef, which had been perfectly roasted, served with potatoes cut into fritters and fried in lard, with a dish of greens. We had bread so fresh it was still warm, sweet butter and prickly pear jam. Next we enjoyed a delicious bread pudding, studded with juicy raisins and smothered with fresh cream. Then a generous serve of cheese and freshly brewed coffee.

Polly and I had not tasted such a meal since we left the home country. Mrs Parsons, who normally just picked at her food, ate with us, and I had never seen one individual put away a larger slab of pudding than she did that day. But the most mysterious thing of all was that the brandy bottle was nowhere to be seen.

‘This is most generous Mrs Parsons,’ I said, leaning back in my chair and feeling the unfamiliar pinch of corsetry about my ribs. ‘Most generous indeed.’

‘Oh it’s nothing at all. I used to enjoy cooking, back when my Percy was alive.’

‘The pudding was particularly delicious. You really are to be congratulated.’

‘I have to confess that the meat was cooked down at the bake-house. They do a beautiful job there.’

‘Went down a treat, that’s for sure,’ said Polly.

‘Thank-you, my dear. It’s safe to say that there will be more where that lot came from when finances will allow. Now that I’m not, well . . .’

‘Falling prey to intemperance?’ I ventured.
‘Exactly. There’s no need for that sinful indulgence now.’

‘Well now, that is good to hear. May I ask what’s caused this change of heart?’

‘But Miss Elizabeth, I shouldn’t think you’d need to ask. Now I know my Percy’s up there looking over me, well there’s no need to hurry to him. I can talk to him anytime it takes my fancy. We’ve had a couple of right good chats today already. Oh it’s a grand feeling talking to him again, you’ve got no idea.’

‘Talking to him?’ said Polly. ‘How do you do that then?’

‘Well, just in my head of course. I don’t want anyone to think I need locking up, but he answers me good and clear, dear soul that he is.’

I felt a surge of happiness for her and for myself, for surely if I could bring relief to one poor soul then my work was not all bad. I reached across the table and grasped her hand. ‘I’m pleased. So very pleased.’

Mrs Parsons beamed and patted her hair. ‘Oh and while we’re talking of such things, I’d like to have our bed back. You girls will find the back room is quite comfortable.’

That night, after we had moved our things into the new room, Polly claimed that it stank and sprinkled around liberal amounts of cheap violet scent that tickled my throat and made my nose run. She then slept like a babe, as she always did, but I had a most uncomfortable night. The bed had a very thin horsehair mattress that made my back ache. It also creaked violently every time I moved, and I was fearful the thing might collapse and send me through the floorboards to the parlour below. I imagined Mrs Parsons discovering me in the morning, sprawled upon her newly beaten Brussels rug or lying with a broken neck among the splintered ruins of her beloved writing desk.

The wardrobe and the knowledge of what was inside also distressed me. I could not help but imagine that Mr Parsons was in the room and angry that I had looked through his things. It was silly, but the thought stayed with me all through the long night. I tried to turn my thoughts to the forthcoming séance. If it all went as I hoped, Polly and I would soon find ourselves able to leave Greeves Street for good. It was a very cheering thought.

In the morning, I washed my face and hands with a sliver of yellow soap, dreaming all the while about the hot baths I might one day take in our new home. The steaming water would be perfumed with rose petals and my lady’s maid would give me fine linen cloths, warmed by the fire, to dry myself with. Fanciful thoughts such as these helped me endure anything that life might put my way.
But I had not endured anything yet.

Over breakfast, Mrs Parsons told us of her excitement about the forthcoming séance.

‘What a night of great entertainment it will be,’ she said.

‘Entertainment of a most serious type,’ I replied rather sombly.

‘I can’t hardly wait for it to come.’

I had overlooked the fact that Mrs Parsons would want to attend. But of course she could not, because Polly would be there as my assistant, pretending to be one of the sitters.

‘Oh but you must not come,’ I said passionately, ‘some people are too delicate for such things, and I believe you’re one of them.’

Mrs Parson’s wiped her nose with the back of her hand and sniffed. ‘Too delicate?’

‘Yes indeed. They feel things too acutely. It could be most unpleasant for you.’

‘Poppycock. There’s nothing delicate about me. I’ll be the first one there so I can get the best seat.’

I smiled weakly, unsure of how I would overcome this obstacle.

‘Will you be sure and contact Harriet’s father,’ she said. ‘He only passed a few months ago and she misses him something awful. Though I don’t know why, he was a terrible blaggard. And could you see what became of her gentleman who made promises to her then disappeared without a trace.’

‘I’m afraid spirit communication is not as easy as you think. The departed will only speak through me as they see fit. I hold no influence over the spirit world whatsoever.’

Mrs. Parsons looked at me thoughtfully, then slowly pulled a piece of bacon rind out of her mouth from between her front teeth. ‘That’s not what my Percy thinks.’

Polly giggled, but I did not find it at all funny. In fact, this simple comment made me more than a little alarmed, for surely I was the one who knew exactly what Percy did and did not think. I dabbed my lips with my napkin then directed the conversation to a safer place.

‘Tell me a little more about poor Harriet’s missing gentleman.’

Mrs. Parsons then proceeded to give me a great deal of useful information about her cousin. By the time she had finished, I felt more than a little sorry for Harriet and resolved to try and help her in any way that I could. She then went on to give me
snippets about various other friends of Harriet’s who might attend, until my mind was in a whirl trying to remember it all.

Polly and I practiced our tricks just as hard as we could. Fortunately our room had a sturdy lock and a good heavy door. On more than one occasion, Mrs. Parsons knocked tentatively and enquired as to what we were about. I told her that Polly had a tendency towards headaches and dizzy spells and at such times I sat with her in a darkened room, as she did not like to be left alone.

Several days before the séance, I sent Polly along to the spiritualist society to introduce herself. She was dressed smartly in a navy blue cape edged with swan’s-down, which I had bought cheaply from a street vendor. We could ill-afford it, but the cape gave the correct message as to her class and was a necessary indulgence as it drew the eyes away from her worn velveteen gown. She was instructed not to remove it, not matter how warm she might feel.

I had told her to say that she was newly arrived to Melbourne’s shores, having travelled from England with her parents, and was most interested in the world of spiritualism. I hoped that she would secure an invitation to my séance.

There was no doubt that I had a great deal of trepidation about Polly’s visit, but she came home with a card that had the date of the séance on it and a bristly red native flower that she claimed was given to her by a gentleman at the society.

The flower looked like the brush Mrs. Parsons used to scrub out the chamber pots in the morning. Polly lifted it to her nose, declared it to have no scent whatsoever and to be the ugliest thing she had ever laid eyes on, then tossed it into the colonial stove where it sizzled and crackled for some moments as if objecting most severely.

‘Who gave it to you exactly?’ I asked, already imagining difficulties with infatuated gentlemen.

‘He was such a handsome fella, Elizabeth, and a real gent too. Mr. Frost’s his name. He said I was the prettiest thing he’s laid eyes on in ages.’

I sighed. ‘You have forgotten that it’s not ladylike to accept flowers from the hands of strange gentlemen, especially ones that flatter you so.’

‘Where’s the harm in it? Harriet introduced him to me so he must be all right.’ She grinned. ‘He’ll be at the séance.’

I had a dreadful vision of all that could go wrong, once again, if Polly was not completely focused on the task at hand.
‘That most certainly cannot happen.’
‘Don’t be so stuffy. It aint going to stop me doing my tricks right. I’m a professional you know.’
‘I’m sorry. It’s just that I do worry.’
Polly put her arms around my waist and embraced me lightly. ‘You silly old thing,’ she said.
‘I know.’
‘I’ll be as keen as a Fritillary searching for nectar.’
‘How do you know that word?’
‘You told me.’
But I was sure that I had not.
The day of the séance arrived all too quickly, but I was feeling reasonably confident that Polly and I had had enough practice to put on a good show. I had just poured one nip of sherry into my hip flask, when I realised there was a problem that I had not addressed. This problem came tripping down the stairs wearing a peacock-blue bonnet trimmed gaily with daises.

‘I’m beside myself with excitement,’ said Mrs Parsons. ‘Could you contact dear old Mum? She always said there was a fortune hidden in the house but no one ever could find it and we pulled the place half apart when she died.’

I felt very flustered. In the whirl of preparations I had completely forgotten about Mrs Parson’s intention to attend. Polly had already left the house after saying she was spending the evening with a sick friend. Using her excellent dramatic skills, Polly had even squeezed out a tiny tear as she told Mrs Parsons her friend had pleurisy and was unlikely to live through the night.

‘I had quite forgotten that you intended to come,’ I said.

‘Dearie me, I would not miss it for all the tea in China.’

‘That is . . . well I’m afraid that is most unfortunate.’

‘Why ever do you say such a thing?’

‘Well, last night I had a most unusual dream. When I have dreams the night before a séance, I often find that they are of a prophetic nature. I hadn’t thought to mention it to you as I assumed that you would be at home this evening.’

‘What sort of a dream? Was it a nightmare?’

‘Oh no, nothing like it. It was quite a beautiful dream, although it was of a most intimate and personal nature.’ I cleared my throat and cast my eyes to the floor.

Mrs Parsons laughed. ‘You don’t have to tell me about your wild fancies, Miss Elizabeth. It’s not uncommon for unmarried ladies to have such dreams. Why I’ve even had them myself.’

‘Well that’s the strange thing you see. The dream was not about me. It was about you.’

‘About me? What about me?’

‘I fear this is a matter of great delicacy.’
‘You don’t have to mince no words with me.’

‘Well, I dreamed that your Percy would come to you tonight. In spirit of course but, well, how shall I say it . . . that he would come to you more fully than he ever has before.’

‘My Percy? Tonight?’ Mrs Parsons let out a small high-pitched giggle. ‘What a marvelous thing. And where will all this happen then?’

Here I managed an entirely genuine blush. ‘Why in your marriage bed, of course.’

Before I left for the night, I did something else that I am ashamed of. After my conversation with Mrs Parsons, which left her considerably flustered and in need of a good sit down, I stole upstairs and placed a clay pipe that had belonged to her late husband between the sheets of her bed. I found the pipe in the pocket of the loathsome greatcoat. It was well hidden in a secret pocket on the inside, which led me to believe that she may well not have known it was there.

Obviously this would have the profound effect that an item seemingly transported from the other side always does, but I also believed that the pipe would be a reminder of his physical presence and proof that Percy could appear to her in a physical way. There was no end to my treachery.

I was able to take my leave without being noticed. This was essential. Some items and devices were already secreted in my skirts and tucked into the tops of my stockings, but the others required a bag that was suspiciously larger than I would normally carry.

It was my usual way to get close to the place where the séance was being held, then slip into a back lane to make the necessary adjustments before I entered the premises. Usually I would hide the empty bag out-of-doors in as safe a place as possible, then retrieve it the next day. It was important that I made my way back home with my devices still intimately about my person, in case I was seen or offered a ride in a sitter’s carriage, as often happened.

The complication with Mrs Parsons had cost me valuable minutes and I did not want the added stress of being pressed for time. To that end, I walked briskly to the main through-fare and allowed myself the luxury of a cab. A hansom came rather quickly and the cabby stepped down to help me aboard. Not all cabbies show such good manners, and I made the incorrect assumption that he was a decent sort of fellow.

As I was climbing up, a most unfortunate event occurred. A small luminous wax doll, which I had believed to be very firmly fastened within the confines of my bustle, slipped out and tumbled to the floor of the cab. Instead of politely passing me the doll
with his eyes averted, the cabby made a raucous comment about it being the most painless delivery of a babe he had ever witnessed, then fell about laughing.

I rushed from the cab with my cheeks aflush, but the lewd cab driver was not my real concern. What bothered me most was how I would be able to correctly place the doll back in my bustle, a process that involved a certain amount of undressing and dexterity, without Polly’s assistance.

Suddenly I could feel eyes upon me, and standing in the shadow of a shop’s verandah, I saw a young girl staring. On an impulse, I held the doll out to her and she edged towards me cautiously. The doll was just a cheap thing, dressed in a piece of sacking and coated with luminous paint, but the little girl grinned when she saw it. She was very poorly dressed in a torn cotton shift and the toes of her shoes had been cut off to accommodate her growing feet. I passed her the doll. She clutched it to her chest and kissed the top of its head.

‘Oh Miss, I aint never been given nothing by nobody, least of all a lady like you,’ she said.

I smiled. ‘Well, you must love her and look after her, for she’s a very special little dolly.’

The girl nodded gravely. ‘I promise. What’s her name?’

‘Holly Blue.’

‘That’s a beautiful name.’

I nodded. It was a beautiful name and I felt a familiar pang of sorrow that I would never have a little girl of my own I could give the name to.

‘Whenever I look at her, I shall fink of you and your kindness, Miss.’

I said goodbye and she disappeared into the shadows. By this time I was running a little late, but I did not want to take another cab. Still, without the doll hidden in my skirts, I was able to make good progress on foot and arrived at a laneway only a short distance from the society in reasonable time.

As I have mentioned before, laneways are not a fit place for a lady. Most of them are little more than sewers, and the one I had chosen was no exception. I stepped carefully through a shallow lake of brownish liquid that shone ominously in the dark, holding my breath all the while, until I found a spot relatively clear of rubbish and slime. Then I carried out my preparations, which included inserting the folding rod into my sleeve and the lazy tong down the front of my dress into its secret pocket. Then I lifted my skirts to adjust the strong elastic garter that accommodated the needle and bell.
As I made my final rearrangements, I noticed a maggot-ridden pig’s head among a pile of bones in the gutter to my left. The sweetish smell of rotted flesh suddenly overwhelmed me and I rushed away from the place, still holding my cloth bag. I could not bring myself to go back into the laneway to hide it as planned, so I placed it behind a stack of old timber in the street. In the morning I would come back and fetch it, and if the bag was gone it would be no great loss.

By the time I knocked on the door of the Spiritualist’s society, I was not as calm and well prepared as I had intended to be. Fortunately Harriet let me in. She was wearing a gown of canary yellow that suited her colouring beautifully.

‘Harriet, how perfectly lovely to see you,’ I said.

‘Hello Elizabeth, I’m ever so excited. I could barely sleep a wink last night.’

Then she inclined her head to mine and spoke in a whisper. ‘There are not as many sitters here as we had expected. I do hope that will not upset you.’

‘Not at all, the spirits are often more communicative with a smaller group.’

In truth, I was greatly relieved, for the larger the number of sitters the more difficult it was to engage them fully.

‘It’s just that we had a lady out from England not a month ago, she was the most shameless fraud. I’m afraid it has put some of our members off coming if they don’t know the medium or their reputation.’

Just at this moment, the folding rod began to tickle the soft skin in the crook of my elbow and it was very difficult to stand still. ‘A fraud? Dear me, oh dear me, how dreadful. Might I ask how this lady’s trickery was discovered?’

‘Oh look, here’s our Mr. Frost.’ Harriet smiled shyly at a tall handsome gentleman who came in through the front door, my question quite forgotten.

I looked closely at him as he approached, for I had recognised the name of the one who had so taken Polly’s fancy. It was not hard to see why, for he was indeed handsome. His black hair curled rather rakishly about his face and as he came closer I noticed that his eyes were a dark cocoa brown. He also had a most erect carriage and an air of great charm about him. I had never entirely trusted charm in a man, and right from the start I did not entirely trust Mr. Frost.

‘Good evening ladies,’ he said and bowed deeply.

‘Good evening Mr. Frost, do let me introduce you to our medium, Miss. Maudsley.’
‘Delighted to make your acquaintance,’ he said, taking my proffered hand and holding it for longer than was necessary.

‘Likewise,’ I replied with a stiff smile.

‘The sitters are all assembled in the séance room,’ said Harriet. ‘Apart from Mr. Frost who is, of course, always fashionably late.’

She began to giggle and Mr. Frost laughed along with her, in a way that seemed most condescending.

‘In London, lateness has quite gone out of fashion,’ I said. ‘Now, please be kind enough to show me to the séance room, Harriet. I do hate to keep everyone waiting.’

Harriet and I swept up the stairs arm in arm, with Mr. Frost following close behind. I had a most uneasy feeling about the man and wished he was not attending the séance. If he sat beside Polly it would send me into a panic.

The séance was to be held in a small anteroom off the library. It was dimly lit by gasoliers but the windows were covered in black paper, and I knew that when the light was put out the room would be darker than I would have wished. One of the ladies had doused herself far too liberally with scent and the smell overpowered all others, which meant that there would be no point using the oil of cloves I had secreted in a vial in my bodice, or the cinnamon stick in my pocket. Smell was a very potent force in a séance, and I was concerned that I would have to do without it.

The only furniture in the room was a highly polished oval mahogany table of good quality, around which sat three gentlemen and four ladies. Again I felt a prickling discomfort. Harriet had led me to believe that there were only a few sitters, eight was a large number to manage even when the conditions were perfect. I had always found it best to limit the numbers to six.

I noticed Mr. Gilbert Banks, who was wearing a spray of mauve rosebuds in his buttonhole. He smiled at me and I found myself smiling broadly back. Then I turned my attention to Polly, who nodded at me and looked away as if we had never met. She had left her purse on the chair beside her so the seat would remain unoccupied, as was our plan. I sat down, relieved that Mr. Frost was sitting on the other side of the table.

Harriet stood up and spoke enthusiastically of my talents. I bowed my head politely as she introduced me to the people at the table, including Polly, who she described as ‘a young lady new to the society and the colony’. In her blue cape that was demurely buttoned right up to her chin and decorated with a brooch of modest paste stones, Polly looked as radiant and innocent as any debutante. I felt very proud of her.
As I had already made the acquaintance of two of the men present, it was only necessary to meet one other. This gentleman, a Captain Tidmarsh, I took an immediate dislike too. He was an older man, perhaps about fifty years, of large bearing, with a moustache waxed to the point of caricature and an old-fashioned eyeglass. It was all too evident from his manner that he was very taken with ladies. I found myself imagining his eyeglass pressed up against the keyhole of a young lady’s bedchamber.

Harriet was forced to sit on his left, as it was the only space at the table, and I could see her lean away from him as he greeted her. Unfortunately, I was on his right. I consoled myself with the thought that at least he was not sitting beside Polly, for he seemed exactly the type of man who would do something entirely inappropriate and cause a scene.

Apart from Harriet and Polly, there were three other ladies. Miss Betters, a lady of considerably advanced years with an ear trumpet who was wearing a great quantity of emerald jewels and seemed to have no other expression except dour and disapproving, and a widow in half-mourning called Mrs Palmer, who looked me up and down then shook her head so hard it seemed as though her heavy jet earrings would come loose from their fleshy moorings and fly across the table. She had her needlework upon her lap, presumably in case the séance became too tiresome, although how she would stitch in the darkness I could not guess. The last was Miss Hall, a young lady with fine noble features and a slender neck, who was significantly distracted by her constant flirtations with both Mr Frost and Mr Banks.

I was relieved to find that I immediately disliked several of the sitters. It took the edge off my guilt and worries better than any strong drink ever could.

‘Thank you all for coming this evening,’ I began. ‘I am honored to have been asked to share my modest talents with the Victorian Spiritualist Society and I hope that I’m able to bring you many messages from departed loved ones this evening.’

‘Oh I’m quite sure you shall,’ enthused Harriet. ‘I believe you will have a message for each and every one of us tonight for I –’

‘Only if you let her get started,’ interrupted Miss Betters.

‘Thank you Harriet. That was most kind,’ I said. ‘Now if we could all hold hands to form a circle and we will begin in the usual way by singing some hymns.’

The light was put out and the room became dark. Captain Tidmarsh reached out and grabbed my hand. I had never felt a hand so repulsively moist and I had to fight hard not to pull mine away and wipe it on my gown. Polly’s cool hand held my other loosely.
As we all began to sing, I relaxed a little and adjusted my position in the seat, but as I did so the long handled tong shifted quite unexpectedly beneath my skirts and became acutely uncomfortable. But I could not break the circle of hands, and had to wriggle about upon my seat as if I were too tightly laced until I finally managed to relieve the great pressure where it stabbed me. My skirts rustled a little and I heard a little knowing sniff, which I guessed to be Miss Betters. I could just imagine her piercing, suspicious look.

I had hoped there would not be someone like Miss Betters at the séance. Still, it was not so bad. I had come across many of her type in the past and rarely did they manage to spoil the occasion completely or prove the fraudulence or otherwise of the medium.

Soon everyone began to sing in a most spirited fashion. Captain Tidmarsh’s voice was loud and tuneless and he had the unpleasant habit of spitting as he sang. I could feel moist droplets upon my hand and once again I fought an almost irresistible urge to withdraw it, but I reminded myself of the comfortable life Polly and I would have one day and remained stoic.

Two hymns were quite enough, and I called a halt to the singing by saying that I could feel eager spirits amassing. The group fell into a respectful silence and I decided to start with what I knew would be easy ground.

I breathed deeply and loudly for a few minutes, and as I did so, Captain Tidmarsh’s slimy grip grew firmer on my hand. It was hard to put thoughts of him from my mind but I managed it as I slipped my foot out of my shoe and flexed my toe. It gave a firm resounding snap. I repeated this several times, then spoke in a whispery voice.

‘There is a gentleman here, a young gentleman only recently gone to spirit. He is sorry. So very sorry for what he has done. A broken promise. A promise made to a lady, a lady of very good repute and great kindliness. . . ’

I heard Harriet’s sharp, hopeful intake of breath and I threw my head back and conjured forth a deep male voice. ‘I meant to keep my promises to you my darling, I swear, but it was my time to pass over. An accident . . . a horrible accident . . . my horse . . . my horse . . . please God save me . . . I cannot leave my love . . . ’

‘It’s my dear one,’ said Harriet softly. ‘My dear Charles. I knew he did not desert me. I knew his promises were true.’

‘My most beloved darling,’ I said, finding the male voice rather a strain on my throat. ‘Never forget I shall always love you.’
‘Dear Charles, I will wait until we can be together. I will always be true to you. No other man shall ever possess me.’

This was not quite what I had intended. Harriet was a good person and I did wish her to waste her life waiting for a non-existent spirit lover. It seemed to be working well for Mrs Parsons, but would not do at all for Harriet.

‘No you must not. It pains me to see you wait and grieve. We will be together in the next life but you must find another love on earth. It is right . . . it is right . . . my love it is right,’ and here I let my voice trail off croakily, as if I was much exhausted.

‘Oh . . . oh . . . I will do anything to please you, dear Charles until -

‘Harriet, do not allow yourself to become carried away,’ interrupted Miss Betters sternly, ‘every single lady present has been let down by a gentleman at one time or another, that is simply the way of things. There really is no proof that –

I gasped and gave a sudden violent jerk, using the opportunity to pull my hand free from Captain Tidmarsh’s frog-like grasp. ‘The circle is broken! Quick Captain, take my hand,’ I said in alarm.

Polly then leaned over me and thrust her own hand into Captain Tidmarsh’s, leaving me with both mine free to do whatever I wished. Now it was time for a little trickery, and I saw no better place to start than with Miss Betters. So I pulled the lazy tong from its hiding spot, reached across the table and pinched her bony shoulder. But unfortunately I had become rather disorientated in the pitch-black room.

‘Oh really Captain,’ said Miss Hall sounding rather bored. ‘I do wish you would keep your hands to yourself for once. It is most ungentlemanly to grope about in the dark as you do.’

‘I have not done a thing,’ spluttered the Captain. ‘That’s an entirely false accusation. As it is I could barely reach you from where I am sitting.’

‘Miss Hall, I believe you were touched by the hand of a spirit,’ I said. ‘Physical manifestations are not uncommon. Perhaps there is someone wishing to speak with you?’

‘Mr Frost, it was you, was it not? Trying to get my attentions all to yourself? What a devil you are.’

‘It was not I,’ said Mr Frost. ‘This good lady to my right will attest that I have not broken the circle. I’m sure it was a most forward spirit, and who can blame him for wanting contact with one such as you Miss Hall?’

‘You do flatter me so, Mr Frost.’
I had the dreadful feeling that things were slipping from my control. It was time to take a drastic measure that I usually reserved for later in a séance. I gave the right signal and Polly let out a beautiful, long blood-curdling scream.

‘It touched me also,’ she cried. ‘Oh it is too Horrible.’

Polly still over-pronounced the letter ‘h’, as it was a letter of the alphabet quite unknown to her for much of her life and still foreign to her tongue. I hoped that no one noticed.

‘Has he touched you in a way that is indecent, my dear?’ said Captain Tidmarsh.

‘No, but the touch was deathly cold. I’m shivering all over.’

‘Look!’ cried Harriet. ‘Over there, above Miss Hall’s head. It’s a light.’

I was eternally grateful to Harriet for telling me exactly where Miss Hall was sitting as I was able to orient myself to the seating at the table immediately. I spun the luminous tip of my folding rod around and around her head as I spoke.

‘Miss Hall, I believe there was a beau? Like poor Harriet, there was a beau gone to spirit?’

‘Well, not that I know of,’ she replied. ‘Although there are plenty that are still living.’

‘I’m quite sure of that,’ said the Captain, moistly.

I moved the rod around in a larger circle. ‘There is a man, another gentleman who has gone to spirit, someone who was very much loved. A married man, he tells me, he was a married man and very happy for it.’

‘Mr Palmer’s been dead these five years gone,’ said Mrs Palmer.

‘Yes! And he says he still loves you. He remembers how radiant you were on your wedding day. Such a beautiful bride.’

She sniffed. ‘I doubt he would remember all that much about it, given the quantity of port he’d supped. He could’ve married a donkey and he’d not have known the difference.’

One of the gentlemen, I was not sure who although I suspected Mr Frost, let out a giggle but was quickly shushed by Harriet.

‘He’s a tall man, a tall man with fair hair,’ I said, feeling rather desperate. ‘Died of a terrible disease.’

‘Could be my father,’ said Mr Banks. ‘He passed away last spring from the consumption. A dreadful lingering death it was, God bless him.’
‘No, no it’s my father,’ said Captain Tidmarsh. ‘I’m sure of it. Scarlettina took him quick as a flash.’

‘He was a kind man.’

‘Ah, my father was very kind,’ said Mr Banks.

‘Are you trying to suggest that my father was unkind?’ said the Captain.

‘No, no, no, not at all.’

‘Well it sounded very much like it to me. Father was a wonderful chap, much misunderstood by society especially -

I hitched my skirt up above my knees and moved my legs rapidly back and forth so the lead weights attached to garters on the insides of my knees produced a rapping sound. At the same time I whirled my luminous rod wildly about the room.

‘This spirit is not happy, he cannot rest until he has spoken to you.’

‘Father,’ said Mr Banks cautiously. ‘Is that you?’

‘It is time you took a wife my son. You need an heir, the time has come.’

I feared the male voice sounded identical to the last one I had produced, so I tried to take it down an octave. ‘Do not wait . . . do not wait.’

‘I wish only to make you happy Father, but I’m much involved with my work at present.’

‘Marry . . .marry,’ I croaked, my voice giving out on me in a way that was impressively consumptive.

‘I shall try father, I promise I shall try.’

‘Everyone knows someone who died from the consumption. Why my own brother passed away from it when he was but ten years old,’ said Miss Betters.

‘Please,’ said Mr Banks gently. ‘I have felt a communion with my father, do not deny me it.’

I smiled at him in the dark, even though I knew that he could not see me, and I fancied that I felt his warm smile in return.

After this passed a most uncomfortable ten minutes or so where I floundered around trying to get the sitters to recognise various spirits. I used all my usual ones – the sweet Grandmamma with a last unfulfilled wish; the lonely young girl, dead years before her time; the gentle poetic man struck down with disease and even the tragically lost infant, which never fails to strike at the heart of someone, but alas, not one of the sitters would own any of my clamoring spirits.
Then I used a collapsible pasteboard hand to touch Mrs Palmer on the arm, but she blamed the Captain as well. Given these unfortunate circumstances, I had no choice but to attempt a partial materialisation using a luminous inflatable silk figure. In my experience, the appearance of an ectoplasmic apparition never failed to impress. Normally I would not hesitate to use this device should the situation call for it, but since being in Melbourne, I had experienced some difficulties getting the recipe for luminous paint exactly right, as the potency of the ingredients seemed to differ from home. I was hoping to have the recipe perfected before I attempted an inflation, but as my sitters got increasingly restless, I found myself forced to attempt it.

As I extracted my silk figure, which had been carefully sewn by Polly who had a good steady hand for needlework, I began to moan softly as if something of great importance was about to occur. Then once it was removed entirely, I attached it securely to the end of my reaching rod.

‘Please, I must ask for complete silence,’ I said in a weakened voice. ‘I feel if we all concentrate extremely hard we may well have an apparition visit us.’

I then blew, ever so slowly and gently, into my hollow reaching rod and the luminous silk figure began to inflate. The figure started as a ghostly glow that slowly began to take a vaguely human-like shape. It seemed, thank goodness, I had finally got the recipe for luminosity correct.

Everyone grew silent as they watched my eerie production. All was well and I was pleased with Polly’s neat tight stitches that held the air so beautifully. When the figure was partially formed, I paused for a moment and put my finger over the end of the rod so the air should not escape.

‘Mama, Mama,’ I whispered in a voice that could belong to an infant anywhere up to five years of age, or possibly even older if one stretched the imagination, as sitters often did.

‘Mama, Mama, Mama.’

Then I sobbed in a childlike fashion, punctuating the cries with sniffs and sniffles. I could hear someone around the table breathing rather rapidly, but I could not say who it was. After a few minutes, I began to inflate the figure still more, stopping now and again to give more cries. Once Bertha was fully inflated (Polly had given this name to our first ever luminous doll and the name had stuck for every one that proceeded it) I slowly moved her about the room.
Bertha was a fine silk figure. When fully inflated, her vapour-like form very much resembled an infant with thin outstretched beseeching arms. Of course, if the room were fully lit she would look like nothing more than a crude blob of fabric, but in the dark the effect was most pronounced.

By this time Polly had made a lot of these figures and I believed she had quite perfected the art. The secret was in getting the stitches very tight so that no air could escape, for there was nothing more mortifying than a spirit that deflated before the medium would wish it to do so, or did not inflate at all.

‘Mama, I am in heaven surrounded by angels,’ I continued, my voice as high as it could reach without cracking. ‘It’s lovely here, do not mourn me for I’m surrounded by light and beautiful flowers and only people with the kindest hearts.’

‘Oh my sweet Jane,’ came a wretched sounding voice in the dark. ‘I still mourn thee, my little dove.’

It was unmistakably Miss Betters, and who but a mother would mourn the death of a child with such intensity? Despite the fact that I did not like her particularly, I did not wish for Miss Betters to embarrass herself further by revealing more at my séance, and I knew from experience that she would dislike me even more intensely afterwards if she did. So I let Bertha deflate slowly and with dignity, as a disappearing apparition should, then I tucked her back into my secret pouch.

Once she was safely hidden, I gave another almighty jerk, thus allowing Polly to remove her hand from the Captain’s so I could slip my own back into his.

‘Please, I ask that the lamps be lit,’ I said. ‘The manifestation has quite exhausted me.’

Harriet broke the circle and lit the gasoliers. Everyone sitting around the table had their head turned towards Miss Betters. It was she who had aroused their suspicion and not I.

‘Did you have a child?’ asked Mrs Palmer. ‘I had not known that.’

But Miss Betters had already recovered her dignity. ‘Of course not. I’m an unmarried lady. How dare you accuse me of such an impropriety?’

‘I did not mean to presume –

‘The child was my niece. A dear girl who died very young.’

‘I’ve had two little nieces pass away and I never mourned them like they were my own.’ Mrs Palmer emphasised the last two words and gave Miss Betters a rather knowing look. ‘They didn’t call me Mama either, for that would not have been right.’
‘I’m sure it’s different for everybody,’ said Mr Banks. ‘We all mourn in different ways.’

‘My sister died. I raised the child as if she were my own,’ said Miss Betters, not meeting any of the inquisitive eyes that regarded her so keenly.

‘The passing of a loved one is always difficult and I’m quite sure Miss Betters does not wish to dwell on her loss any further,’ I said, bringing the matter to a close.

‘Of course,’ agreed Mrs Palmer. ‘My apologies.’

Miss Betters nodded regally.

Despite the sincere-sounding apology, I knew that it would not stop gossip, which would surely spread like an Australian summer fire once Mrs Palmer had a few eager listeners.

Harriet stood up. ‘That was a splendid séance. I hope you will join us in some light refreshment? I’m sure you are quite in need of it.’

‘I must confess, I do feel rather drained. Some tea would be delightful.’

I rose and Harriet took my arm. I was glad to leave the closeness of the room.

‘You have made me enormously happy,’ she said.

I smiled, although shame rushed into my heart.

In the main meeting room a table had been set up for tea. There was a tiered stand of sandwiches and a delicious-looking fruit tart. I was rather hungry, as I had been far too nervous to eat anything before the séance.

Polly was talking in an animated fashion to Mr Frost, which displeased me greatly as it was against our rules. She was not permitted to get into a deep discussion with anybody, least of all a single man. I caught her eye and frowned. She made her excuses to the gentleman and came over to me.

‘Thank you Miss Maudsley,’ she said, barely suppressing a grin. ‘For allowing me to come to your séance.’

‘You are more than welcome.’

‘I must be getting along now.’

‘Yes. You most certainly must. Goodnight then and I hope I shall see you again.’

‘Goodnight.’

After thanking Harriet and the other members, Polly made her way to the door where she was intercepted by Mr Frost. I heard him offer to escort her to a carriage and to my absolute horror she accepted. Polly was under the strictest instructions to make her way home alone. That she should allow herself to leave unchaperoned with a strange
man was unthinkable. I was furious, but of course there was not a thing I could do about it.

As she walked out of the room on Mr. Frost’s arm, Miss Hall came up to me and jealously insinuated that Polly was not a lady. I began to say something in Polly’s defense, but Miss Hall turned away from me then swept haughtily out of the room.

Harriet supplied me with a cup of tea, which I sipped gratefully for I found that I was indeed as exhausted as I had claimed. A great deal of energy was required for a successful séance, particularly when there was no materialisation by Polly to enthrall the audience.

Mr Banks came and stood beside me. ‘That was a most gratifying séance Miss Maudsley,’ he said. ‘Thank you for contacting my father.’

‘It was my pleasure.’

‘I fear his wishes may not be so easy to carry out.’

‘No? How is that so?’

‘It’s no easy task to find a wife.’

I forced myself to look into his eyes. He had a most serious expression on his face but I fancied that he toyed with me.

‘There are a great number of single ladies about surely? Why even tonight there were three.’

‘I do believe you have not counted yourself, Miss Maudsley. Are you perhaps spoken for?’

I felt an odd kind of disquiet deep in my stomach. ‘No. I’m alone.’

Feeling very flushed and wanting to direct the conversation away from myself, I started to ask him how his work at the asylum was going, but I sensed someone else at my side wishing to speak with me. More than anything I wanted to turn my back on this person and speak only to Mr Banks.

‘I must not keep you all to myself,’ he said, offering me his hand, ‘there are others who wish to talk with you. It has been a great pleasure meeting you again.’

I took his hand and the touch made me jump. Then he was gone, and I immediately became involved in a conversation about ectoplasm with Mrs Palmer. I chatted politely as I drank my tea, but in truth could not wait to take my leave, and did this just as soon as was proper.

Captain Tidmarsh offered to see me home, but I said that I had a dreadful headache and preferred to travel alone in the silence of my own carriage. Of course the
carriage did not exist, and as it was too late to catch an omnibus, I had to walk all the way back to Fitzroy.

The walk took me well over an hour. I was not comfortable traversing the poorly lit streets alone at night, especially as my equipment meant I could not run very fast if I was accosted. My route took me back past where I had seen the little girl. I hoped the doll was bringing some happiness into her dark life.

When I finally arrived at Greeves Street, I was surprised to find that the parlour was still lit. I walked inside the room and found Mrs Parson’s sitting on the sofa with a dreamy look upon her face.

‘Mrs Parsons, are you unwell?’

‘No Miss Elizabeth, I’ve been waiting for you to come home. You were right about my Percy, he was here with me all night.’ She giggled. ‘Thank you, I shall always be ever so grateful.’

‘He was here with you tonight?’

‘Dear me yes. And he promises to come to me every night until we are reunited in the next world.’

‘I’m amazed at such a thing . . . although of course I expected it.’

She looked at me and smiled and her face was full of joy. I touched my chest and could feel my butterfly brooch through my bodice. ‘I’m so happy for you,’ I said, and I truly was. But then I walked upstairs and my worst suspicions were confirmed. Polly’s bed was empty. I waited up for three hours, but I knew she would not come home.
Polly tiptoed into our room just as dawn began to creep through the thin curtains. I had not slept a wink.

‘Where have you been?’ I said, flinging off my bedclothes.

‘Out with James. I didn’t mean to wake you up.’

‘Wake me up? But Polly how could I sleep? I’ve been worried sick about you.’ She sat down beside me and sighed. Her hair had come loose and it was tangled.

‘Sorry. I should’ve asked if he could take me home, but I knew you’d say no.’

I could smell tobacco on her clothes. ‘But you didn’t come home.’

‘We’ve been dancing.’ She grinned then bent to pull off her boots.

My nightgown slipped from my shoulder and I shivered. ‘How could you? What if we’re found out? We will be finished.’

‘You can trust him.’

‘Of course I cannot trust him. I barely know the man and what I do know I certainly don’t like.’

I swung my legs down onto the ground and stood on the cold floor.

‘Elizabeth, please.’

‘And what do you mean trust him? You wouldn’t tell him the truth about us, would you?’

‘Of course not,’ she said.

‘You cannot see him again.’

‘I’m going to sleep.’

‘Promise me.’

Polly climbed into her side of the bed without taking off her clothes.

‘Promise me!’

‘Yes, yes, I promise,’ she mumbled into her pillow.

But her promise did little to reassure me and she did not keep it. Soon she began to see the Mr Frost on a daily basis, although she respected my request that he should not discover where she lived. She would meet him in town and not come home until late. I missed her terribly. We had several fierce arguments about it, but there was nothing I
could do to stop her. Polly was truly smitten with the man, and for the first time ever I feared that I really might lose her.

Two weeks after the séance, I finally received the wonderful distraction that I had been hoping for. The letter carrier brought me an invitation requesting that I perform my first séance in a private home, the residence of Mr. and Mrs. Charles E. Hunter at Brighton beach. It was written on fine, lilac-coloured paper that was lightly scented with lavender and the wax seal was stamped with a family crest. To be working at Brighton again seemed like a horrible coincidence, but I pushed away thoughts that it was a bad omen and focused instead on our good fortune.

I could hardly wait to tell Polly and begin immediate preparations for the big night, but she had gone out and I did not know when she would return. To pass the day, I first went for a long walk. Then I visited the lending library, where I spent some time in the pleasant domed reading room, trying not to look at the clock, which seemed to be running excruciatingly slowly.

Polly did not get back until very late in the evening. She came into the parlour humming a bawdy tune and looked surprised to see me still waiting up.

‘Polly, at long last. I wish you wouldn’t come home so late.’

‘Don’t make such a fuss. I was out with James. He made sure no harm come to me.’

She threw herself upon the sofa, releasing a cloud of dust. ‘We was walking so long and talking ever such a lot that I never noticed the time.’

‘I see.’

‘He’s such good company.’

I was keen to direct the conversation away from the topic of Mr Frost. Unfortunately my excitement about the forthcoming séance had somewhat waned during the long hours of waiting, but I made my voice sound animated, although I really felt cross and exhausted.

‘Well I have some excellent news. We’ve been invited to conduct a séance in a private house at Brighton beach.’

Polly sat up and clapped her hands together. Her face was unnaturally flushed.

‘That’s just perfect, Elizabeth. I’ll tell James first thing tomorrow.’

‘Tell James, whatever are you talking about? You cannot invite Mr Frost to the séance for I fear he would be a great distraction to you.’
'I aint going to invite him, he's going to be there helping us. He's got some tricks that will make us rich and ever so famous.'

Polly giggled and I smelled liquor on her breath.

'What are you talking about?'

'I telled James all about us, explained all our little tricks and such –

'You did what?'

'Don't worry, he won't tell. He's ever so nice.'

Suddenly I felt a suffocating constriction about my chest. ‘How could you – how dare you!’

‘Stop it, you’re making a big fuss and bother about nothing at all. James is right handy, he can make us all sorts of special equipment. He was telling me about an electric box that can read minds. Can you imagine that?’

My fingers scrabbled at the neck of my bodice. I needed air.

‘Listen to me Elizabeth, with his help we really will be rich and I’ll have gowns that are the latest fashion straight from France, and you can have turtle soup for breakfast and-

‘Be quiet. I’ve heard enough.’

Polly stood up and began to parade around the room with her nose in the air.

Her gait was unsteady. ‘Look at me ladies and gents, in my beautiful Paris gown.’

‘Sit down for goodness sake. This is not a joke.’

‘No it’s a blessing, that’s what it is, a blessing.’

My face burned and I feared I might be ill. I could not trust a stranger, particularly one I had taken an immediate dislike too.

‘How could you do this without discussing it with me? We’ve never taken anyone into our confidence before, that was never part of our plan.’

‘But James aint just anyone. He's special.’

‘Oh dear God.’

Polly began to dance about the room, lifting her skirts and showing her drawers like a cheap music hall dancer. The carriage clock trembled upon the mantel as she trod the uneven floorboards.

‘Sit down. You’ll break the clock and Mrs Parsons will never forgive you.’

‘I'll be able to buy her a hundred of them soon,’ she said, throwing herself back on the sofa.
'I'm afraid I don't trust Mr Frost one little bit. In my experience, men with such an eye for the ladies are rarely what they seem.'

'Don't you worry about that now,' Polly grinned. 'He only has eyes for me.'

For a moment I feared I would scream or that I might even hit her. 'He will never make you his wife and when he is done with you, Mr Frost will simply cast you off like a worn out old boot.'

Anger flared on Polly's face. 'You're jealous of him and me. You wanted him all for yourself but he wouldn't want a bleedin' ugly old maid like you, no one in their right mind would unless they were blind.'

My eyes filled with tears. I felt as if I had been slapped, but I stood up and walked from the room with as much dignity as I could muster.

Polly did not come to our bed at all that night. I had a dreadful sleep and several nightmares. The worst one was about a séance where I was the medium. All was going well until I began to pull a piece of luminous cheesecloth out from a most private place, only to find that the cloth was never ending. No matter how much I pulled there was yet more of the stuff, and I had the most distressing sensation that I was unraveling from the inside out. In the end there was nothing left of me but a heap of steaming, soiled fabric.

Polly appeared at breakfast looking very sorry for herself. We did not speak at first. I drunk a cup of tea but could not touch anything else.

'I thought you cared for me,' I said.

Polly met my eyes and I saw that hers were bloodshot. 'I do Elizabeth, you know I do.'

'A true friend wouldn't do such a thing.'

'I did it for both of us.'

I shook my head. 'No.'

'Yes Elizabeth. I could've run off with him and left you all alone.'

'Why didn’t you then?'

Polly took my hand from my lap and held it in hers. 'We’re like sisters, remember?'

'I thought you didn’t want a sister?'

'Don’t be silly.'

Mrs Parson's came into the dining room with her hair done up in rags. 'You haven’t touched your bacon Miss Elizabeth. What’s the matter with it?'
‘I’m afraid I don’t have much of an appetite this morning.’
‘Not to worry then,’ she picked up my plate. ‘I’ll give it to Percy. All that time dead’s given him a big appetite.’
Polly grinned. I could not even smile.
Mrs Parsons left us to finish our tea.
‘Please don’t be cross with me,’ said Polly. ‘Don’t you want to get out of here and be a lady in a nice house with proper servants?’
‘You know that I do. But you should have asked me first before taking someone into our confidence.’
‘I know, and I’m sorry. But it’s done now.’
‘Yes,’ I said. ‘It is done.’

My first official business meeting with Mr James Frost was at The Imperial Coffee Palace in Collins Street, where Polly and I were to have afternoon tea with him. The Imperial, as it was known, was an elegant building that had a reputation for being very expensive. I had never been there before and was very impressed with the extravagant blue and yellow furnishings inside the place. But furnishings could not distract me for very long, and as I looked around at the groups of ladies who were enjoying scones and light conversation in the airy salon, I wished that could join them instead of embarking on the onerous meeting I had before me.

‘Isn’t it smart?’ said Polly as we were shown to a table near a large wicker cage that contained several brightly coloured birds. ‘A right treat.’

Mr Frost was waiting for us. As much as I disliked the man, I had to admit that he was impeccably groomed. He had removed his hat, which I saw was made of fine silk, and his collar-length hair was neatly oiled.

‘Miss Maudsley,’ he said, standing and offering me his hand. ‘What a pleasure to meet again.’
I took his hand briefly and gave a curt nod. It was more than I could bear to pretend that we were here under cordial circumstances. I did not intend to make the meeting pleasant for him.
Polly took his hand for rather longer than I did, then all three of us sat down.
‘Now ladies, what will you have?’
‘Scones and cakes and white bread and butter for me,’ said Polly.
Mr. Frost smiled paternally, although I had no doubt that his feelings for her were anything but.

‘And you Miss Maudsley?’

‘Just tea, thank you.’ I said, although I would have loved to indulge in one of the petite sandwiches I could see being devoured by a pack of hungry gentlemen at a table to my left.

‘Come now, won’t you have a little something to eat?’

‘No thank you.’

‘Very well. I shall order enough for three, just in case you change your mind, for you’ll see that the food here is quite delicious.’

Mr Frost called the waiter over and ordered enough food to feed a party of ten. Steadfastly, I determined not to eat a thing.

‘Elizabeth, look at that crimson hat,’ said Polly, pointing to a girl at a table nearby. ‘How do you think that colour would look on me?’

‘Most striking, I believe,’ said Mr Frost, ‘but there are few colours that would not.’

Polly giggled and they exchanged a look of some intensity.

‘Personally, I don’t especially like the loud colours that the ladies wear so freely in the colony,’ I said.

‘But surely you would agree that the climate is well suited to it?’ asked Mr Frost. ‘Perhaps. I have yet to experience the height of summer.’

‘Ah, then you shall be in for quite a surprise. It is far too warm for drab colours.’

‘Subtle colours are not necessarily drab colours, Mr Frost. They are simply more tasteful.’

He smiled. And in his smile I saw only conceit and challenge.

‘I shall stand duly corrected then Miss Maudsley, for I always bow to the ladies on matters of fashion and taste.’

‘I believe we are here to discuss a matter of business Mr Frost, are we not?’

‘Indeed we are, indeed we are.’

Then he persisted in making small talk until the tea arrived and our table was laden with all sorts of delicacies. But no matter how tempting, I would not take one bite at the expense of Mr. Frost. I wanted to make it very clear that I was not beholden to him in any way. Polly, meanwhile, had no such scruples, and was tucking in with the enthusiasm of a starved convict.
Mr Frost sipped at his tea contentedly and gazed about the room, no doubt admiring the other ladies as men like him always do, but I could not bear to wait a moment longer to speak of the ugly business that must be discussed.

‘So it seems that Polly has been rather revealing to you about our little . . . arrangement, Mr. Frost.’

‘Please, call me James.’

‘I didn’t tell him the whole lot,’ said Polly, spitting scone across the table, ‘not the real private stuff.’

I sat up straight in my seat. ‘I see.’

‘I must say, when I attended the séance I was very impressed with your abilities, very impressed indeed. Polly has told me about your exceptional toe and I must say it had me really fooled for a moment. You have the look of a genuine medium too, something about the eyes, I think,’ he said. ‘Anyway, it came to me that we would make a formidable team.’

I refused to be flattered. ‘Skill, Mr Frost, always requires a great deal of practise. I have worked very hard to get where I am today.’

‘Indeed you have.’

‘And so has Polly.’

Polly nodded her agreement and helped herself to another slice of bread.

‘Polly is the . . . how shall I say it? Icing on the cake in this whole enterprise.’

I did not like Polly being referred to in such a flippant way. Nor did I like the implication that we were involved in some sort of enterprise with Mr Frost.

‘Let me be candid, Miss Maudsley. There is a great deal of scope to make rather a lot more money than you are at present.’

‘I understand that. And let me assure you that in London when I was at the top of my profession, the rewards were most lucrative. I have no doubt they will be so again.’

‘Now, I believe that’s where I come in.’

No you most certainly do not, I wanted to say, but refrained.

‘If I might be so bold as to speak with you about the rather delicate issue of money,’ he said. ‘With the use of my inventions, I believe you could make much more than any medium working in the country at present. Modern machinery has yet to be used a great deal in séances here, and certainly nothing of my calibre. You would be the first.’
‘Polly has told me a little of what you believe you can do to help us. However, a good medium does not need cumbersome and unreliable machinery. It’s her own well practised skills that will enable her to make a living.’

Mr Frost lowered his voice and leaned forward as if he was about to offer me an obscene publication or a racing tip. ‘Do you understand the principles of electricity and the wireless?’

‘Very little.’

‘They have electric lights in some of the shops in town. Oh it’s a beautiful sight,’ said Polly. ‘You can see everything ever so clearly.’

I smiled smugly. ‘In our profession, that is rarely an advantage.’

‘I’m not talking about lights,’ said Mr Frost, ‘electricity can do far more than provide illumination.’

I took a sip of my tea, which had begun to cool. ‘Could we get some more hot water?’ I asked.

‘Yes, yes,’ said Mr Frost impatiently, ‘but listen, some of my more sophisticated equipment will make full use of both these modern inventions. I would need to sit down with you in private and spend some time explaining it fully so that you can understand exactly what I propose to do.’

I had no wish to use machines so complicated that I could not understand how they worked, for surely then it would be the machines who were in control of the séance and not me.

‘It sounds interesting, but I’m not sure about these new inventions. They are untested and –

‘Excuse me for interrupting, but we could begin with something quite simple and uncomplicated. For example, I could make a box that would easily conceal a person, and through the clever use of mirrors it would be impossible to tell there was anybody inside.’

‘I have seen a medium in Cheapside use something like that. It did not work especially well as I remember.’

‘But mine is greatly improved on the old version. You would not believe how effective it is.’

‘And what would be the use of this box?’

‘Spirit writing, Miss Maudsley, effortless and perfect spirit writing. Here, I shall show you.’
He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and unfolded a technical drawing of a most strange-looking contraption. I studied it for a moment but could make no sense of it.

‘What do you think? Is it not brilliant?’ he said.

‘And it’s all measured right,’ said Polly, ‘so that I can fit inside.’

I felt a stab of panic that they had arranged things so thoroughly between them, but I pushed it away. ‘Fancy machines are all very well, but I do very nicely on my own, with Polly’s help of course. I most certainly would not want to be eating into my profits by purchasing complicated equipment that may or may not do what you promise.’

‘Let me assure you that any piece of equipment I provide for your use would have no initial cost at all.’

I frowned, knowing there would be a catch.

‘However, each time the machine is used, I would require fifty percent of the money that you take on the night.’

‘Fifty percent?’ I gave a shocked gasp. ‘Well thank you for your time but I believe I will take this proposal no further.’

‘You have quite a head for business, Miss Maudsley.’

‘Not at all, I’m only being practical, and it’s not practical for me to give you fifty percent of what I take. Polly and I must make enough to survive.’

‘So you don’t wish to do business with me?’

‘No. I do not. But thank you for the tea and no doubt we shall meet again.’

Mr Frost reached across the table and grasped my wrist with his cold fingers. ‘Of course I could find someone else, Miss Maudsley, but you and I now know intimate things about each other, do we not?’

I pulled my hand away, upsetting a teacup as I did so. The tea spilled on the white cloth and I watched as the stain quickly spread. Up until this point I had somehow managed to fool myself into believing that I had some control over the situation. It was clear that I did not.

‘I will not be blackmailed.’ I glared at Polly.

‘There’s no need to talk so harsh to her,’ she said to him before turning to me, ‘but please Elizabeth, it’s all for the best. Surely you can see that?’

‘No I cannot. Now, good day to you Mr Frost. I intend to take my leave this very moment.’
‘Excuse me for mentioning a matter so delicate,’ he said with the charming smile that I already loathed, ‘but as I’m entirely aware of your fraudulence, I do believe you have no choice but to accept my offer.’

‘I do not and I shall not.’

Mr Frost gave a brittle laugh and leaned back in his chair with the contented air of a man who has already got what he wants.

‘I’ve been in the colony a great deal longer than you. I have friends in high places all around the country, and I should only have to say the word and you would be finished for good.’

He was right. Of course he was right. I was trapped and there was not a thing I could do about it.
I never forgave Polly entirely for betraying me. That I should be forced to work for a man I despised was unthinkable. The only option available to me was to run away, but what good would that do? I would be penniless and utterly alone. I believed that Polly was sorry for what she had done. She knew something had changed between us that day at The Imperial, and that it could never be undone. Sometimes I would catch her with a terrible melancholy look upon her face, especially in the evenings.

Our days fell into a pattern that varied very little. Mr Frost sent a carriage around for us every morning punctually at 10.00 am. We were then taken to his home on Richmond Hill, where our instruction and practise in the sophisticated arts of deception he had developed would begin.

Mr Frost was an up and coming man of business. He was not enormously wealthy, although he lived extremely well by our standards, with several servants and a carriage at his disposal, and I had no doubt that a ruthless man with such fierce ambitions would eventually do very well for himself.

I did not like his house or his taste. On the first day there I discovered a stereoscope in the drawing room and put my eyes to it eagerly. I saw a crude image of a bathing beauty wearing pantaloons and nothing else, which reinforced what I already thought of him. Men who looked at women like horseflesh were not to be trusted.

It would be inaccurate not to admit that his inventions were impressive. By this stage I had conceded that Mr Frost was a clever man, but I did not like him any more for it. I found his company unpleasant, almost intolerable at times, and his involvement in my professional life was a source of ongoing distress.

Despite my concerns, I knew that if Polly and I did sufficient practice, we were likely to hold the most impressive and sophisticated séances that Melbourne had ever seen. This thought was of great solace during the long hours I had to spend in Mr Frost’s company.

Before the day of our first private séance arrived, Mr Frost took a servant boy from the Brighton home of Mr and Mrs Hunter into his confidence. By giving the boy several shillings, he was able to get him to hide the wireless equipment in the séance
room with no difficulty whatsoever. The highlight of the séance would, of course, be Polly’s appearance as a fully formed spirit, and Mr Frost discussed the layout of the house with the boy to work out which was the most effective way to smuggle her inside. He had also been able to elicit some information from the boy about certain members of the family and their close acquaintances. All rumour and gossip no doubt, but something to work with none the less.

In addition to these preparations, Mr Frost hired a man to get names from the cemetery and read old newspapers for information about the dead. The man was a seedy looking fellow who perspired heavily and was very secretive. I did not trust him. Then I overheard Mr Frost and the man talking about a secret ‘brotherhood’ among mediums and their managers where information about sitters was passed about for a small fee.

All of this made me very uncomfortable, particularly in regard to the servants. Would we have to let them into our confidence at every private séance we performed? If that were the case, then surely it would only be a matter of time until one could not hold their tongue. After all, a fraudulent medium was a salacious secret to disclose after a few ales on a half-day off. I expressed my concerns to Mr Frost but he dismissed them as nothing, insisting that as long as we paid them enough, all would be well. But all was not well with me.

In the late afternoon on the big day, Mr Frost called by with a bunch of flowers for Polly and one for myself. I accepted the fragrant pink roses reluctantly and tasted bitterness on my tongue as I thanked him.

‘All is in order for tonight,’ he said. ‘I believe it shall go very smoothly.’

‘I’m ever so excited,’ said Polly.

Mr Frost smiled, showing the grey teeth of one given to consuming large quantities of claret. ‘As am I, my pet.’

He kissed her neck and she squealed.

‘Now Miss Maudsley, there will be a man there tonight who you know. He was at the Spiritualist Society séance.’

‘Who?’ I said. ‘Not the Captain?’

‘No, Mr Banks who works at the madhouse. He’s a mild mannered fellow and will cause no difficulty. Perhaps you can summon his father again. That would be very easy, I’m sure.’

I did not want to fool Mr Banks again, and I would not do it.

‘I’m very tired. I must rest.’
In truth, I was sick with nerves and could barely keep still, let alone sleep; so I went up to our room and began to prepare myself for what lay ahead.

There were only two dresses hanging in the wardrobe for me to choose from - a drab grey silk and a cheaply made olive green velvet. Mr Frost had offered to buy me a new gown on several occasions but I steadfastly refused. I still had some pride. As it was, I had been forced to accept a new pair of handmade shoes. They were ingenious things with hollow steel heels covered in leather, where a wad of luminous muslin or a gauze mask could be easily hidden.

The olive green velvet had faded significantly, for all clothing left out in the sun to dry lost its colour very quickly in Melbourne. Unfortunately it had faded only in patches and was really only suitable for wearing around the house. It would have to be the grey silk.

I took off the cotton shift I was wearing and then stepped into a stiff petticoat that had horsehair bustle attached. In London I had owned a bustle with a hidden compartment, but it had been difficult to operate and we had not bothered to make one for this evening. Plus the memory of the incident in the cab was still fresh in my mind and I did not wish to repeat it. Instead, I tied four pockets around my waist to contain all the bits and pieces I would need for the séance. There were another two buttoned directly to my corset, although these were harder to reach. Polly had cut small slits in the upper folds of both of my dresses and neatly hemmed them. They were just large enough to fit my hands through.

Although the grey dress was old and plain, I had an inexplicable urge to see myself in it. So I did something that I would never usually do; I studied my reflection in the looking glass. Since her bout of spring-cleaning fever, Mrs Parson’s had covered the glass on the front of the wardrobe with green netting to protect it from flies. I lifted the netting up like a bridal veil and saw myself reflected.

My dress had a very straight, rather tight skirt in the hobbled style that made walking somewhat difficult, and heavily gathered panniers on either side that easily concealed my bulging pockets. The panniers exaggerated my hips in a way that was not unflattering, but I was most concerned to see that about the region of the waist I had become ever more stout. I must admit to thinking fleetingly of Mr Banks as I held my belly in and tried to stand tall. Perhaps I would take the dress off and pull my laces a little tighter.
Polly came into the room holding two glasses of sherry.

‘Where’s Mr Frost?’

‘He’s gone.’

‘You didn’t go with him?’

‘He’ll be back in an hour. I wanted to stay with you.’

‘Is this dress all right? I’m afraid the blue one has faded terribly.’

‘Perfect.’ She held the glass out to me. ‘Here you go. A big one tonight.’

‘Thank you.’ I took the glass and drank half its contents quickly. ‘Is that our usual Spanish sherry? It tastes rather different.’

‘It’s a special one Mr Frost brought for us. Isn’t he kind?’

I raised my eyebrows and finished off the drink, which admittedly tasted infinitely better than the low priced stuff I bought from a wine cart in town.

‘Will we be all right, Elizabeth?’

‘What?’

‘I’m worried. Do you think tonight will go well?’

‘You’re asking me that?’ I put the glass on the dresser, slamming it down harder than I intended. ‘What ever happens, it’s all your doing.’

‘You’ll be thanking me, Elizabeth. Just you wait and see.’

‘I can only hope.’

‘You always had everything you’ve ever wanted, spoilt brat, what do you expect?’

I frowned. ‘What on earth do you mean by that?’

‘Nothing.’ Polly picked her brush and began to work furiously at her hair. ‘Just forget it.’

Since Mr Frost had come crashing into our lives, I was beginning to understand Polly less and less. I picked up the sherry glass. It had a crack down the centre that would eventually split it in two.

I travelled to Brighton alone in a cab. As I understood it, Polly was already hidden somewhere in the house. Mr Frost mentioned something about a butler’s pantry and I imagined Polly waiting in such a room. It would be dank, probably without the benefit of a window. Great cedar shelves that groaned under the weight of crockery and silver would dwarf her and the flagstones would be cold beneath her bare feet. Polly would be uncomfortable, unlike me. For some reason I could not explain, I felt enveloped in a deep feeling of calm and contentment. The nerves that had been troubling me all day
seemed to have vanished. I even slept briefly as the cab gently rocked, and when I jolted awake, I could smell the sea.

We trotted along at quite a pace, for the roads were in a much better state of repair than the pot-holed ones in the streets of Fitzroy. All the houses seemed to be owned by people of great wealth and many were on enormous estates. I saw a grand house all lit up, with a magnificent turret and a widow’s walk. A British flag rippled in the sea breeze. In the flower-filled front garden was an immense brass fountain with a figure of cupid about to draw an arrow.

By and by, the cab pulled up in front of the finest manor house I had ever seen in Melbourne. Servants standing two abreast by the great front door bowed to guests as they ascended the wide stone steps, and the towers on either side of the imposing home gave it the air of a castle. I felt strangely giddy and light-headed, but it was not an unpleasant sensation.

Once inside the house, I was presented to Mr and Mrs Hunter in a great hall with stained glass windows that depicted the seasons of the year in exquisite detail. Servants lurked in the shadows, ready to assist with the slightest thing, and the walls were hung with stuffed specimens of game and giant portraits of dour looking gentlemen in extravagantly gilded frames. A fine string quartet played in the background, blending melodiously with the hum of civilised conversation.

Mr Hunter explained that he was not attending the séance, preferring instead to play billiards with some of the other gentlemen who were non-believers.

‘I hope you won’t take offence, Miss Maudsley?’

‘Certainly not,’ I replied. ‘I’m honoured to have been invited.

Mrs Hunt was a gracious lady of about fifty years. She was wearing an exquisite beaded gown and an enormous quantity of fine diamond jewellery. I took her gloved hand when she offered it. Her gloves were made of doeskin and I felt ashamed of my much-mended coarse silk ones.

‘It’s a pleasure to meet you,’ she said. ‘Unlike my husband, I’m very interested in spiritualism and I have heard the most marvellous things about your abilities.’

‘They are modest, I’m sure.’

Mrs Hunt smiled. She had a face that was full of goodness and compassion.

‘There are so many here who are suffering terribly from bereavement after the recent outbreak of colonial fever,’ she said. ‘If you help only one of them, then this evening was worthwhile.’
I felt a flash of conscience, but it passed quickly and left my emotions feeling oddly blunted.

‘Come, there are many people I wish to introduce you to before we begin this evening.’

She took my arm and led me into a grand drawing room that was decorated in deep crimson and gold. The room was heady with the scent of roses that were artfully arranged in large Chinese vases. Adorning the walls were several fine tapestries depicting Regency ladies and gentlemen taking tea; strolling about fine gardens; gazing at their reflection in a lake, and other gentle pursuits.

The ceiling was painted with golden winged cherubs whose plump, pink fingers reached upwards to the billowing clouds of the heavens, their view to eternity illuminated by enormous crystal chandeliers that each held hundreds of glittering candles. Houses such as this had long been fitted with gasoliers, a few even with the new electric light, but a good hostess still appreciated the power of candlelight to create a convivial atmosphere and flatter her guests’ complexions.

Mrs Hunter guided me from person to person, making polite introductions and saying the most flattering things about my abilities, which seemed not to bother me as it normally would. I looked for Mr Banks but could not see him among the great crowd.

When I was introduced to Mr Frost, he gave me a private knowing wink and said that he had already been to one of my séances.

‘She’s the best medium in all of Australia,’ he said. ‘I’ll wager Miss Maudsley is good enough to rival anyone in London.’

‘You are too kind,’ I replied.

‘I’m sure you’re right,’ said Mrs Hunter, ‘Miss Maudsley has the most otherworldly eyes. She could not be anything but a sensitive.’

After some brief refreshments, it was down to the business of the evening. I was led me to a small darkened room behind the great drawing room, which was where the séance would be held. There were twelve people around the table, which was far much more than I cared for, but I had been advised of this beforehand so it did not alarm me. Although the sitters were of various ages, they were all clearly people of significant wealth. Mr Banks was one of them. I wondered at how he was able to move in such circles. He smiled at me, and I noticed that his moustache had been closely trimmed, revealing a perfectly bowed top lip. I smiled back.
I longed to be without the encumbrance of Mr Frost’s inventions and the fear that they may not perform as well as they had during our many rehearsals. I glanced at him, seeking some sort of reassurance, but he did not notice me. He was too busy staring at a pretty young lady sitting across the table.

Before we began singing the hymns, Mrs Hunter introduced me to the sitters. Although I knew I would not remember their names, I tried to take in as much detail as I could about each of them, concentrating very hard so I would remember at least one small thing which might assist me.

This skill was something I had practised many times. It involved visualising the table in my mind and trying to place each person around it according to a significant feature. For example, the gentleman directly to my left had a very handsome face and a sad haunted look, as if his heart had been recently broken. The lady beside him was quite painfully thin, possibly from disease. Her face was almost without any flesh at all. Beside her was another younger lady with downcast eyes, who was made shy by her protuberant front teeth, and next to her an old man who had hardworking hands that did not fit with the rest of his perfectly groomed appearance. I guessed that he liked to work in the garden.

An elderly lady, whom I presumed to be his wife, sat next to him. Her fingers were swollen and her knuckles so disfigured that despite wearing lavish quantities of jewellery on the rest of her person, the only ring she could wear was her gold wedding band. Her finger was red and bloated around the ring, and I imagined that she persisted in wearing it because her marriage meant a great deal to her.

I carried on like this around the table, until I had formed an opinion, no matter how sketchy, about everybody. Although the conclusions I drew from my observations were unlikely to be accurate in some cases, experience had shown that there would be enough real things to make me seem convincing. I also had the various bits of information about the sitters that Mr Frost had gleaned from the servant boy and the man who did secret investigations, which I added to the pictures in my head.

‘Now then,’ said Mrs Hunter when she had finished her introductions and sat down. ‘How shall we begin Miss Maudsley?’

I fanned myself with my hand. ‘Dear me, I’m feeling rather faint. Would you mind leaving the door open just a little bit so we can get some air?’

This lie was easy to tell, as I suddenly did not feel very well at all. Of course, the door had to be left ajar so that Polly could get inside.
Mrs Hunter saw to it immediately, and then I suggested we begin with some hymns.

‘May I have the pleasure of leading us in song?’ asked Mr Frost.

I nodded politely and he began the first hymn in his shaky baritone.

The group sang in unison and although there were some discordant voices, as there are in any group, there was something quite powerful about the sound of twelve hearty voices in such a small room.

After they finished three hymns, I began to moan loudly as a sign that the spirits were about to commune. Everyone immediately stopped singing and I could feel twelve faces turn to me in the dark, their expectations hanging thickly in the air.

At this point, I had arranged to use the first of Mr Frost’s machines. This particular one involved nothing more on my part than pressing my knees together. I did this several times in quick succession. It triggered the wireless that was hidden in the room and had the very clever effect of producing a disembodied groaning sound. The groan was far deeper in timbre than I could have done myself, and came from quite a different part of the room to where I was sitting.

I felt the lady next to me give a surprised jump, so I squeezed her hand reassuringly, which made her jump even more. Often at a séance there was a person, usually a lady, who was of a rather nervous disposition and tended to become frightened very easily. I always felt truly sorry for these ladies and wished I did not have to frighten them, but I had little choice.

Then, with the help of Mr Frost, I performed one of my good old tricks with the grappling hook. We both had small hooks attached to metal rings around our forearms, well hidden by our sleeves, and we placed them under the rim of the table then shrugged our shoulders, which produced a most satisfying rocking.

The groaning from the corner of the room suddenly turned to a sinister laugh, and the poor lady beside me gripped my hand in a state of terror.

‘There is a spirit amongst us,’ I said. ‘An unhappy spirit who will not rest.’

I had enough information to know that several of the sitters might ‘own’ the laughing man, but they were all silent.

‘There is a man passed over to the other side. He was a bad man who did a bad thing but he’s ashamed of it now . . . he wants to say sorry . . . cannot rest until he says sorry.’
At this stage I would hope for a glimmer of recognition from someone, but still there was nothing.

‘Oh he’s sorry, he is so sorry for committing the evil deed. His name begins with H . . . Henry . . . Horatio . . . no, no his name is Harold . . . he’s got fair hair . . . white hair . . . an older man . . .

Now the man began to cry softly, which was a stark contrast to the laugh and designed to elicit a response if the laugh had not been successful in doing so.

‘He knows this is his only chance . . . he must have forgiveness, someone please help him so he can finally rest.’

There was an uncomfortable silence.

‘It could be my Grandfather,’ said the lady beside me, but I sensed she was only saying it to be kind.

‘Or mine, perhaps,’ said Mr Frost, who should have spoken up far sooner.

‘He was an old man . . . an old man with a heavy conscience.’

Mr Frost cleared his throat and spoke up, as was our plan if all else failed. ‘I’m ashamed to admit that my Grandfather embezzled a great deal of money not long before his death.’

The words sounded nervous and rehearsed, which surprised me because I had presumed Mr Frost would lie with the greatest of ease. I decided that it was best not to pursue this rather unconvincing spirit.

I knew that I could have conjured up someone who had died of Colonial Fever, but the trusting face of Mrs Hunter would not leave my mind and I could not do it. Besides, I found that I had lost some of my already shaky confidence and did not feel able to bring forth any others for the moment. So instead, I began some table rapping, beginning with the rather muffled noise of my toe cracking and then the far more impressive knocking sound created by Mr Frost’s needle and lead weight contraption, which was fixed around my ankles.

I allowed the rapping to go on intermittently for about five minutes until I could sense that the sitters were starting to become restless. My pockets were full of tricks and there was a hook around my neck hanging beneath my bodice so I could easily tip the table dramatically, but I was feeling too unsure of myself to try anything. So I gave five raps in quick succession instead, which was our signal to begin the materialisation.

The first step in this process was for Mr Frost to release a spray of Lavender scent into the room by means of a small pump hidden beneath his armpit, something
that he did without any detection. Within just a few moments I could hear a dozen noses
sniffing as keenly as a pack of bloodhounds.

‘I do believe it's lavender,’ said a woman’s voice.

‘A cheap scent however, much watered down with alcohol,’ said another female
voice.

A man spoke next. ‘It’s a cheap scent you say? Well perhaps it’s a scarlet woman.’

‘Please,’ I said, ‘we must be silent and not break the circle. Send light and love for
I believe it’s my spirit control Emily Rose trying to come through.’

Before the séance began, I had told Mrs Hunt that I fervently wished my spirit
control would appear to us tonight, as that was the best possible outcome of any sitting.
I said that she was a young maiden who had been brutally murdered by her lover, which
never failed to stimulate even the most jaded imagination.

After a few minutes of silence, I began some very high-pitched gabbling that
went something like this: ob Mama, ob Mama, the rain is falling and he is coming to get me, my
dress is wet, I cannot see, the curtains are drawn oh my love my love (and so on and so forth).

It all meant nothing of course, but it had the effect of gaining the rapt attention
of my sitters so that Polly could sneak into the room and take her place, crouched behind
my chair. She did a rather good job of it, and I was not altogether sure that she had
entered the room until I felt her tap my shoulder.

Entering the darkened room was not so simple as it sounds. Polly was wearing a
luminous outfit, which meant she had to crawl on her stomach so she would not be seen.
As well as this, she had to find her way to my seat in the darkness. It was quite a feat,
considering that she had only seen the room briefly once before.

I brought my gabbled monologue to a halt and made a gurgling sound. This was
intended to signify that I was under complete control of my spirit guide. Now it was time
for the easy part. While Polly became the tragic Emily Rose, I had only to keep
completely still as though I was in a trance. I kept my eyes open just slightly so that I
could watch her.

She began her movements behind me first. I could only imagine that she was
wafting her arms softly up and down, her loose muslin sleeves moving either side of my
inert body, as we had planned. Mr Frost had devised a very subtle electric light that
followed all Polly’s movements and illuminated her body in a stunning ghostly way.

In the darkness, I often got a sense of how receptive the sitters were and their
reaction to the apparition. This was not something I could explain, but when the room
was lit at the end of a séance, I already knew whether it had been a success or a failure. I was getting an extremely good feeling about how this particular séance was progressing.

The lady beside me began to whimper slightly. I could not press her hand for reassurance as my body was meant to be somewhere else entirely. For a moment I considered saying something like: ‘Do not be afraid, I mean no harm’, in a high-pitched voice meant to resemble Polly’s, but this was not in our plan and could potentially have a disastrous effect if Polly were not expecting it. Her scripted performance was superb, but her ad lib skills tended to be sorely lacking.

Polly began moving around the table as delicately as a ballerina. She really did look quite spectacular. Her loose luminous dress hung softly about her body like floating clouds, the outline of her feminine form subtly revealed. We had sewn some paste stones onto her sleeves and they sparkled beautifully.

Polly wore her hair unfastened and it tumbled across her shoulders. Mr Frost had suggested that we colour strands of it with pulverised luminous paint, which would be relatively easy to wash out. Polly had not been keen on this idea at first but she acquiesced eventually and the effect was most successful, contrasting as it did with the paleness of her powdered face and red lips stained with strawberry juice. She looked exceptionally beautiful.

As she moved about the room, she moaned slightly, as if reliving some sort of horrible pain. Polly had been instructed never to answer questions if they were asked by any of the sitters, only to say the words which we had rehearsed and which she could enunciate properly.

‘Oh why,’ she began in a pleading mournful voice, ‘oh why, oh why, oh why, did you not love me?’

‘What is your name?’ said one of the men.

You could always rely on somebody to ask this question, so Polly had the answer all ready. ‘Emily. I am Emily Rose.’

She continued to float around the room. ‘Why did you hurt me? Why did you hurt me? Why oh why?’

At this point someone usually said something like: ‘What did the scoundrel do?’ but these sitters were an unhelpful lot and no one asked anything.

After a few moments of silence, Mr Frost was forced to say: ‘My poor girl, what happened to you?’
Polly pretended to cry. She was doing a wonderful job and her sobs were pitiful and moving.

‘My love did me wrong. He did me wrong. My love, my love . . . he hurt me and put me in my grave.’

‘Dear God,’ said a male voice.

‘I’m growing weak. I cannot stay.’

Polly began to make her way back towards me. She folded her arms across her chest and looked heavenwards in a gesture that was meant to suggest she was returning to the other side. I was sure the lady beside me was crying.

When she reached my chair, Polly dropped to her knees, then rolled out of sight behind me. I gave a piercing scream and began to throw my body about in a wild and abandoned fashion, so Polly had the opportunity to crawl to the door and make her escape. Once I was absolutely sure that she had gone, I settled down, gave a final jerk, and then asked if the lights could be lit.

After a materialisation, it was important to act as if one was suffering from nervous exhaustion, for there was an assumption that being a medium was a most tiring business indeed. To this end, I sat in a rather slumped posture and asked that I be given a few moments to compose myself.

The sitters immediately began fussing around, bringing me glasses of water and asking if I would like to lie down or be given smelling salts. All this was a sign that the séance had been a resounding success, for if a séance fell flat, the sitters would not care about my health at all. Instead they would mutter among themselves and cast suspicious looks in my direction.

After I had been given sufficient time to recover, I was led into the drawing room for supper. Then I was approached by nearly all of the sitters and asked to give an account of what I knew of Emily’s life. I found it easy speaking about Emily Rose, as if I were an actress or any other performer bringing to life a fictitious figure. It did not trouble my conscience as much because she was not connected to any of the sitters.

I told them that she had been my spirit control for a number of years but her appearance was unpredictable. At this point I reminded them how fortunate they were to have experienced a full materialisation that evening. Then I told them that the poor girl was brutally murdered by the man she was betrothed to.

Someone always asked for the gruesome details. If it was a lady she would say something like: ‘Oh no, was it really too dreadful for the poor girl?’ which meant that she wanted
all the details but must not act as though this was the case. The gentlemen would always
be more direct and ask me exactly how he committed the deed.

This time a woman asked me if she had suffered.

‘It was mercifully quick,’ I replied. ‘She was strangled with her own stay lace.’

There was a collective gasp of horror. I continued: ‘He shaved her head. That
was how they caught him; his pockets were stuffed with bloody locks of hair. A child saw
some of it hanging out and pulled on it. Her mother screamed for help.’

This story was stolen straight from one of my penny novels, although I added
the bit about the child pulling on the hair. In the real story the fiend made his dastardly
escape.

‘And did he hang?’ the woman asked.

‘I believe so, although fortunately Emily Rose has not come across him on the
other side.’

As I spoke to various people, I found myself scanning the room for Mr Bank’s
face. I could not see it, but he surprised me from behind me as I was sipping a cup of tea.

‘Miss Maudsley?’

I jumped and the teacup bumped against my teeth. Then I looked at him and
found myself wondering if that ever happened when two lovers kissed. It was not a
thought I’d ever had before and it made me blush deeply.

‘Good evening Mr Banks. I’m so glad you could come.’

‘It was a most satisfying séance. Thank you.’

‘You’re very kind.’

‘Not at all.’

‘Do you go to a lot of séances?’

‘Yes, quite a few, but this was the best I’ve been to for a very long time. It’s been a
pleasure.’

‘Oh. I see.’

I smiled, trying to hide my disappointment. I wanted him to say he was pleased to
see me not just because I was a medium, but I knew that this was silly. He hardly knew
me after all. Then I surprised myself by allowing my hand to rest on his sleeve for just a
moment as I thanked him, but I quickly withdrew it as the sensation made me feel
strange and he stared at my hand as if he was shocked by it.
Before we could resume our conversation, an eager sitter came over and began to engage me in conversation. I responded reluctantly but Mr Banks melted away into the crowd. Although I looked for him, I did not see him again that night.

When it was time to take my leave, Mrs Hunter offered her fine carriage to take me home. The driver must not discover where I lived and it would appear suspicious to just drop me in town, so I refused.

‘But I insist,’ she said, pressing into my hand a small silk purse. ‘A little something for your trouble.’

‘Oh, but I don’t expect –

‘Please, do me the honour of accepting Miss Maudsley. We will be delighted to have you sit for us again soon.’

‘The pleasure would be all mine.’

I could see that I had no choice but to accept her offer of a ride, particularly as I had no carriage of my own waiting. But it would not matter. Now that I had some money, I could slip the driver a little something to buy his silence about the fact that I lived in poverty. This thought rather disturbed me, for it seemed the kind of thing that Mr Frost would do under the circumstances, but really I had no other choice.

Once I was safely cocooned in the comfort of the luxurious carriage and progressing rapidly down Mr and Mrs Hunter’s long driveway, I opened the purse. There was enough money inside to pay six months worth of rent to Mrs Parsons.
The séance for Mrs Hunter turned out to be the start of very many more. Word spread quickly, and within no time at all I had been invited to hold three more private séances in grand homes. They all went extremely well and before we knew it, Polly and I were booked at least four nights a week. We were making a considerable sum of money, much more than I ever dreamed possible. I still loathed having Mr Frost in our lives and our arrangement continued to make me feel uneasy, but as time went on, I became more accepting of what I could not change.

It was around this time that I first began to be concerned about my health. I often had a headache and a feeling of nervous restlessness that was extremely unpredictable. Some days I felt well and very positive about our future, but on many other days I was shaky and unsure of myself. On bad days, doubts and worries plagued me, and I suffered from aches and pains and a sickness in my stomach that made all food seem repulsive.

I did not tell Polly of my concerns as I did not wish to worry her, but I saw a doctor in town. He told me that my work as a medium caused a type of nervous excitement, which was harmless in itself but could be easily treated. He claimed my symptoms would respond very well to *Newton’s Improving Tonic*, but this foul-tasting concoction did little to alleviate the condition.

After I had finished the tonic, I went back to the doctor and he sold me a medical battery that, according to a letter of recommendation from the Queen, was guaranteed to cure all ailments. It gave me an unpleasant tingling sensation that set my teeth on edge when I held it in my hand, but did not make me feel any better.

Still, my illness was manageable and did not affect my performance at séances, and before long we could afford to leave Mrs Parson’s lodgings for good. I had managed to secure the lease on a pleasant, airy house in a leafy suburb called Hawthorne, that was an enormous leap up from our accommodation in Fitzroy.

To thank her for her kindness, I bought Mrs Parsons a folding kangaroo chair that had a tinted picture of the Shah of Persia set into the back. It was not to my taste, but I knew she wanted one. She was very pleased by the gift.
Mrs Parson’s life had completely turned around since Percy had come back, and it made me happy to think I had done this thing for her. On dark days when I became ever more convinced that being a medium was wrong, I would focus single-mindedly on Mrs Parsons and her joy.

The day that we moved into our own house was a marvellous occasion. The only thing marring that memorable time was a persistent headache and the presence of Mr Frost who insisted on helping us, even though I did not want him anywhere near me. I was sensible enough, however, to realise that tolerating Mr Frost was in my best interests, and to this end I treated him cordially, if rather distantly. But it was odious giving him half of my earnings, and I never got used to it. It was my hope that in time I would find some way around this problem, although I had no idea what that might be.

Mr Frost gave us a pair of bookends as a gift for the new house. They were made from an owl that had been sliced in half and stuffed, then mounted on a piece of polished timber. I hated them and thought them far more fitting for a gentleman’s study than our parlour. Polly did not like them much either, so we put them in the hallway on gate-legged table at either end of a set of old dictionaries.

The house was a delight to live in. It was three stories high, like a proper house should be, and even had its own small walled garden where Polly planted pansies and geraniums and a creeper with flowers that smelled like burnt honey. Downstairs was a modestly sized but well furnished parlour, with blue velvet curtains and embossed wallpaper; a dining room with a mahogany table to seat eight, two small rooms for servants and a fitted scullery. I was particularly excited by the prospect of finally having servants, and I planned to find a maid-of-all-work and a good plain cook as soon as possible.

On the second floor, Polly and I had a large bedchamber each. Polly decorated hers in pink and cerise, with curtains and a bed cover that were covered in enormous roses. I left mine as it was, plain and serviceable with white walls and a brown linoleum floor that smelled waxy in the heat, for bedchambers did not interest me a great deal. But I did spend an extravagant amount of money on a new bed. It had a coiled wire sprung base that was exceptionally comfortable and a mattress filled with goose down.

Both of these second floor rooms opened up onto a pleasing little balcony, which was just wide enough to stand upon and take the air; and what wholesome, bracing air it was, greatly improved on the foul fumes of Fitzroy. At the top of the house was an
attic room that we had no use for, although I hoped that one day, if things continued to
go as well as they were, a lady’s maid might be installed there.

I found that my thoughts often turned to Mr Banks and how much I would like
his friendship. It had never occurred to me that I might have a gentlemen friend and I
never would have considered such a thing at home, but in Melbourne where the rules of
etiquette were so much more relaxed, it was not unusual.

Mr Banks had not attended any more of my séances, and I did not know how I
might meet him again. So I began spending time in the Spiritualist’s Society reading room,
with the sole purpose of seeing him. I had done this about half a dozen times before I
was finally successful.

During the day, I often found that I was strangely tired, and if I was alone in the
reading room, I would rest my head on one of the desks and fall asleep.
This is how Mr Banks found me one stifling hot afternoon. I felt a feathery touch on my
shoulder and I started awake. He was standing beside me with a glass in his hand. His
face was ruddy and a single drop of perspiration rolled down his cheek like a tear.

‘Good afternoon, Miss Mausdley. I apologise for waking you, but Miss Simpson
was concerned. She said you’d been in here for some time.’

I looked up at the clock and saw that I had been asleep for four hours. ‘Mr Banks,
dear me, I must have dozed off.’

‘I am glad that I’m not the only one who does such things.’ He smiled and passed
me the glass. ‘I thought you might like some water, given the heat.’

‘Thank you, that was kind.’ I took a sip then patted my hair, which was no doubt
in a terrible state. ‘How are you?’

‘Very well, and you?’

‘I’m fine.’

‘Good.’

There was a moment’s silence, and then we both spoke at once.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said, grinning broadly, ‘you go first.’

‘I haven’t seen you at any séances lately, have you been busy?’

‘I am afraid that I’m always busy, but I don’t move in those sort of circles. I was
only at Mrs Hunt’s séance because I have known the couple for a very long time. We
came out on the same ship together.’

‘Really? Did you travel over first class? What was that like?’
Mr Banks smiled. ‘Goodness me no. Mr Hunter made his fortune in gold and then cattle. He arrived here as penniless as me.’

‘How unbelievable to think you can change your life so completely.’

‘It would never happen at home.’

‘No.’

Then there was another long silence while I desperately tried to think of something to say.

‘It’s been terribly hot,’ I said.

‘Ah yes, indeed it has. Most unpleasant really.’

I nodded.

‘But there’s been a cool change.’

‘Really?’

‘It came thorough only a little while ago. I’ll show you.’

Mr Banks walked towards the only window in the room. I followed closely behind him. The back of his frockcoat had become hooked up in the belt of his trousers. I smiled to myself.

He pushed the window up as far as it would go and a strong, fresh breeze swept into the room. I took a deep breath.

‘That’s absolutely delicious,’ I said.

Mr Banks leaned against the windowsill and turned his face to the wind. ‘Come over here, there’s room for two.’

I walked over and then stood beside him, my hip against the sill. There was room for two, but we were standing very close.

‘Isn’t that marvellous?’ he said.

Out of the corner of my eye I watched as the wind ruffled his dark hair. It was oiled down neatly, but he had some wiry grey hairs scattered among the brown and these sprang up in the breeze. I had a sudden urge to smooth them down. Strands of my own hair were blowing forwards in a frenzied fashion, twisting and swooping like strings on a child’s kite. I felt reckless.

‘If it were not for the cool changes, the summers would be unbearable,’ he said and turned to face me.

I could smell tobacco and something else acidic and fresh. Then suddenly a long strand of my hair flew into his face and plastered itself across his cheeks. Instinctively I reached out to remove it and my fingers brushed his lips.
‘Oh . . . sorry,’ I said awkwardly.
His cheeks seemed ruddier than before. ‘No need to be.’
We both moved away from the window at the same time.
‘Will you . . . do you come to the reading room very often?’ he asked.
‘Yes, a great deal.’
He smiled. ‘Good.’
‘Yes. Good.’
‘I suppose it’s important for a medium to keep up to date with what’s happening in the spiritualist world, particularly in London.’
I looked down. ‘It is.’
‘You really have a remarkable gift. Quite remarkable’
I nodded, wishing that he had not mentioned it, and the exhaustion came upon me yet again.

Polly and I became ever more busy. After a month or so in Hawthorne, it was not unusual for us to be conducting five or six séances every week. Unfortunately, Mr Frost was essential to this. As well as his equipment, which was becoming more and more sophisticated, he knew an awful lot of society people in Melbourne. This meant that he was able to secure us many séances while our reputation was still being established, but most importantly, he could always find a servant in any house who would happily divulge family secrets and hide Polly for the payment of a few shillings.

This practice continued to make me increasingly nervous. I did not know how long it could continue, for Melbourne was not an especially large place and the numbers of servants were very few compared to home. Knowing that so many servants were aware of our fraudulence was a terrible burden, for surely someone was bound to slip up eventually. Mr Frost did not seem in the least bit concerned when I mentioned this, and it occurred to me that if we were to be found out, I would be the one who would suffer the public shame of it.

Despite the increased expenses at Hawthorne, my money was accumulating at a fantastic rate. If my calculations were correct, before six months were out we would be moving again to an even larger house. My dream was to live in a villa at Brighton Beach. I felt sure that the sea air would be beneficial to my health, although I did not know how I would manage moving house as I felt so unwell much of the time.
Now my earnings had become so large, I had a great deal of excess cash and was not sure how to keep it secure. I did not trust banks. It had never made any sense to me to hand one’s hard earned cash over to someone else to look after, so I had taken to hiding my money beneath a loose floorboard under my bed, well hidden by a Brussels rug.

Before long I was able to employ two servants. The maid-of-all-work was a sullen girl called Maria who I did not altogether trust, but I had advertised the position for three weeks and not had a single response, as there was such a shortage of servants in Melbourne. But she did her work tolerably, and I felt fortunate to have found anyone at all.

It was relatively easier to engage the services of a cook. Mrs Paterson was a friendly woman with reasonable cooking skills. It was a terrible irony that the first time in my life I had been able to have a cook of my own, I found myself quite without any appetite most of the time. Still, Polly enjoyed the food Mrs Paterson prepared, and I had great hopes that my hearty appetite would return as soon as my health did.

But my health showed no sign of improving. In fact, it began to deteriorate quite rapidly. Some days I awoke feeling tolerable, but by the afternoon would be feeling very low indeed and would take to my room to be alone. I could never sleep, but nor could I concentrate on a book or any other task. Sometimes I was able to just lie still, but more often than not I was struck by a restlessness that made me want to scream out in frustration. During these times I paced my room like a madwoman until the feeling passed. I always removed my shoes so that no one downstairs could hear me.

I longed to go to the reading room in the hope of seeing Mr Banks again, but no longer felt well enough for it. I tried to get there several times, but always had the carriage turn back because I felt too unwell. Sometimes I imagined inviting him for tea, but it was not really the proper thing to do, and I could not trust that I would be able to entertain him anyway. All my energy was saved for the séances, which exhausted me dreadfully.

We had been at Hawthorne for only a short time when I started to have the nightmares. At first I could not remember exactly what they were about, but I was left with a feeling of terror and helplessness when I woke up that stayed with me for much of the day. My nervous condition worsened significantly.

Then without warning, I began to remember my dreams in horrible detail. Father fornicated in the street with Emily Rose, who was not Polly but a grotesque half-woman
with the bulging eyes and antennae of a death’s head moth; then he slipped a stocking around her neck and strangled her while she silently writhed and kicked. I was often in the dreams, a helpless fluttering cabbage moth pointlessly brushing his face with my tiny wings, unable to stop him.

Sometimes he mutated into a demon with fangs and ripped out women’s throats with his teeth. Decapitated heads floated down the River Yarra, the water red and boiling; a woman gave birth to a fly blown carcass; the sewers were choked with blood and human hair, I died by my father’s own hands. Eventually I became afraid to go to bed and would fall asleep on a chair in the parlour when I could keep my eyes open no longer. But it did not stop the nightmares.

Strange things began to happen around the house. There were unusual smells in my room some mornings as I dressed, which Polly was unable to detect when I asked her – the sickroom smell of eucalyptus, acrid smoke and ammonia - and I was constantly misplacing things and finding them in the most unusual places.

For example, Maria found my hairbrush in the coalscuttle one morning when she went to clean the grate. It was in a greatly blackened state. Even when it had been washed robustly and left to dry in the sun, the bristles remained a dirty grey colour. I threw it away so I should not be reminded of my debilitated state.

There were a couple of healthy aspidistras in the parlour that Polly had given me, but one morning I awoke to find they had lost all of their leaves. I was convinced they had been cut with scissors and blamed the servants, who denied all knowledge of it.

Polly looked after me well during this terrible time. Every morning she would wake me with a cup of tea, which I appreciated because sleeping in a chair made me stiff and sore. She helped me dress and bathe as if I were a child.

I was reluctant to see a doctor again because I was convinced that there was something terribly wrong, and I did not want to know what that might be. Besides, part of me believed the sickness was punishment for all my lies. I was beyond any medical help. But then things got very bad, and I asked Polly what I should do.

‘What do you think about another tonic?’ I said. ‘A much stronger one this time.’

‘There’re all a load of rubbish and a waste of good money, truly Elizabeth, trust me.’

‘Perhaps if I was bled?’

Polly shook her head. ‘That doesn’t work either . . . Look, I want to show you something’
She peeled off her stockings and then showed me her feet. One letter was tattooed on each of her toes in dark blue ink spelling out the name: JAMES FROST.

A wave of sickness and revulsion passed through me. ‘Oh Polly.’

‘What’s wrong with it?’

I shook my head.

‘I love him and he loves me.’

‘But will he marry you?’

‘He might.’

I rushed to the commode and opened the lid, afraid I might be ill.

‘You poor thing,’ said Polly, plumping my pillows. ‘I feel so sorry for you.’

‘I will go to the doctor, I can’t go on like this.’

The sickness passed and I lay on the bed. Polly took my hand and gently stroked the back of it with her thumb.

‘You listen to me Elizabeth, I never wanted to say this to you before but now I’ve got no choice. You’ve been acting very strange. If you go to a doctor and tell him all that’s been going on, you know what’ll happen don’t you?’

I shook my head.

‘They’ll have you locked up.’

She was right. I had heard of women being put in asylums for behaving oddly.

‘We’ll get you better, don’t you worry about it one little bit. You’ll be just fine soon enough.’

But I was not fine, and before long I could not manage the séances. On several occasions I fell asleep during the hymn singing and had woken only when Mr Frost kicked me hard on the shin.

Fortunately my rapidly diminishing skills no longer mattered that much. The séances were made successful by Mr Frost’s machines and Polly’s beauty. I did not like to admit it, but by this stage my contributions were really very modest.

Then one night, after a particularly dreadful dream where I was a butterfly pinned to the wall by my wings, I went into the kitchen for a drink of water. I overheard Maria and Mrs Paterson having a conversation that disturbed me greatly.

‘I reckon she’s going mad,’ said Maria. ‘My old aunt went like that. She used to say there were faces in her soup. They took her Round the Bend and I never saw her again.’

Mrs Paterson wiped her hands on a dishcloth and shook her head. ‘She’s just tired is all. Poor soul’s been ill for such a long time now.’
‘A rest would do her good, especially if it was under lock and key.’

‘Maybe you’re right Maria. Maybe you’re right.’

Under normal circumstances I would not be bothered by idle servant’s gossip, but I found that Maria’s unkind comments bothered me enormously. Because if everyone thought I was going mad, then perhaps I truly was.

That night Mr Frost came to our house for dinner. I discovered him and Polly committing a lewd act on the sofa in the parlour, Polly’s creamy legs wrapped around his beastly hairy back, but then it felt like a nightmare and I could not be sure it had happened at all. But Mr Frost was at our breakfast table the next morning, and he delivered some crushing news.

‘I’m afraid that there’s a group of scientific fellows who suspect that you’re a fraud. They have proposed you undertake a test séance.’

I gripped the arms of the dining chair, overcome with a rush of vertigo. ‘But why?’

‘For two reasons. Your performance of late has been rather lacking, and it also seems a servant has talked. It had to happen eventually.’

‘I said it would! You didn’t listen.’

My heart beat so fast it frightened me. I rubbed at my chest with the heel of my hand.

‘Calm down,’ said Polly, ‘just calm down.’

‘Well tell them I refuse. It’s as simple as that.’

‘That’s not wise.’

‘I don’t care.’

Polly tried to take my hand but I would not let her. ‘If you don’t do it, they’ll be suspicious.’

‘She’s quite correct,’ said Mr Frost.

‘But what if I can’t do it?’

‘Then I’m afraid it will all be over.’

Did I imagine that I saw the flicker of a smile on his face? A look of satisfaction?

‘It’s my livelihood, I couldn’t survive without it.’

‘Don’t you worry about a thing Elizabeth. It’ll all work out just fine. I know it will,’ said Polly.

Mr Frost leaned back in his seat and lit a pipe of tobacco. ‘Anyway, if things go wrong, Polly would make an admirable medium.’
‘James, no.’

‘But everybody knows Polly as a spirit, she could not become a medium, no one would believe it.’

Mr Frost laughed. ‘My dear Miss Maudsley, you and I both know how a wig and a rouge pot can transform a girl’s looks so she’s unrecognisable. Especially if that girl has only ever been seen in a dark room before.’

I looked to Polly for reassurance. She smiled at me and patted my leg under the table where Mr Frost could not see. I knew then that everything would be all right. Polly and I were as good as family. She would look after me. So I sat up as straight as I could and looked into his emotionless black eyes. ‘Well then, if I must conduct a test séance, let us set a date immediately.’
The test séance was to be held at a private home I was not familiar with. Mr Frost explained that my Accusers (for this was the name I had given them) would tie my hands and feet to a chair, then turn out the lights and expect me to produce spiritual phenomenon, although not necessarily a full materialisation. After some time, he was not sure exactly how long, the lights would be lit and I would be examined to ensure the ties had not been tampered with in any way.

There would be no need for me to do anything about the ties, although I could usually get myself out of any bindings, because Mr Frost had designed a chair for me to use which would be smuggled into the room before the séance. He told me that to the observer, this chair with polished wooden arms and a comfortable padded seat, would look just like any other. In fact, it was made to match one of the dining chairs in the house so that no suspicion would be aroused.

But this was no ordinary chair. When I sat down in it, two latches that held the arms in place would unlock. The arms of the chair then slipped out, enabling me to use my own arms freely. It was a simple matter, he said, to have them safely back in place before the lights were lit.

‘Do you understand all of this Elizabeth?’ he asked, glancing at a very fine gold watch I had not seen before.

Mr Frost had taken to calling me Elizabeth when we were not in company, even though I had not invited it, and I found that I did not have the strength to correct him.

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘I’ll remember it all too,’ said Polly who was sitting beside me on the sofa, ‘just in case you forget anything.’

I turned to her and smiled. ‘Thankyou.’

‘Now, just before the séance is due to commence, the room and surrounding environs will be thoroughly searched,’ Mr Frost continued,’ then you will be requested to enter. After you have been introduced to the gentlemen, you will be tied to a chair by means of a silk cord. It is necessary to tie both your hands and your feet. You do understand?’
I nodded. I knew how to place my ankles so that there would be some slack in the cord. Slipping my foot out of my shoes would not be difficult.

‘I’m afraid the next part is rather delicate. The gentlemen will then leave the room and a lady they have appointed will search your skirts and your undergarments for any item that may be secreted there.’

I did not like to hear Mr Frost speak of such intimate things, but I forced myself to meet his gaze. He had a smirk on his face.

‘I shall not be bothered by it,’ I said.

I had little concern about the search. Mr Frost would hide a telescopic reaching rod in one of the chair arms with an inflatable silk figure attached to the end of it. That was all the equipment I needed. My real worry was that the chair would malfunction, or that my Accusers would discover its secret mechanism before the séance began.

Mr Frost assured me that this would not occur. The chair was set so that the latches would not release until a wooden peg under the seat had been firmly pushed, which I could easily do by grasping the base of the seat with both hands when I first sat down. If anyone else happened to sit in the chair beforehand, nothing would happen.

I pushed my fingers inside the collar of my bodice and tried to ease it away from my neck, for I was sweating profusely. Around my neck and shoulders it felt like an army of insects had lodged beneath my skin and were engaged in battle. I fancied that if I looked in the mirror, I would see their frantic movements rippling the surface of my skin.

Mr Frost took a plug of tobacco out of his pocket and pushed it into his pipe. ‘I hope you’re not worried about this test, Elizabeth?’

‘Do you believe I have anything to be worried about?’

‘Certainly not. With my marvellous chair and your well-practised skills, I think you’ll be most impressive.’

‘And will that be the end of it? Or will there be others who will wish to test me?’

‘I cannot say. Certainly it’s expected that a medium of your calibre will conduct a test séance from time to time. There is nothing out of the ordinary in that.’

Polly put her arm around me, and I leaned gratefully against her shoulder.

‘You’ll be right as rain,’ she said.

‘I must rest Polly, can you help me to bed?’

That night I had the worst nightmare ever. Polly stood before me naked, luminous and beautiful, and I stabbed her with the sharpened end of a reaching rod. She
begged me not to do it but I couldn’t stop, and I stabbed her until the streets ran red with her blood and her screams exploded in my head.

When I finally awoke, my nightgown and bedclothes were soaked with cold sweat, and I needed desperately to use the chamber pot, but I could not leave my bed because the room was filled with spirits. Their suffocating presence pressed down upon me and rushed into my nose, my ears, my mouth and my very soul. I tried to spit them out but my mouth was so dry I could not do it.

Finally I managed to sit up and swing my legs over the side of the bed as the room reeled about me. I pulled the chamber pot out from under the bed and lifted the lid. The pot had a green eye painted in the middle of it. Polly and I had bought a couple of them for a lark, but it did not seem funny now. The eye stared mockingly, and suddenly it seemed to be the very centre of all the horror that was engulfing me. I picked up my hairbrush and stabbed at it again and again, until the china splintered and the eye lost its menace.

I must have made a great deal of noise, for I heard a knock on my door and Polly’s voice asking if I was all right.

‘No,’ I said, my throat so dry it felt as though it might tear.

Polly’s worried face appeared before me. She had not been stabbed and I felt a surge of gratitude for this that lifted my spirits momentarily.

‘Elizabeth, what’s the matter? I heard such a terrible noise.’

‘I’m not well, the room is spinning.’

‘You’re just tired, that’s all. Come on, lie back down.’

I did as she asked, and Polly smoothed the blankets around my shoulders.

‘I cannot conduct the test tomorrow. I’m too unwell.’

‘Nonsense, now you get yourself to sleep and everything will be fine in the morning, you’ll see.’

‘You always tell me I’ll be fine but I’m not fine. Can’t you see that?’

Polly picked up the ruined chamber pot.

‘What’s happened here then?’

‘I couldn’t bear it looking at me.’

She laughed. ‘Well it won’t see nothing now.’

I eased myself down into the pillows and a wave of tiredness overcame me. ‘I think you’re right after all, I will sleep. Can you bring me another pot?’
‘Of course. Now don’t you go worrying about tomorrow, James’ll do us proud like he always does.’

I wanted to tell Polly that my night time horrors and terrible health had only begun since Mr Frost had been part of our lives, but it seemed silly and petty to blame him for my nervous condition, so I said nothing. It was my punishment and I must somehow learn to live with it.

By the time the carriage arrived to take me to the séance, I was in a terrible state of nervous apprehension, particularly as I had not yet tried out the chair with the detachable arms. Mr Frost said he had not quite finished it, but assured me that I would get to see the chair before the séance. I was horrified to hear on the morning of the dreaded day that this would not happen because he had been called away unexpectedly on a matter of business.

‘But Polly, I must try it out. I have to know that it will work without any difficulty.’

‘I wish you wouldn’t work yourself up into such a state. Has James ever let us down before with any of his inventions?’

‘I suppose not.’

‘So why would he now when it’s more important than ever?’

I shrugged but could not shake off a dark feeling of foreboding.

The carriage ride was extremely unpleasant. I felt every rut most acutely, as if we were driving over a pot-holed country road rather than a city street. Although the seasons were changing and the weather had turned cooler, my skin was slick with perspiration.

‘Polly, I don’t feel well. Please roll down the window so I can have a little air.’

‘It’s just nerves Elizabeth, that’s all it is.’ She smiled indulgently. ‘You and your blessed nerves.’

If I had been feeling better I would have congratulated her for using the word blessed instead of the word bleeding as she usually did, but I was feeling far too ill for such trifles.

‘I have a bad feeling about tonight,’ I said. ‘Something dreadful will happen, I just know it.’

‘It’ll all be fine, you’ll soon see.’

But Polly would not meet my eyes, which convinced me that she was of the same mindset as I was.
‘Oh do be truthful Polly, will it all go wrong? I’m afraid I don’t have the strength to do anything well at the moment.’

‘Like I said, it’ll be fine. You’ll find the strength and it’ll be over as quick as anything, you’ll see.’

I did not see how it could be fine when I was feeling so queer. Although Polly sat across from me and I did not suffer from poor eyesight, her face seemed to swim in and out of focus.

We had been in the carriage only a very short time before it stopped in front of an imposing building I had never seen before, in a part of town that I did not recognise.

‘This must be it,’ said Polly. ‘James reckoned it was a grand place.’

Two enormous stone lions flanked the entrance to the building. As I stared at them, I was sure I saw one yawn, revealing razor sharp teeth that were stained with the blood of its latest prey.

‘Polly, I don’t like it here. I want to go home.’

But the door of the cab was opening and Polly was receding into the shadows, pulling her bonnet down over her face so she would not be recognised. We had already taken a risk. If Mr Frost discovered she had travelled with me, he would no doubt be angry.

A gentleman helped me out of the carriage then led me up the steps to the front door. We exchanged pleasantries but I feared my voice sounded slurred. The man wore thick spectacles, and when I looked into his eyes I could see nothing but a vague blur.

The door to the building opened without my escort needing to knock. We were greeted by a sombre-looking gentleman in a black top hat who showed us through to a large, lavishly furnished room. The room had a distinctly masculine feel, owing mainly to the fact that there were many stag’s heads hung on the walls and a distinct smell of cigar smoke. I tried not to look at any of the stags for fear that they too would come alive.

A man with a bushy white moustache appeared beside us. It seemed to me that he had come from nowhere.

‘Miss Maudsley,’ he offered his hand. ‘How nice to meet you. I’m Doctor McPherson.’

‘Hello. Thank you.’ My tongue felt numb and it would not form the words properly.

I felt pleased that there was a doctor present, and for a moment I was tempted to tell him of all that ailed me, but I did not get a chance.
‘I imagine you would like to start the proceedings as soon as possible. Please follow me.’

The other man disappeared and I followed the moustached doctor through to a darkened room where the séance would be held. There were already four gentlemen and one woman in there, seated at a round table. They all turned to look at me and their faces blended together, becoming one hugely disfigured human head.

After brief introductions, I sat down gratefully. There was no way of knowing if this was the correct chair until I tried to detach the arms, but I could feel the peg underneath the seat with my fingers, which gave me a little confidence. I pushed it in firmly as Mr Frost had instructed me to do.

The men then left the room and the woman searched my clothing. She seemed embarrassed doing it and the search was not very thorough. I could have hidden equipment in my button-on pockets and it would not have been detected. After she had finished, the woman apologised. I told her she had nothing to be sorry about, but she scurried out of the room without saying anything more. The men came back in.

‘Thank you for agreeing to our little test, Miss Maudsley,’ said one of them. ‘I take it you will have no objection if we tie your hands and feet?’

I shook my head, which seemed infinitely easier than trying to speak.

The woman came back and stood beside me to see that everything was proper, while the man tied my arms to the chair with silk cord. Then I felt a fumbling about my skirts and the pull of the cord as it dug into my ankles rather more tightly than was comfortable. They had told me to wear slippers and not boots, which I had done. The gentlemen were all watching me closely.

I did not like being tied to the chair. It gave me a feeling of powerlessness and I had to fight hard against a surge of panic. I also had the unpleasant sensation of needing to scratch myself all over. My scalp, especially, felt unbearably itchy.

‘Are you comfortable and ready to commence, Miss Maudsley?’ asked one of the gentlemen.

I nodded.

‘Then let us begin.’

Someone extinguished the lights and the room became as black as night. Darkness was something I had become entirely comfortable with, but this time was different. The darkness felt thick and malignant. If I had been a believer, I would have
said it was teeming with unhappy spirit life that wanted to crush me and take my breath away. With a feeble voice I barely recognised as my own, I asked that a hymn be sung.

The gentlemen seemed unused to singing. Their flat voices stumbled with the simple tune. I longed to press my fingers to my temples to still the vicious headache that had suddenly taken hold. Without even meaning to do so, I moaned, and the singing immediately stopped.

‘The spirits are gathering around us,’ I whispered, and for once in my life it felt like they truly were.

There were strange flashes of light before my eyes, shapes in the darkness, a feeling of feathery hands brushing against my face. The perspiration on my body turned icy cold and I began to shiver.

I would use my toe first, so that I would not have to speak. Mr Frost had assured me I would be able to get my foot out of my slipper, and Polly had tied me to a chair so I could try it out. But I could not do it now because my ankles were tied too tightly. I realised with a wave of dizzy panic that I’d forgotten to position my ankles in the right way and could not move them now.

I flexed my toe inside the slipper, but the sound was muffled and ineffective. I could not be sure the men had even heard it.

‘The spirits are gathering,’ I said.

I tried to remember everything else I said at a séance, which I knew was a great deal, but I could not remember any of it.

‘They are gathering . . . the spirits are gathering.’

One of the men cleared his throat. I could not carry on like this for much longer and I just wanted the horror to end, so I grasped the handles of the chair as firmly as I could and pulled them forwards. Nothing happened. I pulled again, harder this time, still nothing. Then I wrenched them with all the strength that I could muster but they did not move an inch.

At first I was terrified by the thought that I would be found out to be a fraud, but strangely this fear soon left me. It was replaced by something far more sinister. The dark room was suddenly full of all the horrors of my nightmares and every imaginary spirit I had ever conjured up. Except that they were real and I was pinned to my chair, unable to escape them. The monsters and the murderers were there in the darkness, as well as the rotting corpses of all the dead lovers, mothers sisters and brothers. They held out their
arms to me, coming closer and closer by the second. I could smell blood and burning flesh and the stench of sulphur.

I think that I began to whimper, but I cannot be sure. Of course the gentlemen had no way of knowing that I was in great distress and not simply in a trance, which is why no one moved to help me. I began to rock in my chair and at the same time jerk my arms backwards and forwards in a desperate attempt to get the thing to release me. In my befuddled mind it had not occurred to me that I was simply sitting in an ordinary chair and not the one fashioned by Mr Frost at all.

‘Help me, help me!’ I cried. ‘I must get out.’

I somehow managed to tip the chair onto its side then writhed on the floor in an effort to be free.

‘Oh please, please! I’m not in a trance. I want this séance to end, oh please help me.’

The room was suddenly full of white light that stung my eyes. It was then that I first heard Mr Frost’s voice. ‘Elizabeth my dear, you are not well,’ he said, patting my forehead then untying me and helping me to stand.

By this stage I was sobbing quite uncontrollably. Mr Frost put his arms about me and I did not have the strength to resist. ‘Gentlemen, you must excuse my poor cousin. As you can see, she’s in need of a good long rest.’

I heard him call me his cousin and it made no sense, but I did not care.

The men were talking but I caught only snatches of what they said: ‘... such a sad case... of course she must rest... nervous excitement... you did the right thing.’

‘No,’ I said, sensing that something was very wrong, and struggling as he held me to him tightly. But I was as ineffectual as a child.

‘The rest will be very good for her,’ he said.

Suddenly I became still in his arms. A rest was what I longed for, endless sleep that would be uninterrupted by night-time horrors, a sleep that would finally restore my health and my fragile sanity.

Mr Frost let me go and two men I had not seen before took hold of both my arms. They lifted me up and swept me across the floor as if I weighed nothing at all. Then they helped me into a waiting cab and sat one on either side of me, as stony faced as a couple of undertakers.

The cab was painted black inside, like a hearse and I wondered if perhaps I had died and it was my ghost that was experiencing all these strange things, but then we went
over a pothole and I bumped against one of the men. He pushed me up very firmly and I seemed to come to my senses.

It occurred to me that I had been kidnapped. ‘Where are you taking me?’ I asked, panic again flooding my body. ‘I have no money, what do you want with me?’

The men were silent.
‘I shall scream if you don’t let me out right now.’
‘Scream all you like in here,’ said one of them. ‘ Ain’t nothing we’ve not heard a million times before.’

The man turned to me and smiled. He had a scar across his cheek and lips, which disfigured him horribly.

I had still not grasped the meaning of what was happening. ‘Oh please have mercy. Let me out. I’ll say nothing of this night if you just let me go.’

‘We can’t. We’re under orders.’
‘But from whom?’
‘Look here,’ said the second man. His breath was so foul that I recoiled. ‘Best you just come with us easy like, and there’ll be no trouble. We don’t want no trouble.’

The I noticed the strangest thing. It was not an ordinary hansom at all. The walls of the cab were padded and covered with cheap black calico. In several places it was ripped and the horsehair had begun to spill out.

I screamed and the man grabbed my wrist and held it too hard.
‘Don’t give us no trouble and we won’t have to put you in braces.’
‘What are you talking about? Where are you taking me?’
‘Didn’t they tell you?’ said one of the men, grinning at his mate. ‘You’re off to stay at the Ritz.’
The carriage rocked violently as it climbed a steep and rutted hill. One of the men had fallen asleep and his thunderous snores filled the suffocating space. The second man elbowed him in the side.

‘Wake up, you’re making a bleedin’ racket.’
The man sat up with a start. His chin was wet with saliva.
‘I’m going to need your help if this girl gives us any trouble.’
Both men laughed, then one of them broke into an explosive fit of coughing.
‘I’ll bring up me lungs one of these days,’ he said, when it finally subsided.
Suddenly we came to such an abrupt halt that I was thrown against one of the walls. The horsehair was thinly distributed and did little to cushion me. My shoulder smarted, but it was nothing compared to the terrible black fear that possessed me.

‘Where are we?’ I asked.

The man sitting nearest the carriage door opened it and they both got out. I heard one of them spit on the ground.
‘Please, tell me where we are?’
‘I told you before, The Ritz.’
Panic tightened my chest.
‘Look out the door, don’t it look fine?’ said the man with the scar.
Cautionly I peered into the darkness. We had driven up a circular carriageway. In front of me I could see a big building that was all lit up like it really was a hotel, but on the door there was a large sign that read: Kew Lunatic Asylum.

I wrapped my arms around my waist and shrunk back into my seat. ‘Please, this is a mistake, you must understand me, it’s a terrible mistake, you cannot leave me here, please listen to me.’

One of the men stuck his head back into the carriage. ‘Are you going to get down or will we have to drag you out?’
‘I won’t get out, there’s nothing you can do to make me.’
‘You hear that Charlie?’ said the man, turning his swollen face back to his mate.
‘This lady here reckons there’s no way we can get her out.’
The other man laughed. ‘She’s got a lot to learn about this place then.’
‘How’s about we show her what’s what around here.’

They both put their heads into the carriage at once like some terrible two-headed monster. I hid my face in my hands.

‘Excuse me Madam, but may I escort your ever so humble self down from this ‘ere carriage?’ said the second man while the other one chuckled to himself.

‘No, go away.’

‘Then I do believe Madam, that I’ll have to show you how we deal with ladies round these parts.’

He grabbed my ankles and pulled me so hard I landed on the floor of the carriage, jarring my back and hitting my head on the side of the seat. Then I was dragged along the carriage floor with my skirt up around my thighs, until my feet made contact with the ground. The men caught me roughly under the arms and jerked me up to a standing position where upon I was sick on a pair of boots.

‘Blimey,’ said the man leaping back. ‘Watch it.’

‘I’m not well,’ I tried to say, but it was as if hands were pressing against my throat and the words would not come.

Stones crunched beneath their feet as the two brutes hurried me to the front of the imposing building and up wide stone steps into a marble foyer.

‘It’s a mistake,’ I whispered, ‘a terrible mistake.’

I could barely lift my head and kept my eyes to the floor as we travelled down dark, twisting corridors. The marble floors soon became splintering scrubbed wood and I could smell the foetid stench of poor sanitation and boiled meat. When the men finally stopped, I found that I was in a large hospital ward. My slippers were lost.

The dirty walls were whitewashed, just one rough coat so the bricks showed through in places. There were rows and rows of narrow iron beds, most of them occupied, that were attached to the floor by metal plates and screwed down. Only a few women bothered to look at me as I came in.

After the men left me, I struggled to stay standing without their support, but a nurse appeared and took my arm. She led me to an empty bed and instructed me to lie down on the coarse coir mattress. A thin grey blanket was tucked around my chin. It was a modest enough bed, but I was incredibly glad to by lying down on it.

The bed beside mine was barely a few inches away. It was occupied by a tiny woman with bulging eyes like milky green marbles, who was watching me intently. As soon as the nurse had left she told me that her name was Maud.
I nodded then shut my eyes, for I only wanted to sleep.

‘I did away with me husband.’

My eyes sprung open. The woman was smiling and nodding. She had only two teeth. I could smell her rancid breath.

‘And the one before him too. He was a bad lot. And my babies. All thirty of them.’

My bed was at the end of a row, the other side of it pushed up hard against a damp wall, I was virtually trapped.

There were prone bodies as far as I could see. I estimated there to be at least forty beds in the ward, possibly more, and they were all occupied.

The noise in the place made my temples throb. There was moaning and crying and the rhythmic clanging sound of someone banging on their bed with a spoon. Several women were laughing and joking as if they were at a party.

‘It’s a long way to Tipperary,’ sang a sweet, quivering voice from somewhere behind me, ‘a long, long way from home.’

‘And I stabbed me mother and father. Now I come to think of it, I enjoyed that the most,’ said Maud, sitting up menacingly.

No matter how ill I felt, I had to try and escape. I could not be still and accept this terrible fate; I might be murdered in my bed. So I stood up shakily and made my way towards the enormous double doors at the end of the ward.

‘Where you going?’ called my neighbour. ‘I thought we was friends.’

Walking across the ward was not easy, as several women reached out and grabbed at my skirt. One woman begged me for water, another for a bit of bread, but I could help no one, least of all myself. My whole body trembled. I was perspiring profusely and my heart hammered like a bailiff on a debtor’s door. Nausea came upon me with such force from time to time that I had to stand still until it passed.

Despite my debilitating physical condition, I was easier in my mind than I had been in the carriage. It was clear to me that a terrible mistake had been made. I was most certainly not insane, and as soon as I could make the person in charge of this wretched place realise that, I would be released. It did not seem possible that I could be detained here for even one night.

I could hear Shakespeare being recited, every word perfect as far as I could tell, and the raucous screech of a woman yelling profanities. Someone had been sick in their bed and the sour smell of it made my stomach clench.
But I did not make it to the big doors. Before I was barely a quarter of the way there, two burly women wearing stiff white aprons came into the ward. They took one look at me then came charging as if they were a couple of prize bulls. I cried out that a mistake had been made, that I should not be here, but they dragged me to my bed and pushed me down roughly, although I offered no resistance.

‘Where d’you think you’re going then?’ said a woman with sores around her mouth.

I shook my head from side to side and wanted to tell her that I would give no trouble, but I could not speak. Although I was lying on the bed and being quite still, the second huge woman pushed me hard on the shoulders, pressing me into the unyielding mattress until I felt pain.

‘You watch out girl or you’ll be in a camisole before you know it,’ she said with spittle flying from her mouth.

‘Please,’ I managed to say, ‘there’s been a terrible mistake. I’m not a lunatic and I don’t belong in this place.’

‘You Elizabeth Maudsley?’

I nodded.

‘Well I’ve got a certificate that says you’re mad. Signed by your cousin and two doctors.’

‘But I don’t have a cousin.’

‘And I suppose the moon’s made of cheese.’

Both women laughed heartily at this.

‘Right, we need to get you sorted.’ The woman thrust a coarse calico shift at me.

‘Get that on.’

‘But where can I get changed?’ I said.

They seemed to find this even more amusing. ‘Got something special hidden down them drawers, have you?’

Her crudeness made me cringe. I glanced around at the other beds. It was fair to say that most of the poor souls seemed far too gone in their own suffering to take much notice of me, but the thought of these two dreadful women staring at my unclothed form was more than I could bear.

‘Please, you must find Polly. She’ll tell you what a dreadful mistake has been made. I’ve been tricked don’t you see? Horribly tricked.’

‘There aint no one in here what thinks they should be, you know.’
'I don’t feel well.’ The woman’s face was foggy and indistinct. ‘I need to see a doctor.’

‘We’ll put you on the list.’

‘Right down the bottom.’

The sound of their laughter suddenly seemed to be very far away. I was overcome with tiredness and wanted nothing more than to lay my head down. It would be humiliating to stand naked before two such bullies, but my sensibilities were dulled by the exhaustion that overwhelmed me.

I put on the stiff garment I was offered with barely a thought to my modesty and swallowed the sweet, unpleasant-tasting concoction they gave me. Then I drank thirstily from a tin cup and fell straight to sleep.

But my sleep was not restful. I awoke in the middle of the night feeling more ill than I had ever before. There were terrible cramping pains in my belly and feared I would lose control of myself. The warder on duty took me swiftly to a filthy water closet where I spent an agonising time brutally emptying the contents of my stomach.

There was much worse to come. Over the next few days, I was swept away by sickness and dragged screaming towards the end of my life by every horror that had ever appeared in my dreams. Sometimes I feared death terribly, while other times I wished for the blessed relief of it, but whenever I thought my last moment was upon me, I would be given a bittersweet reprieve. I fought for every breath. Day and night ran into each other and time was meaningless.

During that period of my life, which I later discovered was four days and nights, I have only three clear memories. The first was of being lifted up and forced to drink something from a horn cup that tasted rather like beef tea. I remember the thickish feel of it in my mouth and the difficulty I had in swallowing. Then someone held my hand, quite tenderly, and whispered to me, although I cannot remember what they said. Lastly I recall a woman mopping my burning face with a cold cloth and dripping water between my lips. The relief of it was exquisite.

When I was finally well enough to become aware of my surroundings, I found that I was quite alone. On either side of me stretched rows of empty beds, a worn blanket tucked neatly around each mattress and a thin pillow on top. I could not be sure if I was in a different ward or the same one. Lime was spread out in white patches on the floor, but it did not mask the smell of what was underneath it.
I felt a great deal better, the headache was gone and I was no longer sweating. In fact, my mind felt clearer than it had for a long time and when I held up my hands they did not shake. They were white and bloodless, like the hands of an invalid, and my wrists had lost some of their plumpness. My arms had been badly attacked by vermin and some of the bites were raw from scratching. There were spots of blood on the blanket.

The nightgown I was wearing was a shapeless thing, marked with arrows as if I were a lowly convict. The hard fabric had softened a little with wear, but I could still feel the clumsily sewn seams against the raw skin of my neck. I was told later that there were deep scratches there where I had clawed at myself, although I could not see them or remember doing such a thing. I was rather shocked to discover that I was wearing no undergarments of any kind.

I felt extremely weak and was not sure whether I should attempt to get out of bed by myself, but it seemed to me that the sooner I got up, the sooner I could get out of the place. Now I was well, I naively believed it would be a simple procedure to get myself released, for surely my shocking illness had been the only reason they were keeping me here.

My mind was finally clear, and I realised that Mr Frost had been the so-called cousin who had signed the lunacy certificate. He had always resented the money that I made using his inventions, despite his most generous cut. It would suit him well to do away with me and pay Polly a pittance to take my place.

But there was part of me that did not entirely believe this fiction. I was not so important that he would go to such lengths. He could easily have told the world I was a fraud if he no longer wanted me around. Of course I knew about his inventions, but I also knew, as he certainly did, that I was the one who would not be believed, should there be a public outcry.

I conceded that perhaps he had motivations I knew nothing about. I could not and certainly would not believe that Polly had had any part in my committal. In fact, at that very moment I imagined she was trying to get me released. Polly would be desperate and frantic with worry. I firmly believed that her loyalty to me was stronger than any mere infatuation.

Then I had a terrifying thought. What if Mr Frost had lied about what happened? He might have claimed I simply disappeared after the séance. In fact, he could have told her anything. It was possible that Polly might even believe I deserted her. I could not endure this thought and it motivated me to get out as quickly as I could.
A shuffling old woman carrying a bucket came into the ward. I stood up, ignoring the giddiness, and she came over to my bed.

‘Woken up then, have you?’ she said in a hoarse voice.

‘Yes.’

She grinned. ‘You’ll be wanting to go in for tea.’

‘Tea?’

‘It’s just about that time.’

Suddenly I was gripped by a ravenous hunger. ‘Yes, please. I’m famished.’

It could not hurt to stay for a meal, and surely I needed to get my strength up after my long illness.

‘Follow me then.’

‘But I have a nightgown on. I cannot go to the dining room attired for bed.’

‘You’ll find they don’t get dressed for dinner round here, lass.’

‘All the same, I would prefer it.’

‘Righto then, let’s get you some clothes.’

I followed her to the back of the ward where there was a large cupboard filled with clothing. Most of it was made of the same stiff calico as the nightgown I was wearing but some was of a thick grey flannel, more suitable for a bed covering than a garment. She pulled out a worn looking, patched skirt.

‘This looks about right,’ she said, holding it up against me. ‘Might be a bit big but you can just roll the waistband over a couple of times and it’ll be fine.’

A number had been picked out in red cotton on the waistband and there was a large brown stain down the front.

‘But where are my clothes? I was wearing a blue dress when I came here.’

‘No one has their own clothes here, lass. You get them from the cupboard when you’re dirty - properly dirty mind, remember the poor soul with the red raw hands in the bed next to you probably works in the laundry.’

I realised that there was little point in pressing the issue. Eventually I would get back my belongings. It did not matter so much. So, dressed like a beggar, I followed the woman through a maze of foul smelling corridors to the dining hall. I glanced into only one room as we walked and immediately wished that I had not. A partially bald woman was strapped to a chair. She held a handful of her own hair, and when I looked at her she let it drift slowly to the ground.
Outside the locked dining hall in a vestibule that was far too small for the purpose, dozens of women were waiting. They were laughing and arguing, pushing and jostling, altogether making a terrible racket. Then a bell sounded, the huge door swung open, and the women rushed in as if they were at the picnic races.

There was a great deal of fighting over seats, although they all looked the same to me. It surprised me that no one seemed to be supervising. There was only one warder in the room who appeared to be asleep in her chair. When the noise reached its peak, she lifted her head and looked about with a dazed expression, then yawned and let her chin drop back to her chest.

I was not entirely sure that she was a warder at all, for the woman was well dressed in a moire silk gown with a gold locket around her neck, but when I glanced down at her feet, I saw that she was wearing muddy workingmen's boots.

I was more than a little distressed by the commotion and hung back until all the women were seated before I made my way to the only spare bench space at the scrubbed cedar table. The young woman on my right was gently rocking from side to side with her arms tightly crossed. I did not like the rough look of the woman on my other side, who had a blackened eye.

A warder wearing an apron covered with marks came into the dining hall through a rear door and dumped a platter of meat in the middle of the table. Then I witnessed a sight that I shall never forget. Instead of having the food dished out to them, the women simply made a grab for it with the intention of getting as much as possible. I watched, horrified, as two of them had a tug-o-war over a bone. Had they been in an alehouse they would have been swiftly ejected, but here no one took the least bit of notice.

Several women were wailing because they had not got a fair share, while some sat stonily staring straight ahead, ignoring the food and the ruckus completely. A couple of others had rested their heads on the table and appeared, unbelievably, to be asleep.

The joint of meat, which had been very mangled as it was carved and resembled something mauled by large cats, lasted only a few moments before it all disappeared, leaving nothing but a congealing pool of grease and blood on the bottom of the plate which several women scraped up with their fingers. As well as the meat, there were tin mugs of tea and hunks of bread. Some of the women soaked their bread in the tea, leaving it to swell in the liquid until it resembled infant food.

Needless to say, I was not quick enough to procure even the tiniest shred of meat or crust of bread, which did not matter as I had lost my appetite entirely. I looked down
at my webbed fork and empty plate. The words *Lunatic Asylum* had been stamped on the plate in blue and the edges were very badly chipped and stained. I pushed it away from me.

The young woman on my right tugged my sleeve and I turned to her. I saw that she was very pretty although her eyes were terribly sad. She picked up a piece of bread from her own plate and offered it to me without a word. I was quite moved by this, although I could not bring myself to eat the bread and gave it back to her saying that I was not hungry.

Once the food was all gone, a woman sitting across from me suddenly noticed that I was a stranger.

‘Who’re you then?’ she said.

‘Miss Elizabeth Maudsley, and you are?’

‘A raving loonie.’

Several women seemed to think this was very amusing.

‘What brings you to this den of horrors then?’ asked someone else. ‘Are you melancholic or idiotic?’

‘Look at her, she’s got old maid’s insanity,’ said the first woman, which caused much hilarity among the others.

I glanced at an elderly woman nearby with her head on the table. Her jaw was slack and I could see inside her mouth. She was asleep but her eyelids flickered horribly as if she was beset by nightmares. I shuddered to remember my own.

‘How can she sleep with such a noise?’ I asked.

‘Old Mavis? She’s one of the Living Dead.’

The urge to escape was suddenly overwhelming. I stood up and clambered over the back of the bench with great difficulty, but before I got half way across the room, the sleeping warder suddenly sprang to life.

‘Where’re you going then Missy?’ she shouted.

‘I would like to speak to whoever is in charge. A mistake has been made and I seek to rectify it.’

Before she could answer, a bell sounded again. It was deafeningly loud.

‘Right then, out to the yard, you lot,’ said the warder when it finally stopped.

‘Hook it!’

The women all stood up and rushed out of the room. I had to raise my voice to be heard.
‘I need to see the Master-in-Lunacy as soon as possible.’

‘You’ll be lucky. Out to the yard like I said, you old devil.’

The girl who had given me the bread, slipped her hand gently into mine and led me away.

I felt rather shocked at being spoken to in such a way. I was also beginning to feel the first stirrings of panic. If no one would listen to me or take me to the person in charge, how was I ever to escape from this dreadful place? As I followed the girl down the stone steps to the yard, I was fighting back tears.

‘Thankyou for helping me,’ I said, desperate to hear a kind voice. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Violet.’

‘Such a pretty name. How long have you been here?’

‘I don’t know. A long time.’

The tears came then, spilling down my cheeks, and there was not a thing I could do to stop them. The girl patted my hair to soothe me, which only made me cry harder because it was what Polly used to do during my sickness when things were very bad.

The yard, which the women called an airing court, was just a patch of scuffed brown grass that was surrounded by bluestone walls. At one end was a water closet with no door so that anyone using it was in clear view of all the others. A woman was sitting in one of the stalls with her legs wide open, but she did not seem concerned by the women milling in the yard. I was not sure what would happen if I needed to use it myself while I was outside, for I could not bear the indignity of doing so in public.

In the middle of the yard was a sunshade built of rough wood in the shape of a rotunda. Several women were sitting on the hard benches inside it while others sat outside on the ground, paying no heed to the drizzling rain and biting cold.

My companion suddenly stopped patting my hair. She stood up. Panic gripped me.

‘Please don’t go,’ I said.

‘I must use the privy. I’ll be back.’

She left me, and I felt once again the desolate loneliness that I had not experienced since Polly came into my life. I had forgotten how much it hurt. I wrapped my arms tightly around my chest as I wrestled with the terrifying thought that it might be some time before I was free.
A woman with a friendly face came and sat beside me. She said that her name was Rosie. I was so grateful to hear her speak that I grasped her arm. She pulled it away and stood up, looking fearful.

‘I shouldn’t be here,’ I said quickly. ‘It’s a terrible mistake.’

‘Nor should I. My husband put me in here, but he’s the one that should be locked up.’

The realisation that she could not help me either made me slump to the floor of the sunshade. I had been here no time at all and already I was sitting in the dirt.

The woman squatted down beside me, keeping a cautious distance. ‘Are you all right?’

I shook my head. ‘I have to get out of here.’

‘But you can’t, if your husband has signed the certificate then you can’t get out until he agrees to take you back.’

‘I don’t have a husband.’

‘Lucky you then.’

I looked closely at Rosie. She had a good sweet face and did not seem in the least bit mad.

‘Why did he bring you here?’

‘I had a . . . oh dear, my last babe was born dead and I was quite wild with grief for a time . . . everyone told me to be stoic, but I couldn’t do it. My husband was ashamed.’

I spoke without thinking. ‘Your little one is resting safe in the arms of all your loved ones who have passed to the other side.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I don’t.’ I shook my head and looked down at the dirt. ‘I don’t know.’

It soon became clear that I was not going to find anyone in charge until we had left the airing court, which apparently would not be before it was time for the next meal. Two warders were sitting on the verandah playing cards and taking little notice of us. When I approached them for help, they were not at all interested in my predicament. In fact, one of them told me that if I did not keep quiet they would throw me in the refractory yard, which they said was much worse. I could not imagine it.
So I sat under the sunshade, shivering with cold while the rain pelted down and waited. Violet sat beside me and I began to tell her some of my story, although I said nothing about being a medium.

‘They brought me here in a carriage with padded walls,’ I said, ‘and the men were brutes. It was awful.’

‘I remember the black carriage. I didn’t know where I was going either at first.’

‘How did you end up here?’ I asked.

Violet said that she was orphaned at a young age but taken in and cared for by a loving and wealthy Aunt. The Aunt was widowed but she had one child; a daughter called Constance.

Her voice dropped to a whisper as she spoke of her cousin. ‘Constance hated me with all her heart.’

‘But why? How could she?’

‘She was jealous and didn’t want to share her mother’s love. And she knew that it was stated in Aunt’s will that I would inherit half of her estate. She didn’t want that.’

‘You poor girl.’

‘It wasn’t so bad. I had the love of my aunt to sustain me . . . while she was alive.’

She went on to tell me that her Aunt had become very ill with a brain fever that caused her an agonising death over two slow months. During this time her mind was muddled and dull. Constance took full advantage of her weakened state. She had a new will drawn up and her mother signed it. Violet knew nothing of this until after the funeral when the will was read out.

‘I told Constance that I wouldn’t keep quiet about it because it was not what my Aunt would have wanted.’

‘That was brave, you did the right thing.’

‘Constance was well known in society by this time and didn’t want word of her deception getting out. She’d become engaged to be married to a dubious man of medicine. I think you can guess the rest.’

‘They had you sent to Kew?’

Violet nodded.

‘But I would not ever wish it any different,’ she said vehemently.

‘Why ever not?’

Her eyes were brimming with tears and she would say no more.
It was not clear how long we stayed outside for, and none of the other women could enlighten me on this matter for they had all lost track of time long ago. One woman told me that I would know the time was up because the bell would ring. As far as I could tell, a clanging bell directed their whole lives, as if they were children in a schoolyard.

After what seemed like a lifetime of waiting, I detected a change in the atmosphere. Excitement seemed to be in the air and several women whistled in a lewd way. I looked up and was shocked and thrilled to find Mr Gilbert Banks striding towards me.

I leapt up, ran to him and immediately began imploring. ‘Oh Mr Banks, there’s been a terrible mistake. You must help me, oh please help me.’

He took both my hands in his and held them for a moment. I had never touched a gentleman’s hands without wearing gloves before.

‘Miss Maudsley, as soon as I heard you were here, I came straight away.’

The sense of relief I felt to see a familiar face was staggering. It had stopped raining, so I sat down on the nearest bench and Mr Banks sat beside me. He was wearing an apricot rosebud in his buttonhole. It was the brightest thing I had seen since I had been incarcerated and the sight of it quite affected me. I wanted to fill my nose with its sweet untainted perfume.

‘You must call me Elizabeth,’ I said, for social protocol seemed suddenly irrelevant.

‘And I’m Gilbert.’

I glanced over at the warders. They did not seem to be at all interested in Gilbert’s presence and were playing cards as if he was not there at all. ‘But surely it’s forbidden for a male warder to come among the women?’

‘Yes, it’s forbidden. But you’ll find the rules do not mean so much here at Kew.’

I could feel the other women staring at us intently. Several were looking at Gilbert in a way that suggested it had been a very long time since they had seen a member of the opposite sex.

‘Mr Frost pretended to be my cousin and had me committed, you must go to my house in Hawthorne and fetch Polly, tell her what he has done so she can come and get me out of here.’
Gilbert went red in the face. Then he slapped his thigh with his hand and the smacking sound was loud. ‘By God I’ll make that scoundrel pay! I’ve never trusted the man, never trusted him one little bit.’

‘I just want to go home.’

‘You will, Elizabeth. I promise you that.’

‘You’ll go and get Polly?’

‘Immediately.’

I then did something utterly impetuous. I seized Gilbert’s hand, pressed it to my mouth and kissed it. It was the most daring thing I had ever done in my life, but this was no time to be a lady. Gilbert was my only hope and I wanted him to know just how desperately grateful I was.

He blushed quite scarlet and I found myself blushing in response. Then he stood up.

‘Don’t worry Elizabeth, you’ll be home in no time,’ he said, before hurrying away.
After Gilbert left, we went in for dinner, then the rest of the day was spent back in the airing court. It was long and tedious but I was full of hope that I would soon be free. Physically I felt stronger than I had in many months and was confident my past troubles had left me for good.

I sat beside Violet for most of the afternoon but she had become silent since her strange comment earlier in the day. I tried my best to draw her into a conversation, but with little success. Still, just having her beside me was a comfort. I did not feel so alone.

The women around me had devised various ways of passing the time. A couple were throwing a stick to each other, some drew pictures in the dirt with their fingers or played noughts and crosses, while others prowled around the perimeter of their cage as slowly as they possibly could.

One woman was furiously slicing into the great wooden gates with a sharp stone, her face twisted in anger. I looked later when she had gone, and saw that the gate was covered with cross-hatching in different sizes and at various angles, all in neat rows like some kind of secret code.

There were other women, at least a dozen, who seemed only to sleep. They made a very sorry spectacle indeed, curled up in foetal bundles on the ground. These drowsy women were the ones the others called the *Living Dead*. They were once boisterous and outspoken, lewd or inappropriate; some had tried to take their own lives, or someone else’s. Essentially, these women had given the warders trouble. They were heavily sedated with choral every morning to keep them still.

When I asked them about it, the others assured me that this was better than a life spent locked in a camisole or a solitary cell, and probably it was. At least they were insensible to the horror of their own lives and the slow limp of passing time.

One of the sleeping women was lying facedown with her skirt bunched up around her thighs. The legs of her drawers were frayed and torn. I pulled her skirt down and was surprised at just how inert she was. My mind was taken back to that day in the
street, remembering the drunken woman with the bruised shins. It seemed so very long ago.

I arranged her skirt so that it covered her ankles, then the sleeping woman moaned and rolled heavily onto her back. Dirt, small stones and twigs were pressed into her clothes. The skin of her face was crumpled and her hair was cropped so short I could see her scalp. Suddenly she opened her eyes and tried to speak, but no intelligible words came out. In moments she was asleep again. I pushed away tears with the back of my hand.

Violet appeared suddenly at my side. ‘Come and look at the view. It’s nice.’

She took my hand and we walked to the opposite side of the airing court where there was a low wall concealing a ha ha at least fifty feet deep. The style was the same as that used to stop livestock wandering into gardens, except the drop was far steeper.

Looking from this vantage point, I could see a sweeping view over pleasant green fields and farms down to the River Yarra, which wound about itself quite violently like a kink in a rubber hose. The sprawling, densely packed suburbs of the inner city were visible beyond.

Due to the quantity of black smoke that plumed up into the air, I presumed that I was looking down on the familiar working class suburbs of Collingwood and Fitzroy, with their many factories and slums. I remembered Mrs Parson’s parlour with a pang of fondness, for it would seem a luxury beyond belief after the foul confines of this place. In the distance I could just make out the Dandenong range, although the view of these magnificent hills was much affected by the thick fog that hung stagnant in the air. A gust of wind blew up from the river, bringing with it the rancid stench of blood, offal and dung from the tanneries and slaughterhouses.

‘That’s dreadful,’ I said, turning away.

Violet shrugged. ‘At least we don’t have to bury our own nightsoil like they do at some places.’

I watched as a woman walked quickly past me, her chest swinging freely under her thin dress. We all wore corsets of the lightest and most inconsequential type with very little boning. They did up in the front and had no laces for adjustment. The corsets were not made to our own particular shape, and came in only large or small, standard sizes that neither flattered nor fitted anyone. I had never witnessed the movement of women’s bodies beneath their clothing, except occasionally on the streets, and then I had only allowed myself the briefest glance. Here it was impossible not to look.
Now my health was restored, I knew that Polly and I would be parting ways with Mr Frost for good. Once she learned of his terrible treachery, Polly would want nothing to do with the man. Escape from our situation had seemed insurmountable when I was ill, but it no longer did. I had enough money stashed away to last us some time if we were careful. We would simply need to lay low for a while, perhaps in Bendigo or even New South Wales, until Mr Frost had all but forgotten us.

I was beginning to see that I could no longer work as a medium. Not just because my reputation would be ruined, but because the thought of telling another lie made me feel repulsed. I was deeply ashamed of what I had done. My illness had been a punishment I truly deserved. Now I had stopped being a medium, my health had returned. This rationale made no sense, but I could think of no other explanation.

During the long hours of that day, I often found my thoughts wandering to Gilbert. When I kissed his hands, and I blushed deeply to remember this shameless act, it had sent a powerful feeling through me. I was not so naive that I did not know what this meant, but it seemed impossible that he could ever feel that way for me. For this reason, I tried to curb my dreams so that I would not be disappointed. But they were more persistent than any nightmare had ever been.

My sweet thoughts were interrupted by the appearance of a warder who was swearing loudly as she pushed a woman into the airing court. The woman was locked up in a canvas camisole. I had never seen one before and was shocked by the cruelty of it. Her arms were tight against her body, the shape of them barely visible. At her back and neck were large padlocks, which would make lying down excruciating. The woman’s nose was bloodied and her face was white with terror.

The warder shoved her hard and she stumbled towards me. I caught her just before she pitched head first into the dirt. The woman put her head on my shoulder and began to sob. I was suddenly incensed.

‘Excuse me, Madam,’ I shouted to the warder’s wide retreating back, ‘but there’s no need to treat this poor woman so roughly.’

She spun around and stared with mean, glittering eyes. ‘Are you speaking to me?’

‘No, no, no,’ the woman whispered in my ear between sobs, ‘be quiet, please be quiet.’

The warder strode over to us. She had keys on a belt around her thick waist and they clinked together as she walked. Her nose was flat and disfigured, as though it had been broken.
‘I said, are you talking to me?’

I put my arms around the bound woman’s back to support her.

‘Yes, I was.’ My voice faltered.

‘You’ll call me Matron,’ she said, stabbing her finger in my direction. ‘I’m in charge around here, and no more of your lip or you’ll regret it something terrible.’

Then she stepped forward and slapped my shoulder. Her face was so close to mine, I could see the red veins in her eyes and smell liquor on her breath. The slap did not hurt much and was not hard enough to push me over, but I was beginning to feel very afraid. The woman in the camisole started quivering like a frightened animal.

All of a sudden I noticed the stillness and silence. The women did not move and no one was making a sound. It was as if they were turned to stone. All the singing, shrieking, crying and laughing, which I was beginning to get used to, had completely ceased. I actually heard the trill of a bird. Fear hung thickly in the air.

After what seemed like five minutes or more, but was undoubtedly much less, the silence was pierced by the clang of the bell. The woman in the camisole lifted her head off my shoulder and struggled toward the great heavy gates as fast as she could. Everyone else followed. I wanted to run, but feared making Matron angrier.

‘Come on Sal,’ called a warder from the verandah, ‘your tea’s getting cold.’

It broke the spell. Matron pulled her face away and turned to her mate. ‘Righto, coming’ But then she spun back around. ‘You’ll keep out of my way if you know what’s good for you.’

I nodded, and hid my hands in my skirt so she could not see them shake.

Later that night when we were all lying in our beds, the warder on duty left us and closed the door firmly behind her. I could hear the key turning in the lock and the sound of several bolts being slid across. We were locked in, but at least we were alone. The atmosphere in the dark room immediately began to lighten as women started chatting to each other.

I was not afraid of the dark. No longer did I sweat or tremble, see ghostly apparitions and nightmarish creatures or fear sleep more than death. I was in good health. It had been many months since I had been so well.

Violet’s bed was some distance from mine, but I had noticed there was an empty one beside her before the lights were put out. I stood up and felt my way over to it.
Several women cursed as I stumbled over them and I stubbed my toe in the darkness, but eventually found my way there.

‘Do you mind if I sleep here?’ I asked.

‘I’d like that.’

I climbed into the cold bed and pulled the blanket over me. I could not see Violet’s face but I could hear her steady breathing.

‘Will the warder be back?’ I asked.

‘No. We’re left alone now until morning.’

There was a loud stomping, crashing sound coming up through the floor. ‘What’s that noise?’

‘Just the warder’s boots on the flagstones downstairs. It’ll stop soon when they go to bed.’

I turned on my side to face her. As my eyes became accustomed to the darkness, I could just make out the shape of her handsome features.

‘I don’t like the nights here,’ she said.

‘No. But at least we’re left alone.’

I realised with a start that she was crying.

‘Violet? Are you all right?’

‘Yes,’ she said, but I knew that she wasn’t.

‘It’s a dreadful place, but I’m sure you’ll get out soon.’

‘No I won’t. There’s no one to get me out.’

My mind was working away furiously. Perhaps when Polly came for me we could take Violet too. Surely it would not be that hard to get her released when she was so obviously sane.

‘Maybe when my friend comes for me in the morning, you can come too. You could stay with us until you were settled.’

‘Oh Beth, you don’t know much about this place at all. It’s almost impossible to get out of here.’

‘Beth?’

‘Do you mind if I call you that? Only you look like a Beth to me, and it’s such a gentle name.’

I could feel myself blushing and was glad of the darkness. ‘Beth is nice. I’ve always liked it. I had an friend who called me that once, but Father didn’t approve.’

‘You have a father?’
‘Both my parents are dead.’
‘I’m sorry.’
‘It was very sudden. I didn’t know what to do . . . such an awful shock.’
I found myself telling Violet all about the ledgers and Mr. T. Smith, even though I hardly knew her, and I realised that I had wanted to talk to someone about it for a very long time.
‘That’s terrible,’ she said. ‘And have you forgiven him?’
It was such an unusual question, I did not know how to reply. ‘I don’t know,’ I said, truthfully.
‘Grieving is the most terrible hurt of all,’ she said.
‘Have you lost someone you loved too?’
‘Yes,’ her voice wavered as she spoke, ‘Lily my true dear friend.’
I felt a prod on my shoulder and I turned over.
‘Hello there,’ said the woman on my other side. ‘I’m Mavis Smith from Ballarat.’
‘Nice to meet you Mavis. I’m . . . Beth.’ I smiled to hear myself say it.
‘Is she crying again? Poor Violet, they would go to sleep holding hands you know.’
‘She must miss her terribly,’ I whispered. ‘How long ago did she die?’
‘I don’t know, seems like a very long time now. They transferred her to another ward, then the next thing we heard she was dead. She was only a young thing too. Violet didn’t speak for months after.’
‘The poor girl.’
‘Have you been to Ballarat?’
‘No, I haven’t.’
‘It’s a nice place, cold in the winter though, gets right into your bones.’
I wanted to turn back to Violet but did not wish to offend the woman.
‘My Father used to have the butcher’s shop in the main street,’ she continued.
‘Really.’
‘His pork sausages were famous for miles around.’
‘Lovely. I’m sorry but I’m very tired.’
‘You go to sleep then. Don’t mind me.’
‘Thank you.’
I turned back to Violet then slipped my hand under her blanket. It took me a moment to find her hand in the darkness, but when I did, she squeezed mine tightly. I lay awake for hours.

The next morning, I had only just entered the airing court when Gilbert arrived. He wore a white rose in his buttonhole this time. I heard him tell the warder that I was needed for some task, and then he led me away so easily I wondered if I could have walked out myself.

We did not go far, just to a small room that he told me was used by those who were allowed occasional visitors. The room was in a relatively good state of repair, freshly painted and with a window that was rather larger than in the wards, but like all the other windows in the place, it had safety restraint fitted at the top to stop it from opening wide enough to allow a person through, and was undoubtedly solid steel under the wood veneer.

I sat down on a low wooden chair and found my mind turned to my appearance. My hair had been hastily put up and I did not have enough pins to keep several thin strands from fluttering about my face. It had not been combed either, for I did not wish to use the comb with missing teeth I had been given for fear of vermin. When Gilbert was not looking, I twisted up a few loose strands and poked them into the bun at the back of my head.

I need say no more about the hopeless corset, but suffice to say there were bits of me that were in the wrong place and there was not a thing I could do about it. It bothered me terribly to look like this in front of a gentleman, particularly Gilbert. I tried to arrange myself nicely, but with even the slightest movement, the effect was lost.

I had been so caught up with these thoughts, that I had not noticed how uneasy Gilbert looked. Suddenly I sensed something was terribly wrong.

I stood up. ‘Please don’t keep me in suspense. Where’s Polly? When will she come?’

But he was shaking his head and would not look me in the eye.

‘Elizabeth, please sit down and I’ll tell you everything.’

‘Just tell me quickly. I would rather have it over with.’

‘I think you should sit. I’m afraid I have some rather bad news.’

I sat in the chair, preparing myself for the worst, although I was not sure what that would be.
'Polly will not be coming.’

‘But why not? Couldn’t you find her?’

Gilbert thrust his hands deep into his pockets and I could hear the jangle of coins. ‘It pains me to bring you such bad news, but I’m afraid Polly is gone.’

‘Gone? Whatever do you mean gone?’

‘Your house is quite empty. There’s not a stick of furniture left, or anything else for that matter. I’m afraid you have been robbed.’

I grasped the arms of the chair. ‘My money, it was hidden under a floorboard in my room.’

‘There were a couple of boards pulled up upstairs. I thought it odd –

‘But Polly wouldn’t do this, she would never do this to me.’

‘Elizabeth, I’m so very sorry to have to tell you, but I am afraid she’s run off with Mr Frost.’

‘No, I won’t believe it. There has to be a mistake.’

‘It’s true, and they have cleaned you out completely.’

The room began to swing violently like it had when I was ill. There was a feeling of sickness and dread deep in my stomach.

Gilbert reached out and touched my hand.

‘Polly was seen by a neighbour, loading up a wagon with Mr Frost.’

‘He made her do it. He must have threatened her, oh the poor girl, I must help her.’

‘Elizabeth please, that is the wrong conclusion.’

‘How do you know? You didn’t know her.’

Gilbert hung his head.

‘I must know everything, tell me everything you know.’

‘Your neighbour –

‘Mrs Perkins, she’s a busybody.’

‘She told me Polly was quite gay and . . . and they embraced fondly, I don’t believe she was being forced to do anything against her will.’

I looked down at the coarse weave of my grey skirt. ‘She wouldn’t do it.’

‘I’m truly sorry but please, you must believe what I say.’

‘No, it’s wrong. I have to get out of here and discover the truth for myself.’

‘I’m afraid you will not be leaving quite as soon as you think. A family member must take care of you after your release, and a doctor must agree to it.’
When the anger came with a rush, I was glad of it. ‘That’s ridiculous! I’m sane, surely anyone can see that for themselves? Besides, I don’t have any family to come and get me out.’

‘There are other ways around it, we can petition the Master-in-Lunacy, but these things all take time.’

I shook my head.

‘There’s something else. I’ve been speaking with the doctor who attended you while you were in the receiving ward, doubtless you do not remember him, for you were so very ill. He has indicated that he would not allow you to be released at present for you are a danger to yourself.’

‘Gilbert, I can assure you, the only person in danger is Mr Frost, should I ever get hold of him.’

‘He believes that you’re an opium addict.’

I laughed, for it was so preposterous.

‘Your illness was withdrawal from the drug, the doctor is sure of it, and the fact that you are now so well has convinced him that this was indeed the case. He believes that if you are let out you will once again find your way to an opium den.’

‘An opium den? Me? That is the most ludicrous thing I’ve ever heard in my life. I have never taken opium or any other drug not given to me by a man of medicine.’

‘I must say, I found it very surprising. I cannot imagine you among the Chinese in Little Bourke Street, Elizabeth.’

‘The very idea of it. Goodness me.’

I giggled then, for the idea of me in an opium den with a pipe and pigtails rather tickled my fancy, but then the horrible truth hit me with such a force that I bent over with the pain of it.

‘My dear God . . . every night Polly would pour me a sherry, it was the only liquor I ever took. I found it calmed me immensely, but now I think of it, that was when the dreadful dreams and sickness started. . . .then she would bring me tea in the morning, it tasted a little strange sometimes but the water here can be so bad . . .it cannot be.’

‘If she was giving you the drug sometimes then withdrawing it at others, you would certainly have all the symptoms the doctor described.’

‘No,’ I shook my head. ‘She’s like my own sister.’

Gilbert took both my hands in his. I could feel that my cheeks were wet but I was not aware that I was crying. I felt utterly numb.
The days after this dreadful news were a very dark time. I felt nothing at first because I refused to accept it, but when I finally did, the grief came crashing down on me with a violence I had not felt since my parent’s death.

For several days I could not speak of what had happened. Violet was gentle with me and led me around by the hand like a child. Without her it would have been so much worse. I tried not to cry when there were warders around, because Violet had said I would be given a strong purgative called sugar-on-a-spoon that would make me violently ill if they thought I was melancholy.

I began to think about my life with Polly, the friend I had been so desperate for, in the light of what she had done. There had been times when her words or behaviour had made me unsure of her feelings for me but I always dismissed it. I would blame her harsh comments or thoughtless deeds on her time spent living on the streets or the hard life she had endured, but I would never blame her, and I would certainly never allow myself to think about it too much. I saw now that I had been wrong.

Then there were the secrets and the things Polly said that seemed to make no sense. I had stifled my suspicions and ignored my doubts because her friendship was the only one I had, and I was desperate to cling onto it, no matter what the cost.

Despite realising all of this, I still firmly believed that Mr Frost had made her poison me. I did not know his motivation, but I suspected that he simply did it because he disliked me and wanted Polly entirely under his influence. Polly had her faults, but I knew that she would never do something so evil without being forced.

I cried the most at night when a terrible despair would descend on me. Although she was weighed down by her own great sadness, Violet would creep into my bed and soothe my forehead with her fingers until eventually I fell asleep. I was surprised by her tenderness and affection, as we had known each other such a short time, but everything was different at Kew.

After a couple of days had passed and I could not keep it to myself for a moment longer, I told Violet about Polly’s betrayal. But I did not tell her I had been a medium, because of the great shame I felt about it.
‘Mr Frost made her do it, I just know he did,’ I said.
‘You don’t know that for sure, Beth.’
‘Why would she want to hurt me?’
‘I don’t know, only you can answer that.’

But I could not. If she had wanted to be rid of me, Polly could simply have run off with him. I would have been powerless to stop her. Why did she need to make me suffer? It made no sense. He was wholly to blame; he had to be.

‘Mr Frost is a wicked man. No doubt he enjoyed seeing me in pain.’
‘Perhaps that is it then. But still . . .’
‘What?’
‘A true friend wouldn’t do it, not even if she was threatened.’

I did not reply, for I knew what Violet said was right.

Fortunately I was soon despatched to work in the sewing room. Spending my days outside, immersed in black thoughts and with nothing to distract me, would have been unbearable.

There were at least a ten sewing rooms at Kew, and the women in my ward who were fit enough to do so, worked in three of them most days. I was assigned to a different room than Violet, but in the push and shove to queue up, I switched to Violet’s group and no one seemed to notice.

My first day in the sewing room was dismal. Dozens of woman sat bent over at long tables, darning socks and mending rough clothes like the ones we all wore, while others worked the industrial sewing machines. The treadle machines made a steady rattling noise most of the time, but sometimes they were worked by hand over a bulky seam. I would hear the popping sound of thick cloth being punctured with a needle that needed sharpening. The sound made me shudder until I got used to it.

The bluestone walls at Kew were full of holes like honeycomb, the perfect home for vermin. When the machines stopped for a more than a few minutes, mice would race across the floor and under the tables. Then when the noise started up again, they magically disappeared, but you never forgot that they were there.

Not all the women were mending asylum garments. I was surprised to see several working with brightly coloured fabrics. A vermilion red silk in particular stood out starkly in the dreariness of the place. One woman was even stitching glittering beads onto the bodice of a wedding gown.
I sat on the bench beside a tiny silver-haired woman. Violet was on my other side. Across the table sat a rough-looking girl I had not liked the look of in the dining hall. She glanced up briefly but did not smile.

The warden on duty came over and handed me a grubby nightdress with a rip under the arm. ‘Fix it.’

I nodded and she walked away.

‘Hello there dear,’ whispered the old woman beside me. ‘You’re a new face.’

‘I’m Elizabeth . . . Beth. Nice to meet you.’

The woman grinned. ‘They all call me Aggie round here.’

‘Is that your real name?’

‘She’s Queen bleeding Victoria, since you’re asking,’ said the surly girl from across the table.

‘Don’t you mind her,’ said Aggie, patting my arm. ‘She’s nothing but a filthy slattern.’

I glanced nervously at the girl, afraid the insult might incite some sort of unpleasant altercation, but she was working steadily and had either not heard or chosen to ignore it.

‘Beth’s my friend,’ said Violet.

I smiled at her, my eyes filling with tears yet again.

Aggie looked me up and down and gave me a wink. It made me feel uncomfortable but I did not comment on it. Then she went back to work on a restraint camisole that was spotted with sinister dark marks. Patches of coloured fabric had been used to mend the camisole in places, giving it the incongruous appearance of someone’s favourite old piece of clothing. With great care and precision, Aggie was stitching a piece of peacock blue silk around the neck of it.

‘Why are you sewing a silk collar on that awful thing?’ I asked

She suddenly looked afraid. ‘The warden said I could. It’s only a scrap, they couldn’t use it.’

‘Of course not, and you’re doing a fine job. I only wondered why you were doing it.’

‘It’s old Flo’s, the neck scratches her something dreadful and she’s given to terrible itchy rashes.’

‘Oh. I see.’

‘It’s a surprise, for her birthday next week. You won’t tell her, will you?’
I shook my head. ‘Is she . . . I mean, does she wear it very often?’

‘Always, but not this week because she’s off having treatment. That’s how come I can surprise her.’

‘That’s a kind thing to do, Aggie,’ said Violet.

‘And the wedding gown?’ I asked. ‘Who’s that for?’

‘It’ll be for one of the warders. Actually, come to think of it, it’s probably to sell on.’ Aggie’s thin shoulders shook as she giggled. ‘Them lot are all too ugly to find themselves a fella, unless they were blind.’

Her words sounded familiar, and I remembered when Polly had said something similar to me. It had stung, but at the time I had dismissed it. How quick I had been to push away the things I did not like and focus only on what I wanted to believe was true. I had given her my unconditional love and never once stopped to consider if that was the right thing to do. Someone cared for me, or so I thought. At the time it had seemed to be all that mattered.

I picked up the nightgown and examined the tear. It was large and jagged and would be difficult to repair, but it was wonderful to turn my mind to something other than my own sadness.

In front of me was a pincushion pierced with needles and pins of various sizes, most of them rather rusty, a few rolls of coarse black thread and a stubby piece of chalk. I threaded a needle and began the task in earnest, but my sewing skills had always been very poor. When I had finished, I could see that it was a rough repair; the stitches were too large and very uneven. I doubted that it would hold for very long.

Violet was working carefully on the hem of a petticoat, which she was mending as neatly as any seamstress ever could.

‘You’re clever,’ I said.

‘I like sewing.’

Aggie sighed. ‘You wait till your eyes are shot like mine are, you won’t like it much then.’

‘Can’t you get a job somewhere else?’ I asked.

‘What? Like the laundry? Over my dead body.’

The warder was walking around the tables and inspecting everyone’s work. I could hear her berating a woman for her careless sewing and dreaded the moment she would come to our table. I tried to quickly repair my rough work, but only managed to make it look even cruder.
'Look’s like it’s been done by an idiot child,’ I heard the warder say. ‘You’ll have to do better than that.’

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see her advancing on our table. Everyone was stitching very diligently and had stopped talking. Then, as the warder was busy examining the first piece of work from our table, Violet grabbed my nightgown and exchanged it for her petticoat.

At first I was not sure what she was doing, and I could not ask her because the warder was now very close. Then suddenly it became clear.

‘This isn’t like you Violet,’ said the warder. ‘What a damn mess.’
‘Sorry Miss. I’m not feeling myself today.’
‘It’s not good enough. Working in here’s a privilege, don’t you forget that.’
‘No Miss.’
The warder threw the nightgown down on the table. ‘You’d better get stitching.’
Before I could say anything, the warder was picking up the petticoat that lay in front of me.

‘Not bad, not bad at all,’ she said. ‘Are you new?’
‘Yes, but I have to tell you that I –
‘Shut it.’
‘But –’
‘I said, shut it. You might be able to sew but you’d better not answer back or I’ll get the strap out.’

Aggie gave me a kick under the table. I said no more. The warder threw me another torn petticoat then moved on.

I could not believe what Violet had done. No one had ever taken a risk to protect me before and I felt enormously moved by it. Once the warder was well out of earshot and busy telling off someone else, I turned to Violet and thanked her.

She shrugged. ‘It was nothing.’
‘Yes it was. I’ve never . . . it was a lovely thing to do.’
‘You don’t want to end up in the laundry.’
I looked down at my work but tears blurred my vision.

‘Watch me sewing Beth,’ said Violet. ‘I’ll teach you. It’s not hard.’
I willed away the tears and watched intently for a few minutes. Then I tried to copy what she had done. I took my time with it and made my stitches much smaller and closer together. The result was not bad at all.
After she had finished repairing my nightgown, Violet began work on a chemise that was riddled with holes. Some of them were tiny but others were great rents that only a skilled seamstress like Violet could hope to repair. It looked like someone had taken to the garment with a pair of scissors. She held up the damaged chemise before she started so that I could see what a mess it was.

‘Just imagine this is your heart,’ said Violet. ‘Every stitch I make and every hole that’s mended closes over a bit of your sadness and heals your heart.’

I let the tears fall.

It took Violet two days to finish mending the chemise, but when she had we stole it and hid it under my mattress. When I was feeling very low, I would take it out and feel her neat stitches in the darkness; how smoothly the rips had been repaired. It gave me great comfort.

When the warder had finished inspecting all the work in the sewing room, she bashed her fist on the desk three times to bring us all to attention. Everyone stopped talking instantly.

‘It’s time to award today’s prize,’ she said with a smirk. ‘For the worst work I’ve ever seen by someone who should know better.’

Then she threw a garment at Violet and it landed on her head. There were giggles from the women as Violet reached up to remove it. The garment was an enormous pair of men’s under-drawers.

‘Fix them, there’s a hole been blown out the back.’

Aggie giggled and I gave her a harsh look.

The warder seemed satisfied by this act of humiliation. She sat back down at her desk, rested her head on her plump forearms and promptly fell asleep.

It was all my fault and I felt terrible. I looked at Violet but she did not seem at all troubled by what had happened. She put her finger through the hole in the drawers and wiggled it in the warder’s direction. There were stifled giggles all around.

Fortunately the rest of the morning passed without incident. I did my best to sew as neatly as I could, and to cause no further trouble.

When the bell for dinner finally rang, my fingers had been pricked so many times I was beginning to get spots of blood on the mending. I was extremely grateful to leave the room before the warder noticed.

The women walked in orderly single file out into the stone flagged hallway that led to the dining hall, but once they were out of the warder’s view, they ran and jostled
for the best place in the queue. Although I did not push, I found myself standing my ground much more firmly than I had before.

Violet had taken to saving me a place if she was in first, and I would do the same for her. We got food for each other too, because if you were late for a meal it would all be gone.

Someone touched my shoulder and I whirled around in alarm, ready to protect myself, but it was only Gilbert. He was smiling broadly.

‘I’m so pleased to see you,’ I said, trying not to succumb to tears.

‘I felt I must come and see how you are getting along.’

I could only nod.

Gilbert’s hair was neatly combed with a low side part. This flattered his small features and broadened his rather thin face. I noticed that he had ears of the kind that men often complain about, sticking forward sharply as if they were on constant alert, but they gave him a boyish air and were not at all unattractive. He wore a yellow native flower in his buttonhole. It was a spiky thing but the colour suited him well. Over his neat jacket was a workman’s apron, spotlessly clean and tied loosely around his slight waist.

‘Gilbert, have you put my petition to the Master-of-Lunacy yet?’ I asked.

‘I did it as soon as I left the asylum but I must tell you, these things are not considered in any great haste.’

I felt a sharp pang of disappointment. It had been silly to get my hopes up.

By now the hallway was empty, the women having all hurried in to their dinner.

‘How did you get the bruise on your cheek?’

I reached my hand up to my face, for I had not known I had a bruise, but that morning I had slipped in the muck on the privy floor and banged my face on the wall.

‘I’m sure it’s nothing.’

‘I fear they’re not treating you well, Elizabeth.’

‘Would you call me Beth? I’d really like you to.’

He smiled. ‘I have a cousin called Beth. It’s a nice name.’

I was very concerned about how I might smell. Bathing was not looked upon as a necessity and I had not even had a proper wash for some time. I wanted to apologise for my state, but could not bring myself to talk of such things with him.

I took a step backwards. Then realised it might seem insulting.
‘I’ll do what I can to get you released as soon as possible, but I’m just a warder. My powers are very limited.’

‘What are you doing working in this terrible place, Gilbert? It doesn’t suit you at all.’

‘I believe we share some similarity there. I’m simply trying to bring some comfort to the people here, just as you did in your work as a medium.’

My bruise suddenly began to throb. I cast my eyes to the ground and my face burned.

‘There has been a shift recently towards moral therapy and I’m trying to do what little I can to encourage it.’

‘Moral therapy?’

‘It means little more than treating people with compassion and understanding instead of brutality, but I’m afraid it’s little used here at Kew yet.’

‘You’re a good man, Gilbert.’

He waved his hand in dismissal.

‘I like your buttonhole. You’re the only warder who wears one.’

‘This place needs some brightening up,’ he said, taking the flower out then pressing it into my hand. ‘Put it in your pocket so no one can see.’

‘Thankyou.’

I put the flower to my nose and smelled a summer’s day.

‘I must get back to my ward before I’m missed.’

‘Yes, of course.’

He took my hand in his. My nails were black and my fingertips bloody, but I did not pull it away.

‘Please don’t despair, Beth.’

And then he was gone.

I was worried about going into the dining hall late, but I need not have been. The women had been left alone and were busy having a potato throwing fight. A potato flew past my head, barely missing me as I entered the room, then it hit the wall with a wet splat.

There was a terrible uproar inside. At least half the women were engaged in a joyous pelting of each other with soggy potatoes. There were marks all over the walls where they had missed their target, and dozens of potatoes had been trampled underfoot. A couple of women sat quietly at the table, as if nothing at all out of the ordinary was
happening, others squatted on the floor, feasting on the spoils, but a few were huddled over looking terrified and confused.

I could not see Violet, so I took shelter under the table beside several others, including a woman who I recognised from the receiving ward where I had spent my first dreadful days.

‘I remember you,’ she said.
‘And I remember you. Your name’s Maud, isn’t it?’
She nodded vigorously. ‘Maud the murderess.’
‘Yes, of course.’ For some reason the words did not seem to bother me much now.

‘Don’t believe a word of it,’ said a sickly-looking girl with sticky eyes. ‘I’ll bet she ain’t never even wrung a chook’s neck.’

Maud looked very put out at this. ‘Oh yes I have. I’m a celebrated murderess. Don’t you dare tell me I’m not.’

‘Why didn’t you hang then?’

‘Do you think we’ll be in trouble if we’re discovered under the table by a warder?’ I said, hoping to head off an argument.

‘Not in as much trouble as them lot throwing the taters.’

‘I murdered my husband and my mother and father and all my little kiddies.’

‘Take no notice of her. She’s just insane,’ said another woman, giving me a reassuring smile. ‘My name’s Catherine, who are you then?’

‘Beth.’
She narrowed her eyes. ‘Not Elizabeth?’

‘Yes.’

‘Elizabeth Maudlsey?’

I nodded.

‘I knew it,’ she said sounding excited. ‘You’re that famous medium they’re all talking about.’

Maud suddenly started to look most strange, as if she had just got a nasty shock, and she began rocking back and forth. Then, to my absolute horror, she let out the loudest scream I had ever heard. The potato throwing immediately ceased, but the scream, inevitably, bought several of the warders scurrying into the dining hall like rats coming out of their holes.
‘What’s going on here then?’ said the raspy voice of Matron. ‘You pack of filthy devils.’

The women were so quiet it was as if the room were empty. I did not know what to do. It seemed sensible to stay hidden under the table and hope that I would not be detected, although this seemed extremely unlikely as Maud was sobbing beside me. I patted her back in an attempt to soothe her, but it made little difference.

The other women under the table were shaking their fists and threatening Maud with all sorts of dreadful things, if she would not be quiet.

‘Who’s that snivelling under the table then?’ said Matron.

A woman behind me gave me a rough shove and I banged my head on the table leg. It stung terribly. I gasped loudly and it was all I could do not to cry out.

Unfortunately the noise alerted Matron to our position. I watched the sway of her dirty apron hem and her swollen ankles as she walked towards us.

Then she bent over and her puffy face, all the more beastly for being upside down, was so close to mine I could smell the rot in her brown teeth.

‘I should’ve guessed it’d be you. You’re nothing but a trouble maker.’

I did not say that I was merely taking shelter and had not thrown any food, for I feared provoking her. So I lowered my eyes in what I hoped was a conciliatory gesture.

‘Got nothing to say for yourself, eh? Too good to speak to the likes of me then are you?’

In seconds her stubby fingers were around my arms and she was hauling me out from under the table. I banged my head again rather hard and felt blood trickle down my cheek.

Matron gave me a sly gummy smile. ‘Our spiritualist has become excited. I think she needs a bath.’

Then she called out to another warder and a pretty young girl came over to us.

‘Sarah, make sure she’s number twelve.’

‘Yes Matron,’ said the girl and led me away.
The warder called Sarah took me to a small bathing room that smelled of mould and contained nothing but a tin bath, a towel horse and a large padlocked cupboard. On the towel horse hung long strips of ripped white cloth with frayed edges.

The room was the quietest I had been into at Kew. I could even hear the drip of the tap. It had roughly whitewashed walls and a slippery, sodden wooden floor that was covered in a thin layer of greenish slime. I remembered the first day Polly had come to my lodgings and I had filled a bath for her in the washhouse. It felt like another lifetime.

The bath was already full of water. It was the colour of stewed tea and frothy at the edges. I looked down into the soupy mix and my nostrils were assailed with a smell like fermented potato peelings and dirty underthings.

‘Now then,’ said Sarah, ‘you’re to take off all your clothes, pass them to me then get into the bath. Quicker you’re in, quicker you’re out.’

‘But you haven’t even let the old water out yet.’

‘We do twelve to a bath here.’ Her cheeks coloured slightly. ‘I’m afraid you’re number twelve today.’

‘Oh please, I cannot.’

‘Come on, we’ll get you in and out quick. Now get undressed.’

The door was wide open. There was a view into a dreary room where two women wearing locked caps and gloves sat motionless.

‘Please, close the door.’

She shook her head. ‘Not allowed.’

‘Could you hold up a cloth for me, just for a little privacy?’

‘I wouldn’t worry about those old girls out there, they don’t even know the time of day.’

‘Still, I would prefer not to lose my modesty entirely.’

I remembered something I had once read about the Magdalen Asylum at Abbotsford. ‘Do you have any light bathing gowns?’

‘I’ve never heard of such a thing. They wouldn’t do that here.’

‘Why not?’
‘Just make extra laundry, wouldn’t it. I’ll hold up a cloth though, just so long as you’re quick.’

‘And surely, if you’re holding it up, no one need see what’s really going on behind it.’

She frowned and a deep crease formed between her blue eyes.

‘What if I take off my gown and just splash the water with my hands a little in case anyone should be passing. No one will be any the wiser.’

‘But if someone sees, I’ll get in terrible trouble Miss. I need this job, I’ve got six brothers and sisters at home and my Ma and Pa are both dead. I barely earn enough to feed the little ones as it is.’

‘I tell you what. I’ll take off my clothes, you keep a look out and if anyone comes I’ll get in the bath.’

‘Truly?’

‘I promise.’

‘All right then, but be quick.’

She held up the cloth, which was too small and ragged to cover very much of me. I pulled off my boots, unbuttoned my stiff gown and shed my corset, chemise and drawers. Then, in one act of human kindness I shall never forget, Sarah averted her eyes from my naked form.

I kneeled down on the repellent floor and began to vigorously agitate the putrid water with my hands, making as much in the way of splashing sounds as I could. This was a most unsavoury task, for the water once disturbed from its stagnant puddle, released an odour that made me retch.

After a few minutes of this, I fished around the bottom of the bathtub to locate the plug. The bath took some time to empty as the plughole kept getting clogged with clumps of hair and dirt.

I got dressed as quickly as I could.

‘Thank you Sarah. I won’t forget this.’

‘You have to go out to the yard now.’

‘I will, straight away.’ Then I noticed the thin strips of cloth on the towel horse again. ‘What are they for?’

‘The bath treatment.’

‘Whatever is that?’

‘I’m sure you don’t really want to know.’
'But I do, really I do.'

The more I knew about Kew, the more prepared I could be for whatever horrors might come my way.

‘It’s just for those that are excited. I’m meant to be learning how to assist but I’ve never seen it done it yet, thank goodness.’

‘And what exactly happens during this treatment?’

‘The hands and feet are tied Miss, with those rags,’ she pointed to the towel horse, ‘and the woman in question is put under the water for . . . well, for some while.’

‘You mean her head is held under water?’

‘Yes Miss. And the water’s stone cold and they do it for ever so long. I don’t think I could bear to watch it.’

I folded my arms. ‘No. I couldn’t either.’

‘Matron does it mostly, and some of the others. It’s not an easy thing to do on your own.’

The bath made a loathsome sucking sound as the last of the water drained out. Sarah picked up a rag and leaned over to scrub the filthy marks that ringed the sides.

‘I’ll never forget your kindness,’ I said, truly amazed that a complete stranger could be so compassionate. ‘You risked your job for me.’

‘It were nothing.’

But it was not nothing. Her kind act was yet another mark against Polly’s name.

We were not sent to the sewing room that afternoon, but spent it outside instead. The weather was beginning to warm up just a little and there was no rain. Violet and I passed the time talking about butterflies. I enjoyed teaching her and drawing crude pictures of caterpillars and chrysalides in the dirt with a stick.

I was surprised when Gilbert came striding into the airing court. It was so soon since I last saw him that I could not help but think he had good news. I rushed to his side.

‘Gilbert, am I to leave this place?’

‘I’m afraid not. The Master-in-Lunacy wouldn’t see me but I met with the Superintendent this morning and he could not even sanction your release to a Benevolent Asylum. A family member must agree to look after you and a doctor must perform a full examination. There are many others on the list before you. I’m truly sorry.’

‘But I have no family.’
'No.' Gilbert looked at his boots. ‘That is a problem, Beth.’

‘Even if you had found her, Polly would not be able to get me out?’

‘It’s most unlikely. I’m sorry,’ he said.

I struggled to keep the disappointment from my face. ‘You have done all you can and I’m very grateful. I’ll be all right. I won’t lose hope.’

He smiled. I noticed that his honey brown eyebrows were as fine and sparse as baby’s hair. I clasped my hands behind my back, resisting an urge to touch them.

‘I look forward to our conversations very much,’ he said.

A woman nearby let out a long whistle. ‘You’re a bit of all right Mister. Why don’t you come over here and see me then?’

‘I’d better go,’ said Gilbert.

I nodded. ‘Yes.’

‘I’ll be back as soon as I can.’

A considerable amount of time passed at Kew. It was many weeks, possibly months, but I had given up trying to work out how long. The weather became fine, although the heat of high summer was still to come. I could have asked Gilbert how long it had been, but I did not really want to know. He would visit me as often as he could, but we never had long together before one of the women would cause some sort of trouble and he would have to leave.

Violet was everything to me during this time. We had become great friends and found much joy in each other’s constant company. It was an equitable relationship where we both respected one another, so different to what I had shared with Polly. Sometimes I wondered if I could even call what I had with Polly a friendship at all. I could hardly believe I had once said we were like sisters.

But no matter how close Violet and I became, neither of us would share our secrets. She refused to talk about Lily or how she had died, and I had said nothing of my shameful life as a fraud. I could not tell Violet for fear I would lose her trust, but most of all I feared losing the dearest friend I had ever known.

One night the weight of my secret felt very great, and I hinted that there was something about me that she did not know. Violet reached out and squeezed my hand.

‘I have a secret too Beth, but mine is dark and shameful.’

I smiled at the irony of this in the darkness. ‘I don’t believe it.’

‘It’s true.’
‘Tell me and I shall judge for myself.’
‘I’ve never told anyone my secret and at times I’ve feared it would destroy me.’

A tremendous sigh passed through Violet’s body and her hand became limp in mine. I could tell she was struggling, just like me, longing to unburden herself but weighing up the risks. Then she pulled her hand away and curled her body into a tight ball.

Violet murmured something that I could not hear. I shuffled over in my bed to be closer.

‘What did you say Violet? I can’t hear you.’
‘I killed her,’ she whispered.
‘What?’
I killed Lily, my beloved Lily. I killed her.’
‘But that can’t be true.’ I put my hand on her shoulder but she pulled her legs even tighter to her chest and rolled to the very edge of her bed. ‘Violet?’
‘It’s true.’
‘How is it possible? It can’t have been your fault. What happened?’
‘I can’t tell you.’
‘How long ago did she die?’
‘It was a long time ago, more than two years I should think. Everyone’s forgotten her, everyone except me. I think about her every moment.’

Violet was silent for a while and then she began to sob and tremble violently. I did not know what to do. I wanted desperately to hold her in my arms and comfort her but she did not seem to want it.

After some time had passed, she turned over and faced me.
‘Lily used to sleep in the bed next to me but then she got transferred to another ward. I missed her terribly. We would see each other in the airing court but it wasn’t the same as being together. . . we used to talk and giggle half the night.’
‘Poor Violet, how hard that must have been.’
I could feel her breath on my face. I let my fingers gently run through her hair. She did not push me away but sobbed like her heart would break.

I climbed into her bed and held her shuddering body. We stayed like that all night. I did not sleep. The bed was narrow and my arm went numb where it was trapped under her side, but I would not move in case she might get a few minutes sleep and some respite from her dreadful grief.
After that night, Violet changed. It was as if she had ripped open a terrible wound but did not know how to close it again, and all the neat stitches in the world could do nothing to help her. She fell into a deep melancholia and I could not bring her out of it, no matter what I did.

Violet barely spoke and I had to force her to eat and drink like a reluctant child. I was too afraid of her reaction to speak of Lily so I did not mention it again, although I could think of nothing else. But I did not question her innocence in the matter of Lily’s death for one moment. In the months at Kew, I had come to trust my own judgement and what I felt deep within my heart. I had ignored all my instincts and stifled my true feelings with Polly, rejecting everything that did not fit with how I wanted her to be. The Polly I saw was just an illusion, a fiction created entirely by me. She was no more real than Emily Rose or a character in a romantic novel. I did not know who Polly truly was. I never had.

During the day Violet worked silently in the sewing room; and when we occasionally sat in the airing court under the sunshade, I continued teaching her about butterflies. She nodded occasionally, as if she was listening, but hardly spoke at all and asked no questions. I could not bear to see her so pale and fragile looking. Then one morning as we dressed, I noticed how her backbone jutted out through the worn cotton of her nightgown and I could keep quiet no longer.

‘I’m so worried about you Violet. Look how thin you’ve become.’

She stared at me and her eyes were blank.

‘I know how you’re grieving, and I know how terrible it is to lose someone you love. Whatever happened to poor Lily, it could not have been your fault. Please talk about it, I know it will help.’

Violet shook her head. ‘I killed her and I cannot live with it.’

Tears rolled down her freckled cheeks. I brushed them away with my fingertips but I could not make them stop.

‘If I can go to her, perhaps I’ll rest in peace. It’s my only chance.’

‘Violet, you don’t know what you’re saying.’

‘I do . . . I do know, I can’t live like this.’

I grabbed her shoulders and shook her hard. ‘No,’ I cried. ‘No! Lily wouldn’t want you to feel this way, she loved you and she wouldn’t want you to suffer. Whatever it is you think you’ve done, Lily would have forgiven you.’

Violet shook her head. ‘Let me go Beth, let me go to her and say I’m sorry.’
I hugged her tightly, and I could feel every bone in her tiny body.

Only last week there had been a woman who hung herself with a sheet. I heard that she had kicked for ten minutes or more while someone tried desperately to get her down. She had died, eventually. Others had tried slicing their wrists with stones or refused food and drink until they became so weak they were strapped to a chair and force-fed through a rubber tube. Another woman had died eating glass.

I could not let Violet do something like that, not when I could help her.

For days I had been thinking about what I could do, how I could ease her pain, but there was no answer except for the one I had right from the start. That answer was so distasteful that I had pushed it from my mind. I had blackened my very soul and I had no desire to taint Violet with my terrible lies, but now I knew there was no other choice.

‘What if you had Lily’s forgiveness?’ I asked.

‘That’s impossible.’

‘No it’s not. Violet look at me.’

I held her head in my hands and looked into her eyes. ‘There’s something I haven’t told you about myself. Before I ended up here, I was a famous medium.’

‘A medium?’

‘The best in all of Melbourne, or so it was said.’

‘You?’

‘Yes, me. Ask Gilbert next time he comes, he’ll verify it.’

‘But of course I believe you, Beth.’

My breath caught in my throat. ‘Of course you do.’

‘Does that mean that you could contact Lily?’

‘Maybe . . . yes . . . I mean, yes. I could.’

‘Oh Beth! Really?’

I watched as the sweet lively smile that had been missing for so long made her blue eyes shine.

‘When can we do it? Tonight? Now?’

‘Not tonight, I must think about how we’ll go about it in this place, but very soon. I promise.’

In the days that followed, the old Violet returned. She was cheery and happy and she hummed as she sewed. Of course, she asked me constantly about when we could hold the séance. I kept putting her off, but I knew that I could not do so for very long.
The thought of conducting this séance troubled me enormously, but I could see no other way out. I would be doing it to save Violet’s life.

Fortunately, we both soon had a pleasant distraction. Gilbert came to see us and said he had some good news. I had not been troubling him about my release, as I knew he was doing all he could, but I felt a glimmer of hope at this comment.

‘Sometimes the ladies who the warders believe can be trusted are taken out in the asylum wagonette for outings to the seaside or into town,’ he said. ‘I told the Superintendent that before your . . . well, your misfortune, you were quite a figure in society and a most well respected medium. He has agreed that you can join two other ladies on an outing tomorrow afternoon.’

I hid my disappointment well. I was used to it now. ‘How nice. Where will we be going?’

‘To the city, for the seaside is too cool just yet.’

‘And who will be accompanying us?’ I asked, for if it was Matron I would not go.

‘Well of course they need a gentlemen to escort the ladies, and I’m to have the honour tomorrow.’

‘Beth, how exciting!’ said Violet.

The thought of an outing into town with Gilbert by my side was delightful, until I remembered that I was the inmate of an insane asylum who owned nothing but rags and could not remember the last time she bathed.

‘You’re very kind to think of me, but I’m afraid I cannot.’

He looked truly disappointed. ‘Beth, please say you’ll come. I’ll be sorely disappointed if you don’t.’

‘Of course she’ll come,’ said Violet.

I looked into Gilbert’s gentle eyes and realised that he was the kindest man I had ever met. He would understand my dilemma. I glanced down at my dress.

‘I cannot be seen in public like this.’

His cheeks blushed a deep pink. ‘Please, say no more. I understand entirely. But unfortunately it’s common practise for women from Kew to go out in asylum clothes, so that they are less likely to escape.’

‘I wouldn’t try to escape but I do understand. Thank you Gilbert but I shall decline your kind offer.’

‘No, no, please. I’ve had an idea.’ He looked behind him furtively as if we were organising an illicit liaison.
‘There’s a room where all the things are kept that the women wore when they arrived here,’ he whispered. ‘They’re in labelled boxes, although I must confess that the warders often take liberties if they see something they want. I shall go to the room and find the box with your garments in it. There’s a girl called Sarah, have you met her? She will help us.’

I nodded.

‘Sarah will come to the yard just before lunch to collect you. I’ll have your things waiting in the coach house.’

‘But I can’t go without Violet.’

‘She can come. I’m allowed to take three and I’ve only asked one other. Violet is well behaved, there will be no objection.’

Violet clapped her hands with enthusiasm.

‘But it’s not fair that I should be dressed in my own gown and they should not.’

Gilbert was beginning to look a little nervous. ‘I’ll try to get their boxes as well, but I can’t promise. The room is unattended but the warders often go to look through new boxes when they come in.’

‘We cannot ask Sarah to risk her job. She can’t afford to lose it and she has already helped me once before. I cannot ask it of her again.’

Gilbert touched my wrist. ‘Please Beth, just say yes and leave all the arrangements to me.’

‘Yes,’ said Violet. ‘Yes, yes, yes.’

I looked at Gilbert and we both smiled.
The morning of our outing we did not go to the dining hall for breakfast. Instead, we sneaked into one of the bathing rooms and washed ourselves as best we could with cold water from the tap. We even found a scrap of cracked soap to use. I scrubbed myself with one of the rags and was shocked at the dirt around my neck. It felt exquisite to be clean afterwards.

Sarah collected us from the airing court as had been arranged. We were both very excited. Violet could hardly stop smiling and there was a lightness in the way she walked that I had not seen before.

‘Mind you two behave,’ said a warder as she unlocked the doors to let us through, ‘or you’ll regret it when you get back here. You mark my words.’

When we had passed, Violet stuck out her tongue and we both giggled.

Sarah led us through a labyrinth of corridors and wards that varied very little. They were all shabby, with wooden floors in need of a good scrubbing and rows of narrow iron beds. Some of them smelled strongly of the spirit of turpentine they burned to kill vermin. There was no sign of any personal possessions except for one bed that had a peg doll propped up on the pillow. The doll had a crudely drawn face and string hair.

I marvelled that Sarah could find her way about the place so easily, for it seemed that every door she opened led to another almost identical space. But eventually she came to a halt in a day room where one lone old woman sat waiting on a long bench.

When she heard us come in, the woman grinned. Her face was gaunt and distorted by deep lines, but she had brown eyes as bright as a child’s.

‘Afternoon, Sarah,’ she said, standing up quickly like someone years younger than she was. ‘I’m that excited, I don’t know what to do with myself.’

Sarah patted her arm. ‘Hello, Peg. I’d like you to meet Beth and Violet.’

‘How nice to meet you,’ I said.

Peg looked at me and frowned. ‘Sounds like you’re from the paying section.’ I think it was meant to be a compliment, as that was where those of the middle classes tended to stay. It was said that in the paying section of the asylum they had white
tablecloths and proper sharp knives to eat with. There were brocade-covered chairs, beds with feather mattresses and fine food to match any restaurant.

‘I’m just from G ward, the same as Violet,’ I said. ‘Have you been on an outing before?’

‘Yes, lots of times. Only last year I went to St Kilda Beach. Oh such a grand day that was,’ she chuckled to herself. ‘I even had an ice-cream cone, can you believe that?’

I smiled. ‘How long have you been here?’

‘Well to be honest with you, I lost count at twenty. Hard to say how many more its been.’

‘Twenty months?’

Peg seemed to find this hilarious. Her thin frame trembled with laughter.

Sarah looked at the heavy watch that hung from her belt. ‘We’d better get a move on. They'll be waiting for us at the coach house.’

‘My, what an adventure,’ said Peg, leading the way forward with a confident stride.

‘It is an adventure,’ said Violet.

I squeezed her hand.

When we arrived at the coach house, Gilbert was waiting for us. He looked nervous as he said good morning.

Violet gave him an exaggerated curtsey. ‘Good morning to you too, Sir,’ she said.

He blushed and I could feel my own cheeks flushing in response.

There was a strong smell of horse. A big black beast with white markings on its face was stamping and whinnying in one of the stalls.

‘Quick, there’s no time to lose,’ said Sarah. ‘Come with me.’

We followed her through to the coachman’s small makeshift office. On his desk, which was just a rough hewn piece of wood held up by a stack of logs, were three oblong boxes made cheaply of pine that put me in mind of children’s coffins. At the end of each box in blue ink was a number.

Sarah picked up a box numbered 18 and passed it to Peg. ‘These are all your things. Quickly, get changed.’

Peg looked mystified, then excited, and I realised that she had known nothing of this surprise.

‘Blimey Gawd,’ she said. ‘I ain’t seen this lot in twenty years or more.’

Next Sarah passed a box to Violet. ‘There were no boots in yours but I found you another pair. I hope they won’t pinch.’
The last box, number 1742, was mine.

‘I’m so sorry Miss, but your gown has gone. I didn’t have much time to chose you another, I hope it will do.’

She opened the box and pulled out a winter dress made of musty heavy wool in a shade of muted green similar to the walls in the dining hall.

I thanked her and took the dress. Then I searched quickly through my box. It contained only a petticoat, my chemise and a hairbrush with few bristles that did not belong to me. I pulled out the chemise and found that a miracle had occurred; my butterfly brooch was still attached to the front.

‘Goodness me,’ I said.

‘What’s wrong?’ asked Sarah.

‘Nothing, nothing at all.’

I studied the brooch. It was very beautiful and still reminded me achingly of Father, but somehow I did not feel the same attachment to it as I had before. Besides, it would doubtless be stolen if I left it in the box or took it back to the ward with me. I handed it to Sarah.

‘Here. I want you to have this.’

She cupped the butterfly in her palm as if it might fly away. ‘Oh no, I couldn’t Miss. It’s yours.’

‘Please take it. The eyes are sapphire. It’s worth something, a few meals for your family at least. I’d much rather you had it than one of the other warders.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes, quite sure. Put it in your pocket.’

‘Thank you, thank you so much.’

I turned my attention to the green dress. It did not have a bustle as I would have liked, but came with three heavy petticoats, one lightly threaded with whalebone, so I would not feel the need of it so acutely.

The dress smelled damp and as I held it up, I could see there were several moth holes in the bodice. The boots, too, were not mine, although they were not in bad condition and looked as though they would fit me well enough.

Peg had already pulled her dress on without bothering to take off her coarse asylum gown, but that did not matter in the least, because the dress was so large on her it looked as if it was made for another woman entirely. Without the bulk provided by the garment underneath, it would have fallen off her shoulders.
The dress was designed to wear with a hooped petticoat but fortunately the petticoat was missing. I was glad. A crinoline was very out of fashion, and I would hate to think that people might stare and spoil the day she had so longed for.

Without the petticoat, Peg was completely swamped in yards of pale mauve crepe-de-chine. She did not seem to mind that the dress was too big or that there were a few rusty marks on it. Peg lifted the silk over-skirt and let the fabric slip through her fingers as dust billowed in the air.

‘Will you look at me girls,’ she said, thrusting her shoulders back. ‘Wearing my old favourite after all this time. I had two other gowns just like this once, my sister helped me make them.’

Peg turned slowly and regally so we could see her from all angles. ‘I feel like a queen, truly I do. If only I had a looking glass.’

Sarah rummaged through Peg’s box then pulled out a cream sash. ‘Put this around your middle and it’ll fit you perfect.’

I told Peg that the mauve colour looked well on her. Then I took off my own asylum clothes and stepped into the green dress. It did not smell like any human being had ever worn it, although judging by the wear about hem and sleeves someone clearly had.

As I buttoned up the fitted bodice and glanced down at the way the full skirts fell to the floor, I felt extremely glad to be finally wearing a proper dress again, even though it was not one I would choose myself.

Violet was holding her pale blue gown, which I noticed was made of extremely good quality silk brocade, but had not yet changed into it. She looked sad.

‘That shade would suit your complexion beautifully,’ I said.

‘It reminds me of Aunt. She liked this dress. Actually, she liked everything blue, especially cornflowers.’

‘We must be quick,’ said Sarah. ‘You’ve got to get away before the warders finish tea.’

Violet took off her shift and I noticed again how thin she had become. Once she had the blue dress on, I did up the long line of covered buttons at the back and brushed a piece of cotton off her shoulders.

Although the dress was somewhat loose, it was still flattering. I arranged the skirts carefully and went around to the front to look at her. She was very beautiful. The
dress had a slightly scooped neck that showed a little creamy skin and the pastel blue colour set off her eyes.

‘You look lovely.’

‘It was always my favourite.’

Peg was having a wonderful time going through the contents of her box. ‘Will you look at this, it’s my cookery book,’ she cried, pulling out a slim volume that had been nibbled around the edges. ‘I used to be famous for my steak and kidney pudding.’

I wondered what other items she had brought with her when she came to Kew, and could not resist peeping over her shoulder as she looked in the box. Inside was a lace parasol that was yellow and ragged, a couple of cotton reels, an embroidered cloth bag and what looked to be a pot of rouge. It was this last item that she seized upon.

‘It’s been years since I’ve worn a bit of colour,’ she said, screwing off the lid.

I could see that the contents were entirely dried up, although they were still a bright pink colour. Peg spat into the pot, mixed it up with her finger, then applied a blob of the stuff to the centre of each sunken cheek.

‘Oh this is fun, this is wonderful fun,’ she said. ‘How do I look?’

Violet looked at me and I at her, for the livid dots on Peg’s cheeks looked like the pox.

‘Lovely,’ I said. ‘Just let me just work it in a little for you.’

I rubbed at Peg’s cheeks with my thumb and managed to remove most of the colour.

‘Won’t you have some too?’ she said.

‘That’s most kind, but the sun here has made my skin too florid as it is.’

There was a tap on the door then Sarah told us that we must go. I took Violet’s arm and we hurried out of the coachman’s office to the waiting wagonette. Gilbert was standing beside it. I caught his eye and he gave me an approving smile. Ned, the old coachman, was much more effusive in his praise.

‘You ladies look lovely. I ain’t never took out such beautiful ladies as you lot before.’ Then he stood up straight and offered Peg his arm. ‘Madam, allow me to help you aboard.’

She gave him a salacious wink and linked her arm through his.

‘I wish I was coming with you,’ said Sarah. ‘We’d have such a laugh.’

‘Thank you for all your help. You’ve been so kind to us,’ I said.
‘Sarah, hurry back now so you don’t get seen.’ Gilbert sounded very anxious.

‘Tea will be finished any minute.’

I must admit that in all the excitement I had quite forgotten the risk we were all running, especially Sarah. ‘Yes go,’ I said, ‘hurry.’

Once we were seated in the wagonette, Gilbert drew the rain cover over to hide us, then climbed up front with Ned and we set off.

It was too hot under the cover and I could feel myself perspiring in the heavy dress. During my time at Kew, I had become used to feeling cold, and the thick wool was uncomfortable now it was spring.

The wagonette passed through the front gates at a brisk pace, then we all turned to the small window to get our first glimpse of the outside world. The view was the same one we saw from the low wall in the airing court. Still, the motion of the carriage and the passing landscape felt very novel and a little strange.

‘Mr Banks said he would take us to the coffee palace first,’ said Peg. ‘I’m that excited I can’t hardly think straight. I’ll have cucumber sandwiches, you know the real dainty ones like ladies eat and scones with jam and tea from a china cup.’

Up until that point I had not really thought much about the outing or where we would be going. My thoughts had only been of spending time with Gilbert, but as Peg spoke of delicious fresh food that had been nothing but a fantasy for so very long, I found myself salivating at the thought of it.

Peg sighed. ‘What a dream it is to get out of that place for an afternoon.’

‘Please don’t think me rude Peg, but why are you there? You don’t seem in the least bit mad.’

‘Where else is an old girl like me going to go then? No one would give me work now and I ain’t got no family to speak of.’

‘But the benevolent asylum, surely that would be better? At least you’d have your freedom during the day.’

‘No thanks. They kick you out of there at seven every morning and then you’ve got nowhere to go. And the queue to get in is as long as me arm on a cold night. I’d rather stay at Kew. I’ve got lots of friends there. They’re my family.’

‘But you’re sane. Surely they would not want to pay for your keep?’

‘Sane am I?’ she grinned. ‘Watch this then.’
Peg then began to writhe and groan, giving us a most convincing performance of a lunatic. At the end of it she was a little out of breath. ‘Glad I don’t have to do that too often these days. It’s hard damn work.’

I shook my head. ‘But surely the doctors would know?’

‘They don’t know nothing. Besides, I haven’t seen one in years, not since I’ve been working for Matron.’

‘Working for her?’

‘I was a seamstress once, you never lose it unless your eyes go. I make clothes for her.’

I could not picture Matron in anything except an enormous dirty apron and a pair of hobnailed boots. ‘Surely she’s not interested in fashionable clothes?’

Peg looked at me and grinned. ‘You can tell you’ve not been locked up for long. The clothes ain’t for her to wear. She sells them on.’

‘And do you get some of the proceeds?’

‘Blimey, not likely! Got to go out today though, didn’t I? Got to have an ice-cream cone last year. I’m doing all right for myself.’

Tears came to my eyes but I would not let them spill. I looked down at my hands and studied the cotton gloves I wore that were too big and not very clean.

‘I’ve never tasted ice-cream,’ said Violet. ‘Have you Beth?’

‘Only once, and I was not fond of it. It gave me a headache.’

‘Still, I’d like to try some.’

‘Well perhaps today you will.’

Peg looked out through the window, which was really just a hole in the canvas cover to let in flies and dust, and gave us a running commentary about everything that we passed. I nodded politely from time to time whilst enjoying the comforting jolt of the wagonette, the thought that we were leaving Kew far behind, and the anticipation of an afternoon with Gilbert.

We went over a deep rut and I lurched towards Violet. Something dug into my waist, and I realised that there must be a hidden pocket somewhere in the dress. I ran my hand over the skirt and could feel the sharp edges of an envelope. For the first time in ages I thought like a medium and did not take the letter out of its hiding place to show the others. When we got back to Kew, I would smuggle it into my corset as we got dressed. These thoughts filled me with shame, but I reassured myself I was doing it for the best reasons and it soon passed.
The wagonette came to a halt. We had already reached the city, although the journey seemed too short. I was not sure where we were exactly, but it was obviously a good part of town because the streets were bustling with businessmen in frock coats and top hats and ladies dressed fashionably. It all looked slightly odd to me, as if I were seeing it for the first time through unaccustomed eyes or looking at a stereoscopic image that I was not a part of at all.

Gilbert rolled back the canvas cover, exposing the three of us in our faded finery. Peg was the first out for she could hardly contain her excitement. In her enthusiasm to be moving, she did not even take Gilbert’s proffered arm. He stood holding it out for nothing and we exchanged a smile.

Violet and I both took Gilbert’s arm as we disembarked. I could not bring myself to meet his eyes, even though I wanted to very much.

‘I trust the journey was not too rough, Beth?’ he said.

I shook my head. ‘It was quite pleasant, thank you.’

‘As is the company.’

I did meet his eyes then. They were as warm and soft as velvet.

When Ned had finished tying up the horses, he came over to where we all stood on the street, then took off his cap and nodded.

‘I’ll be waiting right here for you girls. Mind you don’t talk to any strange fellas now.’

He gave a deep guffaw but no one else laughed, and he shuffled uncomfortably.

Violet was gripping my arm as if she was a little afraid and even Peg had lost some of her bluster now we were actually standing on a crowded city street.

‘Ain’t it busy,’ said Peg so quietly she could hardly be heard above the rumble of horses hooves and cries of the street sellers. ‘So many people coming and going. You do forget.’

A man with fish in a wooden bucket passed so close to us that I could smell the sea.

‘Please, allow me to escort you into the coffee palace,’ said Gilbert offering Peg his arm.

This time she took it with no hesitation.

I smiled at her. ‘It’s quite all right really. Everything won’t seem so strange once we’re inside.’

‘Don’t worry about me, I’m fine,’ she said, although she did not look it.
I linked arms with Violet and we marched, two by two, into the coffee palace.

Gilbert had obviously informed the manager of the time of our arrival for we were shown straight to a table. It was not the worst table in the house, but I had no doubt that had we all looked like real ladies we would not have been shown to a table so close to the kitchen. But never mind, we were out in the real world and that was all that mattered.

The coffee palace was a grand place with enormous chandeliers and a mural depicting an English rural scene painted right across the length of one wall. I got a pang of homesickness looking at the lush green fields, and a sudden longing to feel bracing cold London air against my skin.

‘Beautiful, isn’t it?’ whispered Peg.

I nodded.

Once we were seated, I realised for the first time how strange we three women must look. I feared that even Peg, who felt quite the beauty back at Kew, was also thinking this, for she did not have the confidence to look around and simply stared down at the tablecloth.

I felt concerned that I might see someone from my real life while looking such a dreadful fright, but then I realised that the only two people who mattered were sitting right beside me. This surprising thought suffused me with happiness.

I looked at Violet and smiled, noticing that she was twisting her napkin on her lap in a very nervous way.

‘They all know where we’re from Beth, I’m sure that they do.’

‘Nonsense,’ I replied. ‘And what if they do? We’ve nothing to be ashamed of.’

I sat up straight just to prove my point, although I suddenly felt very aware of eyes upon us.

‘Now then,’ said Gilbert. ‘Peg, did I hear that you were rather keen on having cucumber sandwiches?’

She brightened at this prospect. ‘Yes please. And a scone too, if I’m allowed.’

‘You’re allowed anything you want today. The only thing I will not permit is for anybody not to enjoy themselves.’

Peg smiled. ‘And cream then. Loads of it.’

A table of elderly matrons nearby were giving us most unkind looks, which I pointedly ignored.

‘Violet, what will you have?’ asked Gilbert.
‘Same for me,’ she said.

Gilbert put up his hand to call the waiter to our table. He seemed to come over reluctantly and did not try to pretend that he was not looking down his nose at us.

‘Now my good fellow,’ said Gilbert. ‘We’ll have tea, cucumber sandwiches and scones with plenty of cream and jam. Is there anything else you would recommend?’

‘Not really sir,’ said the waiter.

Gilbert looked at me. ‘Beth, would you like something different?’

It was hard to believe, but I had little appetite. However, I was not about to miss the opportunity of a few delicious morsels and tea in proper cups.

‘Could I perhaps have a ham sandwich?’ I asked.

The waiter glanced at me, not even attempting to hide his disdain. ‘Would Madam like mustard?’

‘Yes please.’

Then he made a big show of brushing imaginary crumbs off the table, as if we, by our mere presence, had brought them in with us.

‘That will be all,’ said Gilbert in a clipped voice I had never heard before.

Violet was looking around nervously. Like me, I was sure she was afraid of seeing someone from her old life. We had discussed it before we came out and both decided that we would hold our heads up high if it happened, but that did not seem so easy now we were actually sitting in public view. I whispered some words of reassurance to her.

Gilbert cleared his throat. ‘Now ladies, I must confess I have left the very best surprise until last. Today, after tea, we are going to an extremely special place where even I have never been.’

‘I’m sure you’ve been everywhere there is go Mr Banks.’

‘Not to this place Peg.’

‘Do tell us quick,’ she said. ‘The suspense is killing me.’

‘We can’t have that.’ Gilbert grinned, and I saw that he had a tiny dimple in his chin that was only just visible through his well-trimmed beard.

‘All right then, I’ll tell. After we’ve finished here we will be making a visit to the Zoological Gardens.’

Peg was so surprised she banged her leg on the table and the cutlery shook. I managed to steady a thin vase of roses before it fell.

‘I’ve heard they’ve got real lions and an elephant you can sit on,’ she said.
I had never been to a zoological garden and found I was quite excited by the prospect myself.

‘And monkeys,’ said Peg. ‘I do love monkeys.’

‘What about you Violet? What animals do you like best?’ asked Gilbert.

‘I like them all,’ she said.

I smiled at him. ‘You’ve made a perfect choice.’

Our tea arrived, with the waiter looking like he had been eating lemons, so I made a point of looking him in the eye as I thanked him. I would not allow him to make us feel as though we were not worthy of his service.

Peg gobbled several sandwiches very quickly. I feared that she might make herself ill. Violet ate a scone with an ecstatic look on her face. I took a bite of my ham sandwich and was overwhelmed by the taste and texture of it. Had it been a bowl of the finest turtle soup, I would not have appreciated it more.

‘Isn’t it lovely,’ said Peg, reaching for seconds. ‘Only problem is you can’t fit much in after being on rations for so long.’

She was quite right. After only half of my ham sandwich I began to feel rather full, but no matter, I pressed on and even managed to have two scones as well. Needless to say I did not feel especially comfortable at the end of it.

Peg sighed and leaned back in her chair. ‘It’s always the same. I make a right pig of myself then pay the price after.’

‘Never mind,’ said Gilbert. ‘We’ll be walking around the zoological gardens and that will help your digestion.’

‘Please excuse me,’ I said, putting my napkin on the table and standing up.

I made my way to the back of the coffee palace, ignoring the stares from a table of women who were all wearing terrible hats. A black-gloved finger painted onto a sandwich board pointed the way to the Ladies.

The water closet was some distance away, down a track that led to a back laneway. It suddenly occurred to me how easy it would be to run away. I had heard that they were only able to take you back to the asylum if you were found within three months. It would not be impossible to vanish for three months. Perhaps I could go back to Mrs Parsons and see if she would take me in. But I could not do it. Gilbert had not insisted on accompanying me, which would have been embarrassing, or getting one of the others to go with me, and I knew it was because he trusted me entirely. He need not have been concerned. I would never leave Violet.
Suddenly I wondered if perhaps Gilbert was giving me my opportunity to escape, and for a moment I fantasised about how Violet and I might do it together, but surely it would only mean terrible trouble for him and the loss of his employment. Besides, when I came back inside and saw his relieved smiling face, I was glad to have his trust.

Once the account had been settled, we went outside to where Ned was waiting for us. Peg handed him a slightly crushed cucumber sandwich, which she had secreted in her skirts. He was very grateful, and an unmistakable look of infatuation passed between them.

‘Now ladies, let me help you into the wagonette,’ said Gilbert. ‘For we are off to the zoological gardens.’
It was a short and pleasant journey to the zoological gardens. We were all very excited and chatted happily about seeing animals we could hardly believe existed. I was also pleased at the prospect of a stroll through the gardens, which were apparently very beautiful, but most of all I was looking forward to the company of Gilbert.

‘Tell me Beth, what do you think of Ned?’ asked Peg, quite suddenly changing the topic of conversation from bears to coachmen.

I am not sure if it was the rouge, the good food or simply the fresh air, but Peg looked ten years younger than when we had left Kew. ‘I am sure he likes you well enough.’

‘Well enough! Those words don’t give me much consolation.’

‘What do you think Violet, shall we tell Ned he’s got himself a new sweetheart?’

Peg clapped her hands to her chest. ‘Don’t you flaming well dare, I’d be that embarrassed. Anyway, he’d not be interested in an old girl like me.’

‘I think he would,’ said Violet, ‘and he might even kiss you before the afternoon’s done.’

Peg puckered up her lips and made a smacking sound. We laughed ourselves silly.

‘And where should they go for their first rendezvous?’ I asked.

Violet’s face suddenly dropped. ‘Peg’s locked up, just like we are. She’s not going anywhere.’

Violet and I were silent for a few minutes, for suddenly we realised how short this time was and how long it might be before we had our freedom again. I glanced at Peg who was staring out of the window. She looked quite cheerful and began to whistle a tune. I could not understand it.

The wagonette stopped outside a pair of imposing iron gates. I grimaced as I remembered seeing the great gates at Kew for the first time, but his was not anything like Kew. Behind the gates I could see couples strolling arm in arm and children larking about. It was a cool but sunny day and families were picnicking on the grass. In the distance I could hear a brass band playing.

Gilbert opened the door to the wagonette and the sun poured in, turning the worn wooden floor golden brown. We all climbed down onto the cobbled street.
After he had tethered the horses, Ned came over and removed his hat.

‘Well you girls have a good old time, make sure of it,’ he said with an affable smile. ‘I’ll bet there’s some wonders to be seen inside.’

‘Have you been here before, Ned?’ asked Gilbert.

‘No, not me. Reckon I’ll get there one day though.’

‘Why don’t you come with us now? If the ladies don’t object of course.’

‘No, we don’t mind one little bit,’ said Peg. ‘We’d love to have you.’

Violet nodded in agreement.

‘Beth,’ said Gilbert. ‘Do you mind if Ned accompanies us?’

‘No, not at all. It would be a pleasure.’

Ned grinned then went behind the wagonette and squatted down. He did not know that I could see him clearly. Then he spat on his boots and rubbed them furiously with a red checked handkerchief, ran his hands through his thin grey hair and cleared his throat with the harsh sound of a man overly fond of tobacco. He then stood up, walked over to Peg and bowed.

‘Would you allow me?’ he said, holding his arm out for her.

Peg leapt forward and threaded her arm through his, then the two of them set off towards the front gates.

‘Well I believe I have the pleasure of a lady on each arm,’ said Gilbert.

I slipped my hand into the crook of his elbow and felt the warmth of his body through his heavy frockcoat. Violet took his other arm.

He looked at me and smiled shyly. ‘I think you look radiant today in that dress, Beth. It’s just the perfect sort of gown for a medium.’

Suddenly I was reminded of who I truly was and all my joy evaporated. Any affection Gilbert felt would be lost in a moment if he knew that I was a liar and a cheat. I looked down at the green moss that grew in the deep cracks between the cobblestones, trying to push the dark thoughts from my mind.

Peg and Ned were waiting for us at the ticket booth where a young boy in a peaked cap was selling tickets from a long roll. Ned looked tall and proud with Peg on his arm. They were talking animatedly to each other and Peg was laughing a great deal. I tried not to let myself think that it could only end in unhappiness. For once they were back at Kew, even a clandestine meeting would be impossible.

Gilbert bought five tickets from the boy. They were not cheap and I wondered where he got the money. Somehow I could not imagine the Superintendent of the
asylum paying for such an extravagant day out. I was touched to think that he might be supplementing the outing with his own meagre income, but at the same time I felt a prickling shame.

Violet wanted to see the elephants so we decided to go there first. On the way we stopped at a milk bar where a frothy tumbler of fresh milk could be purchased for a penny. Gilbert bought one for each of us, and it was absolutely delicious.

Ned drank his tumbler quickly, as if he was swilling down ale on a Saturday night. He even let out a hearty burp when he was finished, which he was much mortified by, although no one else was really offended.

We walked to the elephant enclosure. I had never seen an elephant before, except in a book, and was amazed by its enormous size and the strength in its thick trunk. The elephant had a large saddle upon its back, on which sat six small children waiting for a ride. The children were unnaturally still and I realised that they were frightened. A man with long dark hair and earrings like a Gypsy was holding the end of a heavy rope that went around the elephant’s neck.

‘Ranee,’ said Violet reading from a large notice. ‘That’s a good name for an elephant. Let’s pat her.’

I touched the elephant’s dry hide reluctantly. It felt as abrasive as pumice. The elephant shuffled its feet and one of the children began to scream. It sparked a chain reaction and before long nervous guardians lifted them all down.

‘She’s beautiful, I wouldn’t be scared of her,’ said Violet.

‘Why don’t you go for a ride? I don’t have the courage myself but I should like to hear what it feels like up there,’ said Gilbert.

‘Could I really? I’d love to.’

Violet did not look quite so sure of herself once she was sitting up so high. She reluctantly took one hand away from the saddle to wave at us as the elephant was led away.

‘Will she be alright?’ I asked, suddenly worried for her.

‘She’ll be fine, it moves very slowly.’

‘But what if she falls off?’

Gilbert smiled. ‘I’ve never heard of it happening here before and that elephant’s given hundreds of rides. I’m sure there’s no need for concern.’

Peg and Ned were sitting on a garden bench nearby, canoodling like a couple of new lovers with not the least bit of interest in the elephant or anything else except each
other. I realised that I had Gilbert entirely to myself. We sat down on a bench that was a
discreet distance away from Peg and Ned.

Now we were finally alone, I found that I did not know what to say to him. After
a few tense moments we both spoke at once, as people will often do when they are
nervous, and then we laughed at our discomfort.

‘I do hope Violet isn’t scared,’ I said.
‘She’ll be fine,’ he reassured me again. ‘You two seem to be very good friends.’
For a moment I was going to say we were like sisters, but then I remembered
when I had said that before and it was not right anymore. It was not right at all.

‘Yes, we’re the best of friends.’
‘She must be a great comfort to you at Kew.’
‘Oh yes.
‘I’m still trying to get you released Beth, you know that, don’t you?’
‘I know you’re doing all you can.’
‘As I’ve said before, you’re a long way from the top of the list. Then there’s the
issue of your family.’
‘It’s all right. I understand.’ His words did not bother me nearly as much as they
would have a few months earlier.

Gilbert frowned then continued. ‘I must tell you something important. Please
don’t think me one to gossip, but I have heard Matron speak ill of you recently. She’s a
difficult woman with a great hatred of spiritualists.’

The sharp reminder of the truth made me wince.
‘Thank you, but there’s nothing for me to worry about.’
‘I still think you should be wary. She attended a séance not long ago, in a public
hall I believe. The medium said that her mother was sorry for being a . . . well, a lady of
the night. Matron didn’t believe it of course, but it seems she found evidence that it was
true.’

‘How do you know all of this?’
‘I’m ashamed to say that gossip travels fast at Kew.’
‘So that’s why she doesn’t like me.’
Gilbert nodded. ‘And I’m fearful for you. You must keep away from her.’
I felt a little unsettled by this, but Matron had not picked on me since my early
days there. ‘Please don’t be concerned on my account. I’m quite sure that I’ll be fine.’
‘Apparently she’s only just found unshakeable proof, she was terribly angry with one of the women in F ward a few days ago and locked her into the bluestone cell they use for hosing down.’

‘That wouldn’t be so bad.’

I did not tell him that the only thing I could never bear was if he discovered the truth about me.

Suddenly Gilbert seized my hand and pressed it to his lips. I could feel the heat of his breath through my thin glove.

‘Beth, I don’t know how to say this but . . . but I have feelings for you. Most strong feelings.’

I closed my eyes and I was plunged into a world where all feeling was heightened, and every sensation foreign. ‘Gilbert, I share those same feelings.’

There was a flare of connection between us like a match lighting a wick, then suddenly our lips were pressed together in an exquisite kiss. He wrapped his arms about my waist and pulled me close, but then the kiss turned sour as the truth seeped in like damp in a cellar. He could never love me. I pulled out of his embrace.

‘I’m sorry, have I been too forward?’ he asked.

‘No . . . Violet is coming.’

The elephant conveniently came into view. Gilbert ran his hands over his hair and straightened his tie. I stood up quickly, finding that my legs were rather shaky, and rushed to meet her.

The Gypsy man helped Violet climb down. I noticed him look at her ankles and I grabbed her hand and we hurried away.

‘How was the ride?’ I asked.

‘It was beautiful. I shall never forget it.’

‘Good.’

‘Beth, what’s wrong?’

‘Nothing, nothing at all. Gilbert’s suggested the carnivore house. I believe the lions are soon to be fed and it makes for quite a spectacle.’

‘You’re not yourself.’

Her dear face looked so worried, I forced myself to smile. ‘Of course I am. Don’t be silly, now let’s fetch Peg and Ned.’

They had not moved from their cosy bench. Neither of them looked at all pleased to see us.
‘Can’t me and Ned just stay here for a while?’ said Peg.

Gilbert shook his head. ‘I’m sorry, but we must all keep together.’

‘I know what the problem is.’ Ned grinned. ‘He’s scared I’m going to run off with you.’

Peg put her arm around his middle and let her head rest on his chest.

Gilbert kept in step with the couple as they walked arm in arm and tried to draw Ned into a conversation about the various species of plants. Ned entered into the conversation reluctantly, and it occurred to me once again what a huge responsibility Gilbert had in looking after us all.

Violet and I walked a little way behind the others so we could speak privately.

‘You’ve got yourself a sweetheart,’ she said.

‘I don’t know about that.’

‘It’s as plain as day to me. I’m so thrilled, Beth. Gilbert’s very proud of you, he told me that you’re a wonderful medium.’

I bit my lower lip and nodded.

‘I’m so excited about the séance. You won’t make me wait much longer, will you?’

‘We need a few more sitters. I’m just working out who would be best.’

‘I want to tell you something Beth, for I know that I can trust you.’

‘You can, of course you can.’

‘I loved Lily.’

‘I know. You must have loved her very much.’

She stopped walking and I did too. Then she gently touched my shoulder and I turned to face her.

‘It’s a shameful love. For we did not love as two friends should but . . . but as a man and woman love.’

I was quite shocked at this, for I had never heard such a thing spoken of out loud before, although of course I knew such things went on. It would have disturbed me very much once upon a time, and I probably would have condemned it. But I did not condemn it now, for who was I to say who had a right to love?

Tears were streaming down Violet’s cheeks, although she was not making a sound.

‘Oh my darling girl.’ I wiped away her tears and my cotton gloves soaked them up as thirstily as a blotter. ‘No love is shameful, for love itself is so pure and good that it can never be shameful.’

‘You don’t hate me?’
I hugged her. ‘No, of course not. You’re the dearest person in the world to me.’
‘The pain of missing her is like a knife.’

I rubbed her back and murmured tender, reassuring words to try and make her feel better, but I was struck by the futility of it. The séance would have to be very soon, just one last time to finally bring Violet some peace.

I was dreading it.

The lions were magnificent looking animals with regal faces. There were also two lionesses in one small cage and they paced back and forth endlessly. They had become expert at passing each other in the cramped space with just a slight twist of their powerful bodies.

‘It’s cruel to have large animals in such a small cage,’ said Violet.

‘Don’t you worry about them,’ replied Peg, licking an ice-cream cone that Ned had bought. ‘I’m betting they get a lot more for their tea than we do.’

Just as she said that, the lion keeper arrived with a tin bucket full of raw meat.

‘What did I tell you? There’s more mutton there than we’d see in a month.’

The lion keeper stood up on a wooden crate and called out to the crowd to come and feed the hungry lions. I could not imagine anyone volunteering to do so, but within just a few moments there was quite a queue. Most of them were larrikins out to impress their girls or swells in curly brimmed hats showing off to each other, although a barefoot mother was encouraging her reluctant young son to join the line.

We stayed and watched for a little while and it was not as dangerous as it first seemed. The lions opened up their enormous jaws and their teeth poked through the bars, but the meat was thrown from some distance away so it often missed its mark. When this happened, the lions roared ferociously and the crowd would applaud. The lion keeper then retrieved the meat with a long handled hook and gave someone else a turn. It was not to my taste, although Peg and Ned seemed to be enjoying it greatly.

Gilbert moved a little to the left, obscuring us from the view of the others, and let his soft hand rest gently on mine.

‘Beth, I’m so sorry if I’ve offended you.’

‘You haven’t, truly you haven’t.’ I did not pull my hand away.

‘Tell me what you would like to do next, for I want this day to be one that you’ll always remember.’
When we first arrived at the zoological gardens, I had heard the merry sound of a brass band playing. It seemed much closer now.

‘It’s a long time since I’ve heard any music. I would very much like to listen to the band for a while, although we should go and see some more animals first.’

‘Well of course you shall. Perhaps we could dance?’

‘Yes, maybe,’ I said, although I did not feel worthy of it.

We looked at nearly all the other animals before we finally made it to the bandstand, but when we got there, the brass band was playing a cheerful waltz. Ned and Peg took to the floor immediately. It was not a proper dance floor, just a well-trampled square of grass, but people were dancing as elegantly as if they were in a sprung ballroom.

Gilbert took off his coat so that Violet and I could sit on it. His shirt was wrinkled, as if it had been hastily ironed and I could not help but think how my life might be as his wife. It would not be easy, married to an attendant at Kew. The burdens on him would be great and the monetary rewards very poor, but I would be dearly loved and cherished. I realised that I wanted this more then I had ever wanted anything before, but it could never be mine.

Suddenly I knew that I would tell Gilbert the truth before the day was done. I could not keep up the lies any more, even if it meant that I would lose him. It was right. There was no other choice.

Violet was tapping her feet in time to the music. Gilbert asked her if she would like to dance and she took his hand without hesitation. I did not particularly want to be alone with my thoughts and the knowledge of what I must do. Fortunately I noticed that Ned was standing in a long queue to buy lemonade and Peg was alone. I went and sat down beside her.

‘Are you having a nice time?’ I asked.

‘The best time ever.’

‘That’s good.’

Peg fanned herself with a newspaper that had been left lying on the grass. ‘You forget how much work dancing is when you haven’t done it for ages.’

‘Will you be all right?’ I asked.

‘How do you mean?’

‘I know it’s not my business, but won’t it be terribly hard to leave Ned today?’

‘Dear oh dear, you do make me laugh.’
I nodded, although I did not think that I had said anything amusing.

‘You ever been married?’ she asked.

‘No.’

‘I have and I tell you, once was enough. Oh it’s all lovely at the start, lots of
kisses and dancing but that don’t last long. Wait till you’ve been wed a few months and
he’s farting in bed and picking his toes and leaving his filthy clothes all over the place for
you to pick up.’

I looked down at the grass, trying not to smile.

‘But that’s nothing, my husband spent all our money on drink, every last penny
of it. We couldn’t even eat in the end.’

‘Peg, that’s awful.’

‘I wouldn’t get married again if you paid me.’ Then she patted my hand as if I
were the one who needed consoling. ‘I’m happy at Kew, and you will be too once you’ve
been there as long as me.’

The sun went behind a cloud and I shivered.

Watching Gilbert and Violet dance distracted me from my troubled thoughts. Violet was
a fine dancer but the same could not be said of Gilbert. All his flaws in this regard were
exaggerated by her skill, but this only served to make him all the more dear in my eyes.

Gilbert and Violet returned and he took me to the floor. He did not lead
confidently and he had a stiffness about his shoulders, but it was the way that our two
bodies moved together that was the marvellous thing, for we were in perfect unison. But
time was marching forward relentlessly. Soon we would be leaving. I could put it off no
longer.

‘Gilbert, there’s something I must talk to you about. I think we should sit down.’

‘You want to stop dancing already?’

‘Yes, we must.’

He took my hand and headed back towards where Violet was sitting. I stopped
him. ‘We must speak in private.’

There was an unoccupied bench under a tree so I led him to it. We sat down
close beside each other. Gilbert cupped my face in his hot hands and held it just inches
from his.

‘Dear Beth, I think I know what you want to tell me and I want to say the same
thing.’
'No,’ I turned my head abruptly, but not before I saw the hurt in his eyes.  
’Beth?’  
’I have lied to you.’  
’No, I’m sure . . . perhaps . . .’  
’Please, let me go on Gilbert, I must go on. I’m not a medium, I’m nothing but a fraud, I’ve never felt or seen a spirit in all my life, it’s all been lies.’  
His entire body seemed to sag under the great weight of my words. He looked down at the dirt.  
’I’m so very sorry, but when my parents died I couldn’t survive. There was so little money –  
’Stop!’ he said, then he turned to me and I could see pain and confusion in his eyes.  ‘I don’t want to hear any more.’  
’But you must understand how much I regret what I did.’  
’I thought you were a woman of great character, someone kind and gentle . . . someone that I could love.’  
I tried to defend myself but he did not give me the chance.  
His eyes became cold and angry, ‘But you’re a liar. How could you fool so many innocent people? How could you live with yourself?’  
He stood up and looked down at me.  
’Gilbert, please, you must let me explain.’  
’There’s nothing else to say, Miss Maudsley. It’s time to go back to Kew.’
Sarah was waiting at the coach house. She helped us change back into our stiff asylum clothing like three pitiful Cinderellas, and Gilbert took his leave without a word to me.

I was crying hard. I swiped at the tears with the back of my hand but they would not stop coming; and all I could think was: *You deserve this. Liar. Fraud. Cheat. This is what you had coming.*

Violet put her arm around me. ‘What’s wrong Beth?’

‘I . . . I’m upset because we might never be together.’

‘But he’ll come and see you in the yard like he always has.’

I nodded, although I knew that he would not.

My mind was racing with what I should have said to him, what I would have said if he had given me the chance; but more than anything in the world, I wanted to tell him that I was sorry.

The four of us traversed the narrow corridors in single file. I followed behind Violet with my head hung low as tears splattered my grey bodice with black.

We went to Peg’s ward first and said our goodbyes to her.

‘You take care of yourself,’ she said, patting me firmly on the back, ‘and stop feeling so low, it does you no good.’

Sarah gave me a clean linen handkerchief from her own pocket. ‘Here,’ she said, ‘you’ve been made ever so melancholy by going out, I wish you never had.’

I put the handkerchief to my nose and could smell starch and freshness. ‘I’ll be fine in just a minute.’

Violet hugged Peg. ‘I hope we see you again. It’s been such a lovely day.’

‘Same time next year, I hope,’ she replied.

By the time we got back to our own ward, I had managed to control my tears, and thanked Sarah for her great kindness to us.

‘I’m the one who should be saying thanks.’ Sarah undid the top few buttons of her bodice, then pulled it to one side, revealing a faded cream chemise underneath. She was wearing the butterfly brooch pinned to it, just as I had once done.

‘It’s beautiful. I’ll never sell it.’
‘It’s yours, do what you want with it,’ I said, although it made me pleased to think that she would keep it. I knew Father would be happy to know it was still loved.

As soon as Sarah had left us in our ward, Violet started begging me to have the séance that very night, insisting that it would do much to cheer me up. I smiled bitterly at this.

‘Please, please,’ she said, ‘I can hardly wait a moment longer.’

‘But we don’t even have any sitters yet.’

‘We can easily get them. What about Rosie? She still mourns her dead infant, I’m sure she’d love the chance to know he’s resting in peace.’

‘Perhaps.’

‘Who else will we ask?’

‘What if someone hears us or a warder finds out?’

Violet grinned. ‘I’ve already thought of that and I’ve got a brilliant plan. We’ll hold the séance in the cupboard.’

At the back of the ward was a broom cupboard the size of a small room. In it were various items of cleaning equipment, such as the floor bumpers and rags, which were used for cleaning the ward. As this was all the room contained, it was never locked.

‘That’s a good idea,’ I said, ‘and doesn’t Rosie have some candle stubs under her mattress? We could probably get matches from the stock cupboard without too much trouble –

‘No!’

‘What do you mean? We must have a little light. No one will see us if the cupboard door is properly closed.’

‘We can’t have candles.’

‘Why ever not?’

‘No.’ Violet’s voice was shaky but resolute.

‘But–

‘Isn’t a séance meant to be held in the dark anyway?’

‘Well yes.’

‘There’s a vent in the wall. It will let in enough moonlight.’

I doubted that it would, but Violet had become unusually agitated over the issue of the candles, so I said no more. She sat down on her bed, put her feet up without removing her boots and shut her eyes.
I wanted to rest too, but instead I turned my back to Violet and began smoothing down my blanket, although my bed was perfectly made. We were alone for the moment, but a warder would undoubtedly come in soon and hurry us out to the yard. When I was sure that she was not looking, I pulled the letter out from my corset where it was hidden. The paper was warm and a little crushed where it had been pressed against my skin.

On the envelope in neat printing was the name: Miss Evie Steward. I did not know the woman very well, although her bed was not far away from mine, but I would do everything I could to persuade her to join our séance.

As quietly as I possibly could, I eased the letter out of the envelope, coughed to disguise the noise as I unfolded it, then quickly scanned the contents before pushing it back in under my mattress out of sight.

It was a profound relief to have the letter to rely on, as I had no other props at my disposal. There was a trick I remembered with floating boots, but I did not feel confident enough to use it and there was no opportunity for practise. I would have been relying entirely on my toe, which fortunately still clicked on cue.

‘Let’s have the séance tomorrow night,’ said Violet.

I shook my head. ‘It’s too soon.’

‘But you’ve been putting it off for ages.’

‘We need more sitters.’

‘I’m sure we can get some easily enough. Please?’

I sighed. ‘All right then, tomorrow night it is, but let me find the other sitters.’

‘Thank you, Beth. It means so much to me.’

By the next morning, my day with Gilbert already seemed like a long time ago, but stamped on my mind so that it could never be erased was the look of betrayal and bewilderment on his face when I had told him the terrible truth.

I could still smell the clean, soapy-freshness of his hair and the sharper male smell that began at his collar; I could see the way his bristles grew in a whorl on his cheeks making the shape of two perfect circles and the fine, fair hair of his brows; but most of all I could still feel the heat from his hands about my waist and his breath on my neck, making my heart race like a bolting horse. These things I would never forget.

When we went out to the yard after breakfast, I introduced myself to Evie and asked if she would like to be a sitter at my séance. Evie was very old but she had the thick brown hair of a girl. She wore it plaïted and twisted around her head and from a distance it looked as though she was wearing a large hat.
‘It would mean a great deal to me if you would sit with us,’ I said.
‘No thanks, I don’t like that sort of thing.’
‘Have you ever been to a séance?’
‘No and I don’t want to, it brings you nothing but bad luck,’ she replied. ‘My aunt went to a séance once and the medium said something bad would happen. Within a week her family were all dead.’

I panicked then, for I could not do without her.
‘Only there’s a gentleman . . . the name of Edward keeps coming to me, he wants you to be there because he’s got something for you.’

She gasped. ‘Edward? My Edward?’

Suddenly I felt a sharp prod on my shoulder. I swung around. Maud stood in front of me with her arms crossed. ‘What’s this about a séance?’

‘Nothing.’

‘She’s got a message from Edward,’ said Evie, ‘he wants to speak to me.’

Maud frowned. ‘I want to be in it too.’

I would never forget her screaming performance during the potato fight. ‘Sorry, but unfortunately I’ve already got enough people,’ I said firmly.

‘If you don’t let me, I’ll go straight to Matron.’

It seemed that I had found sitter number four.

We decided to wait for quite some time after the doors to the ward were locked before entering the cupboard, to ensure all the other women were asleep. When I felt that it was safe, I would rouse Violet and then we would wake up Rosie, Evie and Maud.

I had been worried about falling asleep on the night of the séance, but I need not have been. Fear about my final and most important performance as a medium kept me vigilant as a nightwatchman. This was my only chance to help Violet. If she knew Lily was resting peacefully, perhaps it might bring her some consolation. It was not much, but it was all I had to give.

When I sensed everyone had fallen asleep, I whispered to Violet that it was time, then we felt our way around the ward and gently shook the others awake. It was dark, but because there were no curtains on the windows there was enough moonlight to see by. Maud let out a yelp when I woke her and my heart thudded as several other women stirred.
Once everyone was assembled at the foot of my bunk, we formed a single line and put our hands on the waist of the person in front, just in case one of us became disorientated. We must have made a strange spectacle; five barefoot women with wild hair and billowing nightgowns, snaking their way down the middle of the ward.

We managed to creep into the cupboard without waking any of the others up. There was a strong smell of floor wax and mice, mixed with the musty odour of Maud who washed even more infrequently than the rest of us. I shut the door as gently as I could, but it clicked as the handle struck the plate.

The light was not as good as it had been in the ward. In the gloom, the mops and bumpers made looming human-like shadows on the walls. I sat on the cold floor and the others did the same. The wood was rough and splintery and I could feel it through the thin cotton of my nightgown.

‘I’ve heard that mediums use objects to help them get in touch with the dead, so I want to give you something,’ whispered Rosie, pressing two warm coins into my palm. ‘I used them to close the eyes of my babe.’

I put the coins in my lap and then tied the long skirt of my nightgown around them in a knot, so that they would not be lost.

‘I’m scared,’ said Evie. ‘I don’t like this sort of thing at all.’

‘There’s no need for anyone to feel in the least bit afraid, no harm will come to us. I ask that you all remain silent, for the spirits are reticent and do not take well to unexpected noise. Normally at the start of a séance we would sing hymns, but as that’s not possible, perhaps we can engage in some silent prayer, asking that those whom we wish to speak to tonight are able to make their presence known to us.’

Violet’s warm hand held mine firmly.

‘Is there anyone out there amongst our dear departed who would like to speak? Please give me a sign and make yourself known.’

Maud’s quick breaths were loud in the silence. I flexed my toe. It made a satisfying sound and all of the women jumped.

‘We come in peace and light. I would like to ask you some questions. Give two raps if the answer is yes and one rap if it is no. Do you have a message for anyone here?’

I moved my toe as I always had, but nothing happened. Then I tried it again and again but there was no sound. My toe burned as bone ground against bone, and I was forced to stop before I cried out with the pain of it.
This threw me into quite a panic at first, but before long my old improvisation skills came rushing back. ‘I feel that there’s a presence here already, a reluctant spirit.’

‘It’ll be for me,’ said Maud with a sniff of pride. ‘One of them what I murdered in their beds.’

Rosie could barely conceal her laughter, but Evie’s nerves jangled the air.

‘I don’t like it,’ she said. ‘Can we stop?’

‘I must ask for silence or the spirits will not come through.’

Things needed to start moving quickly, so I began some ghostly moaning at a very low volume then spoke in a strained voice. ‘There is someone trying to speak through me . . . who are you? What do you want from us?’

The anxiety and anticipation in the closet was like a living, breathing thing, more potent than I had ever felt at a séance before.

‘Mama, mama, come and play with me,’ I burbled.

‘William? Oh William is that you?’ said Rosie.

I giggled childishy.

‘My darling boy, are you safe? Are you well? Are you happy?’

‘It’s all playing Mama, nothing but playing all day long in beautiful sunshine.’

‘My darling, I’m so glad.’

‘Do not mourn for me Mama. It makes me sad. I’m happy here . . . happy here . . . so happy . . .’

I let my voice trail off slowly, and then slumped over as if the exertion had cost me a great deal. Violet squeezed my hand and asked me if I was all right. I told her I was quite fine and that we all needed to gather our thoughts and concentrate hard.

‘There’s a gentleman,’ I continued, ‘a most handsome gentleman. He’s telling me that he wrote a letter, a letter that he put his very heart and soul into, but that letter is not with its rightful owner and he cannot be happy until this is put right.’

Evie said nothing.

‘His name begins with . . . it begins with an E.’

‘I had a letter hidden in my dress all those years ago when they first brought me here,’ said Evie. ‘It was from Edward, my poor love who was hit by a carriage. We were betrothed. That letter meant the world to me, but it would be long gone now.’

‘This fine gentleman is desperate to give his letter back to you. He says he called you his Little Sunshine.’

Evie gasped. ‘Oh my, he did, he did call me that.’
‘Edward is with you still, in the next life, but he’s not happy. He wants you to have the letter. It’s yours.’

I jerked about a little, broke the circle and then pulled the letter from the front of my nightgown. I tossed it as hard as I could into Evie’s lap. She jumped about a foot in the air.

‘It’s alright,’ I reassured her. ‘It’s his letter.’

When she realised this, Evie kissed the envelope then held it up close to her face. ‘I can just make out the way he used to write my name. How can I bear to wait until morning to read it?’

‘You must be patient Evie. Our work is not finished here tonight, there’s another spirit that wishes to be heard. A young girl who died a tragic death.’

This was the moment we had been waiting for and I expected to sense Violet’s excitement, but her hand had gone limp in mine and her shoulders were slumped. At first I thought she was asleep, but when I lifted up her hand she looked at me, although I could not read the expression on her face.

‘There is someone here who blames themselves terribly for my death,’ I said in a high-pitched voice, ‘but it was not their fault, it was no one’s fault.’

Then, suddenly, the whole thing fell spectacularly apart. Maud began to scream so loudly I feared she would wake every warder at Kew. Rosie put her hand over Maud’s mouth to try and muffle the noise, but she bit it and then began beating her fists on the door, pleading to be let out. The door was not even locked, but we could not get her to listen.

Eventually we prised her away, and as she collapsed into my arms the door swung open.

‘What’s going on in here then?’ said the angry voice of a warder.

‘She made me go to her séance,’ sobbed Maud, ‘it’s all her fault. I didn’t even want to do it. She made me.’

I shrunk back into the shadows. The mouldy smell of damp mops was sharp as vinegar. There was nowhere to hide.

‘You that spiritualist?’

The warder towered over me. I did not know her. I nodded.

‘I said, are you that spiritualist?’

‘Yes.’
She turned to the others. ‘Right then, back to bed the lot of you before it’s sugar-on-a-spoon all round.’

Everyone scampered away as quickly as they could, except Violet who stayed near the door where the warder could not see her.

‘I’ll be reporting you to Matron in the morning. She’ll decide on your punishment. Now get back to bed and if I hear another peep I’ll have you trussed up so fast you won’t know what’s hit you.’

The warder stormed out of the ward but she was unsteady on her feet. She turned her ankle near the door, yelled a lot of profanities in my direction and then finally left, giving the door a resounding slam.

I climbed into bed, trying to push away miserable thoughts of failure and the punishment that lay ahead. In the dim light I could see Evie lying in bed. She was clutching the letter to her chest. At least I had made someone happy.

‘I’m sorry Violet,’ I whispered.

She turned towards me. ‘That’s alright.’

‘No it’s not. I wanted to help you more than anybody.’

A woman began reciting the Lord’s Prayer as loud as she could. Several of the others told her to be quiet but she did not stop until Maud threatened her with violence.

‘Beth?’

‘Yes.’

‘I know.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I saw you put the letter under your mattress. I know where it came from.’

My breath caught in my throat. This was it then; this was the end. I was going to lose Violet too. Spiritualism had cost me everything. I covered my face with my hands.

‘Beth?’

I could not reply.

‘It’s all right, you can talk to me.’

‘No, I can’t. I can’t talk . . . I can’t even look at you because I don’t want you to see my face, the face of a liar . . . a fraud . . . I’m nothing but a cheap swindler. I’ve done a terrible thing, my life has been a lie, how could you ever care for someone like that?’
Violet got out of her own bed and squeezed into mine. I would not take my hands away from my eyes. She took them in hers and pulled them away but I kept my eyes tightly shut.

‘Tell me why you did it so that I can understand.’

I told her everything then, with no detail altered or loathsome act omitted, and when I was done and I opened my eyes, it felt like I had crawled out of a cave into the light, after a lifetime of cowering in the dark.

‘Beth, I forgive you.’

‘But how can you when I’ve told so many lies?’

‘Because I’m your friend, I know who you truly are. And you’ve learned from what you’ve done. You would never do it again.’

I shook my head. ‘Never, no matter what.’

We embraced and I held Violet tightly to my chest. I could never have imagined how wonderful it would feel to be finally free of secrets and lies.

‘I wish I really could contact Lily for you,’ I said. ‘What would you say to her?’

Violet pulled away from me and shook her head.

‘Please Violet, you must talk about it. I feel such relief at having told you my awful secret. It’s truly set me free, there’s a lightness in my heart that I never dreamed I could feel again. If you don’t talk about your suffering you can’t hope to heal. You can trust me. I’d never judge you.’

She turned away and pulled her knees up to her chest. I rubbed her shoulders and whispered to her that everything was all right, that she was safe and that I loved her.

Violet was silent for a long time. I brushed out her long hair with my fingers and began to braid it, although I could not really see what I was doing. After a while I thought that she had fallen asleep, but then suddenly she put her legs down and the silky braid slid out of my hand.

Violet rolled onto her back and began to speak.

‘We used to make wild escape plans. We were always coming up with new ways to get out of Kew, not that we had the courage to try any of them . . . and we talked and talked about what we’d do with our lives on the outside. I didn’t care what we did so long as we were together. I didn’t even mind staying at Kew forever if I had her love. Then one day they moved her to another ward and just like that, she was gone. . .’
‘I missed her so much I could hardly bear it. We saw each other sometimes in the sewing room, but it wasn’t the same as having every night together and laughing and hugging and making up stories.’

‘Lily was miserable too. I hated to see her so sad. She loved reading, but of course there are no books here and she had no friends to talk to in her new ward. Well, one day I found a penny novel on a warder’s desk. There was no one around so I took it and gave it to Lily. It was just a silly story but she was thrilled to bits. She would be able to read at night after her ward was locked, but we needed a candle. It wasn’t hard to get one. I found an old stub easily enough. It took a bit longer to find the matches.’

Violet took a deep breath.

‘The day I gave her the matches, she told me that after the ward was locked that night she would read. But the candle was only small and wouldn’t last long . . . she would’ve had to get very close to the flame to read and . . . oh dear God I cannot go on –

My heart tightened like a fist. ‘You must Violet, you must.’

‘Her hair . . . her hair caught on fire and she burned to death.’

The shock of it took my breath for a moment.

‘It was my fault, all my fault, if it wasn’t for me she’d still be here.’

I held her tightly as her body heaved with sobs. My own tears fell silently onto her hair. It seemed like a very long time before she stopped crying, my back was stiff and the dawn was just creeping in when she lifted up her swollen face and looked at me with red eyes.

‘It was an accident Violet, a terrible tragic accident. You were not to blame. You tried to do a good thing and it went wrong. It wasn’t your fault.’

She wiped her eyes with the hem of her nightgown. ‘Perhaps we can forgive each other then.’

I shook my head vehemently. ‘No Violet, we must each forgive ourselves.’
Matron was waiting for me in the dining hall at breakfast the next morning. I stood by the door and watched as she picked dark curls of dirt from under her nails with a vegetable knife and flicked them onto the floor.

She looked up and saw me. The knife clattered to the ground. Then she rushed over and stood so close that I could see the pitted black holes all over her face.

‘I hear you’ve been a very bad girl,’ she said.

I cast my eyes down. There were greasy fat stains splattered up her apron.

‘We don’t put up with that sort of thing round here, not for one minute.’

She grabbed me by the ear, twisted it excruciatingly and called out for help. I soon found myself pinioned between Matron and another warder with breath like stewed tea. They held me roughly under the arms and then dragged me across the floor towards the corridor. I was aware of pain and the complete hush in the room, which was broken suddenly by the sound of someone weeping. I wished that I could say goodbye to Violet. Just a glimpse of her face would have given me strength.

‘You’ll pay for this,’ hissed Matron. ‘By God you’ll pay.’

There was no point in resisting as I was hauled along, for there was little chance of escape. All I could do in protest was try to make myself as heavy and burdensome as possible. To this end, I gripped the floor as well as I could with my feet and imagined I was a dead weight. The warders were large but they were not strong. It was a struggle for them to keep me moving.

After much effort on their part, I was eventually dragged into a small dark cell, which was not that far from the dining hall but in a part of Kew that was entirely unfamiliar. They pushed me up hard against the wall then let go of my arms. I slid to the floor. Fear had deadened the pain.

‘You’ll be sorry you took the devil’s side,’ Matron gasped, her chest heaving.

The other warder had clumps of coarse grey hair on her chin. I did not recognise her reedy voice. ‘Damn sorry, make her pay for it, won’t we?’

‘My word we will.’
Matron kicked the door shut and the bolts rattled. Then she squatted down to catch her breath. The other one was breathing heavily too, and her sweaty face shone eerily in the half-light.

I looked around the room. It was lined with wooden planks. Many were covered with deep scratches. Even the ceiling was wood and it was like being trapped inside a suffocating blanket box. There were no windows and one sputtering gas lamp was the only source of light. The lack of ventilation meant the room was heady with gas; the smell competing with the bitterness of damp and the tang of recently oiled wood.

With a start, I recognised the cross hatching that I had seen on the gates in the yard, and I remembered the furious face of the woman with her stone.

I tried to prepare myself for how it would be when they left me alone, as they surely planned to do. They would, I supposed, put out the struggling light, for I had heard that darkness was part of the punishment. It was horrible to imagine and I would be frightened and disorientated, but I felt that I could bear it.

Once she had recovered herself sufficiently, Matron stood up and then left the room, leaving me alone with the other warder. She leered at me nastily with her red currant eyes, and I wondered how she was able to summon such hatred for a human being she barely knew who had done her no wrong.

I averted my eyes from her stare and studied the stained wooden floor that was in need of a scrubbing. It was covered with dark marks, which I realised with a shock were blood.

Matron soon came back. She was carrying a camisole.

‘Let’s see how you like this then,’ she said, holding up the canvas jacket that was covered with straps and heavy buckles.

‘Don’t forget the other half of the outfit,’ said the warder.

‘No fear.’ Matron held up a hobbled skirt for my inspection. ‘I think our sensitive will look a real treat in this. Quite the latest fashion they are around here.’

The two women hooted with ugly laughter.

I could feel myself shivering. My teeth banged together as if I were freezing cold.

‘Please, you don’t need to restrain me. Just leave me in here and I’ll cause no trouble. I swear I’ll be as quiet as a mouse.’

‘A mouse?’ said Matron. ‘Rat’s more like it.’

Again the two women laughed uproariously. I cringed against the wall.
‘Bottom half first,’ said Matron, holding the canvas skirt open for me so I could step into it.

A skirt was really not the right word for the garment, as it did not have an opening at the bottom in the way that a skirt would. Rather, it was a tightly fitted canvas sack that fastened about my waist with a buckle and strap. My own itchy woollen skirt was bundled in with me, uncomfortably bunched around the top of my legs.

When I was inside the contraption, it was fastened up firmly behind. Then Matron put her foot in the small of my back to get the buckles and laces as firm as she could.

‘Hold your arms out in front of you then and let’s put on the top half.’

‘Does wonders for your figure,’ said the warder, prodding my belly.

‘We’ll get you done up nice and snug for the night.’

I held up my arms. They were shaking. Once the stiff canvas sleeves of the camisole were slipped up them, they were forced down into deep pockets at my side, so that there was no chance of movement. Then I was buckled in from the back and sides as tightly as the two of them could manage. My arms were pushed so hard against the sides of my body, I felt as if they might crush my ribs.

When I was completely bound, the neck of the camisole was fastened and a padlock snapped shut. I was so constricted that I could barely move my head. But I had no desire to move any part of me, for even the slightest change of position caused excruciating pain.

I was surprised at what came out of my mouth then, for it seemed so silly later. ‘What will I do,’ I asked, ‘when I need to use the privy?’

They fell about laughing harder then ever.

‘How’s about I come in every hour and powder your nose?’ said Matron.

The pain from the camisole was a distraction from the panic that started to sicken me. For the first time I thought that I might not actually survive this night. I would survive it physically no doubt, but who would I be when I came out into the light again?

Once they managed to stop laughing and joking, Matron extinguished the gas lamp. Then she leaned in close to me and hissed into my ear: ‘Let’s see if your spirits can save you now then, eh?’
The door closed with a bang and I could hear bolts being slid into place and a key turning in the lock. The darkness was absolute. Not a chink of light showed through anywhere and when I shut my eyes, it was brighter than in the cell.

At first all I could think about was the pain in my ribs, around my waist, my neck, even my hands where the fingers were uncomfortable splayed. But after some time elapsed, I cannot guess how long, the pain slowly turned to a creeping numbness and an overwhelming feeling of tiredness.

There was another problem. I was standing up. The only way I could hope to will away the night would be to somehow get myself onto the floor and try to sleep, but it did not seem possible in a skirt as unforgiving as a sheet of tin. I tried to gradually ease myself down, using the wall for support, but when the canvas buckled against the back of my knees, I could not bear the sting of it.

I soon realised that the only way I could get myself prone was simply to pitch myself to the floor and hope that I would not hit my head. The thought of losing consciousness for a while gave me some solace, but I did not yet feel ready to die.

Despite the circumstances, it took some time for me to get up the courage to do this, for I had become disorientated in the thick darkness and had no way of ascertaining where the walls of the cell were. I was very frightened, but eventually exhaustion won out, and I rocked back and forth, using my weight to make me topple over.

I landed on my front as hard as a felled tree. I could taste blood and the pain in the arm that had taken most of the impact burned. With an enormous effort and after many fruitless attempts, I rolled over onto my back. My head only just touched the floor, and I could feel the cold padlock digging into the back of my neck. There was a strong meaty smell coming from the canvas.

Now I began to feel truly afraid, for I realised that I was unable to get up again. I don’t know why this thought upset me so much, perhaps it was the final realisation that I did not have the slightest bit of control over my situation, but I began to weep hard and loud, in a way I never had before. I did not recognise the guttural sounds that came out of my mouth.

Eventually the crying subsided and I screamed and called out for help instead, although I knew that it was useless. Then, fatigued and spent, I finally fell silent. My breathing was ragged and strained.

Suddenly I heard a scratching sound coming from somewhere near my feet and I realised why the warders had found the idea of rats so amusing. The cell was infested
with them. What could I do? How would I protect myself? The thought of a rat slithering over my face, its moist grey skin touching mine, its sharp claws scratching or even, God forbid, pointed teeth tearing into my exposed neck, set my nerves on fire. I began to buck and writhe furiously inside the camisole, which only made my body ache even more.

I lost control of myself then, the momentary warmth of it soon becoming a chafing coldness. There was no shame in it after all, for what further humiliation could I feel.

It became clear that the only way I could make the vermin leave me alone was to make enough noise to scare them off. The warders had taken all my power away, but they had not gagged me. I could still speak. I could still scream. I could keep the rats away if I tired hard enough. In fact, while I had been crying and calling out they had not troubled me at all. So I let out the loudest scream I could manage and the horrible scratching instantly stopped.

My dry throat stung and I could not keep the screaming up for long, but I muttered and I shouted and I sang and I chattered to myself, leaving small, unpredictable gaps of time between the sounds so the rats could not get used to it. No doubt I sounded like the maddest woman that had ever lived, but they did not touch me.

After what seemed like a very long time of doing this, something strange began to happen. My voice continued forming words and making sounds but I was disconnected from it, as if the person lying bundled up on the floor was someone else. The fear and horror receded. They were still there, but they hovered above me like a dark cloud I could choose to be separate from.

I thought about the medium’s trick of rubbing alcohol on a sealed envelope to see through to what was inside, because that was how it felt; as if I was seeing clearly through to the very heart of things for the first time ever. Violet and Gilbert were there at the centre, surrounded by the great love I had for them both, and I was there too, not yet fully formed but taking shape as I realised the extent of our sameness, our fragility, our imperfections. Father stood nearby, with his secret held close to his heart; and on the periphery was Polly, her features hazy and unformed, but there nonetheless. I did not know what all this meant, but I was suffused with a sense of calmness and connectedness and a growing understanding that at the core of my being there resided a sense of knowing that I could rely upon, if I dared to plummet its depths.
By the time the cell was finally unlocked, my throat was so sore I could barely speak and my arm throbbed horribly, but I had never felt more sure of myself in my life.

A warder unbuckled my camisole and skirt, and then helped me shed my canvas cocoon.

I took my first shaky step forward, as weak as a newborn.
After my night in the dark cell, life returned to what I had begun to think of as normal, but it could not have been more different. Although I would not have believed it possible, my longing for escape had faded to a dull ache.

I missed Gilbert, but I did not expect to see him ever again. Thoughts of him came unbidden and left me feeling bleak, but I delighted in Violet’s company and appreciated it like I never had before. So long as I stayed out of trouble, which was not hard once I knew how, the warders left me to my work and life was really not so bad. I had a true friend, but more importantly, I knew the great value of it.

My days were mostly spent in the sewing room. Under Violet’s tutelage, I had become a reasonable seamstress, and I found there was quite a lot of satisfaction in a task well done. It was also reassuring to know that if I ever left Kew, I would at least have a way of making enough money to survive.

Several months passed, although I did not know really how long. It became hot once again and we sweltered at night in our locked ward. Then, one ordinary day, everything changed.

I was darning socks in the sewing room and teaching Violet the habits of the *Tussock Moth*, when a warder that I had never seen before approached me.

‘Elizabeth Maudsley?’

I looked up from my work. ‘Yes.’

‘Come with me.’

‘But why? I’ve done nothing wrong.’

‘Did I say you’d done anything wrong?’

I shook my head but felt uneasy. The warders rarely spoke us to unless we had committed some crime or other, and whenever someone was taken from the sewing room it was inevitably for treatment.

‘Then move it. Now!’ she said.

I had no wish to anger the woman who was almost six foot tall, so I stood up quickly. Violet gave me a frightened look and I smiled to reassure her that everything would be all right, although I had the terrible feeling that it would not be.
I followed the warder, keeping step with her swift march, until we reached a small room that I had never seen before. It looked like a doctor’s room as it had a high bed for performing examinations and a magnifying lamp. There was a big inlaid desk with high-backed chair. On top of the desk was an expensive pen lying on a blotter and a jar of wilted violets.

‘Sit down and wait,’ said the woman, pointing to a smaller chair in the corner of the room.

‘Oh please tell me what’s going to happen.’

‘The doctor’s coming to look at you, that’s what.’

‘But I haven’t done anything wrong.’

She turned and left without speaking, locking the door behind her.

I began to feel very afraid. There was a glass cabinet beside me containing sharp shiny instruments and another cupboard full of medicine bottles. All I could think was that they were going to give me chloral to sedate me, or worse. Then suddenly I remembered Violet telling me how they cut up bodies in the dead house for experiments and I thought I would be sick.

The door opened and a bald man in a doctor’s coat came inside. He shut the door behind him but did not lock it. Under his arm was a big black book. He sat down behind the desk and consulted the book for a few minutes before he said a word to me.

When he finally spoke, he took off his glasses and looked at me intently.

‘Now tell me, are you Miss Elizabeth Maudsley?’

‘Yes I am, but I’m not sick and I haven’t done anything wrong.’

He smiled, but I did not trust him.

‘Climb up on the bed and I’m going to ask you some questions.’

I did as I was told, although I could feel my hands shaking.

‘Do you get the tremors very often?’ he asked.

I sat on them. ‘Only when I’m nervous.’

‘Are you nervous now?’

‘Yes.’

The doctor laughed heartily. ‘Well there’s no need to be, you know.’

I did not believe a word of it.

‘I just want to ask you some questions to make sure you are well enough to go. It won’t take very long.’

‘Go? Go where?’
‘Home.’
‘Home?’
‘Presumably you are to be released into the care of a relative, but I must examine you first.’
‘I don’t have any relatives.’

The doctor smiled indulgently. ‘There must be somebody, Miss Maudsley, or we would not be here, would we now?’

I thought it prudent not to say another word. All I could think was that Gilbert had somehow managed to get me out. But I knew it was not true; that it would never happen. In the end, I decided that some mistake had been made. The warders got us muddled up with each other all the time. I would not be going anywhere.

The doctor looked down my throat and listened to my heart. Then he asked me some very simple questions that even an infant could answer correctly, and pronounced me to be quite well.

‘Now wait here and Mrs Dawson will be in to get you shortly.’
‘I’m to be released?’
‘Yes,’ he said, ‘it does happen from time to time you know.’

I did not know what to think. After what seemed like an age, the same tall warder came back and led me down another corridor and into another small room. By this time I had stopped feeling afraid. I felt a small sense of amusement in fact, imagining the shock on the relative’s face when they saw me and how I would relate the strange story to Violet later and make her laugh.

But I was the one in for a shock. The person waiting in the room was Polly. She smiled at me but I did not want her to come any closer, so I stepped back until I could feel the wall behind me.

‘Elizabeth, I’ve come to get you out.’
She was holding a baby in her arms that was wrapped in a pink shawl.

I could not believe what I was hearing. Surely it was a trick designed to trap me. I folded my arms tightly across my chest.

‘I’m sorry for what I done. I’m real sorry and I just want to explain myself.’
‘Explain? Explain what? Why you tried to kill me then sent me here?’
‘You behave yourself or she’ll go home without you,’ said the warder who was standing by the door.

‘I’m not going anywhere with her!’
‘What?’ said Polly. ‘You’d rather stay here?’
I spoke harshly then. ‘I suppose he’s gone and left you like I said he would and you had no where else to go.’
‘He has left me but I didn’t have to come here.’
‘So why did you bother? I’ve got nothing left to give you.’

Polly adjusted the shawl around the baby’s face. She had grown thin and was wearing an oyster coloured dress that did not suit her. I noticed that her hair was dull and her lips were peeling.

‘Don’t tell me you felt guilty because I won’t believe it,’ I said.
‘I was angry with you.’

I shook my head in disbelief. ‘You were angry with me?’

Suddenly none of it seemed to matter much anymore; what she had done, why she had done it. I wanted to hold onto my anger but it was disappearing fast. Besides, it was obvious what had happened. Since becoming a mother, Polly’s conscience had begun to trouble her.

I would let her get me out of Kew but I would not thank her for it. Then we would part ways forever, because I did not wish to spend a single unnecessary moment in her traitorous company.

‘Just do what you’ve got to do,’ I said.
‘I’ve got the papers in me purse. Will you hold the baby while I get them out?’

I had no desire to do so, but I put out my arms and took it from her. The child was sound asleep.

‘How old is she?’
‘Three months today.’

‘Were you with child before I was put in this place?’
‘Yes.’

‘Did he know?’

Polly shook her head. ‘I thought I could get rid of it, but I couldn’t.’

‘What’s her name?’

‘Holly.’

After she had placed a pile of crumpled papers on the doctor’s desk, I tried to hand the baby back but Polly would not take her. Instead, she undid the clasp of her necklace, took it off and then held it up for me to see.

‘Remember this?’ she said.
It was the key that had always hung around her neck. The only difference was that now it was on a silver chain and not a piece of string.

The baby gave a small cry then opened its eyes. I got such a shock that I nearly dropped the poor creature. She had my murky green eyes, one a slightly deeper colour than the other. They were my eyes exactly.

‘Looks like you, don’t she?’
‘What a terrible coincidence. How cruel of fate to give you such a permanent reminder of me.’

‘Please don’t be angry Elizabeth. Let me explain.’

‘I know exactly what you’re going to say. You’re going to tell me that Mr Frost made you do it, that it was all his fault, that you were an innocent under his spell and didn’t know what you were doing. Well it won’t work. I won’t accept that.’

Polly shook her head. ‘I’m not. I’m not at all. It weren’t his fault. He helped me do it but I was the one who wanted to hurt you.’

A lump came to my throat then, although I had thought that I no longer cared.

The baby squirmed in my arms.

Polly reached into her purse, took out a small wooden box and placed it on the table. I recognised it as the box she had owned since the very first day I met her on the street.

‘Here,’ she slipped the key off its chain and gave it to me. ‘Open it.’

I didn’t know why she wanted me to, but I couldn’t see any harm in it so I passed her the baby then picked up the box.

It felt very light, as if it was empty. The lock was flimsy and worn and it opened easily. Inside was a blue velvet bag tied with a darker blue ribbon. I pulled the ribbon off, shook the contents of the bag out onto my hand, and found I was holding an enamelled butterfly brooch that was almost identical to the one father had made for me. It was an exact replica of a Holly Blue butterfly, just as mine had been. The only difference was that this brooch had seed pearls for eyes instead of sapphires.

‘Look at the engraving on the back,’ said Polly.

I turned the brooch over and read the inscription.

To Princess Polly.

All my love, Father.
‘He was my father too.’

The idea was so preposterous, I almost laughed. ‘No it can’t be, that’s impossible.’

‘He loved my Ma very much, but he was a man of honour and would never bring shame on his family.’

‘But you were living on the streets.’

‘Only for a little while, because when he died he left us nothing. I was that angry with him. I hated you and swore I’d have my revenge.’

‘You knew me?’

‘I used to follow you about all the time. In the beginning you never knew I was there, but then I got lazy about covering my tracks. My Ma was his mistress, she knew that was all she was and she never asked him for nothing, but he used to see us right with money. Then suddenly he died and then Ma died from the same contagion and I had nothing.’

I remembered those days and nights of feeling followed and watched around the streets of London. The brooch slipped out of my hand and fell on the table.

‘I used to look up to Dad. I thought he was a good man, a brave man, but he weren’t brave enough to leave us anything in his will to live on. He was too scared of people thinking bad of him. And I had nothing and had to live on the streets even though I was his daughter too, just like you was. You looked damned rich to me with your fancy clothes. I used to see the money you made giving them séances in the halls and it wasn’t fair, it wasn’t fair at all. So I decided I’d steal your purse and keep following you until I could work out a way to make you pay, but I never needed to even think about it because you took me into your life that very first day.’

I did not believe it, not a single word. It was impossible. ‘I wasn’t rich. I had barely enough to survive on myself.’

‘But it was more than me. Dad always said that he had two girls, the Empress and the Princess, but I never felt much like a Princess. . . he taught me a few things about butterflies but he never had time to teach me the things that really mattered, like my letters. We hardly saw him really. He was always with you and I hated you for it.’

The baby began to cry and Polly thrust her at me.

‘She’s your kin too.’

I looked into my own eyes and knew without doubt that every word she had said was true.

‘We can be together, the three of us. Like a proper family,’ she said.
I did not know what I truly thought, but I did know that Polly would never be like real family to me. It was impossible. ‘I’m not leaving.’

‘What?’

‘I must stay here.’

‘But you can’t, I’ve come to get you out.’

‘I’ve got a friend here, a dear friend. I won’t leave her.’

Polly grabbed my arm and the baby wailed even louder. ‘Elizabeth, what are you saying? We’re your family. You can’t stay here to be with a stranger.’

I shook my head. ‘She’s not a stranger.’

‘They won’t let you back in anyway, not now I’ve said I’ll take you and you’ve been let out. You have to come with me.’

This was likely to be true, so I did the only thing that I could think of. I dropped to the floor pretending to faint. I only meant to pretend, to have them take me back to the ward so that I could work out what to do, but then I felt the back of my head smash against the wall and everything went black.
I awoke from a deep sleep in the dark of night in my own bed. My mouth was dry and my head fogged and sore, but apart from that I appeared to be unharmed. Violet was kneeling on the floor beside me, her head resting on the bed. She jumped in surprise when I said her name.

‘Oh Beth, I’ve been so worried about you. What happened? Why did they take you away?’

I realised that she knew nothing of what had occurred. It must stay that way. I did not want her hurt, and I certainly did not want her telling me I should leave, as she undoubtedly would.

‘They accused me of giving cheek to a warder,’ I said. ‘And I fell over and knocked my head. I can’t remember exactly how it happened.’

‘But you didn’t give cheek to anyone.’

‘They confused me with someone else, but they wouldn’t listen.’

Violet smoothed my hair away from my face. Her fingertips felt cool. ‘Are you sure you’re not hurt?’

‘I’ve got a bit of a headache but really it’s nothing.’

‘You must go back to sleep. You’ll feel better in the morning.’

‘Get back into bed, you need to sleep too. I’ll be fine now.’

But I was not fine at all. I felt terribly upset and confused, although I believed what Polly had told me, because how could I not? For once in my life I had done the right thing, something honourable, but the thought of the life I could have had outside Kew made me want to weep.

Strangely, the fact that Polly was my sister seemed unimportant. Although it was something I had once so desperately wanted, I realised that it was a word, nothing more, and it had no meaning now.

I thought about Mother. Had she known about Father’s affair? How had he done it without rousing suspicion? The field trips? Meetings with other lepidopterists? Polly’s revelation threw his whole life into doubt. But I could understand why Father had done it and I did not condemn him. His life with Mother must have been difficult. He had not
deserted us, as he could have done. And strangely, I felt easier in my mind now I no longer saw him as perfect.

I thought about little Holly. I would never have a child of my own and a niece would have been such a sweet consolation. I could still feel the weight of her tiny body in my arms and the way she smelled like clean linen that had been hanging in the sun.

The next morning I took my old place in the sewing room. I sat with my mending and tried to pretend that nothing had changed, although in my heart nothing would ever be the same again. I worked away silently until just before the dinner bell, taking grim pleasure when I pricked my finger with the needle and red drops marked the flannel underskirt I was mending.

Violet wanted to talk, but I told her my head still hurt so that I would not have to. Then, just as I was tidying away my work, someone burst through the doors of the sewing room. I looked up, as did every other woman in the room. It was Gilbert. He did not even glance in the direction of the warder in charge, but sought me out among the other women and came rushing to my side. I was so shocked to see his dear face after so long that I found myself quite speechless.

‘Beth, I must speak with you immediately.’ Gilbert was out of breath, as if he had been running, and was without his customary buttonhole. He glanced at Violet who was grinning at him. ‘In private.’

The warder stalked over to us. ‘Good morning Mr Banks,’ she said. ‘How can we help you?’

‘The doctor wishes to examine Miss Maudsley. I’ve been sent to collect her.’

‘Very well then.’

Gilbert took me by the wrist and led me from the room. I had no idea what was going on, but could only think that Polly had come back for me. We went into the visitor’s room but it was empty. He shut the door behind us.

‘Gilbert, why are you here? What’s going on?’

‘Polly came to see me. She told me everything.’

‘You won’t talk me into going with her, so there’s no point in trying. Besides, why do you care? Why are you here?’

‘Dear Beth, how could I stay away?’

‘You have managed it thus far,’ I said, not liking the sharpness in my voice.

‘But you must understand, I was devastated when I learned the truth about you. I felt that I had been terribly deceived.’
‘I have no wish to defend myself now; there is little point.’

‘Please, just listen. I was not wrong about you Beth, you are loyal and good. That was a wonderful thing you did for Violet, giving up your one chance of freedom. When Polly told me about it, I can’t tell you the relief I felt. All these months I’ve been so torn, loving you with all my heart but feeling so angry at your deceit, but now my mind is finally clear . . . you are the gentle loving person I knew you to be. To think you could have left here and you chose to stay so selflessly . . .’

Gilbert took my hands and dropped to his knees. ‘My dearest Beth, I want to marry you. I have wanted it since the very first time we met. Please do me the greatest honour and agree to become my wife.’

I slipped to the floor and pulled his sweet body close. ‘Yes . . . oh Gilbert, yes.’

But then I pulled away. ‘What about Violet? I can’t leave her here.’

Gilbert grinned. ‘I have thought up a little plan.’

I said nothing of this to Violet, but just a few hours later we were both called from our work and taken into the doctor’s room where I had had my examination before. The same doctor sat behind the desk with his black book open before him. But he was not alone. Polly was standing beside the window, holding the baby over her shoulder, and Gilbert stood beside her. I was surprised to see them both together.

‘Hello Elizabeth,’ said Polly. ‘I bet you didn’t expect to see me so soon.’

‘No, I didn’t.’

I glanced at Violet to see if she looked worried, but she was smiling like she had something to be very happy about. None of it was making any sense.

‘Good morning, Miss Maudsley,’ said Gilbert.

‘Good morning, Mr Banks.’

Polly took the baby from her shoulder and cradled it in her arms. I could see Holly’s little wet mouth and pink cheeks but I forced myself to look away.

As the doctor read through his notes, I tried to work out what Gilbert had planned but I could not.

‘Now Miss Maudsley,’ said the doctor, ‘we meet again. I don’t suppose I need to tell you why your sister is here, do I?’

I shook my head.

‘This is most irregular, I must say, and rather complicated but I have been speaking with Mr Banks, who as you know is a very well respected warder here. He has
indicated to me that you are reluctant to leave because you have formed a rather close acquaintance with Miss Violet Woods. Is that correct?"

    ‘Yes. Yes it is.’
    ‘I see.’

My heart suddenly leapt. ‘Are you going to let Violet out with me?’

The doctor laughed and looked at me like I was a child. ‘Goodness me no. I’m afraid it does not work like that. Each case is considered on its own merits. Having a friend leave Kew is not cause to leave oneself. If that were the case we would have no one here. No, I have simply brought you and Miss Woods here together because Mr Banks requested it and, I might add, because it was convenient for me to sign two release forms at once.’

    ‘But I don’t understand.’
    ‘I’m leaving too,’ said Violet.
    ‘But how? Who’s taking you out?’

Gilbert moved so that he was close to Violet, and then he took her hand in his. ‘I am to be her husband. We’re getting married as soon as she leaves Kew.’

For a moment I was confused, but then Violet gave me quick wink, so fast I nearly missed it. I shut my eyes in disbelief and had a fleeting vision of myself in a plain gown with loose sleeves, my head bowed to the ground. But then I lifted up my arms to reveal the cascading folds of vivid blue silk underneath them, and I showed them to the world.
‘An exegesis on

*Holly Blue*’
Introduction

The PhD by artefact and exegesis brings together my industry knowledge as a published writer of fiction (Ross 1998; 2001; 2001) with current academic debates about knowledge itself, utilising methodologies framed within practice led research as well as feminism.

I decided early on in my candidature to complete my artefact before beginning the exegesis. I made this decision because I had a clear idea of the shape of the novel, but was only just beginning to develop and explore potential ideas for the exegesis.

During the two years it took me to complete the artefact and undertake the extensive historical research that was necessary to write a publishable neo-Victorian novel, I kept a detailed journal of the issues and areas of interest that arose during the construction of the creative work using practice led research. By this I mean that I allowed my writing practice to lead my research. This research was often experiential and included visiting museums, clothing collections and historical sites. All my experiential research was potential fodder for my exegesis, and it gave shape and direction to my academic reading.

Keeping a journal is essential for recording the research journey as it evolves. Some researchers have seen it as potentially more important than the exegesis itself (Perry 2001). For my research however, it acted as a sounding board and repository for ideas that were yet to find connections.

Before making the final decision on the topic for my exegesis and consequent research journey, I explored several areas in detail before deciding they were not to be my focus. I see these as a vital part of the exegesis and every bit as important as the topic I finally selected. They are discussed at length in the first two parts of this exegesis in an attempt to articulate my whole journey as a writer and researcher and to accurately reflect how this changed as the artefact and exegesis evolved to the point that they began to inform each other (Skrebels 2007).

For this reason I see the exegesis as being in three parts. The first two are an exploration of my practice led research into areas of interest that arose during the
writing of the initial draft of the artefact. The third part represents the central concern of this exegesis: research into nineteenth century women's clothing, underpinned by a feminist methodology. This research resulted in my heightened awareness of the vital role that clothes play in depicting class, femininity and character in the neo-Victorian novel.

The most important role of this exegesis however, is to discuss the significant ways that this knowledge has enhanced and enriched my artefact – a novel set in nineteenth century Melbourne. Analysis of clothing, which had previously been overlooked and undervalued in my writing, has become an indispensable tool in my fiction-writer's toolkit. As my research into clothing progressed, it became clear how important this topic was. This was particularly so in later drafts of my novel, where I began to use clothing more thoughtfully and subtly in the narrative to create scenes that I hoped would resonate with the reader and remain vividly in their imagination.

Since completing the exegesis, I can no longer describe a character's clothing or attitudes towards what they are wearing without giving it significant analysis first. This analysis has been underpinned by a feminist research methodology, as described in the methodology section of this exegesis. Methodologically, my analysis operates on four levels.

The first is through practice led research that was often experiential in nature. This methodology allowed my writing and research to interact with each other in a holistic way (Arnold 2007). The eventual outcome of this is the symbiotic relationship between the artefact and exegesis. Tess Brady says in regard to her own PhD that ‘the academic became the creative; the creative became the academic’ (Brady 2000). This fusion of the two elements became more apparent as the work progressed, culminating in a novel and exegesis that are individual works in their own right, but ‘speak’ to each other in a unique way.

The second is my academic reading into the various theories around clothing, which added great depth and complexity to my understanding of nineteenth century women and the many issues they faced due to the restrictive clothing of their era (Craik 1994; Crane 2000; Finkelstein 1996; Mattingly 2002).

The third important area of exploration was analysing contemporary neo-Victorian novels to ascertain how their authors used clothing to add extra layers of meaning and perspective to their narratives and characters (Atwood 1997; Byatt 1992; Ham 2005; Waters 1999, 2002) particularly in regard to class and femininity.
Finally, studying how other writers incorporate historical fact into their fiction helped me to consolidate my own views about how to write about clothing in a meaningful way (Ames 2004; Beverley 2005; Grenville 2006; Vreeland 2002).

These multiple strands of reading and research considerably increased my knowledge about the creation of character through their choice of clothing. This enhanced my fiction writing and was of significant benefit to the artefact.

Although this exegesis is concerned specifically with my experiences producing a neo-Victorian novel, I have little doubt that the importance of clothing to female characters will be relevant in any other genre that I may choose to write in the future. In the past, I have written chick-lit, literary, young adult and children’s novels and have generally given scant consideration to how I clothed my characters. Since undertaking this research however, my opinion has changed irrevocably. Clothing is an essential tool for the writer of fiction in all genres and one that an effective and convincing writer overlooks at their peril.

My work is underpinned by feminist insights into the way that women have been influenced and shaped by clothing, both consciously and unconsciously, and how this has consequently been interpreted in the neo-Victorian novel. These insights have led me to realise what an important place clothing has had, and continues to have, in western society and the ambivalence many women have towards it (Guy & Banim 2000). For this reason, I assert that it is imperative that any fiction writer who wishes to use female characters in his/her work does not overlook or undervalue this topic.

As I show later in this exegesis, the importance of clothing to women was never more vital than during the nineteenth century (Mattingly 2002). Because of this, the topic of women and clothing is arguably more important in the neo-Victorian novel than any other genre of fiction writing.

In my research into women and clothing, I have focused exclusively on mid to late nineteenth century western society in England, Australia, and to a much lesser extent, America. This particular time frame and these countries were most relevant to my artefact. I have included references to working-class, middle-class and upper-class women, because the protagonist in my artefact, who is the first person narrator of her own story, is exposed to all levels of society during the course of the novel.

I had almost completed the first draft of the artefact before realising that clothing in the neo-Victorian novel was the area that I found most compelling. Because of the time it took to reach this conclusion, I had already explored several other topics in
some detail before deciding that they were not to be my focus. All of this research contributed significantly to the completed artefact and was an important part of my research journey. Therefore, I will begin this exegesis by discussing these other areas that held my interest for some time.

These areas include: how to incorporate historical research into fiction; the inherent difficulty of narrating a piece of fiction from the point of view of an unlikeable character and unreliable narrator; the freedom that the practice of spiritualism gave to repressed Victorian women, and women and incarceration.

It was during my research for this final area that I viewed a collection of nineteenth century asylum clothing at the Melbourne Museum. This experience was the first spark for my interest in nineteenth century women’s clothing. Had I not taken this particular detour, I might not have discovered the topic that was to be the central focus of this exegesis and would benefit my creative writing so enormously.

After I have discussed my exploration of these other areas of interest and how they contributed to my artefact, I will then go on to discuss at length my research into the importance of clothing to female characters in the neo-Victorian novel.

This exegesis constitutes a significant research journey. It has revealed much about my own creative processes in multiple areas. This exegesis stands as a new contribution to knowledge because of the research undertaken in these areas and because it analyses the significance of clothing for the neo-Victorian fiction writer as a way of depicting character, class and femininity, thereby adding a subtle yet significant extra layer of meaning to any narrative work.
Methodology

As a writer, it was important for me to understand nineteenth century women's clothing on an emotional and physical level, as well as an intellectual one, thus enabling me to use the material effectively in my artefact.

Some of the Victorian clothing I viewed elicited a strong emotional response. In the exegesis, I discuss smelling and handling some of the pieces and the effect this had of vividly evoking the past. By discovering 'human patina', such as sweat and ink stains on clothing, I was able to imagine the women that might have worn the garments. Furthermore, I could identify with the women themselves, despite the one hundred plus years of history that separated us. This enabled me to create characters with strong individual personalities who exhibited believable emotional responses. It brought my writing to life.

This experiential research was an essential step in the process of writing both the exegesis and artefact. It is common for writers of fiction but may not necessarily be seen as traditional academic knowledge gathering. Underpinning this with practice led research, with its emphasis on practice leading, informing and interacting with the research in a symbiotic way (Arnold 2009; Barrett & Bolt 2007), offered the ideal methodology for the start of my research journey.

I also studied participant observation, thinking that this might be a suitable methodology for my work. Initially its major requirements of participation, observation and introspection seemed to be particularly relevant to the way in which I was gathering and analysing my research material (Flick 2006; May 2001; Spradley 1980).

One of the requirements for participant observation is a social setting, but in my research into nineteenth clothing women's clothing, I was unable to fulfil this prerequisite. I tried to get around this difficulty with an imagined historical social setting, inspired by the women who might have worn the clothing I viewed. However, after giving this idea some consideration, I rejected it because it seemed too radical.
After gathering my experiential data using practice led research, I was then able to further enrich and deepen my understanding of the issues around nineteenth century women's clothing through reading about the various critical and cultural theories that have been applied to the topic (Craik 1994; Crane 2000; Finkelstein 1996; Wilson 2003).

The next step in my research journey was studying the work of other neo-Victorian fiction writers to see how they had used clothing as a tool for creating character, class and femininity in their novels (Atwood 1997; Byatt 1992; Ham 2005; Waters 1999, 2002). This analysis is extrapolated at length throughout the exegesis.

My research also included reading fiction that was written in the nineteenth century by both men and women (Bronte 1847; Collins 1860; Dickens 1860), although to a lesser extent because the neo-Victorian novel was my major focus. For this reason, there will be little specific reference to these and other nineteenth century novelists. Reading nineteenth century fiction was valuable however, as it helped me to gain information about Victorian attitudes towards women and their clothing at political, personal and societal levels (Ballin 1885; Cunnington 1937; Dent 1885).

It soon became clear that a feminist research methodology should be the spine for my research into clothing. A broad feminist methodology allowed me to appropriate non-traditional research techniques in my work, such as experiential research. It also ensured that I could use myself and my experiences as a woman and a writer to expand and inform my data (Devault 1996). I became an important part of the research process and came to view myself as a ‘resource rather than a contaminant’ (Devault 1996, p. 42).

This experiential approach does not make me a ‘contaminant’ because feminist enquiry legitimately allows for women’s voices and experience to deepen and contribute to the research. The voice of the researcher herself is not excluded in this process. The potential for subjectivity is taken into account and given some value, thus making feminist methodology significantly different to other more traditional methods in this regard.

An experiential approach is imperative for a fiction writer as personal experience, no matter how transmuted, is an essential part of all good writing. Natalie Goldberg in her book *Writing Down the Bones*, describes this experience very appropriately as ‘living twice’ (Goldberg 1986). By this she means we re-live our experiences by writing and thus re-interpreting them.
As a feminist researcher, I was able to be reflexive and use my own experience freely as a way to enrich and interpret results, confidently mixing subjectivity with academic analysis (Better 2006; Devault 1996).

By definition, feminist research methods can consist of many and varied research techniques (Baber 2004; Beetham & Demetriades 2007; Devault 1996) including practice led research. This ‘intersectionality’ (Walker 2004) allowed for great flexibility in my research methods. Questioning traditional research boundaries and interpreting them in a new way that aims to be inclusive is at the core of a feminist mindset (Baber 2004).

Feminist methods freely cross the many man-made boundaries between various disciplines, whilst always maintaining the central objective of allowing women to speak freely and in a way that will ultimately empower (Crossman 2000). It is this aspect of feminist research that enabled me to conduct my research on an emotional, physical and academic level, rather than being tied to one particular research technique that would have inevitably limited my data collection.

‘The real reason for change is, however, that we now have a much more realistic conception of what explanation itself involves. We have begun to understand that the real world, actually is complicated, and particularly that the people in it are so. Because they are complex, we need to ask many kinds of questions about them, not just one. To answer them we need to use many different ways of thinking, and this is why we need to use many different disciplines.’

(Midgley 2004, p. 50)

As a theorist, Midgely asserts that all disciplines, including scientific research, form part of the ‘literature of self’. The implicit meaning in this statement is that multiple disciplines may contribute to the stories we use in an attempt to understand what it is to be a living, thinking human being and an active researcher. This view is apposite to feminist research methodologies that advocate crossing research boundaries and challenging traditional data collection and analysis.

Any study of women’s clothing, particularly during the nineteenth century, will inevitably shed light on the inherent sexual repression represented by these garments and society’s attitudes to them (Craik 1994; Maynard 1994; Wilson 2003). Exploring these
issues using feminist research methods as the backbone to my work enabled me to deepen the portrayal of character, class and femininity in my artefact.

Feminist research is non-linear and lateral, thus representing the way I have gathered and interpreted my data. Writers such as Helen Roberts (1977), Elaine Showalter (1987) and Diane Crane (1999) have deepened my feminist insights about clothing and the way that women have been shaped by the choices that they have made.

Thus, this exegesis utilises a feminist research methodology throughout. It is inclusive, crosses multiple research boundaries and uses this researcher as an important research tool (Better 2006; Devault 1996). It articulates, from a feminist point of view, the ways in which a fiction writer can use clothing a valuable resource in the neo-Victorian novel.
Literature Review

This literature review places my work within the current academic debates, as is traditional in academic theses. Although academic analysis underpinned the entire exegesis, this literature review will focus solely on the second half of the exegesis, which is about the powerful way that women's dress can be used as a social and cultural tool to add meaning in neo-Victorian fiction. To do justice to the literature used in the first half, where several research areas are explored in detail, would be out of the scope of this exegesis.

The purpose of this literature review is to explore the differing theories surrounding fashion and dress from both a contemporary and historical perspective. Through this I will come to an understanding of where both the exegesis and artefact sit in current debate about clothing. But, most importantly, I will gain an understanding of how a working knowledge of theory can enrich the writing of neo-Victorian fiction in regard to dress.

There are a number of academic works quoted throughout the exegesis that are not mentioned in this review. This is because I have chosen to concentrate here on those academic texts that have been the most influential and have had the most significant impact on my research.

The work of feminist writers on this topic is vital, as their insights have added greatly to the layers of the artefact, imbuing clothing with metaphorical, literary and cultural significance unimagined by this writer before undertaking this research (Holland 2004; Roberts 1977; Summers 2001).

Fashion is an area that is open to almost never-ending interpretations from theorists of all perspectives. This being the case, I have needed to restrict my exploration of the literature to be able to do justice to the feminist, social and behavioural areas that I have chosen to explore.
Elizabeth Wilson in her book on fashion and modernity likens fashion to Freud’s vision of the fragmented unconscious mind (Wilson 2003). Whilst this psychoanalytic perspective would be interesting to explore further, it does not relate so significantly to the focus of my work, which is women’s clothing as a cultural and social construction in the neo-Victorian novel, and does not form part of this literature review. Semiotics and linguistics have also been utilised at length to analyse clothing and culture (Barthes 1977, 1990, 2006). Again, due to the size of this exegesis and its relevance, these theories do not form part of this research.

Many theorists have long proposed that fashion is a significant regulator of society (Craik 1994; Crane 2000; Finkelstein 1996; Konig 1973). Throughout time, women’s clothing has served as a constant yet ever-changing symbol of class, status and sexuality in all societies. This exegesis however, due to the nature of my artefact, will focus entirely on women’s clothing in nineteenth century Western civilisation, focusing, where possible, specifically on Australian examples of thought and ideology and the development of clothing as a cultural practice in Australia throughout this period (Maynard 1994).

Early work on women and clothing focused on social psychology and behaviour and is therefore the best starting point for a discussion of the academic literature. Thorsten Veblen was one of the earliest social psychology and behavioural theorists to speak out on the topic of women’s dress (Veblen 1899). He put forward the theory that a nineteenth century woman’s clothing was designed to make her look like a man’s chattel. Joanne Finkelstein, whose work gives a good overview of the important theories around clothing, states that Veblen saw fashion as the very antithesis of culture (Finkelstein 1996).

Veblen’s ideas were very progressive for their time. His early thoughts on dress as a cultural construct would not have been acceptable to middle-class society and were possibly only published because his was an educated white male voice. Female voices of dissent regarding the strictures of clothing were first to be found in the pages of the Victorian novel (Gilbert & Gubar 1984). Much has been written about *Jane Eyre* (Bronte 1847) refusing to let her lover dress her in pretty clothes, thus making her his plaything (Gilbert & Gubar 1984). She had perhaps the loudest fictional voice of the early nineteenth century, but was soon followed by many others.

My neo-Victorian novel is set in Melbourne in the mid 1880s, a crucial turning point for women and dress due to the beginnings of dress reform (Oldfield 1992). This
crux will be illustrated literally, as the protagonist steps out of the bounds of normal society in regard to her dress during her time in an asylum and metaphorically as this creates significant changes to the character’s internal journey.

Early female dress reformers, although similar in their views to Veblen, had a different agenda. Lois Young, in her thesis *Feminism and the Physical: Sex Education and Dress Reform in Victoria 1880-1930* (Young 1984), states that the Rational Dress Society was first formed in Melbourne in 1886 as a response to the unsuitability of women’s clothing for the new craze of cycling. For women the issue was far more a practical than a theoretical one.

In *Appropriating Dress: Women’s Rhetorical Style in 19c America*, Carol Mattingly says that women speakers put forward a ‘strictly fabricated image’ (Mattingly 2002, p. 1), meaning that they were judged almost entirely by their clothing rather than the strength of their rhetoric. She goes on to say that women had no voice in society except when it came to clothing, which epitomises the enormous disempowerment dress represented for the nineteenth century woman, a theme also taken up by other theorists (Craick 1994; Crane 1999; Finkelstein 1996). Conversely, it was purely because of its enormous social power that clothing was finally able to be used as a tool of change and empowerment (Crane 2000).

Michel Foucault in his work *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1979) takes the point one step further by saying that the regulation of nineteenth century clothing, particularly for women, was designed not only as a tool for repression but also for punishment. This statement is also relevant to my later discussion in this exegesis about the corset and restraint clothing used in the Victorian asylum.

Nineteenth century clothing as punishment is a theme that has been enlarged on by feminist theorists, particularly in regard to the corset. Two particularly influential texts on this topic are *The Exquisite Slave: The Role of Clothes in the Making of the Victorian Woman* (Roberts 1977) and *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset* (Summers 2001). The work in this area is particularly relevant to my artefact, which explores the protagonist’s experience of wearing a corset and conforming to social norms, then having this form of external control taken away during her time in an asylum. It also bears significant relevance to the restrictive garments worn as punishment in the asylum by my protagonist. In this exegesis, I intend to draw some meaningful parallels between the two.

Some historians have questioned the feminist view of the corset as a tool of repression, instead taking the view that it was a significant fetishist garment (Steele 1999,
In her book *Fresh Lipstick*, Linda Scott makes it clear she believes that instances of tight-lacing have been exaggerated by feminist theorists (Scott 2005). Although her work has some merit, my reading has led me to take the more commonly held view that corsets were pervasive among the middle-classes in the nineteenth century and served to significantly disempower women.

Other writers argue that clothing should not be approached from any theoretical perspective at all and that to do so does the topic an injustice (Wilson 1996). Elizabeth Wilson sees clothing as purely an aesthetic medium. Whilst I have not shared her views in this regard, seeing them as a simplification, she makes many other insightful remarks in her work and I refer to them at length in this exegesis.

*Fashioned from Penury: Dress as Cultural Practice in Colonial Australia.* (Maynard 1994) is a work on nineteenth century clothing from an Australian colonial perspective. Although not specifically a feminist work, this text is important because it recognises the enormous social and cultural impact that living in Australia had on women’s clothing and how this differed from England. Without fully understanding the enormous social differences between the countries, my artefact could not hope to be imbued with the rich metaphorical and cultural meaning with regard to dress that has been my aim.

In colonial Australia, the dress of the female convict is especially relevant to any work about the social construct of the times (Damousi 1997; Daniels 1998). It is, in many ways, a more relevant topic than the corset in this regard. Margaret Maynard talks about the ‘moral danger’ the patriarchal society saw in the female convict’s preference for brightly coloured and highly ornamented clothing (Maynard 1994). Plainly dressed women were considered to be of higher moral standing, therefore making better wives and mothers. The only chance of ‘salvation’ through marriage for the convict woman, was if she rejected her clothing of choice and dressed instead in apparel that was considered more sober and ladylike (Maynard 1994).

One of the most interesting points in Maynard’s book from a social psychology point of view, is the way that clothing in Australia blurred class, sex and racial boundaries, particularly between women. This blurring of social and class boundaries through clothing is an area I explore in my artefact and also at length in the second half of this exegesis.

The importance of clothing in regard to the Victorian woman cannot be overstated from a feminist, behavioural and social psychology perspective. Although clothing and its social construction is only one of many secondary themes in my artefact,
it is the one I found most compelling and therefore chose to investigate at length in this exegesis.
The first section of this exegesis will focus on the data I collected about how other writers seek to incorporate historical material seamlessly into their fiction and how this knowledge informed my own writing.

Despite a lifelong fascination with all things nineteenth century, I had taken much of what I had read at face value and had not really questioned the accuracy or interpretation of the research, except at a fairly rudimentary level. As a writer of my own historical fiction however, it was clear that my research needed to be far more thorough. I would have to constantly evaluate the authority and quality of the history I was reading, taking into account the hidden agendas and political motivations of the authors (Hirst 2006).

Other writers of historical fiction have discussed experiencing the same interpretation difficulties during the course of their research (King 1993). In her article *The Anxiety of Authenticity: Writing Historical Fiction at the End of the Twentieth Century*, Maria Margaronis states the issue quite plainly:

‘To write a historical novel is to enter a no-man’s land on the borders of fact and fantasy. All fiction is written on this territory, but when the work explicitly engages with historical events – when it is part of the writer’s project to reinvent them – the ground becomes a minefield of hard questions.’

(Margaronis 2008, p. 138)

Many historical fiction writers suggested additional research to clear up a disputed point, or simply trusting your own judgement if no resolution was clear.
Others advocated playing around with minor facts for the sake of a good story, providing that what you have written is probable (Babor 1992).

Whilst I would not knowingly alter an historical fact, most writers would agree that a little exaggeration for the sake of a good story is usually appropriate. The important point here is to always assume that the reader knows at least as much, if not more, historical fact than the writer and that they will undoubtedly bring the text to life in their own unique way (Barthes 1987). As a writer, I see this as something to be celebrated rather than feared.

Because I had not written an historical novel before, I was very interested in what other fiction writers had to say about the process of historical research itself. To this end, I read a great deal of information about how other writers went about the process.

Ian McEwan sees the absolute facts in historical fiction as essential to it (Margaronis 2008). He believes that they must be recreated as accurately as possible without skimping on research. In this way, the writer of historical fiction strives to reach an understanding of the past.

Some writers claim that their forays into the past were partly to make sense of the present (Rash 2006); or as a ‘cautionary tale that spoke to modern conditions’ (Vanderhaeghe 2005, p. 40). Robin Gilmour claims that ‘evoking the Victorians and their world has not been an antiquarian activity but a means of getting a fresh perspective on the present’ (Moore 2008, p. 142).

Toni Morrison, in her novel *Beloved* (Morrison 1998) that deals with the issue of slavery, sees the possibilities of re-interpreting historical events positively, as a way of empowering her current community (Margonis 2008).

Milan Kundera however, has quite different ideas about the function of the historical setting in his fiction. In *The Art of the Novel* (Kundera 1988) he claims it needs little explanation and, presumably, research. It is always the unfolding existential human situation that is of the utmost importance to him as a writer. History and its reinterpretation is a secondary consideration. ‘The novelist is neither historian nor prophet; he is an explorer of existence’ (Kundera 1986, p. 44).

Considering these divergent views led me to question how I saw the place of historical research in my own novel. My views tend to side with McEwan’s. By ensuring my research is thorough I wish to illuminate the past, evoke deep feeling for my characters and represent things as they were as accurately as I can.
Many historical fiction writers offer useful advice about research in general. It was widely reported that early research was scattered and often non-specific (Vreeland 2002) and that early drafts often contained too much of this type of research (King 1993).

This was certainly the case with early drafts of my novel. I found myself including facts that were not necessarily relevant to the story simply because they were interesting nuggets of information. Although there is often room for a fascinating fact, too many can detract from the plot and make the reader feel the writer is simply demonstrating their learnedness. A good piece of historical fiction should contain many facts, but no individual one should stand out to the reader. Facts gleaned from thorough research and reliable sources should integrate seamlessly with the rest of the prose, creating a vivid and arresting historical picture.

‘It is difficult to reconcile ideas of historical fact with those of truth in literature, the raw past with the contrivances of recollection and narration’ (O’Neill 2006, p. 332).

In later drafts of the novel, when I was more comfortable with its shape, I was able to remove extraneous facts without feeling that I had taken anything away from the narrative itself.

John Boyne says that after his initial research for a historical novel, he does not go back to check the facts until the second or third draft of his work (Boyne 2009). Other historical writers were more prescriptive and precise when it came to conducting research. One of them stated that 60% of historical research should be undertaken before beginning to write the novel and the rest done as needed (Fleming 1995). I tend to think that this figure is appropriate, although I would estimate that I had done approximately 75% of the research I needed to do before I began to write. This was in part because I had never written an historical novel before and had much to learn about the Victorian era before I felt comfortable embarking on such a major project. Were I to write subsequent neo-Victorian novels, significantly less initial research would be required.

Much of the skill involved in incorporating research seamlessly is by employing the age-old writer’s adage: ‘show don’t tell’ (Ames 2004, p. 36). It is also essential to remember that the characters are still the most important part of any story, even in an historical piece (Vreeland 2002). Historical facts alone, no matter how arresting, will not evoke an emotional response in the reader or make them care enough about the character to finish the novel.
Facts were not the only historical research that was incorporated into the novel. Visuals, particularly old photographs, added a great deal of depth, realism and perspective. I scoured shops that sold ephemera for photographs of Victorian people then purchased the interesting faces. I pinned the photographs up beside my desk, and some of them became characters in the novel. Later, I read that Kate Grenville uses old photographs in much the same way for her research (Grenville 2006).

Kate Grenville intended to write a non-fiction account of her ancestors when she began her book *The Secret River* (Grenville 2006). However, due to the fact that some of the material needed to be fictionalised, her work became an historical novel. She claims to be ‘very uneasy’ about the genre due to what she sees as the ‘sleight of hand’ of many fiction writers (Grenville 2006). It was partly for this reason that she wrote the non-fiction book *Searching for the Secret River* (Grenville 2006) some months after completing the novel. She said that it was written so that readers could be very clear about her research and sources and see exactly what was real and what was fiction. This book was in part exegetical, some of it written while she was completing her own PhD.

An article by Stella Clarke called ‘Still not Settled’ published in *The Australian* (Aug 09, 2008) claims that the same issues have arisen with publication of her new historical novel *The Lieutenant* (Grenville 2008). This was backed up yet again by a more recent article in *The Age* (Aug 29, 2009) called ‘History Sets the Festival Afire’ that commented on heated discussions about history and fiction, including one with Kate Grenville, at the Melbourne Writer’s Festival (2009).

Speaking at the festival about her relationship to historical research, Grenville said that she is not interested in looking at historical fact per se but searching for that moment when ‘a fact sets up a jangling, resonating energy that speaks about the present . . . the here and now’ (Grenville 2009).

The difficulty of addressing the real and the imagined was an issue in *Holly Blue*. I felt under some pressure to represent the world of nineteenth century London and Melbourne as accurately as possible. For a first time historical writer, this felt like an overwhelming task, necessitating constant fact checking which had the potential to slow up the narrative. As I had already done such a great deal of general research, I made the decision early into writing the novel that I would resist the urge to fact-check until the first draft was completed. This allowed me the usual creative freedom with character creation and narrative construction which otherwise may have been significantly compromised.
The other vital issue discussed by historical writers was the difficult one of fact versus fiction. One writer pointed out that ‘all historical fact is fiction of a sort’ (Beverley 2005, p. 39), which although true, tends to intimate that the fiction writer is somehow absolved from telling the absolute truth. The title of fiction writer Michelle Cliff’s article ‘History as Fiction, Fiction as History’ (Cliff 1994) reads somewhat the same way.

It is far more appropriate to ensure that historical fiction comes from a firm historical foundation created by all-encompassing research (Babor 1992). Then the embellishments and minor exaggerations, mentioned earlier in this exegesis, only occur as an educated choice made by a well-equipped researcher.

The work of an historical fiction writer is not to be underestimated. It is possible that a well-crafted story by a well-informed writer can help historians to reach a fuller understanding of their own area (Slotkin 2005). This issue is much contested, however. The debate about the intrinsic worth of historical fiction to Australian culture has raged alongside the debate about the history wars in recent years (Gelder & Salzman 2009). It could be argued that this debate reached its peak in 2006, shortly after the publication of the acclaimed novel The Secret River (Grenville 2006).

Historian, Inga Clendinnen, made her views about historical fiction writers very clear. In the Quarterly Essay she claimed that historical fiction did not interpret history in a serious or appropriate way and had little value as a genre (Clendinnen 2006). She objected specifically to The Secret River (Grenville 2006) and the way that readers would identify positively with the settler protagonist (Gelder & Salzman 2009).

Clendinnen herself has written an historical account of the first contact between aborigines and the British, Dancing with Strangers (Clendinnen 2003) that predates Grenville’s novel. It has been argued that in some ways her own account is just as subjective (Gelder & Salzman 2009).

Much heated debate followed Clendinnen’s comments. Grenville claimed that she was misquoted on several occasions during interviews. She said that she was never doing anything except ‘writing fiction’ and ‘modifying events . . . novelists (historical) are just doing what we’ve always done – taking aspects of the world and turning them into stories’ (Grenville 2006) The argument became more convoluted, but this brief extrapolation of events serves to highlight the ongoing animosity that often exists between historians and fiction writers.

Reading about how other writers had dealt with the many issues around historical research taught me a great deal about how to undertake and then interpret the vast
quantity of research that was necessary before even beginning my artefact. It also made me realise the responsibility that comes with reinterpreting the past. Choosing to write an historical novel is choosing to potentially involve oneself in a much wider academic debate.
The Neo-Victorian Genre

In this section I will discuss the neo-Victorian novel as a genre and look at what has been written critically about this particular form. I will then go on to explain why my artefact could be further classified as a neo-Victorian ‘sensation’ novel.

The term neo-Victorian is a relatively recent one, not coined until 1997 (Shiller 1997). Neo-Victorian novels seek to bring the past to life for a modern readership. Original Victorian genres and subgenres are often used as the basis for these novels, reinvented to suit a twenty-first century readership. Recent examples of this genre are: The Observations (Harris 2007); The Rose of Sebastopol (McMahon 2007); Summer at Mount Hope (Ham 2005) and The Crimson Petal and the White (Faber 2002).

Neo-Victorian, although often used as a general term, has been broken down into further categories according to genre. The genre label that fits my artefact best is Victorian neo-sensation novel. Original sensation novels were at their height of popularity in the 1860s (Wagner 2007) although the form continued to stay popular well into the late nineteenth century.

For a novel to fit into the category of sensation (or neo-sensation) it must adhere to certain conventions. The novels were written almost exclusively for a female audience and the heroines had to be feisty, strong and passionate (Marsh 1995). A perfect example of a nineteenth century sensation heroine is Jane Eyre (Bronte 1847). Marion Halcombe, the brave heroine in The Woman in White (Collins 1860), also fits this definition.

Sensation novels, along with romance novels, were the kind of literature that was not readily accepted by middle-class patriarchal Victorian society members who believed that they were dangerous to women (Mussel 1981), as illustrated in the J.D. Kellog quote to follow. Feminists however, have argued that rather than being just romantic stories, these novels were often sophisticated, creative and articulate (Tompkins 1991).

Victorian male puritans, however, certainly didn’t see it that way:

‘The reading of works of fiction is one of the most pernicious habits to which a young lady can be subjected. When the habit is once thoroughly
fixed, it becomes as inveterate as the use of liquor or opium . . . the reading of fictitious literature destroys the taste for wholesome, sober reading, and imparts an unhealthy stimulus to the mind, the effect of which is in the highest degree damaging.

When we add to this the fact that a large share of the popular novels of the day contain more or less matter of a directly depraved character, presented in such a gilded form and specious guise that the work of contamination may be completed before suspicion is aroused, it should become apparent to every careful mother that her daughters should be vigilantly guarded against this dangerous source of injury and possible ruin . . . We wish to put ourselves on record as believing firmly that the practice of novel reading is one of the greatest causes of uterine disease in young women.’

J.D Kellog (Spender 1991, p. 9)

This quote clearly illustrates the patriarchal beliefs of the day: that reading fiction could corrupt women and potentially even cause them physical harm.

Spiritualism is also an important and recurrent theme in many (neo) sensation novels (O’Neill 2006), which makes the genre particularly relevant to my artifact. An important feature of spiritualist (neo) sensation novels was a romantic uncertainty about whether ghosts really existed or not. This issue was rarely resolved in these novels.

In early drafts of Holly Blue I tried to keep this issue open to conjecture. However, in the final draft it is clear to the reader that any ghosts in the novel were entirely imagined. I am not completely satisfied with this outcome. It may have been more thought-provoking and powerful to leave the question open to some debate. A revision of the novel that would leave the reader with some uncertainty in this regard is still a possibility.

A (neo) sensation novel must also contain a secret or surprise (O’Neill 2006), the more shocking or unexpected the better. The twist at the end of Holly Blue fulfils this criteria. Another feature of the (neo) sensation novel is complicated plotting. The plot of Holly Blue is not particularly intricate, detailed or conspicuous, so for this reason it does not entirely fit the definition of true neo-sensation novel. However, I believe it contains sufficient features of the genre to be classified as such. It has the required surprises and
twists in the narrative, it has a spiritualist protagonist who is later incarcerated, and it plays with the notion of ghosts so that the reader is never entirely sure what is real.

Sensation novels also fit more broadly into the category of gothic novels. They may share many of the same features such as forbidding houses and imprisoned women (Gilbert & Gubar 1984). Heroines in (neo) sensation and gothic novels were often incarcerated in insane asylums (O'Neill 2006), their passion and wilfulness misinterpreted by conservative society as insanity. In other cases they were locked up by men, most often family members, seeking to silence them, as is the case in Holly Blue.

Many Australian gothic novels differ from their British and American counterparts in one important regard; because ruined castles and abandoned abbeys were rather hard to come by, the Australian bush, so terrifying and unknown to white settlers, became the place that imprisoned and terrified women (Weaver 2007).

Breaking the gothic genre down even further, Holly Blue could also be classified as a terror-gothic novel because it contains supernatural elements that eventually turn out to be imagined or man-made (Mussell 1981).

I chose to refer to Holly Blue as neo-Victorian in this exegesis partly for the sake of simplicity, but also because this genre label accurately reflects the fact that it is a post-nineteenth century work. Deeper exploration of the terms neo-sensation and terror-gothic would be appropriate for a work that studies the issues around genre more fully, but are not the focus of this exegesis.
Narrative Challenges

I decided early on that I wanted to write a story narrated by the protagonist, a knowingly fraudulent nineteenth century medium. This is no easy task. I believe that writing a first-person narrative from a dislikeable character's point of view is difficult to do successfully. A dislikeable narrator alienates the reader and distances them from the story, making it much less likely that they will take the journey through the entire novel. This issue will be discussed in the first half of this section.

The protagonist in *Holly Blue* is also an unreliable narrator, an issue that could potentially pose other narrative difficulties, such as confusing the reader. However, positive resolution to the problem was found through narratological research (Booth 1983; Nunning 1999; Olsen 2003) and the latter half of this section will focus on this.

The Victorians were obsessed with death and the many rituals surrounding it (Morley 1971). Taking photographs or drawing loved ones in their coffins, death masks and mourning jewellery made from the deceased's hair were a part of everyday life. Funerals were lavish and solemn affairs with no expense spared by the wealthy middle-classes (Wilson 2002). But perhaps the most popular ritual surrounding death was the 'religion' of spiritualism (Blum 2007; Gabay 2001).

It was a widely held Victorian belief that the spirits of the dead could be contacted by a sensitive or medium, as they were called. Spiritualist mediums were often female, as it was believed that women were more sensitive to the spirit realm (Oppenheim 1985; Gabay 2001).

Needless to say, this practice gave rise to a great number of charlatans – many of whom made large amounts of cash from grieving relatives (Blum 2007). My protagonist is one of these. In many readers' minds, this would make her a dislikeable character. Indeed, early readers of *Holly Blue* pointed out that the protagonist was painted unsympathetically and that they did not really care about what happened to her as the story progressed. In other words, they were unlikely to finish the book. Something had to change.
During a radio interview on the ABC (Koval 2008), Fiona Capp discussed the narrative difficulties she encountered with her dislikeable narrator while writing her historical novel *Musk and Byrne* (Capp 2007). The protagonist in Capp’s novel is a female outlaw who defies all nineteenth century cultural conventions by choosing to sketch a picture of a child about to be sucked into a mineshaft rather than going to her aid. I did not think that the opening scene of Capp’s novel was successful. It alienated the reader immediately, and it made me all the more concerned about my own dislikeable protagonist.

I took some momentary solace from writer Sonya Hartnett whose most recent novel *Butterfly* (Hartnett 2009) features an unlikeable female protagonist who does not redeem herself by the end of the book. When asked why she chose to write from this point of view during a discussion at the Reader’s Feast Writer’s Festival, Hartnett simply said: ‘There are awful people in real life, why shouldn’t they be the focus of a work of fiction?’ (Hartnett 2009).

I then looked to humour to supply the answer. One historical novel where an unlikeable protagonist works very well right from the start is *Restoration* (Tremain 1989). This is due entirely to self-deprecatory and clever humour that the author employs to excellent use. Following in these footsteps, I used a great deal of self-deprecatory humour in the early drafts of *Holly Blue*, hoping to make the character seem clever and ironic, but on reflection it only made her brittle, shallow and ultimately still unlikeable.

I put aside my quest to make my protagonist likeable and began to explore what it meant that she was also an unreliable narrator. To this end I studied narrative structure and the various theories of narratologists (Booth 1983; Hansen 2007; Nunning 1999; Olsen 2003).

One mode of thought has been that there are various levels of unreliability, breaking narrators up into further categories of ‘fallible’ and ‘untrustworthy’ (Olsen 2003). For a narrator to be unreliable however, he or she must convey or see things quite differently from the implied author (Booth 1983). Irony is often employed within the text to bring this about effectively.

The other main narratological school holds the belief that unreliable narration is not necessarily an intertextual matter, but has much to do with the reader’s interpretation (Nunning 1999). The most extreme example of this being Nunning’s view that a pederast would not find anything wrong with Nabakov’s novel *Lolita* (Nabokov 1955; Nunning 1999).
Reactions to narration are, of course, socially, culturally and historically based; a narration may seem reliable for many years until history proves it not to be the case (Hansen 2007). We bring our own stories to what we read (Barthes 1978) so narration, like all literary devices, will always be open to interpretation.

More recent work has suggested that unreliable narrators cannot be so easily classified (Hansen 2007; Olsen 2003; Marcus 2006). It has been argued that the so-called fallible narrator is often this way because of their circumstances. It has also been suggested that because this fallibility is circumstantially caused, and not due to the narrator’s own making or because of a defect in the narrator’s personality or intellect, readers are far more likely to be sympathetic to the character and able to imagine themselves in the same set of circumstances (Olsen 2003).

This immediately made sense to me in regard to Holly Blue. My protagonist is an unreliable narrator because of her extreme naivety. She is naïve in many ways: her understanding of men; believing that she is in control of her protégé; allowing herself to be fed poison and then used by Mr Frost who eventually has her committed to an asylum.

The reader is aware that all of this is going on, but the protagonist, as an unreliable narrator, is not. It is through this device that the reader is able to have sympathy for the character and to like her at some level. Once I realised that ‘fallible narration’ (Olsen 2003, p. 93) would give me my likeable character, I was able to rewrite the novel, introducing additional scenes where the protagonist is depicted as naïve, vulnerable and, ultimately, a figure deserving sympathy.

Once I had found the solution to my narrative dilemma, further exploration of narration in regard to the neo-Victorian novel no longer seemed a relevant focus for this exegesis. The way forward was, once again, no longer clear.

It is interesting to note that I had never anticipated being in this situation. When I first began my candidature, I assumed that my research topic would be nineteenth century spiritualism in the postmodern novel. It was the research area I was most interested in, and it seemed very relevant to my artefact. Early research had involved exhaustive readings of postmodern novels that had spiritualism as a central theme. Some of these fitted into the category of neo-Victorian: Affinity (Waters 1999); Angels and Insects (Byatt 1992); Selene of the Spirits (Pritchard 1998); Electricity (Glendinning 1995); Shadows and Elephants (Hower 2002). Others were set later, most often in the 1920s: Inamorata (Gangemi 2004); The Man from Beyond (Brownstein 2005); English Music (Ackroyd 1992); had sections that were partly or fully contemporary: In the Red Kitchen (Roberts 1990);
Beyond Black (Mantel 2005) or only contained small, albeit significant, sections about spiritualism: Sixty Lights (Jones 2005).

Reading these novels stimulated my imagination and enriched my artefact to a great extent. Having achieved this, however, I had little desire to do any of the further literary analysis that I had anticipated. It seemed that a comprehensive study of these novels was not to be the central topic of my exegesis after all.
PART TWO

Victorian ‘Madness’

Reflections on Research and Data Collection

Given that half of *Holy Blue* is set in a nineteenth century asylum for the insane, I thought it important to document the way that I approached and researched the issue of madness for my novel. This section will discuss that journey, which ultimately resulted in the discovery of the central research topic for this exegesis.

My research took me on a journey that was physical and emotional as well as academic. This visceral experience was essential to my writing. It enabled me to enact the past so that I could create powerful, realistic characters and settings for my novel. This is not data gathering in the traditional analytical mode but rather practice led research, which has its focus on multi-methodologies (Arnold 2006). Practice led research gave me the freedom to allow the creative work to guide my first research steps.

Roy Porter suggests that ‘the history of madness is the history of power’ (Porter 1996, p. 39). This observation is particularly apt in regard to women. By the 1850s there were more women in asylums than men and this remained the case until the end of the century (Showalter 1991).

Elaine Showalter believes that this was partly because in the nineteenth century ‘the prevailing view among psychiatrists . . . that women were more vulnerable to insanity than men because of the instability of their reproductive organs’ (Showalter 1991, p. 55). According to the middle-class medical patriarchy, simply having a womb made women much more likely to succumb to madness in its many guises (Appignanesi 2008; Showalter 1987; Ussher 1991). The word ‘hysteria’ comes from the Greek word for uterus and until relatively recently was only ever used in reference to women (Felman 1991).
It was also a widely held belief that female madness was somehow more severe than male madness (Appignanesi 2008; Porter 1996). Notably, the two statues that represented ‘madness personified’ outside Bedlam had traditionally been males but they were replaced with female figures during the nineteenth century (Appignanesi 2008).

In late nineteenth century London, a bill was passed that required two doctors to sign a certificate of ‘certification’ that was needed for admission to an insane asylum (Porter 1996). Ostensibly this was to protect women from unnecessary or inappropriate incarceration – they could no longer be admitted so easily (Showalter 1987) – but instead it made the diagnosis of madness all the more concrete and permanent. Once classified as mad, it was difficult, often impossible, for a woman to get that decision reversed (Appignanesi 2008).

This is the experience of the protagonist in *Holly Blue* when she is sent to the Kew Insane Asylum. Despite being sane, she is unable to get herself released. There is an interesting juxtaposition between her ‘normal’ behaviour when incarcerated and her much more outrageous, yet publicly accepted behaviour as a spiritualist.

Spiritualism enabled women to act in a way that was ‘mad’ and yet legal, so in most cases they avoided incarceration. It gave Victorian women the power of expression not available to them in any other real sphere (Blum 2007; Gabay 2001; Owen 1989). They could do everything that would be considered ‘mad and bad’ by society: fall into raptures; speak foul language and even appear half naked, all in the name of the spirit world, with a freedom not known to Victorian women in any other social setting. Female spiritualists were not locked away for this uninhibited behaviour; in fact the opposite was true. They were admired, sometimes even revered, and often paid at a rate unthinkable for any other female occupation at the time (Gabay 2001).

Despite her outrageous behaviour as a medium, the sanity of the protagonist in *Holly Blue* was never questioned by society. It is not until she becomes the unwitting victim of a slow poisoning and begins to lose her mind that she is incarcerated. Once inside the asylum, the effects of the drug soon wear off and she is arguably more sane than she has ever been before. Her behaviour is rational and her mind clear. Despite this, she is considered a lunatic by the authorities because she does not abide by the asylum rules.

An important measure of sanity for a woman was her ability to undertake ‘women’s work’ (Coleborne 2003) such as sewing, laundry and housekeeping. If a woman
refused such work or did it in a shoddy manner, it was seen as a complete rejection of society’s rules (Coleborne 2003).

Another important measure of sanity was a woman’s interest in her appearance and femininity (Porter 1996). If a middle-class woman was seen to neglect her physical upkeep, which was expensive and time-consuming in the extreme, it was immediately assumed that madness was the most likely cause of this (Showalter 1987). Michel Foucault writes at length in *Madness and Civilisation* (Foucault 1965) about how easy it was to cross the boundaries of normality. These are important issues in *Holly Blue* because the protagonist fails the femininity test on both counts in the asylum. Middle-class women were expected to work as seamstresses in the asylum while lower-class women did laundry work (Coleborne 2003). But the protagonist in *Holly Blue*, unlike most of her contemporaries, is unable to competently perform many feminine tasks, particularly sewing (Jones 2001), and she takes very little interest in her appearance. Both of these traits, plus her tendency to speak her mind, mean that she endures much degradation in the asylum at the hands of the warders.

In an attempt to understand what life in an asylum might have been like for my protagonist, my research next took me to several museums where the history of ‘madness’ had been collated. The first place I visited was the museum at Willsmere (formerly Kew Insane Asylum), the actual location where the protagonist in *Holly Blue* was incarcerated. Being able to set the asylum scenes in my novel in a place that still physically existed, albeit greatly changed, was extremely valuable. I believe that it gave the story added depth and credibility.

In recent years, Willsmere has been turned into luxury apartments. It became, somewhat ironically, the first gated community in inner Melbourne. Its original soaring bluestone walls and two metre high security gates are now intended to keep people out rather than lock them inside.

The architecture of Willsmere has not changed since the nineteenth century. There are administration buildings at the front, built on a grand scale. The back of the asylum, where the inmates were housed, consists of three long wings, which are much less ornate in style, as well as various other outbuildings. These wings were the male and female sections, and a smaller middle wing for the staff, many of whom lived on site.

Inside the asylum were enormous dormitories that offered no privacy. These were juxtaposed by small isolation rooms, ostensibly used to stop inmates from injuring themselves or others. These rooms however, were often used for punishment.
The Kew Insane Asylum was notorious in the nineteenth century for its abuse of patients (Day 1998), which was extreme, even by harsh Victorian standards. Disgruntled family members took officials and warders to court on at least two occasions in the 1870s and 1890s. I was able to read a facsimile of the court cases, which gave me a great deal of material for my novel (Paley 1870, 1886) particularly in regard to the ‘treatments’ the patients were forced to endure. Kew Asylum was well known for its water treatments, which involved tying a patient’s hands and feet then immersing them in cold water until drowning was imminent.

Under its new name, Willsmere stayed open as a psychiatric institution for the elderly until the early 1990s. Its squalid conditions improved little in a hundred years, and Willsmere continued to operate in sub-standard conditions. It was closed down after an inquiry in the mid 1990s, which was chillingly reminiscent of what had happened a century earlier (Percival 1985).

The sprawling, decaying Victorian buildings modelled on the Barrak’s system of institutions, and once considered an architectural feast (Day 1998) before their rapid decline, were sold to a developer and turned into nearly two hundred apartments. As part of the settlement, the developer was required to retain a small section of the building intact so that a museum could be created on site in recognition of its confronting past. As I hoped to inject a healthy dose of realism in my novel, a visit to this museum was essential.

Museums have undergone a transformation in recent years. Traditionally ‘designed for the collection, exhibition and study of objects’ (The Concise Oxford English Dictionary 2006), they have become places of interactivity that cross cultural, social and academic boundaries – but not at the Willsmere Museum. Firstly, access to the grounds was denied to all except residents and not granted under any circumstances to the general public. It could be argued that this was a reasonable security measure, given that the apartments are all privately owned, but it made a visit to the museum virtually impossible.

I imagined that it would be relatively easy to explain my research to the caretaker of the site and thus be permitted inside. But this was not to be so. After being referred to several people, none of whom seemed able to help me, I finally got in touch with the person in charge and was told, in no uncertain terms, that the public were never allowed access to the museum.

I have a relative who lives on site, so I tried a different tactic and asked if residents were allowed to look inside. Much to my amazement, I was told that not even
apartment owners, who pay hefty body corporate fees, were permitted in the museum. A public open day had been considered, I was told vaguely, but no date had ever been set. As the apartments had been completed for fourteen years, it seemed unlikely to me that this was ever going to occur. It was suggested that I put my request to visit the museum in writing, and it would then be put to the board at the next meeting, which was not for several months. After this unsatisfactory exchange, I decided to take some photographs through the grille above the museum door to get an idea of what was inside.

The museum itself was located behind a securely padlocked door at the back of a small library intended for the use of residents. The door was solid wood, built to sturdy Victorian standards, and there was a large iron ventilation grille above it. I constructed a makeshift platform from a table and some chairs, then climbed up, held the camera high above my head and took photographs through the grille. The results were quite extraordinary, for inside the museum, right in the middle of a slick apartment complex, was the chilling sight of six isolation cells, their doors eerily wide open as if waiting to receive an unfortunate 'lunatic'.

At length I eventually did gain access to the museum, although my time there was strictly limited as it was being opened just for me and a few other people who had also been waiting some time to visit. The museum contained much fascinating memorabilia: a primitive wheelchair with a stained leather strap; the original gates to an exercise yard, covered all over in furious cross-hatching and graffiti; old singer sewing machines; brown glass medicine bottles that still filled the room with their ammoniac smell; and, most movingly, some photos of past residents, pain etched unmistakably on their faces. It was a collection that I will never forget.

In Collecting Madness (Coleborne 2003) there was much discussion about the Charles Brothers collection. This is a collection of over 700 items from nineteenth and early twentieth century Australian asylums collected by two brothers who were doctors. The items are as diverse as pieces of clothing; restraining jackets; letters; records and documents, early electro-convulsive equipment and even a shower cubicle used for water-therapy at the Kew Asylum.

The collection is housed by the Museum of Victoria, but despite a plan for it to be fully displayed by 1987, this has never occurred, and most of the items have remained in storage. It was thought that the collection would not appeal to the taste of the general public and that it might be considered too confronting.
Of this vast array of fascinating memorabilia, the Museum of Victoria displayed only five items: a white plate with ‘Lunatic Asylum’ stamped on it in blue ink; a silver fork with short prongs to ensure it cannot be used for any other purpose than eating; a locked glove and a wooden key box with ‘Master-in-Lunacy’ written on it in cursive script. There is no doubt that these were evocative and well selected items, but what of the rest of the vast collection that remained locked away in the bowels of the museum?

Fortunately this issue has been addressed by a new exhibition about Melbourne’s history that opened in 2007. There is now a small but well collated permanent section devoted to the history of Kew and other asylums in the Museum of Victoria. More recently (2009) the Mind and Body section of the Museum was home to a display about the human mind that included several articles of everyday clothing worn by patients at Kew as well as some restraint clothing.

I believe that the curators have acted appropriately in displaying more of this collection. Foucault writes that society should be prepared to question institutions (Foucault 2006). By hiding away and somehow sanitising the harsh facts of life in the asylum, then surely we as a society are doing an injustice to the thousands whose lives were sacrificed to incarceration. The Melbourne museum has addressed this issue in a meaningful way by ensuring the incarceration of people in Victorian asylums is not forgotten.

Many people are fascinated by Australia’s darker past, hence the enduring popularity of Port Arthur and other historic convict sites. Jacqueline Wilson in her book Prison: Cultural Memory and Dark Tourism (Wilson 2008) claims that many Australians are ambivalent about this part of our history, and decommissioned prisons, such as Pentridge, that have been opened to tourists have verified this claim.

When Pentridge Prison was closed down in recent years before becoming apartments, it was swamped with visitors during the short period it was open to the public. The Abbotsford Convent, home to ‘fallen women’ who laboured in the laundries there during the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, has been turned into an arts, educational and cultural precinct and receives thousands of visitors a year. Willsmere itself had one open day after it was decommissioned in 1991 and hundreds of people queued to see inside.

Tourist sites that are representative of human misery, incarceration and death have recently become the focus of academic study (Stone 2006; Wilson 2008) and media attention. The term ‘Dark Tourism’ was first coined in 1996 to describe this particular
aspect of the tourist industry (Foley & Lenon 1996), which continues to gain popularity. Dark Tourism has been broken down into seven categories (Stone 2006) to include sites of war and genocide as well as cemeteries and shrines, etc. The term ‘Dark Dungeons’ (Stone 2006) has been given to places of incarceration, which would include abandoned asylums.

To find out more about the real people who were kept at Kew, my research took me to the Public Records Office (PROV). I was particularly keen to view the casebooks kept about the patients at the Kew Asylum or ‘continuation notes on admissions’ as they were then called (Patient medical files 1871-1905).

I was amazed to discover that PROV holds Kew Asylum casebooks that date back to 1871. In fact, the most well-documented years of the asylum are those around the turn of the century. Needless to say, I anticipated that this would make for fascinating and revealing reading, but I had never anticipated that it would finally give me the main topic for my exegesis.

PROV, situated in North Melbourne, is in every way a government building. It is over air-conditioned to the point of being icy cold, even on a sweltering summer’s day. The walls are painted battleship grey to match the spotless vinyl covered tables and office chairs covered with heavy-duty, itchy woollen fabric.

The environment of PROV itself makes a stark contrast to the fascinating items that it houses. Sitting at the bland tables were people studying ancient, yellowed letters tied up with ribbon; leather-bound books with crumbling spines and maps of places that no longer existed, precious documents that were redolent with history and story and a sense of lives long past.

Finally, I sat alone at a table, a plastic cup of perfectly sharpened pencils and two massive volumes of the Kew Asylum casebooks before me. These leather bound books covered the years 1871-1905 and were each several thousand pages long. The larger volume was held together with an old bit of canvas tape and fastened with a rusty metal buckle. The similarity between this and pictures of ancient restraining garments I had seen struck me; and I had the strong sense as I undid the buckle that I was somehow freeing these people and their desperate stories.

The thing that I noticed about the casebooks was how much was missing. For example, one of the first entries I read was of a woman who had only been seen by a doctor once in forty years. This examination was just days before her death. Forty years lost, unaccounted for entirely and probably remembered by no one. Her whole life was
documented in a few short emotionless lines and at the end of the page, written with a flourish and in letters larger than all of the notes about her was one underlined word: **DIED.**

At this early point I realised that I could not read an enormous amount of this material as it made me feel deeply saddened. It is all very well to read histories of asylums and view salvaged objects, but when they become real people with real lives, it becomes much more difficult to process.

‘Secondary post traumatic stress’ and ‘vicarious traumatisation’ are recognised as significant issues for therapists who work with victims of trauma and abuse, often leading to depression, anxiety and intrusive thoughts (Blair & Ramones 1996; Marriage & Marriage 2005). It is thought that one of the most effective ways to deal with these conditions is through thorough debriefing. For me, the act of writing is a type of debriefing or therapy in itself, and many pages of my journal were taken up with notes about the Kew Asylum patients as a way of processing their often tragic lives.

The casebooks were full of unsent letters from inmates begging to be allowed to leave; letters full of bad poetry and crazy schemes, lost loves and ruined lives. There were letters from family members containing news from home that never made it to their intended audience for fear they would become excited or melancholic, and letters of cold rejection: ‘The only correspondence I wish to receive from Kew,’ writes a man on monogrammed paper, ‘is that my brother has passed away’ (Patient medical files 1871-1905).

Nearly all the entries in the casebooks, with the exception of some who were transferred to asylums in Ararat or Sunbury, ended with the word ‘Died’. It was not always written with a flourish, but often in tiny barely legible letters. I am not sure which of the two seemed more poignant.

Around the turn of the century, autopsy reports written in antiquated and redundant medical language were included, as asylum inmates were often given extensive autopsies in the name of science (Porter 1996). It is an unfortunate fact that those whose families did not want them were rarely buried, and if they were it was in a pauper’s grave where many bodies were thrown into a pit with no marker. The scant notes in the casebooks are all that is left to remind us that they existed at all.

The casebooks were also full of unanswered questions. Why, in the first of them, was only one woman photographed in more than forty years? Who decided that it would be her desperate, broken face that should somehow stand for all those others? Why glue
just her grainy photograph in the middle of the book? The later book had more photographs in it - snapshots of young, vibrant girls posing for the camera, taken long before they could imagine their fate.

When the books were returned to the trolley, possibly to remain untouched for many more years, I noticed that there were brown flakes of decayed paper and leather left on the vinyl desk. No doubt they would be swept away by a vigilant cleaner that very night. I left the PROV full of admiration for the woman who had written her doctoral thesis on the Kew Asylum (Day 1998) and spent months poring over the asylum casebooks. I admired her, for as I had buckled the canvas strap around the massive volume of lost lives, I knew that I would not be returning to them.

Strangely, it was not the blunt facts or the faces that haunted me for days afterwards, it was one particular unsent letter written by a woman known only as Alice Maud. The letter was fixed to her case notes with an old fashioned pin. When I had carefully removed it, two rust-circled holes were left on the page. I had read that on admission Alice Maud had been: ‘sleeping in her wedding dress’.

At the time, the pathos of this almost had me closing the casebooks for good – until I realised that there were four other such letters by her, all addressed to different suitors. Although this fact was no less tragic in a way, it had made me smile and enabled me to continue my difficult reading. But what was it about the wedding dress that had so resonated? Why was this one small detail the thing that I couldn’t get out of my mind after all that I had read? I was about to find the answer to this in the most unexpected of places: the basement of the Melbourne Museum where the Psychiatric Services Clothing Collection, another vast collection that had never been displayed, was housed.

To view any of the 700 items of psychiatric memorabilia that make up the collection, I had to order them from a catalogue. The catalogue made for fascinating reading for several reasons. The first was that each item of clothing was described in minute detail, right down to any mending or marks that were on the garment. This gave me a great wealth of material for my novel, particularly as I had been struggling to imagine the exact clothing worn by women in the asylum. These details are obviously essential for an accurate historical novel and up until this point I had assumed that I would have to rely on the little I’d gleaned from books about institutionalisation, combined with my knowledge of period costume.

As an aside, a decision had been made that the inmates who were incarcerated in the asylum would be referred to as clients. Hence we have ‘manacles for client’ and
‘buckled restraining jacket as worn by client’ (Willis 1994), which made me feel as if I had been let behind the doors of a modern bondage parlour rather than a nineteenth century asylum. But any sense of levity soon vanished when I finally got to see the items themselves.

Viewing a collection of nineteenth century straightjackets, locked-gloves, caps and restraint belts, all carefully packed in labelled boxes and wrapped up in tissue paper was something that I will never forget. It was the juxtaposition of these brutal items, which elicited such a strong emotional response yet were displayed in a bland sterile environment, not dissimilar to the PROV, that made for such a disturbing experience.

One garment in particular stood out from the others. It was a straightjacket that had been mended and patched with coloured fragments of fabric. This was a stark contrast to the heavy cream calico the garment was made of. Around the neck of the straightjacket, a padded blue collar had been stitched, presumably so that it would be more comfortable for the person wearing it. This unusual addition and the patchy mending served to humanise the garment and to ignite my imagination. I was no longer viewing bland historical clothing but something that represented a person no less real than me. I could also vividly see a caring woman stitching on the padded collar for a friend, trying to make her life in restraining garments a little easier. A story was beginning to unfold, and I used this material to write a scene in the novel that is discussed later.

But despite the difficult viewing these restraint garments made, the everyday clothing the patients wore was in some ways more moving. Perhaps because the garments were closer to my own human experience, they seemed somehow more real.

Although the collection spanned over a hundred years, I chose to view mostly nineteenth century garments such as heavy flannel dresses; stiff calico pantaloons; bonnets and coats, as these were most relevant to my novel. Unfortunately most of these items, probably saved because they were found at the back of cupboards or the very bottom of a pile, were still strangely crisp with newness and had never been worn. Many were in enormous sizes, which the museum curator suggested meant they may not have been used, for few could grow plump on an asylum diet.

I wanted to see worn garments in the hope of seeing what I had begun to call ‘human patina’ – the tears, wear and stains that bring a used garment to life. I had not yet fully understood the importance of this in my research, apart from some vague notion about it bringing me closer to the people who had worn them and making a connection
through time, but most of the asylum garments were spotless and smelled very strongly of harsh chemicals like an old fashioned medicine cupboard.

The historian asked me several times if I was ‘coping all right’ with the confronting collection. She had catalogued all the items but hadn’t looked at them for many years and found revisiting them somewhat difficult herself. It was not a collection that is easily put aside. I was doing all right, but then I was shown an item that would come to my mind unbidden and unwanted for many months. I took a photo, but no picture could capture its essence or the emotion that still seemed to cling to this piece of clothing.

It was a child’s dress made of a heavy black fabric, with a collar, three buttons down the front and a gathered waist. But what made this dress different from the others, which were all quite crudely and cheaply made of coarse serviceable fabrics, was that it had a contrasting collar in a smart black and white print and on the back of the dress was a handmade label with the child’s name still legible in black ink.

The historian suggested that this garment would probably have been supplied by parents who had brought their child to the asylum dressed in her Sunday best, but the thing about the dress that struck me most was that one tip of the collar had been chewed until it frayed.

The little girl was suddenly in the room and my central research topic emerged from the fog. Alice Maud who had slept in her wedding gown, the much-mended straightjacket and the dress with the chewed collar had sparked such an interest in me, that the research area I suddenly found most compelling was nineteenth century clothing. The rest of this exegesis will discuss this research in detail.
PART THREE

An Exploration of Women’s Clothing in the Neo-Victorian Novel

Clothing as Text

My interest in clothing escalated when I stumbled upon an exhibition called Noble Rot at the Melbourne historic house Como, which is owned and run by the National Trust. This collection of nineteenth century costume showed clothing not in all its antique splendour as we have seen so many times before, but displaying its closeness to humanity: a grease stained chemise; a wedding dress flecked with blood, ink on a sleeve. Clothing, in this instance was ‘unspeakably meaningful’ (Wilson 2003, p. 3).

The collection claimed to display the ‘funeral of fashion’ and the ‘aesthetics of decay’ (Healy 2006), but for me the exhibition meant so much more. Suddenly, discarded clothing was imbued with many layers of meaning, for what could show humanity more vividly and intimately than stains on a piece of cloth once worn against the skin? For me, these costumes suddenly became people, just like the little girl in the dress with the chewed collar had come into the room to stay vividly in my imagination.

I realised that clothing could be read like text, revealing the past in its own meaningful and multi-layered narrative; through the way it is constructed, the way it has worn and the stains that it has acquired. An analysis of these characteristics reveals much about the history of the garment and, more importantly for a fiction writer, the imagined history of the person who may have worn it.

Art curators and historians have routinely read the surface of artefacts, particularly paintings, to learn about the artist and their technique and practice, as well as the provenance of the artefact itself, often referring to it as an ‘articulate surface’ (Wallace & Macnaughton & Parvey 1996). A reading of clothing and textiles can reveal the same sort of details.
Some of the Noble Rot garments were displayed inside out. As well as showing the intricate workmanship and laborious stitching, often done by hand, the disintegration of the garments and human patina was all the more visible on the inside. This ‘reading’ increased my understanding of both the creator and the wearer of the item.

Many of the garments had been selected for their very human stains. The most evocative item in the collection was a delicate 1840s beaded bodice, clearly designed for a woman but barely big enough for a child. It had enormous, man-sized sweat stains under the arms. The raw humanity in this quite took me aback, for suddenly the wearer of this historic relic had become as human as I was. When the curator left me alone, I could not resist leaning down and sniffing the stain, for what could have been more incredible, or more unlikely, than to find a trace of flesh and blood smell?

Of course, the garment smelled only slightly dusty and had no human odour at all. But I became a little obsessed after that, sniffing all sorts of items in the hope of finding more traces of humanity, for I was tricked into thinking that the garments had been worn just the day before, but all were predictably completely devoid of smell.

I surreptitiously touched some of the fabrics too, just to imagine how a silk wedding gown or a velvet slipper might feel against the skin. I marvelled at the tiny size of an embroidered boot; the vast quantity of petticoats a woman was expected to wear; the heavy boning in the undergarments and the yellowed wedding veils, folded and stored for posterity in embroidered, mildew-flecked pillowslips.

In the catalogue it stated that: ‘the interior (of clothing) has the intimacy and breath of the wearer upon it’ (Healy 2006), which expressed exactly what I was experiencing as I viewed the exhibition. This point was illustrated again and again by an unexpected ripped seam in a waistcoat; skirts still with traces of mud around their hems; a chemise smudged with rouge, and a bodice with what could only be lactation stains on the inside.

Despite my enthusiastic interpretation of stains and rips in clothing, I realised that it was important not to forget that my reading of clothing as text was from my twenty-first century point of view. Although my significant historical research into the nineteenth century enabled me to envisage the past vividly, I would be bringing my own cultural, social and political meanings to the clothing that I read, imbuing it with my own worldview, as every writer and reader of printed text inevitably does (Barthes 1977).

With whetted enthusiasm for the world of period costume, I found a private collection curated in the home of an elderly woman. Her home, with its sweeping
Hollywood-style staircase, was built especially to house her enormous collection. Every piece was displayed on a mannequin, many of them were years old and were a study in themselves. Some were headless or had lost limbs and many had garish painted faces. The woman lived alone among this collection of non-people, sharing her life with them. The eeriness of it all was astounding and I recalled a quote about displays of second-hand fashion on mannequins: ‘In the aquatic half-light (to protect the costumes) the deserted gallery seems haunted. The living observer moves, with a sense of mounting panic, through a world of the dead.’ (Wilson 2003, p. 1)

Clothing brings us closer to the dead than any other artefact left behind. Dickens is quoted in Adorned in Dreams, describing the second-hand clothing markers in Monmouth St London:

‘We love to walk among these extensive groves of the illustrious dead, and to indulge in the speculations to which they give rise; now fitting a deceased coat, then a dead pair of trousers, and anon the gaudy remains of a waistcoat, upon some being of our own conjuring up . . . We have gone on speculating in this way, until whole rows of coats have started from their pegs, and buttoned up, of their own accord, round the waists of ordinary wearers; lines of trousers have jumped down to meet them; waistcoats have almost burst with anxiety to put themselves on; and half an acre of shoes have . . . gone stumping down the street with a noise which has fairly awakened us from our pleasant reverie.’

(Wilson 2003, p. 2)

As I viewed this private collection, my interest in Victorian clothing grew significantly. I was able to see many costumes from the 1880s, the era in which my novel is set, and touch the fabrics to imagine how they might feel to wear. I looked carefully at the way they were worked on the inside, although there were no stains to stimulate my imagination. Like most historical clothing collections, this one was pristine and its curator was proud of the lack of human patina.

It was impossible not to be impressed with the workmanship in the lost art of dressmaking. The handmade lace and intricate beading on many of the gowns was particularly impressive; a relic from an era when many middle-class women had a great
deal of time on their hands and few occupations that were considered by society to be acceptable.

There was also a display of Victorian underwear and I saw my first genuine nineteenth century corset, fortified with whalebone to achieve the ideal waist size of eighteen inches (Summers 2001), and a pair of baggy white knee-length pantaloons, open at the crutch and tied with ribbons above the knee that were designed to be worn underneath. In the collection were several lace trimmed camisoles and a modest cotton nightgown; white, high-necked and full-length, the perfect garment for a Victorian woman with eight children already.

For the first time it occurred to me that if clothing could be such a vivid and real reminder of humanity, then surely it was also a potent force in the novel. Clothing had the potential to be so much more than just stitches and fabric. It was a unique and essential tool for adding depth and meaning to character and narrative, and seemed to offer a way forward for this exegesis.

Barbara Bolt talks about the exegesis being the ‘realisations that occur out of the chaos of practice’ (Bolt 2004). My writing practice had led me to research nineteenth century clothing, ostensibly only to get some basic description for my novel, but it had ended up being a much more meaningful experience that deserved full articulation. Out of the ‘chaos of practice’ that had led me down many avenues in my reading, the central research question of this exegesis was emerging.

Estelle Barrett in her article: *What does it Meme? The exegesis as valorisation and validation of creative arts research* sees the exegesis as a ‘replication or re-versioning of the completed artistic work as well as a reflective discourse on significant moments in the process of unfolding and revealing’ (Barrett 2004).

I see the following section of this exegesis as containing both of these elements. It is a ‘reinterpretation’ or ‘re-versioning’ of my creative work, utilising academic research to explore the issues around women and nineteenth clothing that have arisen during my practice more deeply. The exegesis is also an ‘unfolding’ of the significant research areas that have arisen during the creation of the artefact, culminating in the area that will be explored most deeply – clothing as a tool to create character and meaning in the neo-Victorian novel.

I believe that one mode of expression is not more important than the other. The exegesis and the artefact are equally valid forms of creative enquiry. Although able to be
read individually, they sit side by side, informing each other and made more meaningful in the presence of the other (Barrett 2004; Skrebels 2007).

The second half of this exegesis will articulate my journey into the significance behind clothing for Victorian women and how this has been used to add meaning and depth to my artefact, particularly in regard to class and the asylum. A study of the research processes behind other neo-Victorian novels will also form a significant part of this section.

*    *    *    *

The topic of how neo-Victorian writers choose to clothe their characters has been overlooked for academic analysis. Despite rigorous searching, I could find no articles, apart from some very broad ones about period costume (Oliver 2005), where contemporary writers talk about their decisions to dress their historical characters a particular way and what this might mean on a deeper level in their work.

In fact, the only references to clothing in the neo-Victorian novel I could find were in the most basic of ‘how-to’ writing books, which offered no reflection about the enormous power of clothing to define character, class and femininity.

Literary critics and historians have offered much textual analysis about nineteenth century clothing in the true Victorian novel in works such as: *The Mad Woman in the Attic,* (Gilbert & Gubar 1984), *Dressed in Fiction* (Hughes 2006), *Naturalism Redressed: Identity and Clothing in the Novels of Emile Zola* (Thompson 2004), but these works were never intended as an adjunct for fiction writers and none of them offer any reflection on novels that fall into the neo-Victorian genre.

In the light of all that had been written about the Victorian novel, I felt that I had nothing original to add to the great deal already said about Miss Haversham’s wedding dress in *Great Expectations* (Dickens 1860); the significance of colour in *The Woman in White* (Collins 1860), and *Jane Eyre* (Bronte 1847) who refuses to allow Mr Rochester to dress her like a doll – even as it pertains to a writer of fiction.

In addition to this, a study of the neo-Victorian novel in particular was much more relevant to my artefact. Graeme Harper states that ‘creative writing research is both creative and critical in nature’ (Harper 2008, p. 161). In this exegesis, I discuss my creative or experiential research into nineteenth century women’s clothing, and then reflect
critically on the academic writing about clothing as well as how other fiction writers have
dealt with the topic.

I considered at length whether to analyse neo-Victorian novels written by men
and women or just women. Due to the enormous amount of interesting material
contained in The Crimson Petal and the White (Faber 2002), I initially favoured the former.
However, when I decided to undertake my research utilising feminist research methods,
as discussed in the methodology section of this exegesis, I decided that I would cite only
books written by female novelists. As my own work is significantly about female
characters, this seemed to be the most appropriate choice. Whilst it would be an
interesting study in itself to examine the ways in which male writers clothe their female
neo-Victorian characters, I choose not to do so in this exegesis.

To this end, I have chosen to cite six relatively contemporary neo-Victorian
novels by female writers, in addition to my own: Fingersmith (Waters 1999); Affinity
(Waters 2002); The Rose of Sebastopol (McMahon 2007); Summer at Mount Hope (Ham 2005),
Angels and Insects (Byatt 1992) and Alias Grace (Atwood 1997).

After extensive reading in the genre, these novels were chosen because of their
particular reference to clothing and the interest their authors seemed to exhibit in this
subject. Four of the novels make reference to clothing in the asylum and to spiritual
mediums, which makes them particularly relevant.

In this third section, I argue that the garments we choose to clothe our characters
in, their attitudes to clothing and the conscious and unconscious choices they make in
this regard, add a deep layer of meaning to the neo-Victorian novel that has previously
been over looked. The discussion will focus on three specific areas: class, clothing in the
asylum and the corset.

The following quote is an apt illustration of the power of clothing to delineate
character:

‘On one late stormy afternoon in 1875 they were proceeding
along the front, in Margate, to take part in a séance in Mrs Jesse’s parlour.
Lillas Papagay, a few steps ahead, wore wine-dark silk with a flounced
train and a hat heavy with darkly gleaming plumage, jet-black, emerald-
shot, iridescent dragonfly blue on ultramarine, plump shoulders of
headless wings with jaunty tail-feathers, like the little wings that fluttered
on the hat or the heel of Hermes in old pictures. Sophy Sheekhy wore
dove-coloured wool with a white collar, and carried a serviceable black umbrella.’

(Byatt 1992, p. 163)

*   *   *   *

Fashion has been with us for a very long time and it is universal (Scott 2005). Even those who don’t care about fashion, do care about clothes and grooming to a greater or lesser extent. Without clothing we do not know where to place ourselves in society. We are essentially adrift and exposed. Grooming is an essential part of our sense of self (Scott 2005). Even at the most basic level, taking care of our appearance is vital to our self-worth. There are few of us who could function comfortably without soap, a toothbrush and a comb.

Personal appearance is a powerful and seductive force in our society, offering us the chance to become someone else. Its power over women is particularly strong (Crane 2000). Whether in the etiquette books of the nineteenth century or their modern day equivalent, fashion magazines, its message is the same: fashion can change your life. It can make you someone better, someone stronger, someone more likely to attract the mate that you desire. Its cultural weight is enormous (Craik 1994).

The regular fickle changes in fashion can only work in societies where social divisions already exist, which is perhaps why it has been so fully embraced by the western world where it serves ‘ultimately to maintain cultural continuity’ (Finkelstein 1996, p. 66). For without fashion, class distinctions disappear (Wilson 2003).

Fashion has never been without its detractors. As early as 1666, Charles II tried, unsuccessfully, to put an end to it by introducing a serviceable oriental-style tunic and insisting it be worn by all of his court. Ironically, all he succeeded in doing was creating a fashion for tunics (Finkelstein 1996).

For the purpose of this exegesis, I have chosen to focus on fashion as a regulator of class and femininity and also as it relates to politics, particularly in regard to dress reform, rather than focussing on ethnology, profession or ideology.
Fashion Circa 1885

The year 1885 has been chosen for analysis because it is when *Holly Blue* is set. It is also a particularly important time for women’s dress because after years of puritanical Victorian dresses with buttons right up to the neck and long voluminous skirts that left everything up to the imagination, the focus of women’s clothing became once again to promote erotic activity (Lurie 1981). This had not been the case since early in the nineteenth century.

In 1885 the lean silhouette was in vogue. This look required a wire or horsehair bustle at the back of the skirt to give the appearance of an exaggerated rump (Cunnington 1937). The skirts were pulled tight about the hips, waist and legs, thus giving a hobbled effect not dissimilar to the restrictive hobbled skirts made from canvas I viewed in the Psychiatric Services Collection at the Melbourne Museum. Middle-class women were expected to wear these fashionable garments on all occasions, even when tennis became popular in the late 1880s (Wilson 2003).

This style of bustled dress, which was designed to give women an impossible hourglass figure, could not work without the wearing of excessively tight corsets reinforced with whalebone and steel. A woman was expected to wear a corset throughout her entire life, including during pregnancy (Summers 2001). The corset was responsible for many spontaneous abortions and was used by some women as a fairly unreliable means of birth control (Waterhouse 2007).

It was widely believed that women were too physically frail to hold themselves upright without heavy support garments (Lurie 1981). Ironically, the wearing of a corset often caused such physical decay that eventually it became impossible to manage without wearing one (Summers 2001).

In the book *Victorians Unbuttoned* (Levitt 1986) there are some gruesome pictures of patented devices designed to hold the uterus in place. After years of wearing a corset and multiple pregnancies, it was not uncommon for the uterus to lose all muscle tone and be unable to support its own weight.

Girls as young as six years old were fitted for trainer corsets. The practice of reining in female flesh began even before that flesh had developed. Much has been
written on this topic (Summers 2001; Roberts 1987) and it will be discussed at some length later in this exegesis, as it is an essential component of any discussion on nineteenth century women's dress.

This restrictive fashion that women were expected to wear was universal in the western world. Even in the Australian outback, women were committed to stringent dress standards (Maynard 1994) and wore crinolines and corsets despite the unimaginable discomfort they must have endured (Jones 2001).

For women to be incorrectly dressed suggested immorality (Craik 1994; Mattingly 2002; Maynard 1994) and inexcusably lax or lower-class standards. The Victorians coined language around clothing that was in itself suggestive of morality (Wilson 2003). Clothing was described as down-at-heel, shabby, faultless and still is, to some extent, today (Wilson 2003).

The importance given to female dress was emphasised by the fact that nineteenth century women were often referred to as petticoats. Interestingly, it is only recently that women have stopped being referred to as skirts (Crane 2000).

In addition to the bustle and boned corsetry, women were expected to wear up to eight heavy petticoats underneath their full-length fitted gowns, hampering their movement enormously and creating a significant fire hazard. Shoes had only a moderate stacked heel but the toe was usually pointed and boots often laced tightly around the ankles. Cheaper leathers were stiff and unyielding and only wealthy women could afford to purchase shoes that fitted properly.

In 1885 the hugely exaggerated wide skirt of the crinoline had only recently gone out of fashion. This particular style, which made the skirts bell-shaped, epitomised women's submissiveness (Wilson 2003). A crinoline was a wire cage that women dragged around with them wherever they went which, because of the enormous hindrance to even everyday activities, made women virtually prisoners in their own skin (Levitt 1986). It also made them susceptible to accidental death by catching alight or becoming entangled in the spokes of carriages.

When crinolines finally went out of vogue in the late 1870s, women's bodies suddenly became more sexualised, but clothing did not become any more practical or comfortable. In reality, the bustle, tight corset and restrictive skirt that then became fashionable were little better than a crinoline.

The late nineteenth century was also a time of immense change in relation to the manufacture of clothing. For the first time ever, clothes could be purchased ready-made.
Even working-class women were freed from the drudgery of making everything they owned. They were able to purchase clothing off the rack that was practically complete, requiring only a little finishing or trimming to make it wearable. This would represent a time investment of only a few hours, which was nothing compared to the task of making a garment from scratch.

This important change in manufacturing and availability signified the beginning of our consumer culture. For the first time in history, spending money on clothing and accessories became a leisure activity for women (Wilson 2003). This was because of a widespread economic prosperity that was experienced in the mid to late nineteenth century. In England this was due to increased foreign trade (Thomson 1950), while in Australia, the profits of wealth that had been made on the goldfields then invested in farming were finding their way into wider society (Maynard 1994).

Department stores opened for the first time in Australia in the late nineteenth century, making fashion readily available to all. Early reports of ‘ladies’ shopping in the newly opened department stores suggested that they were not comfortable being served by ‘shop-girls’ (Scott 2005); something that was soon to change with the advent of the modern woman who earned her own money. Interestingly, the opening of stores where fashion was elaborately displayed on mannequins and in shop windows caused an outbreak of kleptomania (Wilson 2003).

But for women the freedom provided by fashion and shopping was two-sided. In the nineteenth century more than ever before, women were identified and classified in terms of their clothing (Holland 2004). Nineteenth century fashion was a means of controlling women (Mattingly 2002; Young 1984) and was embedded in misogyny (Finkelstein 1996).

Clothing immediately signified a woman’s social status. The clothing of a wife was designed entirely to display the affluence of her husband (Crane 2000; Konig 1973; Lurie 1981; Maynard 1994). The woman acted merely as an attractive moving mannequin to display expensive fabrics and jewels.

Single middle-class women wishing to embark on their only possible career path, that of marriage (Craik 1994), were expected to display their father's wealth and the extent of their dowry by the extravagance of their clothing and presentation. The more wealthy the woman, the more restricting her clothing was meant to be, thus showing her incapability of carrying out household duties and indicating her father’s ability to afford a large retinue of servants; for a woman totally hampered by her clothing could not attend
to even the most basic tasks and was completely reliant on a husband and servants (Wilson 2003).

Such was the power of clothing that in early Australia when female convicts were classified as ‘respectable’ or ‘immoral’, it was widely believed that the wearing of a government-issue uniform would make the immoral women more respectable (Maynard 1994). It was also thought that if convict women dressed demurely and in a way that was not ‘flashy’ they would have more chance of procuring a husband, thus maintaining the social status quo. Uniforms were also a way to reinforce humiliation when incarcerated. Convicts, like the rest of society, were put into classes. Women of the lower convict class had a yellow ‘C’ on their uniforms (Damousi 1997).

Yet there was a dichotomy in the way Victorian women were meant to dress. Their dress was highly sexualised through corsetry, bust improvers and bustles, but women were not permitted to be sexual, unless they were prostitutes (Finkelstein 1996). Women who were overtly sexually active were often incarcerated in asylums (Ussher 1991).

Late nineteenth century women were expected to be completely unaware of their sexuality, despite the fact that their clothing flaunted it openly. The impossible dress of 1885 was designed to show weakness and vulnerability (Roberts 1977), but slow change was soon to come with the advent of dress reform in the late nineteenth century.
Dress Reform

A discussion of Victorian women’s clothing would not be complete without mentioning dress reform. This section will focus briefly on this movement.

The dress reform movement, initially known as ‘Bloomerism’, began in America at the instigation of Amelia Bloomer (Mattingly 2002). Women wore ties and boaters and early American feminists attempted to introduce clothing, such as long bloomers worn under a shorter skirt, that were less restrictive (Crane 2000).

Women who became bloomers were lampooned and called brazen and non-descript (Mattingly 2002). The term ‘non-descript’ was considered particularly insulting in the class-conscious nineteenth century. As a term it summed up so perfectly the way nineteenth century women were entirely defined and confined by the clothes that they wore. Without clothing and its inherent social capital they failed to exist as individuals.

Australian women did not question the confines of fashion in a meaningful way until the mid nineteenth century. The Victorian women’s movement began in Melbourne in 1884 (Bomford 1993), and although its primary focus was on suffrage, other issues around discrimination, including dress reform, soon became of equal importance (Margery 2001; Oldfield 1992). First-wave feminists such as Melbourne woman Vida Goldstein began to speak forcefully for women’s rights and push for change (Bomford 1993).

Women were no longer happy to be clothed repressively and spoke out about being stereotyped as ‘vain decorative objects who considered dress indispensable’ (Maynard 1994). Dress reform became the symbol of women’s fight against the patriarchy and a vital form of non-verbal resistance (Crane 1999).

The Rationalist Dress Society began in London in 1881 (Weston-Thomas 2001) but it was not until cycling became fashionable that dress reform was finally taken seriously in Australia. The Rationalist Dress Movement was eventually formed in Melbourne in 1886 (Young 1984).

It seems incredible to us today that cycling would motivate women to reform their dress rather than wearing a corset in the stifling heat of the outback, or the many female deaths caused by crinolines (Levitt 1986). Presumably it was much more to do
with timing. Australian women were undoubtedly spurred on by the modest success of early feminists in America and England.

In Australia, women wore boaters and divided skirts for riding and bicycling and a specially designed cyclist's trouser suit (Oldfield 1992), although shorter skirts were not introduced until 1889 (Crane 2000). Cycling and the burgeoning popularity of gymnasiums finally made trousers a real possibility (Wilson 2003; Young 1984).

The advent of the Rationalist Dress Movement in Melbourne saw significant changes in the way women began to think about the clothing they wore. Clothes finally became a serious tool for defiance (Finkelstein 1996). But this was not the first instance of Australian women using dress as a form of protest. The first recorded attempt at dress reform was early in the nineteenth century in Tasmania at the notorious Cascades Female Factory.

The Female Factory was a workhouse and prison for convict women, where the principal work was laundry (Salt 1984). There are many accounts of mistreatment of inmates by prison guards and it is thought that many babies were born and died from mistreatment and overcrowding (Damousi 1997; Daniels 1998).

Some of the original walls of the building still stand and it is a sobering place to visit. It is one of the few sites in Australia that housed only female convicts and is historically very significant. The names of the many women who were imprisoned there have been carved into several of the few remaining sandstone walls, a testament to the short lives of many Australian's forebears.

Even during summer when I visited the site, it was freezing. It was not hard to imagine barefoot convict women standing on bluestone flags and washing clothes in icy water during a bitter Tasmanian winter. Not surprisingly, many of the women who were imprisoned died from disease and complicated childbirths (Damousi 1997; Daniels 1998).

It was generally believed that by forcing women to wear a uniform that protected their modesty, their morality would be saved (Maynard 1994). Groups of women in the factory who became known as 'Flashmobs' wore earrings and scarves as a way to protest against the harsh convict uniform that was marked with broad arrows, signifying government property (Daniels 1998; Maynard 1994).

As well as its plainness and the discomfort of the heavy fabric and coarse seams, the female convict uniform was discriminating in other ways. As mentioned earlier, lower-class prisoners were forced to wear a badge on their clothes so that others could be
in no doubt of their lowly status (Damousi 1997; Maynard 1994; Salt 1984). They also wore yellow, which was the colour of disgrace (Damousi 1997).

Clothing was a much sought after commodity in the female factory. Its currency was high because it enabled women to assert their femininity (Daniels 1998).

The rioting Flashmobs are a particularly interesting study as their aim seems at first to be opposite to the Rationalist Dress Movement reformers. The reformers wanted a world where women were not the sum of the clothes they wore. They fought for clothing that was less decorative and more comfortable (Young 1984). But although their ways of resistance were different due to their circumstances, the aims of the two groups were not dissimilar. Both groups were fighting for women’s rights in regard to their clothing, ultimately demanding the freedom to dress in any way they desired without ridicule or judgement; something we would now consider a basic human right.

But not everyone supported dress reform. Many women were resistant to it (Oldfield 1992). In the novel *Summer at Mount Hope* (Ham 2005) this is illustrated in a scene where two innocent young girls come across several suffrage women dressed in loose-fitting shifts. The inference from the women’s conversation is that this is acceptable because the shifts worn by these particular suffragettes were well-made (Ham 2005).

After the convicts early and unsuccessful attempts at dress reform, women endured the confines of restrictive Victorian dress that was totally unsuited to Australian conditions with little complaint until the mid 1880s (Jones 2001). But the start of the Rationalist Dress Society opened the door for changes that would eventually lead to a revolution around the way women were expected to dress.

At its most radical, dress reformers purported the rationalist view that clothing should be functional and no more. Holding this view in the nineteenth century was a double-edged sword because it did not take into account that clothing, despite often being enormously uncomfortable and inappropriate, was one of the few avenues of creative expression for the repressed Victorian woman (Scott 2005). Dressmaking and embroidery were crafts where women were relatively free to be creative and somewhat individualistic.

Even poor women attempted to make-over their old clothes so that they would not appear too out of fashion. It was not uncommon for the average gown to be painstakingly unpicked then restyled many times over. More important still was the fact that for many working-class women, their clothing was often the only thing that they owned. Grace Marks, the protagonist in the novel *Alias Grace* (Atwood 1987) gives a
detailed and proud account of her modest clothing collection when packed for a journey. These items were her only possessions:

‘My winter things, my red flannel petticoat and my heavy dress, my wool stockings and my flannel nightdress, as well as two cotton for summer, and my summer working dress and clogs and two caps and an apron, and my other shift, were tied in a bundle with my mother's shawl and carried on top of the coach. It was well strapped down but I was anxious about it the entire journey, as I was worried it would fall off and be lost in the road, and I kept looking behind.’

(Atwood 1987, p. 237)

Holding the rationalist view about clothing would have been a brave and potentially life-changing one for Victorian women in other ways. Women were disciplined into believing that their femininity was completely defined by the harsh and utterly impractical restrictions of fashion and etiquette (Mattingly 2002). If a woman did not adhere to these strict rules, then her chances of finding a husband were greatly diminished, and there was nothing that was more important in Victorian society than the career of marriage (Craik 1994). Without marriage a Victorian woman was destined to end up childless and alone, branded an ‘old maid’ who had been ‘left on the shelf’.

All of these issues are particularly relevant in regard to the protagonist in Holly Blue who believes that the restrictive fashion of her day is impractical and uncomfortable. But she does not have the courage or confidence to make any meaningful changes in this regard until she is forced to reconsider all her attitudes towards clothing in the asylum, as will be discussed later in the ‘Clothing and madness’ section of this exegesis.
Dress, Class and Femininity

This section will discuss the vital nineteenth century issue of class as it relates to women’s clothing and how this has been used in the neo-Victorian novel to help construct female characters who are able to both comply with and subtly defy society’s strict rules.

Women’s dress decoded but also blurred class boundaries in colonial Australia in ways that were quite different from England (Maynard 1994). Llewellyn Negrin states: ‘Fashion is a celebration of artifice, appearance and sign games’ (Negrin 1996, p. 83). This was certainly an apt description of the fashion world in nineteenth century Australia.

The middle-classes were concerned about money made by the gold rush and other less salubrious means and then used for flashy dress by the ‘nouveau-riche’ and ‘slummocracy’ (Jones 2001; Maynard 1994). Money made in this way was not considered so socially acceptable as money made in the ‘old country’ and preferably passed through multiple generations of the same family. However, it soon became clear that money, rather than class, was a more sure indicator of success in Australia, no matter how it was obtained, and society soon began to reflect this change (Davison 2004).

In England, an individual’s social status was instantly signalled by their dress (Roberts 1977). It was not necessary to even speak to a person before verifying where they sat on the social scale, as their clothes said everything about them that a stranger needed to know; but this was not the case in Australia. It was of great concern to the middle-classes that it was difficult to tell a person’s class by the clothes that they wore (Maynard 1994). In Australia, as elsewhere: ‘Dress was the acknowledged badge of status’ (Davison 2004, p. 244). But it was not so easy to categorise people by their dress because it was possible for even ex-convicts to dress up and fool society about their origins (Daniels 1998). The class problem was also exacerbated by the shortage of available textiles, which meant the middle-classes could not always dress in the manner of their choice (Jones 2001).

As the century drew on, it became harder to distinguish through dress or any other means, who had the ‘convict-stain’ and who did not. Convicts earning money on the goldfields, then buying land and livestock, was seen as an enormous problem for the middle-classes, who felt that such people had no right to the privileges that money
instantly bought them. The term ‘moral ascendancy’ was coined to describe the descendants of non-convicts who were seen as superior in every way, despite the wealth they may or may not have (Maynard 1994, p. 44).

Nineteenth century English women were identified entirely by their clothing (Holland 2004) but in Australia this notion was turned on its head. One of the factors affecting this was the advent of the department store (Holland 2004; Wilson 2003) and another was the lack of wealthy dowagers. In Britain, elderly, widowed, rich women were considered to be of the highest moral standing in society. It was these extremely conservative women who set the tone for the younger women when it came to matters of dress and behaviour (Maynard 1994). For obvious reasons these women did not exist in Melbourne society.

J. Dent’s book on etiquette Australian Etiquette: Rules and Usages of the Best Society (Dent 1886) gives a good impression of how the middle-classes felt about this issue: ‘It is unfortunate that in Australia too much attention is paid to dress by those who have neither the excuse of ample means nor of social culture’ (Dent 1886, p. 344) and ‘Consistency in regard to station and fortune is the first matter to be considered’ (Dent 1886, p. 343).

Although appropriate dress was still considered crucial by the middle-classes, this etiquette guide also suggests that paying too much attention to dress leads to vanity and could, in some instances be ‘criminal’ (Dent 1885), which is likely to be a reference to the so-called flashy dress of ex-convicts.

When boarding the boat to come to Australia, middle-class women were invariably dressed in all their finery. Yet when they finally disembarked after three months of gruelling sea travel, most had shed layers of petticoats and wore only their most comfortable garments (Maynard 1994). It is hard for us to imagine the shock of mid-summer’s heat for an English woman dressed in a corset, stockings, petticoat, boned bodice and floor-length gown.

Another issue governing dress was that many middle-class women, upon first arriving in Australia, realised how unsuitable their restrictive clothing was and gave it away to the poor. This produced a well clothed yet impoverished strata of society, which confused things even more (Maynard 1994). Despite this, once settled in Australia and presumably more used to the weather, women generally worked very hard to maintain dress standards (Jones 2001).
In *Victorians Unbuttoned*, Sarah Levitt discusses the way that second-hand clothing made the impoverished into caricatures (Levitt 1986). Although this was also the case in nineteenth century Australia, due to shifting class boundaries the caricatures were much more difficult to identify, unless they were Aboriginal. It was possible for a working-class woman with a quality second-hand dress and a newly acquired Australian twang to her voice to pass herself off effectively as lower middle-class, thus giving herself a significant hoist up the social ladder.

The dress of Aboriginal women needs to be mentioned here. Class boundaries were shaken up even more by the fact that wealthy middle-class women often gave their clothes away to Aboriginal women, encouraging them to dress more like they did. They were also taught European sewing techniques to enable them to make their own garments (Jones 2001).

Traditionally many settlers, particularly women, perceived the Aboriginal’s lack of clothing as immoral and disrespectful, and proceeded to change it as much as possible (Brock 2007). Changing the clothing habits of Aboriginal people, especially women, was seen as an easy start to assimilation (Maynard 1984).

Aboriginal women who were employed in white women’s homes were expected to adhere to social norms and dress in a way that approximated servants in England. It is interesting to note that despite not having a voice in society for many years to come, Aboriginal women unanimously refused to wear discarded convict’s clothing (Jones 2001).

One of the few ways that class could be accurately assessed in white Australian women’s clothing was through the dress of female ex-convicts. They are described as dressing in a flashy or ostentatious fashion, not surprisingly favouring bright colours over ‘more tasteful’ ones after years of wearing grimy, dark flannels. Female dress that was overtly decorated immediately classified a woman as an ex-convict (Jones 2001). Because of their taste for colours, convicts unconsciously regulated the dress of all other Australian women, for to be seen to dress like a convict was the lowest a woman could fall (Maynard 1994).

Despite this, diary accounts of women arriving in Australia for the first time invariably mention the bright colours that all the women they see are wearing. In *Holly Blue*, the protagonist is shocked by the garish colours of the Melbourne women’s gowns and it takes her some time to see them as anything other than cheap. It is likely that in some cases the colours were not dissimilar to the colours worn by women in England,
but rather that the quality of light in Australia was so much sharper and clearer it gave the illusion of brightness.

Later in the novel, the protagonist in *Holly Blue* remarks that she does not like the bright colours favoured by colonial women and finds them to be distasteful, thus agreeing with her contemporaries who believed that a middle-class woman should be subtly and conservatively dressed, her clothing instantly signalling her elevated social status (Finkelstein 1996; Wilson 2003).

There is a good example of the importance of colour in denoting class in the novel *Fingersmith* (Waters 2002). The middle-class protagonist, who finds herself transported to a working-class house in London, is appalled by the tawdry coloured clothes she is offered: ‘violet with yellow trimming on it, another of green with a silver stripe, and a third of crimson’ (Waters 2002, p. 353). She claims the clothes are ‘hideous’ and make her feel physically sick; but there is more horror to come as she is offered coloured undergarments: ‘I have always supposed that all linen must be white-just as, when I was a child, I thought that all black boots must turn out Bibles. But I must be coloured now, or go naked. They dress me like two girls dressing a doll.’ (Waters 2002, p. 353)

*The Rose of Sebastopol* (McMahon 2007) is a neo-Victorian novel about a rebellious middle-class young woman who leaves the parental home to become a nurse in the war. This character uses dress as resistance by refusing to wear enough petticoats or lace her corset tightly enough, thus making her look like she was from a lower-class and causing her family great shame.

The idea of clothing as rebellion is also used to good effect in the Australian novel *Summer at Mount Hope* (Ham 2005). Once again, one of the central characters rebels by refusing to wear corsets and petticoats; garments which both epitomised fragile femininity in the nineteenth century. The corset as ultimate tool of female repression is discussed at length later in this exegesis.

At the beginning of *Holly Blue*, the impoverished protagonist longs for a lady’s maid to help her dress. Only wealthy women could afford the luxury of their own maid, and she sees this as the ultimate success symbol. However, her time incarcerated in an insane asylum changes her attitude to servants. It also causes her to reassess the way she sees clothing. On a rare outing from the asylum, her point of view has changed to the extent that she is grateful to wear an ill-fitting, second-hand dress; something she would have considered beneath her in the past.
A working-class female character in *Fingersmith* (Waters 2002) asks why a lady wears stays that don’t fasten in the front like hers do. She’s told that if her stays fastened at the front then she would not be a true lady, as a real lady was unable to perform even the most basic of tasks such as dressing herself. Later in the novel, a lady gets her maid to try on one of her gowns to see how it looks on someone else. The incongruity and inappropriateness of this act is clear when another maid walks in and is both shocked and embarrassed to see her workmate in her employer’s luxurious clothes. The clothing of servants was expected to be plain and serviceable. It is very likely the servant in this instance would have never worn a garment that was made for anything other than work.

The idea of clothing as a potent signifier of class differences is used in a scene in *Holly Blue*. The protagonist remembers her late mother’s fox fur stole, which was one of many items lost when she had to abandon her luggage: ‘It made me smile to imagine some wretched woman living in a dilapidated tin shed on the outskirts of town, stirring a pot of kangaroo tail soup with the fox warming her back.’ (p. 45)

The working-class character Polly, in *Holly Blue*, is delineated in a different way. She is particularly fond of pretty feminine things and it is this desire that drives the character’s actions in many instances. The intimation being that this marks her as lower class (Dent 1886).

The protagonist is able to manipulate this character as the promise of pretty things is the ultimate incentive. By promising Polly fashionable clothes, the protagonist is initially able to wield some power in the relationship; but this power turns out to be as superficial as the desire for pretty things itself, for it soon becomes apparent that the protagonist is not the only one who can buy Polly’s loyalty and affection.

Later in the novel, clothing speaks volumes about class and character in a scene at the asylum when the women are getting ready for an outing (p. 160). They wear their own clothing for the first time since their incarceration. It is an opportunity to explore and differentiate the women’s class and characteristics and show who they truly were and where they sat on the social scale through their choice of clothing. This important scene will be analysed further in the ‘Clothing and Madness’ section of this exegesis.

Having the female characters all dressed in the uniform of incarceration had made it more difficult to clearly delineate their individual personalities in the asylum. It also meant that the character’s class was not clear to the reader and needed to be subtly suggested in dialogue. Not having clothing as a descriptive tool made creating believable
characters an enormous challenge, adding weight to the argument that dress is an essential ingredient for the fiction writer.

The working-class protagonist in *Alias Grace* (Atwood 1997), Grace Marks, was nearly convicted of murder for coveting and then taking a dead woman’s clothes. It is implied that her character was weak and that she was unable to resist the temptation of the clothes, despite the moral implications of this. The judge and jury are shocked that she could sink so low, and the issue of the dead woman’s clothes takes on almost more importance than the facts of the crime itself. This is highlighted even further when it is revealed that Grace Marks, in her ignorance and innocence, is actually wearing the dead woman’s clothes to court in an effort to make herself appear more respectable.

Clothing and class are inextricably combined in the neo-Victorian novel. As an analysis of specific characters in this section has illustrated, it is not possible to clothe a Victorian character without giving significant thought to the issue of class.
Clothing and Madness

As half of *Holly Blue* is set in an asylum, this section of the exegesis will discuss clothing in the asylum as it relates specifically to my novel and others in the neo-Victorian genre.

It was usual practice for the clothes belonging to the inmates of nineteenth century asylums to be put away in numbered wooden boxes. Asylum staff often stole many of the good quality items, while much of the rest became fodder for moths.

Once women were incarcerated, their clothing was taken from a common stock (Day 1998). When the time for release finally came, the inmate’s clothes were often in a style that was many years out of date, immediately marking them in society as a person of low standing.

This practice is mentioned in both *Affinity* (Waters 1999) and, very movingly, in *Alias Grace* (Atwood 1997), when the protagonist likens the effect of her garments being shut up in a box for years to the experience of being incarcerated herself. She also speaks of the clothes, once released from their box, as being a potent reminder of the dead women who had worn them.

Clothing is able to evoke potent memories (Holland 2004) and is the one thing that seems to still hold fragments of the dead. The stark imagery in this quote from *Alias Grace* illustrates this point very well: ‘The emotions I experienced were strong and painful. The room seemed to darken and I could almost see Nancy beginning to take shape again inside their clothes.’ (Atwood 1997, p. 516)

The vital importance of clothing for nineteenth century women, as has been previously discussed, was sharply contrasted with the stark deprivation in the asylum. Women did not have access to their own clothing (Day 1998). Having to choose clothing from a common lot was a humiliating and dehumanising experience, instantly turning the inmate into a nobody. For the middle-class Victorian woman, whose sense of self was based almost entirely on her appearance, this was one of the most confronting aspects of incarceration. Without clothing to signify her class and good character, she was invisible and her morals were questionable (Wilson 2003).
The dehumanising effect of asylum and prison clothing is explored in *Alias Grace* (Atwood 1997) and *Affinity* (Waters 1999) and is an important theme in the second half of my novel. The protagonist in *Holly Blue* finds it hard to adjust to the uniform of incarceration when she is put in the Kew Asylum. She is given a dirty skirt from a common lot and a poorly-fitted corset that initially causes her much discomfort.

My research into clothing at the Kew Asylum and viewing the Melbourne Museum Collection, gave me a very clear idea of how her garments would have looked. They were coarsely made from cheap serviceable fabrics, ill-fitting and plain in the extreme (Day 1998; Willis 1994). Some were marked with convict arrows which were stamped on the outside of the garments as a way of recognising and recapturing prisoners who had escaped (Maynard 1994).

The broad arrow denoted government property and insinuated ownership of the inmates themselves. Visible numbers and marks were common on charity clothes well into the twentieth century to ensure that the poor could be easily recognised and treated with pity and scorn (Maynard 1994).

There were other more subtle disadvantages of sharing clothing in the asylum. The protagonist in *Alias Grace* (Atwood 1997) speaks of the fact that her nightdress, drawn from a common lot, may have rested against the skin of her enemy. Elizabeth Wilson writes about the ‘intimate dialogue of clothes and body’ (Wilson 2003, p. 8). For the inmate of the asylum, this intimacy was forced upon them and often served to denigrate them further.

In *Affinity* (Waters 1999) the middle-class protagonist visits and falls in love with a spiritualist medium who is imprisoned in Newgate Jail. The attitudes of both the protagonist and the prisoners with regard to clothing and its innate meaning and social weight are explored. In one scene the protagonist, desperate to initiate conversation with a prisoner, asks about her dress and what it is made of. The protagonist steps forward and touches the fabric to ascertain its origin. She is surprised by the coarseness and the smell of the fabric that was rarely washed, highlighting the class differences between the two characters (Waters 1999, p. 21).

This scene is contrasted well by another that occurs later in the novel. The protagonist is visiting a different prisoner. She has ‘dressed down’ for the visit so as not to look out of place. The prisoner is shocked by the plainness of her clothes and cannot understand why she would dress in such a serviceable fabric when she could wear anything she wanted. The prisoner then describes in detail the luxurious garments she
would wear if she were not imprisoned, giving the reader a telling glimpse into her character and class (Waters 1999, p. 65).

In *Holly Blue*, the protagonist and two other inmates from the asylum are taken on a rare outing. They are given the opportunity to wear the clothes they had on when they were admitted to the asylum. In one character's case, her gown is moth-eaten and more than twenty years out of date, yet after the restrictive dress of the asylum she feels transformed when she wears it again:

‘Will you look at me girls,’ she said, thrusting her shoulders back.
‘Wearing my old favourite after all this time. I had two other gowns just like this once, my sister helped me make them.’ Peg turned slowly and regally so we could see her from all angles. ‘I feel like a queen, truly I do. If only I had a looking-glass.’

(p. 162)

The protagonist in *Alias Grace* who has been incarcerated for a considerable period of time, eloquently describes the items that would represent her life, illustrating the importance of clothing to her identity: ‘A piece of coarse cotton from my Penitentiary nightdress. A square of bloodstained petticoat. A strip of kerchief, white with blue flowers. Love-in-a-mist’. (Atwood 1997, p. 445)

The dress of the nineteenth century asylum inmate was an integral part of the way discipline was reinforced (Foucault 1979). (Despite his significant work on incarceration, Foucault did not focus on clothing in the asylum and is therefore not discussed in great detail in this exegesis).

By making clothing as uncomfortable as possible and branding it with the marks of government ownership, the authorities were able to achieve a certain amount of control. When this no longer sufficed, the idea of dress as a means of control was taken a step further. As a form of punishment, restrictive garments such as straightjackets (then known as camisoles), hobbled-skirts, locked-gloves and a hat or a blanket weighed down with lead were used to completely incapacitate the inmate (Day 1998). Clothing became the ultimate form of imprisonment.

In a scene that was inspired by viewing the much-mended straightjacket at the Melbourne museum, an inmate who is working in the asylum sewing room in *Holly Blue*, stitches a piece of silk around the neck of a well-worn restraining jacket in an attempt to
make it more comfortable. It is a gift for a woman who wears the jacket almost continually. The juxtaposition of silk and stained canvas is significant, symbolising clothing both inside and outside of the asylum and the inner and outer life of the inmate.

‘Then she went back to work on a restraint camisole that was spotted with sinister dark marks. Patches of coloured fabric had been used to mend the camisole in places, giving it the incongruous appearance of someone’s favourite old piece of clothing. With great care and precision, Aggie was stitching a piece of peacock blue silk around the neck of it.’

(p. 142)

Restraining garments worn in the asylum are imbued with meaning in *Holly Blue*. At one point the protagonist is locked in a hobbled-skirt and straightjacket, then left in a dark cell overnight as punishment for a minor transgression. She describes the experience of dressing in the restrictive clothes:

‘A skirt was really not the right word for the garment, as it did not have an opening at the bottom in the way that a skirt would. Rather, it was a tightly fitted canvas sack that fastened about my waist with a buckle and a strap. My own itchy woollen skirt was bundled in with me, uncomfortably bunched around the top of my legs.

When I was in the contraption, it was fastened up firmly behind. Then Matron put her foot in the small of my back to get the buckles and laces as firm as she could . . . I held up my arms. They were shaking. Once the stiff canvas sleeves of the camisole were slipped up them, they were forced down into deep pockets at my side, so that there was no chance of movement. Then I was buckled in from the back and sides as tightly as the two of them could manage.’

(p. 193)

Trussed up in the most severe restraining garments imaginable, the protagonist initially experiences only fear and pain. But after some hours spent alone in the dark, these feelings vanish and she is left with numbness and a sense of being apart from her body that becomes almost a transcendental experience. She sings to keep away the rats
and is almost able to leave her restrained earthly body behind. It is a pivotal point in the novel because during this time she has some deep insights about herself and her relationships with others. She leaves the cell a different, more aware person - ready to steer the novel to its conclusion.

Restraining clothing and uniforms were important methods of controlling women in the asylum. In this section I have discussed the importance of clothing in the asylum as it relates specifically to the characters in *Holly Blue* and offered some insights into how other novelists have approached this issue.
The Corset and its Symbolism

‘A stout girl without stays looks very much like a shapeless and quivering mass of fat.’

(Ballin 1885, cited in Wilson 2003, p. 213)

A discussion of Victorian clothing would not be complete without a section on that most controversial and fascinating of Victorian garments: the corset. It was difficult to select a quote to begin this section because of the vast quantity of material that has been written about the corset (Roberts 1977; Steel 2001; Summers 2001; Fontanel 1997). Academic analysis is full of anecdotes about this garment, which in the twenty-first century strike us as both disturbing and amusing.

Writers of the neo-Victorian literary novel and the popular romantic genre colloquially known as Bodice Rippers, have made significant use of the corset as a symbol of repression, humour and overt sexuality; giving this writer many quotes to choose from. But I chose the quote that starts this section because it was written by a woman and is an excellent example of how entrenched thinking about the corset had become by the late nineteenth century, when Holly Blue is set.

The corset was also considered by both men and women to be an extremely erotic garment, a fact that some theorists claim has been overlooked (Scott 2005; Steele 1999). The eroticism and fetishism of the corset, however, is not relevant to my novel, so will not form part of this discussion.

It is often incorrectly assumed that men put women in corsets and women simply put up with the enormous discomfort they caused. In reality, the corset had become so engrained in nineteenth century culture that few women saw it for the physically, sexually and emotionally restrictive and dangerous garment it really was (Summers 2001).

There were many cases of women becoming ‘addicted’ to their corsets and even sleeping in them (Roberts 1977), as the following poem of the time illustrates.
The Lay of the Lacer

(English Woman’s domestic magazine, 1869, cited in Waugh 1954, p. 142)

Don’t lace me tighter, sister dear;
I never had supposed,
That it would give me so much pain

‘My dear, they’re not near closed.’

Then I must get a larger pair,
To clasp my clumsy waist,
Of this I’m sure, I cannot bear
To feel myself tight-laced,
Oh, the misery of tight-lacing
None but the tried can tell;
I’m sure that as to figure,
I cannot be a belle.

The pain, you say, it will not last?
Well I will try again!
Lace me up tightly, sister dear,
I’ll try and bear the pain.
Do lace me tighter, sister dear,
I never had supposed
It would give me so much pleasure

‘My dear, the corset’s closed.’

Then I must get a smaller pair
To clasp my slender waist;
Full well, you know I cannot bear
To feel I’m not tight-laced.
Oh, the pleasure of tight lacing.

I that have tried, can tell;
Besides that, as to the figure
I feel I’m quite a belle.

This is the teaching of my lay,
Lace tightly while you can;
Be sure you'll soon forget the pain
You feel when you began.

In 1885 when my novel is set, the fashion of heavy corsetry and a bustled skirt gave women an S-bend shape (Flanders 2003; Fontanel 1997). The breasts and hips were thrust forward and therefore highly exaggerated. For those without a sufficient bust to achieve this look, inflatable breasts that sat inside the corset were invented (Fontanel 1997).

Apart from some doctors who argued against the corset on health grounds right from the start of its rise in popularity (Aaron 1978), men were generally active in their support of the garment. Patents applied for by men included corsets made of horsehair; felting; metal; wood, wire and even plaster of Paris (Summers 2001).

Restrictive clothing was introduced to women at a very early age. Girls as young as nine wore a copy of their mother's clothing, including a corset (albeit looser) and high-heeled boots. Even their dolls had corsets (Summers 2001) and in many cases these were as intricately worked and severely boned as the real thing. The onset of puberty meant that girls switched to a proper boned corset and were no longer able to run and play as they had in childhood (Flanders 2003). Middle-class girls were indoctrinated from childhood so by the time they became women, a corset was seen as an indispensable item.

The corset was a potent signifier of female morality. Corsets served to restrain ‘the body and the emotions’ (Collins 2007, p. 26). The term ‘straight-laced’, which is still in use today, was coined to mean a woman of high moral standing. Women with high morals always wore a firmly laced corset as a symbol of their elevated social status (Wilson 2003). A thin waist was associated with women of ‘superior’ race and class (Steel 2001).

Ada Ballin, author of the quote about ‘stout girls’ that begins this section, considered herself to be a dress reformer. She put forward the view that women should be wearing more comfortable and less restrictive clothing. In addition to this, she vigorously questioned the use of fabric dyes in women’s clothing, many of which were highly toxic (Wilson 2003). Yet despite this forward thinking, she was still a confirmed supporter of the corset, illustrating just how radical and foreign the anti-corset stance was considered at the time. It was not until the formation of the Rationalist Dress Society and the increasing popularity of sport for women, that the use of corsets was seriously questioned (Oldfield 1992).
There was a widely held belief that without the corset, a woman would be unable to support the weight of her own flesh (Lurie 1981) when in fact the opposite was true. A popular medical journal of the time put forward the fact that there were over a hundred diseases caused by wearing a corset, the most serious being tuberculosis (Roberts 1977), although the dangers of the corset are disputed by some theorists (Scott 2005; Steele 2001). But regardless of the impact on the health of the wearer, the corset was considered by most middle-class women to be an indispensable garment until well towards the end of Queen Victoria’s long reign (Summers 2001).

A quote from *Alias Grace* sums up the universally held view that women needed to wear a corset: ‘At least he isn’t a woman, and thus not obliged to wear corsets, and deform himself with tight lacing. For the widely held view that women are weak-spined and jelly-like by nature, and would slump to the floor like melted cheese if not roped in.’ (Atwood 1997, p. 83).

*Alias Grace* is not the only neo-Victorian novel of the six I chose to cite in this exegesis that makes reference to the corset. There are many (arguably too many) comments passed regarding the corset in *Summer at Mount Hope* (Ham 2005); a book about a middle-class family that is set in the Australian bush. The author, Rosalie Ham, makes several references to husbands tightening their wives’ corset strings as part of their daily toilette. This represents an interesting switch in power relations. In most middle-class British homes there was a lady’s maid or a maid-of-all-work to do this job, and it was usual practice for this maid to wear her mistresses cast-off corsets in an attempt to replicate the moulded figure of her employer (Summers 2001).

In middle-class families who were impoverished, the job of tightening the corset strings would fall to a female family member. It would not be considered ‘proper’ behaviour for a husband to perform what was considered both a menial yet intimate task. But in Australia, where maids were in short supply, even middle-class landowners, such as the characters in *Summer at Mount Hope* (Ham 2005), had to adjust to a new life without the domestic staff they once had. If a husband was the only person available to help, then he would have to lace his wife’s corset, putting middle-class sensibilities and convention aside.

In the asylum - and in all institutions - Victorian women were still expected to abide by social norms and wear a corset (Summers 2001). There was one significant difference, however. Like the other clothing worn in asylums, corsets were very cheaply made and given out from a common lot (Craik 1994). They were a dull khaki colour,
commonly known as drab, and buckled up at the front (Summers 2001) to make them easy to fasten.

Asylum corsets were only lightly boned and designed to be worn loose so that the inmates could carry out any physical work that was required of them, whilst still maintaining some sense of decorum. The lack of support given by the institutional corset is something that concerns the protagonist at the beginning of her incarceration in *Holly Blue*.

‘I watched as a woman walked quickly past me, her chest swinging freely under her thin dress. We all wore corsets of the lightest and most inconsequential type with very little boning. They did up at the front and had no laces for adjustment. The corsets were not made to our own particular shape, and came in only *small* or *large*; standard sizes that neither flattered nor fitted anyone. I had never witnessed the movement of women’s bodies beneath their clothing, except occasionally on the streets, and then I had only allowed myself the briefest glance. Here it was impossible not to look.’

(p. 132)

As discussed previously, the corset as a symbol of morality was widely accepted by the Victorians. It ensured that there was no deviation from patriarchal norms (Collins 2007). In the asylum, depriving women of proper corsets would serve to signify their lowered status in society. The impact on middle-class women would have been particularly marked.

It is interesting to consider that during her time in an asylum, a woman would usually become physically stronger, despite the nutritionally poor diet. Corsets caused extreme muscle wasting when used for prolonged periods (Summers 2001; Roberts 1977) eventually making women prisoners inside them. But in the asylum, although they were incarcerated, women’s bodies were to some extent free from the rigid confines of restrictive Victorian dress, often for the first and only time in their lives.

The difficulties posed by the unsupportive institution corset are illustrated in other neo-Victorian novels that have scenes set in an asylum. In *Fingersmith* the protagonist finds the corset is too big for her and has hooks instead of laces. When she
is dressed in the huge unsupportive corset and other ‘madhouse things’ the warder says: ‘Well! You shall bounce like a ball all right, in those!’ (Waters 2002, p. 407)

In this section I have discussed the ways in which the corset defined and constrained Victorian femininity, giving particular weight to corsets in the asylum as this is most relevant to my novel. I have looked at academic analysis around corsetry and used this to comment on how other fiction writers have used corsets, both literally and symbolically, in their work.

* * *

I felt very strongly that I could not complete this exegesis or the novel without physically wearing a corset and recording how it felt. To this end, I purchased a custom-made corset on Ebay. It was a historically accurate copy of a typical mid-Victorian model with 24 vertical bones and a thick steel busk, several inches wide, that ran the length of the garment. Heavy steel hooks enabled the corset to be fastened at the front. The back was pulled tight with black laces that crossed each other dozens of times and were fed through sturdy metal eyelets to allow for serious tightening. The corset was made to my measurements exactly, which I thought was the best way to ensure an authentic experience.

The corset sat in my cupboard for many months before I put it on properly. When it first arrived, I had done it up in the front without tightening the laces at all and had been shocked at how uncomfortable and restrictive it was. Because of this I had been in no hurry to wear it, and the day did not arrive until this exegesis was well and truly complete and it could wait no longer . . .

I secure the corset around my middle with the bulky steel clasps. It’s not easy because the thing is so rigid and the shape doesn’t seem designed for any human body, let alone the generous curves of a woman. My sister tightens the laces. She’s reluctant; doesn’t want to hurt me.

Pulling the laces takes forever, or so it seems, as each of the 30 strings has to be tightened individually and there is always the chance they will get hopelessly tangled. It’s confusing and didn’t come with instructions; do you start lacing at the top or the bottom or somewhere around the middle? We decide on the top.

As each lace tightens, I’m feeling more constrained, edgy and uncomfortable. I ask my sister if it’s nearly done and she tells me that fewer than half the laces have been tightened. There’s a strong
feeling of powerlessness because by this stage the corset is so tight I could not undo it from the front, no matter how much I wanted to escape. I’m stuck in this thing until someone helps me out of it. My body is no longer under my control.

My sister, at first so reluctant, now seems to be getting some satisfaction as each lace is tightened. I wince and insist she pulls the laces only to the point where I say enough. They could be a lot tighter, but they’re tight enough for me.

I’m fully laced now and struck by the shallowness of my breathing. Because my ribs and stomach are compressed, I can’t breathe normally. I fight hard against a feeling of panic as my breaths come short and sharp. My breasts heave up and down as I struggle for air.

As soon as I have conquered the shallow breathing, I walk towards the mirror. Movement is strange and robotic. I’m an overfed snail bursting out of its shell – or wishing that it could. My torso is one solid piece that seems to move independently.

I have pains in my stomach where it is being squashed. I can’t imagine ever wanting to eat while I’m wearing this thing. Even imagining the slight bloating caused by a glass of water is repellent.

As I walk my posture is ramrod straight. It has to be, because even slouching a little bit causes the steel bones under my arms to cut into my flesh.

Standing at the mirror, I can’t believe it’s me. My hipbones jut out dramatically and my waist seems impossibly small. Everything is strangely elongated. With a fair amount of discomfort, I pull on the easiest clothes I can find - tracksuit pants that will barely stay up and a cardigan with a belt that ties around the waist.

The effect is all the more confronting somehow when I’ve got clothes on. It looks very wrong. I measure my waist. It’s four inches smaller than usual but that flesh has to go somewhere. I’ve got a new potbelly that sits uncomfortably low, pushing down on my pubic bone and my breasts, which are twice their usual size, have been levered up almost to my chin. They swell alarmingly with each shallow breath that I take and I feel like they are choking me. The most extreme push-up bra doesn’t even come close to this. But the flesh between these two exaggerated protrusions is totally flat, compressed like it’s in a vice and strangely truncated.

The muscles in my back already ache. They’re not used to this strange posture and the distribution of weight is not right. When I try to bend over my torso is rigid and the bend is all from the hips, thrusting my backside straight out. I feel like a picture on a saucy nineteenth century postcard but it’s not an erotic feeling – anything but. If someone pushed me over I would have no choice but to topple forwards and land on my head. I’ve got as much control over my centre of gravity as Humpty Dumpty.
I make my way out into the living room to face the family, feeling very foolish. The comments are not flattering: 'I hope you’re not going out like that', 'You look like you’ve got an eating disorder', 'I never realised you had such a long body.'

A couple of hours later and I am feeling intensely uncomfortable. I had planned to undertake some nineteenth century household tasks – a bit of hand washing, sweeping the floors, but I’m feeling far too awful to do anything much. I did put a load of washing into the machine; bending over was excruciating.

I’m having an argument with myself about how long I need to wear this torturous thing. I had planned on a whole day but that seems very unlikely at this point.

I lose myself in a good book for a while and manage to stop thinking about it so much. The plot twists and the time passes. Then, when I do think about it, I realise that something has changed. I now feel strangely numb. The aches and pains have mysteriously vanished and I’ve become used to the shallow breathing and the compression. In fact, it’s fair to say that I can hardly notice I’m wearing a corset at all.

It’s a terrible shame my sister’s gone out. If she was here then perhaps I could have got her to tighten the laces, just a little...
Conclusion

This exegesis began with several false starts while I tried to find my central research topic. As discussed at length earlier, it is clear that my research into these areas benefitted my artefact in many and varied ways, leading eventually to the unexpected discovery of my fascination with nineteenth century women's clothing. These topics also represent the research areas that I focused on whilst writing the first draft of the artefact, so they influenced the shape of the novel significantly. For all of these reasons, I believe that it was essential that these topics were given full voice in the first half of the exegesis, and this is what I chose to do.

In the second half of the exegesis, my research topic had become clear. I set out to examine the ways that women's clothing is used to depict character, femininity and class in my artefact and other neo-Victorian novels. This was broken down further into three categories that were most relevant to my novel: dress and class, clothing in the asylum and the corset.

I kept my focus to nineteenth century western women because this was most relevant to my novel. The societal levels covered in the exegesis are broader, however. I make reference to lower, middle and upper-class women's clothing as the protagonist is exposed to all levels of society at various stages in the narrative. As the novel is written in the first person and narrated throughout by the protagonist, I thought it most appropriate to focus on the experiences of this particular character in the exegesis as well.

My examination of nineteenth century women's clothing has been conducted on several levels. This was made possible by utilising a feminist research methodology that allowed me to cross discipline boundaries and use myself freely in the research process. I saw my reactions, both as a woman and as a writer, to be an invaluable part of the research process.

Before I began my academic reading and analysis of other fiction writers’ work, much significant research was undertaken at an experiential level. I viewed various
historical clothing collections and took note of my emotional and physical reactions to these garments. These reactions have been documented in this exegesis and have informed my fiction writing in many valuable ways. I consider them to be an important and valid part of both the research and the writing processes. They added greatly to the authenticity of my fiction writing, enabled me to bring the descriptions of clothing to life and, most importantly, use them as a valuable tool to develop character, class and femininity in my novel.

These experiential observations were then reinforced and deepened by my academic research, which is explored at length in the literature review and methodology section of this exegesis. I was then able to apply this knowledge to my interpretation of other neo-Victorian novels, focussing on analysing how other writers had used clothing to develop character, femininity and class in their fiction.

This analysis would not have occurred without the writing of this exegesis. It has enabled me to develop characters and depict class and femininity at a much deeper level in my historical fiction writing, and to write about nineteenth century women’s clothing with the detail, subtext and passion it so rightly deserves.
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