



## A MINOR DELAY

Clementine Rose leaned between the front seats of Uncle Digby's ancient Morris Minor. She looked up at her great-aunt Violet, who had insisted on travelling in the front.

'Is it . . .?' Clementine paused. 'Is it an old person?' she asked with a frown.

Aunt Violet turned and curled her lip. 'Who are you calling old? Unless you mean him.' She glanced at Digby Pertwhistle, who was in the driver's seat.

Clementine shook her head. 'No.'

Aunt Violet smiled smugly.

'I meant both of you,' Clementine said.

The grin slid from the woman's lips.

Clementine's mother, Lady Clarissa, was wedged in the back seat with Lavender and Clementine. Before Aunt Violet could erupt, she called out. 'Is it the owl on Uncle Digby's key ring?'

'Yes, it is. Thank goodness that's over,' Aunt Violet harrumphed. 'I've had quite enough of I Spy for one day.'

'But it's Mummy's turn,' said Clementine.

'Godfathers! Can't you just look at the scenery, Clementine?' Aunt Violet protested.

Clementine wrinkled her nose.

The little car pattered to the top of another rise. They had been driving for a couple of hours now. They had passed green fields dotted with oak trees and sheep, lush forests, and now the landscape had opened up again.

'Look!' Clementine shouted, bouncing up and down in her seat.

‘Yes, yes, we can all see it,’ said Aunt Violet. But even she couldn’t suppress the start of a smile.

The ocean spread out before them, twinkling in the afternoon sun. There was a pretty village dotted with whitewashed houses and a perfect crescent beach tucked in between a little harbour and a rocky headland. Further around, the green hills looked as if they rolled all the way to the sandy shore.

‘It’s beautiful,’ Clementine gasped.

‘It certainly is,’ said Digby. ‘And just as I remember it from when I was a boy.’

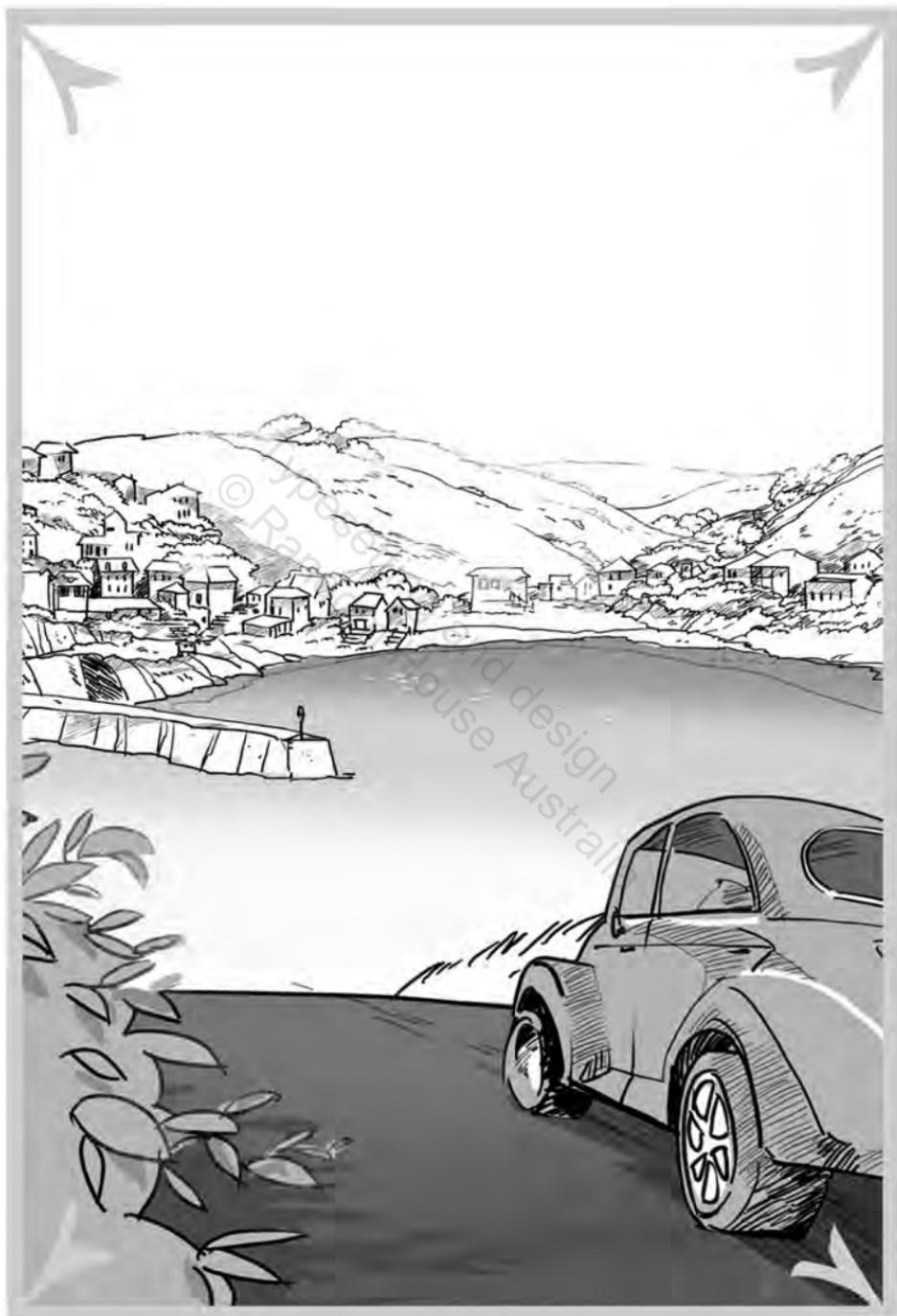
‘I’m surprised you can recall anything that far back,’ Aunt Violet teased.

‘Don’t you worry, Miss Appleby. I have a mind like a steel trap.’ Digby tapped his left temple and winked in the old woman’s direction.

Aunt Violet rolled her eyes.

‘Can we go to the beach this afternoon?’ Clementine asked.

‘Mmm, I think perhaps we should get settled and then take a walk around the village.’



Remember, we've got a whole week, Clemmie,' her mother replied.

'Do you really think those builders will have the new roof on in a week?' Aunt Violet asked. 'They looked an untrustworthy lot, if you ask me.'

'Aunt Violet, I've known Mr Hubbard since I was a little girl and I thought you'd much rather have a holiday by the sea than be woken by builders in the rafters above your bed,' Clarissa replied.

Aunt Violet sighed. 'Yes, yes, you've made your point. In fact, I don't know why we couldn't have stayed for two weeks. One seems a bit stingy, really.'

'One is all I could afford,' Lady Clarissa reminded her aunt.

'I suppose it's for the best. I couldn't bear to leave Pharaoh for longer. I do hope that cat of Mrs Mogg's doesn't lead the dear boy astray,' said Aunt Violet. 'I've heard Claws is a bit of a traveller too.'

Pharaoh was Aunt Violet's sphynx cat.

He was quite possibly the strangest creature Clementine had ever seen, all wrinkly and hairless. But he and Clementine's teacup pig, Lavender, had fallen madly in love, and Clementine adored him too. The only problem was that Pharaoh had a terrible habit of escaping. Aunt Violet had thought about taking him along for the week but, after he'd gone missing for an entire day yet again, she decided it was safer to leave him with the local shopkeeper. Mrs Mogg vowed to keep him under lock and key.

Penberthy House had been in need of a new roof for some time but a recent heavy downpour confirmed that it could wait no longer. Clementine, her mother, Uncle Digby and even Aunt Violet couldn't find enough buckets to collect the drips. As luck would have it, Lady Clarissa had hosted two beautiful weddings in recent months, which had given her enough money to have the roof replaced, as well as a few other minor repairs. The holiday was a lovely bonus.

‘What will our hotel be like?’ Clementine asked.

‘Watertight, I hope,’ Aunt Violet smirked.

‘Of course it will be,’ Clarissa laughed. ‘And it’s a guesthouse, not a hotel. So I imagine it will be almost like staying with friends. Mrs Dent sounded lovely on the telephone.’

‘What’s the difference between a guesthouse and a hotel, Mummy?’ Clementine asked.

‘Not much, darling. It will just be a lot cosier,’ Clarissa replied.

Digby Pertwhistle crunched the gears as the little car coughed and sputtered on the narrow road to the village. There was one last hill before they would begin their descent.

Aunt Violet shuddered at the noise. ‘I don’t see why we couldn’t have taken my car.’

Digby wrestled the gears again. ‘I think that had something to do with you not getting the registration paid in time.’

Aunt Violet pursed her lips and went strangely quiet.

Suddenly there was a loud bang and the little car slowed down. Digby just managed to steer it off the road and onto the grass verge before it rolled to a halt.

‘Uh-oh.’ Clementine looked at her mother. ‘That didn’t sound good.’

‘Wonderful,’ Aunt Violet groused. ‘I might have guessed something like this would happen.’

Digby opened the door and walked to the front of the car. He lifted the bonnet and thick steam poured from the engine bay.

‘You stay here, darling,’ said Lady Clarissa before she hopped out to join him.

Aunt Violet wound down the window. ‘Hurry up, Pertwhistle. I’m dying of thirst in here!’

Clementine leaned forward again. ‘Are you excited?’ she asked her great-aunt.

‘About what? The prospect of having to walk the last couple of miles to the village or the fact that we’ll be staying in a fleapit of a guesthouse that will be altogether too hot and probably smell like boiled cabbages.’

Clementine frowned. 'I meant are you excited about having a holiday by the sea.' She had no idea why her great-aunt thought the house would smell like cabbages. Penberthy House never did.

'I might be, if we ever get there,' the woman replied.

Clementine thought Aunt Violet was a complicated person. The two of them hadn't exactly hit it off when they first met and they'd certainly had their fair share of run-ins. But more recently the woman had seemed to soften a little, although she was still the grumpiest person Clemmie knew.

'Do you want to hear a poem?' Clementine asked.

'No, not particularly,' Aunt Violet replied, craning her neck to see what was going on in front of the car.

'But it's about you,' Clementine said.

'About me?' Aunt Violet eyed the girl suspiciously.

Clementine nodded. 'It's a limerick. Uncle

Digby taught me how to do them. I've just made up one about you in my head.'

'Well, get on with it,' said Aunt Violet.

Clementine frowned in confusion. 'But . . . you said you didn't want to hear it.'

'And now I've changed my mind.'

Clementine began:

*'There once was a lady called Vi  
Who accidentally swallowed a fly  
It tickled and buzzed  
And prickled and fuzzed  
'Til she coughed it back into the sky.'*

Clementine leaned forward to watch her great-aunt's reaction. 'Did you like it?'

Violet Appleby's lips quivered. 'As a matter of fact, Clementine, I thought it was rather . . . clever.' The old woman's mouth stretched into a smile.

'Uncle Digby told me that Vi was short for Violet, because sometimes he calls you that. So I rhymed "Vi" with "fly",' the girl said with a grin.

‘Well, I certainly hope I won’t be swallowing any flies on this holiday,’ said Aunt Violet. ‘And Pertwhistle can stop calling me Vi behind my back too – the cheek of him.’ She stuck her head out of the window. ‘For heaven’s sake, what’s taking so long?’

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