

A BIRDIE MEALING MYSTERY

GIRL
DETECTIVES
JUST
WANNA
HAVE
FUN

PHILIPPA KAYE

ONE

Sneaking out was probably too harsh a way to describe it. What Birdie was currently doing was called... leaving while the music was still playing.

She hightailed it across the lawn, her white court shoes bumping against her shoulder blade as they dangled over it, held by slippery fingertips. After all, if it had been the man staying at her house – instead of the other way around – and he left at 4:30 in the morning without saying goodbye, no-one would bat an eyelid. ‘Scoring’ was what it would be called, a ‘root’ and there would probably be slaps on the back from the boys, no guilt.

Birdie tip-toed across the neat, dewy green sponge. Neat, just like Herb had been. Ordered shelves, morning-made bed, pine-fresh little ensuite. Everything was shipshape, except perhaps his bedding ability. Luckily, the boy was all over the messy place with that!

Thinking about it sent a tingle that started down below and flushed over Birdie’s skin. Possibly, she’d left too hastily. She paused... turned. The sparkle of the rising sun hit the ocean, blinding her for a moment. A breeze lifted from the east, ruffling her hair, cooling her fire. She soaked it in.

It was 1984 for shit’s sake. A girl was allowed a one-night stand. It was the time of liberation. And after it had just taken Birdie a good five minutes to work out how to open Herb’s front door lock – making as little noise as possible – she meant liberation in more ways than one.

She turned away from the sea and continued her creeping exit. The

grass crunching beneath frosted mauve toenails. She would not go back.

‘Birdie.’ She froze. *Please, no. Tell me that’s not him.* ‘Birdie, wait. Where are you going?’

Shit...

He struts the stage, leaps, glares, arms flailing, never still for a moment. It's the kind of rock star performance that energises the audience, has the girls shrieking. And shriek they do. Hutchence has a deep melodic voice sometimes flecked with rage or raw intensity. Hutchence writes most of the band's lyrics; Andrew Farriss the remainder. Many are issue-oriented, plunging into the problems of the '80s. 'The only hope we have is the young. We have to listen to the young.'

'Sights and sounds', *Cleo*, June 1981.

TWO

Sun streamed through the blinds and Birdie Mealing pulled the covers over her head.

‘Let’s have a number, shall we?’ The deep, melodic tones of the breakfast DJ, Uncle Doug, muffled through from the clock radio. ‘*Number two*,’ said an automated voice. The intro to the song started – Mondo Rock’s, *Come Said the Boy* – then Doug’s cheeky voice cut in again. ‘Number two – almost number one, but muuuch harder to get off your shoe.’

Birdie laughed and threw the covers off her head. She’d set her alarm for eight o’clock. After making her excuses to Herb, she had fallen into bed at about five and had happily slept, it seemed, the last three hours away.

She had enjoyed herself with Herb, but that’s all it was. It was a shame, really. She would have liked to enjoy herself with Herb again, but his forlorn look, the slight sadness in his words, his unexpected reaction to her leaving without saying goodbye, had put an end to any further contact. Honestly, what did he think would happen when he took a girl home and slept with her on their first date? This was not the beginning marriages were made from.

Birdie dragged her arms from her sides up her body, pausing at the tenderness of her nipples – another reminder of last night’s antics. Herb’s wavy dark brown hair, fringe flopped over to one side, dancing caramel eyes and warm, silky skin as he rose above her, swam into view. She sighed big. She continued stretching her arms over her head, flat

out like a lion in the sun.

She sat up, took a moment to shake the thought of Herb from her mind and climbed out of the bed.

It really was a shame, but she was not about to be fallen in love with.

Wide eyes and an open mouth met Birdie as she padded out from her private hallway. Lenore Mealing raised herself from the lounge and stood in shock. Two unfolded, small, grey school socks, the scent of washing powder wafting from them, dangled from her motionless hands.

‘What’s up, Mum?’

Her mother couldn’t speak. She turned back to the TV, her breaths deep and controlled. Birdie followed her gaze, moved into the loungeroom and stood beside her mum. She lunged at the TV and rotated the volume knob to the right.

... at the offices of solicitor-to-the-stars, Larry Kean. Police are hoping to find some evidence that will help them with their investigation into his disappearance. Mr Kean’s personal assistant, Miss Shelly Fairchild, alerted police after she and some clients saw him being forcibly bundled into an unknown car this morning.

Birdie mirrored her mother’s expression. ‘Uncle Larry?’

Footage of Larry Kean’s office building was being shown. Police officers milled around the foyer, picked up by the camera as it filmed through the glass rotating door.

‘I spoke to him just yesterday,’ Lenore said in a whisper. ‘He’s supposed to be coming for lunch on Sunday.’

Mr Kean’s most recent and widely televised victory was for Logie award-winning actress Cyn Pearli, who reportedly walked off the set of suburban soap ‘Sunshine Close’, breaking her contract. Mr Kean’s investigation proved she was kicked off after the breakup of her relationship with producer, Darryn Austyn. An out of court settlement saw Miss Pearli compensated, with an undisclosed sum. Mr Austyn, who has since resigned from ‘Sunshine Close’ hoping to try his luck in Hollywood, was quoted as saying, ‘You’ll get yours, Kean.’

On the TV, flashes went off in all directions, as the image of Shelly

Fairchild could be seen conversing with police through a window above the street. *Uncle Larry's office*. After the reporters were spotted, she was moved away from the glass.

One official looking policeman on ground level stepped forward. Reporters jockeyed for position, flying off questions and poking microphones into his personal space. He pulled a hanky from his pocket and wiped the summer sweat from his brow, then centred himself and pointed at one of the reporters.

'Is Darryn Austyn a person of interest, Inspector?'

'Mr Austyn is assisting police with their investigations, Scot. That's all I can say.'

'Is there any truth to the rumour that NSW Police have questioned Vinny Varva in relation to Mr Kean's disappearance?' asked another.

'You know I can't verify that, Miss. Police are following all angles, all leads.'

More questions were fired from the assembled troupe as officers began to trickle out of the building in the background and leave via the steps.

But Birdie had stopped listening. Behind the inspector stood a familiar face. She blinked and refocussed on the TV as the camera swung back to the reporter.

Vinny Varva, or 'Velvet Vinny' as he is known, was imprisoned in 1976, found guilty of planting an explosive that levelled popular Slipway restaurant, killing four people.

'Vinny Varva,' her mother said in a whisper. Birdie remembered the explosion. Remembered his name being bandied around by the media over the years. Lenore grabbed Birdie's arm. 'Larry used to look after his accounts.'

Coincidentally, Kean was mentioned as an associate of Mr Varva during the ABC's 'Uncovered' program on Monday night. The episode focused on the explosion at Slipway, among other historical cases. Vincent Varva is lodging one final appeal against his conviction of murder.

The phone started ringing on the hallstand, making Lenore jump. She hurried across the loungeroom and down towards the entryway.

In the background on the news report, police officers were wandering around. The eyes of one, in his late twenties, caught the camera. Birdie took a step towards the screen. Hazel eyes bored into the lens, bored into Birdie's, as if he could see right through the glass and knew she was watching. She inhaled quickly, a blush rising in her cheeks.

Herb.



'Mum says, do you want eggs on toast for breakfast, Big Bird?' Birdie jumped. Kick stood at her bathroom door. His normally thunderous entrance suspiciously quiet.

'I didn't hear you come in, little man.'

'I was being creeping, like a ninja, like *Monkey Magic*.' Kick sprang onto her bed.

'Oh, I see.' Birdie put her palms together, as in prayer, and bowed. 'Buddha says: Live purely. Be quiet.'

'What?' His big brown eyes crinkled in a frown.

She huffed a laugh. 'Never mind.'

She was not even remotely hungry. She wrapped the towel more tightly around her chest and picked up a photograph, one when she was a toddler riding horsey on Uncle Larry's knee. He had been at the hospital when Birdie was born. She'd heard the story a hundred times about how her mother refused to be coerced into handing her newborn over to the nuns. How Uncle Larry pretended they were engaged and he the father. He was her godfather. He was the next best thing to a father she had.

He'd also been shoved into an unknown car and driven out of their lives.

Saying yes to an egg would be a mistake. Her stomach was in turmoil.

Fluffy cushions, billowy pillows and her white, Laura Ashley quilt cover – dotted with the tiny, pale-blue juniper berries that dominated

her bedroom – bounced under Kick's taut little body.

As a child, Birdie imagined Uncle Larry was her father. She'd often felt the stigma of not having a dad. She'd been embarrassed making a card for her uncle during Fathers' Day craft, even though she loved him. To have just a mother on the sporting sidelines, most other parents toed together. She'd even pretended her father was dead, rather than 'unknown'.

Whenever she met someone new and families were discussed, whenever people came round and saw her situation, whenever there was a discussion around whose teeth she had, whose height she had, whose colouring she had, she felt it. Felt lacking. If only for a moment.

Kick's dark-blonde, curly hair whipped around his head as he flipped and flopped. He and his twin were a mix of Lenore and Glen, their dad.

She pictured what her real father must look like – maybe tall, like her with hard angles in contrast to her mother's petite softness. Maybe he had her strawberry-blonde hair and green eyes. Lenore's both golden brown.

Birdie could feel the truth about her father swimming just beneath the surface every now and then. It never broke through, though. It was upsetting for her mother to recall that time, so Birdie let it go. She put down the frame and pulled on a bra and undies set, covered it with jean shorts and a t-shirt.

As she got older, not knowing her father mattered less. She always had Uncle Larry.

And now she also had Kick and Rusty and even her mother's husband Glen to love.

'Christopher! Stop jumping on Birdie's bed.' Their mother's voice drifted in from the kitchen.

'It's okay, Mum,' Birdie called out. She looked with big eyes at her little brother. 'She used *Christopher*. Serious name calling. You better stop.' Her mother had been on edge all morning.

Kick jumped off the bed, somersaulted across the rug, slid his back along the wall and ran out the door. A ninja in the making.

She brushed her rose-tinted hair with the brush held in her left hand. Uncle Larry was a ginge *and* he was left-handed. She'd even asked her mum once if Uncle Larry was her dad. 'He is in spirit,' was her response. A prickle of fear ran along her shoulders, making her shiver. Where was he? Was he safe?

The walls around her rumbled, the tell-tale signs of her brothers' impending exit to school. Glen's low tone wafted over the soundscape, bringing an instant calm.

'So, Big Bird, are you having an egg?' Rusty popped his woolly head inside Birdie's door, a piece of vegemite toast in hand.

She plastered a smile on her face. Vegemite remnants like clown makeup, decorated his cheeks. 'No, little man. But I might have some vegemite toast.' Rusty looked at his half-eaten piece and offered it to her with a smile. 'Oh... um... thanks, mate. You eat that. I'll come out and get a fresh one.'

Rusty and Kick – to be adored and feared in equal measure.

Vegemite toast might be the only thing she'd keep down today, with her mind constantly returning to Uncle Larry.