

11  
RUBY  
ROAD  
1900

# FOR MUM AND DAD.

*11 Ruby Road: 1900*

First published in 2024

by Walker Books Australia Pty Ltd

Gadigal and Wangal Country

Locked Bag 22, Newtown

NSW 2042 Australia

www.walkerbooks.com.au

Walker Books acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the country on which we work, the Gadigal and Wangal peoples of the Eora Nation, and recognises their continuing connection to the land, waters and culture. We pay our respect to their Elders past and present.

Text © 2024 Charlotte Barkla

Cover illustration © 2024 Walker Books Australia Pty Ltd

Cover illustration and design by Jo Hunt

The moral rights of the author have been asserted.



A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

ISBN: 978 1 760657 94 9

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means – electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise – without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Typeset in Chaparral Pro Light 13pt

Printed and bound in Australia at Griffin Press

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



The paper this book is printed on is certified against the Forest Stewardship Council® Standards. Griffin Press holds chain of custody certification SCS-COC-001185. FSC® promotes environmentally responsible, socially beneficial and economically viable management of the world's forests.

# 11 RUBY ROAD 1900

## CHARLOTTE BARKLA



WALKER BOOKS

AND SUBSIDIARIES

LONDON • BOSTON • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND

# PROLOGUE

## 1860

*The house at Number 11 Ruby Road has stood on the corner for more than one hundred and fifty years. It has provided shelter, warmth and comfort to many families.*

*Like Dorothy's family, the McIntyres, in 1900 ...*

'Well, this is it.' Mother looked up from Mr Doyle's roughly drawn map. 'This is going to be our new home ... one of these, anyway.' She gestured to the dozen timber stakes sticking out from the ground.

Millie blinked. It was hard to imagine the scrubby bushland as an estate of houses. There wasn't even a road yet! But Mr Doyle had said they had to buy now, before they were all snapped up.

'South Brisbane is going to be the new Sydney,' he'd said as he leaned back in his chair, a cheesy grin across his face. 'You won't regret it, trust me.'

In Millie's lap, her dog had growled and Millie had felt like doing the same. Ten pounds a year to rent a

house seemed like an awful lot to Millie. Mr Doyle said they could *buy* one of the houses for twenty! But they didn't have twenty pounds and Mr Doyle said the rental price was going up to eleven pounds tomorrow. So, Mother had signed the lease and decided they should visit the site of their new home immediately.

It had been a long walk from the ferry that bobbed across the Brisbane River, picking through scrub. And why were there so many hills? Several times, Millie was worried they were going to get lost, but Mother had no trouble finding the way. She always seemed to have a sixth sense for direction.

Mother peered at the map. 'Apparently, there's a lovely view of the farmhouses across the valley at the top of that hill.' She pointed to a ridge. 'And over *that* rise,' she indicated the other direction, 'is marshland and an Aboriginal camp. And the river is over there.' She squinted through the scrub. 'Somewhere.'

She faced her daughter. 'I know it doesn't look like much now, but it will be the perfect spot for a store. It will be a new beginning for us, Millie. It's nothing like our old house in town, of course, but—'

'It's perfect,' Millie interrupted, pushing down the funny feeling in her tummy. 'Entirely perfect, Mother. We love it, don't we, boy?' She patted the tan dog on the head and he yapped as if in agreement.

Mother smiled. 'Thanks, Millie, you've been a real trouper. Which one will it be then?' She gestured to the timber stakes. 'Mr Doyle said we can take our pick.'

'Hmm.' Millie squinted through the trees. 'Is that a Moreton Bay fig down there?' She ran to the base of the most beautiful tree she'd ever seen. She turned to her mother, her heart feeling lighter than it had all week. 'This is the one, Mother. Let's take whichever lot this tree is on!'

'It *is* beautiful,' said Mother as she stepped over a log to join her daughter, 'but I imagine they'll need to clear all these trees to build the houses.' She touched the tree's giant trunk. 'I'm afraid this probably won't be here when we move in.'

Millie frowned. Surely they wouldn't need to cut down *every* tree! She took off her hat and untied the pink ribbon that was wrapped around it. It was her favourite ribbon, a present from Grandmother on

her tenth birthday. It was almost as long as she was tall! But the tree needed it more than she did. She wound it around one of the low-hanging branches and tied the ends in a neat bow.

‘I’m not sure that will stop them,’ said Mother with a wry smile.

‘Perhaps not, but it’s worth a try,’ said Millie. She skipped back through the scrub to the closest timber stake. She leaned down to read the numbers. ‘It’s number 11, Mother!’

‘Wonderful,’ said Mother, circling the allotment on the map. ‘Number 11 Ruby Road it is.’

# CHAPTER 1

## 1900

‘Race you there!’ Dorothy tore down the slope towards their new home.

‘Hey, you got a head start!’ Florence called, but Dorothy didn’t look back. She sped down Ruby Road, between the parallel wagon tracks in the dirt, holding her hat to stop it from flying off her head. She was winning! She was actually winning! For the first time in her ten years, she was going to beat her sister!

Dorothy whipped open the front gate and sprinted across the grass. She’d almost made it to the stairs when Florence’s lanky frame appeared in her peripheral vision. Florence overtook Dorothy, leaped up the steps and stood on the verandah, beaming.

‘Yes! Winner!’ she called. ‘Good to see I’m still the fastest in the family.’

Dorothy flopped onto the timber, sucking in breath. ‘I carried Elsie up the hill. I was already fatigued.’

Florence rolled her eyes. ‘Excuses, excuses.’

‘Beat you!’ Margaret threw herself at the steps, closely followed by Elsie. ‘Sorry, Elsie,’ she added as little Elsie’s face crumpled. ‘I’m sure you’ll beat me next time.’ She patted her sister’s shoulder.

‘Will not,’ complained Elsie. ‘I *never* win! It’s not fair!’ She stuck out her bottom lip.

‘I never win either,’ said Dorothy, ruffling her sister’s curly dark hair. ‘It’s hard beating someone who’s older than you. Especially one with stick-insect legs.’ She kicked at Florence’s boot, which was sticking out the bottom of her frilly dress.

‘Don’t be a sore loser. It’s not proper,’ said Florence, discreetly wiping at a grass stain on her skirt. ‘You’re just jealous that I’m naturally talented at sprinting. And gymnastics and tennis and dancing.’ She lifted her skirt above her ankles and twirled neatly.

Margaret giggled, but Elsie crossed her arms.

‘This is the worst day *ever!*’

‘I know it’s been a big day, Els,’ said Dorothy. ‘But how can you be upset when we have *this* to explore?’ She skipped down the steps and onto the grass to get a proper look at their new home.

The small timber cottage had a steep, pointed roof and a narrow verandah across the front. There wasn’t much of a garden, but there *was* an exceptional front door, painted bright red. Dorothy loved it right away.

‘It’s smaller than our old house,’ said Elsie.

‘And it could do with a coat of paint,’ added Margaret, wrinkling her nose.

‘I’d really rather *that* one,’ said Florence, pointing over the fence.

The girls followed her gaze to the gigantic house next door. It was at least twice the size of all the other houses on the street and had pretty iron lace trailing along the roofline and railings.

‘Don’t be ridiculous, Florence. That’s *too* big,’ said Dorothy. ‘Can you imagine how long it would take us to sweep the floors? Besides, if we lived *there*, we wouldn’t have our very own store, would we?’

She ran to the small timber building adjoining

the front of the house. The girls had spotted the store from the top of the hill, just before Dorothy had declared the foot race to the front verandah. The proud sign announcing 'Millie's Store' in bright blue letters was hard to miss!

'Can you believe this is *ours*?' Dorothy breathed.

The girls peered through the window. Tins of every size and colour lined the shelves along the back wall. There were large hessian bags of flour and sugar on the floor. Bottles of preserves were stacked neatly in pyramids, and a shiny cash register stood proudly at one end of the counter. Dorothy couldn't *wait* to learn how to use it.

'Look at all those jams!' said Margaret.

'And all those sweets,' said Elsie, eyeing the bottles on the counter. 'I've never seen so many lollies!'

'They're not for eating,' said Florence. 'They're for selling. Obviously.'

'I know *that*,' said Elsie, indignant. 'I'm not silly.'

'Really? And who was it that ate Mama's cupcakes meant for the church picnic?' said Florence. Elsie's face went pink. 'Now, where was Great Aunt Mildred going to leave the key?'

Dorothy, who had been rummaging through a pot while her sisters were distracted, held it up. 'This key?' She raced back across the grass and flew up the stairs, Florence hot on her tail.

'Dorothy! I *told* you I wanted to be the first to open the door! Give it to me!' Florence lunged for the key, but Dorothy whipped it out of the way.

'Don't be a sore loser,' she said. 'It's not proper.'

Margaret and Elsie giggled.

'Is it really important who opens the door?' said Mama, finally making it to the verandah, along with Father and Ivy. The three eldest McIntyres were always the last to arrive. Although this time they had an excuse. Ivy and Father were carrying a suitcase each and Mama was jiggling a restless baby Helen in her arms.

'Yes, it's been a long day, girls,' said Father as he set the suitcase down. He took off his hat and wiped his brow with his handkerchief. 'Try to be patient with one another. There's still a lot of work to be done this evening.'

'Besides, there'll be plenty of times to open the door,' said Ivy, always logical.

‘But there’ll never again be a *first* time,’ said Dorothy. She ran her fingers over the copper letters and numbers nailed into the timber. *11 Ruby Road*. Her heart fluttered in her chest.

She raised the key to the lock, but the door creaked open before she could even insert it.

## CHAPTER 2

Dorothy gasped. ‘Did you see that?’

‘See what?’ said Florence, brushing past. ‘You opened the door. Congratulations.’

‘But I didn’t even put the key in the lock!’ said Dorothy. ‘It opened by itself!’ It was almost as though the house was welcoming them inside.

‘Doors don’t open by themselves, Dorothy,’ said Ivy, taking baby Helen from Mama. ‘Don’t start filling the girls’ heads with nonsense again.’

‘I’m not filling their heads with nonsense,’ said Dorothy. ‘I swear it opened by itself! Did anyone else see it?’

But nobody was paying attention.