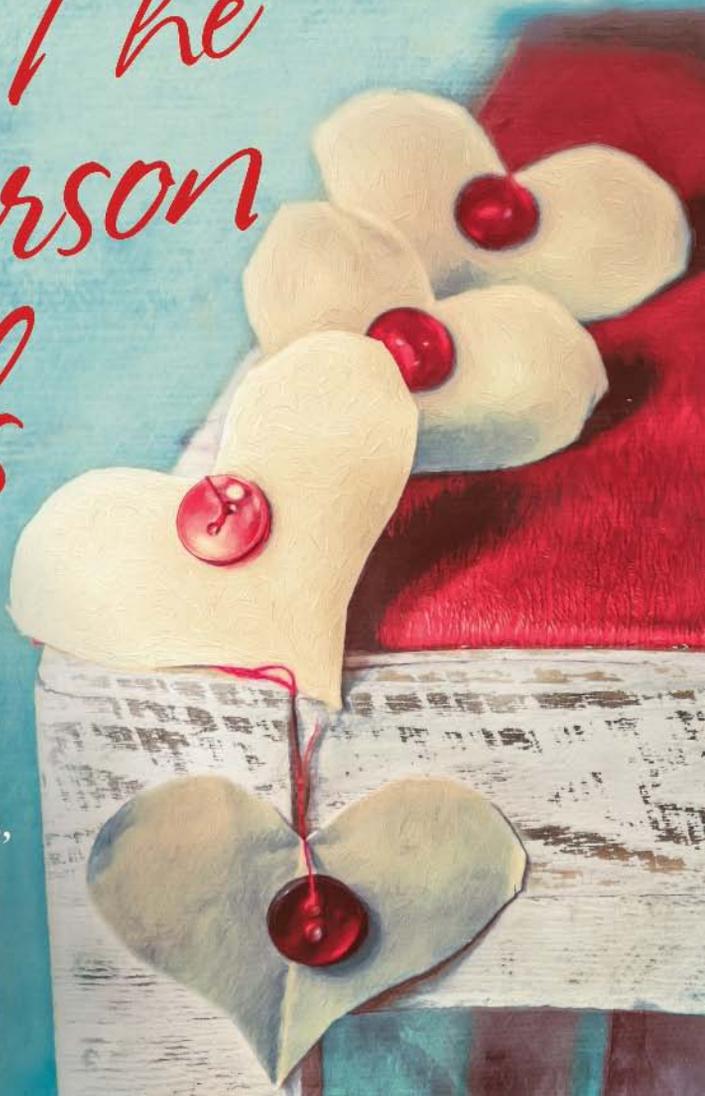


INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

RACHAEL
JOHNS

*The
Patterson
Girls*

A remarkable story of
four sisters, family secrets,
and discovering what's
really important in life



The Patterson Girls

Rachael Johns

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THE PATTERSON GIRLS

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Chapter One

'Dad.' The word slipped from Lucinda Mannolini's lips on a whisper as she emerged from gate 21 at Adelaide Airport and spotted her father. Her heart squeezed. His standard uniform of black work trousers and checked shirt seemed to hang from his lanky body. In the last six months, he appeared to have gone a little whiter on top. He still stood tall though, his glasses perched on his nose and his arms folded across his chest as he waited amidst a sea of people desperate to claim their loved ones so the holiday season could kick off. Overhead, announcements were being made about delayed flights and missing passengers, but Brian Patterson looked lost in his own little world.

Thrusting her shoulders back and pushing her chin high to give an air of confidence she didn't feel, Lucinda slipped into the stream of passengers, approaching a couple so lost in their passionate reunion that they either didn't care or hadn't noticed they were holding up the traffic. Once upon a time she and Joe had been like that whenever he returned from his two weeks on the goldfields, but lately, not so much. Pushing that thought away, she stepped around them as Dad rushed forward, his arms wide open

for her. Her leather handbag slapped against her back as she flung herself into them and dropped her head against his strong, broad shoulders.

‘Dad,’ she said again as tears welled in her eyes.

‘Lucinda,’ he whispered back. ‘My Lucinda.’ His voice held raw emotion, making her feel safe and loved and needed all at once. Still holding her, he shuffled them out of the throng of people rushing past. There wasn’t room for her and him *and* the tongue-locked lovers.

‘How are you, sweetheart?’

His heartfelt question almost unravelled her. He was the one who had been six months without his soulmate. Although she’d been as long without her mother, living away in Perth she’d sometimes forgotten that her mum wasn’t still in their South Australian home town, making beds, cooking meals and greeting guests at the Meadow Brook Motel. Living away she could still pretend that Mum was alive, but being back home for Christmas would put an end to that illusion pretty damn quick.

‘I’m good,’ she lied, forcing a smile. She didn’t know whether to mention Mum. ‘How are you?’ she asked instead.

‘Fine, fine,’ he waved away the question as he led her towards the baggage carousel. She guessed he wasn’t speaking the whole truth either but neither pressed the other for this wasn’t the place for a conversation that would quite likely end in messy, messy tears—hers not entirely related to the loss of her mother.

She wasn’t sure her problem was the kind one discussed with one’s father. Her sisters maybe, although she doubted any of them would understand.

Madeleine might appreciate her desire to have a child but would no doubt tell her to stop being so emotional about it. She’d say science could fix almost anything these days and suggest she book herself an appointment with a fertility clinic. All very well

to say, but you had to have been trying to conceive for a year before a specialist would give you the time of day and she'd only gone off the pill eight months ago. Charlie would ask if she'd tried alternative therapy and suggest she and Joe go on a yoga holiday to get in touch with their inner fertility, or worse, visit some kind of sex therapist—as if that was the problem. And Abigail—the youngest—would get her drunk to try and take her mind off it all.

The Patterson girls were as different as the four seasons. Once upon a time, before careers and in her case a husband had scattered them, they'd been close—the way Lucinda thought sisters were supposed to be—but time and distance had drawn them apart and she missed the companionship they used to share.

'Lucinda?' Dad's voice echoed around her head and she blinked. The crowds had thinned around them.

'Sorry, Dad. What did you say?'

He frowned and then shook his head. 'Abigail's plane lands in half an hour but she'll no doubt be a while getting through customs. Charlie's next, then Madeleine. We'll probably have an hour or so to wait then before Madeleine's flight, but I thought we could grab some lunch.'

'Sounds great.' Lucinda injected chirpiness into her voice and linked her arm through her father's as she looked for her suitcase.

'Dammit.' Abigail Patterson cursed and tapped her Manolo Blahnik heel against the grubby floor of the airport as she eyed the hundreds of suitcases that were doing the rounds of the carousel while weary travellers waited ready to pounce. None of them held her violin, which she'd rashly decided to leave in London. *What a stupid mistake.*

For one, she never travelled without her instrument, and doing so would likely raise suspicion amongst her dad and older sisters.

And for two, how the hell would she get through the week ahead without being able to sneak off to her room and play some Pachelbel or Vivaldi? It would be hard enough trying not to let slip her recent failure, but the first Christmas at home without Mum was going to be plain and simple hell.

However, still raw from being kicked out of the orchestra, she had barely been able to look at her beloved violin while packing for this trip two days ago. She'd shoved it under the bed and decided that a little time apart would do them good. It would give her the chance to work out what to do with herself when she returned to London. What *did* one do with herself when the dream she'd been working towards her whole life went up like a puff of smoke?

'Scuse me, coming through.'

A short, stocky woman with a face as red as her carrot-coloured hair barged past and launched herself at a massive purple polka-dotted suitcase. Abigail glared as the woman tried to wrestle her suitcase off the carousel and then felt a spark of jealous irritation when a tall, well-built blonde God of a man slipped past her to assist, lifting the case as if it were no heavier than a box of movie popcorn. He smiled at the redhead as he deposited the case on a trolley and the woman started blathering her thanks. Maybe Abigail should feign difficulty with her case and he could help *her*? She glanced around the carousel again but saw no sign of it. Anyway, it wasn't much bigger than an overnighter. If there was one thing Abigail was good at—besides playing the violin—it was packing lightly but still managing to look a million dollars.

Maybe that's what she could do...start some kind of boutique travel consultancy. She would specialise in helping women like her sister Madeleine, who always took practically her whole wardrobe on holiday, to pack smarter. Not that Madeleine ever had holidays. This trip home was a necessary exception.

‘I swear my stuff is always the last,’ said a dreamy voice beside her.

Thoughts of the fashion-travel-consultant business fading, Abigail turned to smile at the owner of the voice. She met his gaze and her tummy fluttered at the way he looked her up and down, obviously admiring her long legs in their tiny yellow shorts and sexy heels. Perhaps there was a God after all.

‘Well, this might be your lucky day, cause my belongings have a habit of being last as well.’ The guy smiled as her fingers inched up to her hair and she flicked her straight blonde locks over her shoulders, flirting without being fully conscious of it.

‘Pity there’s not a bar this side of customs,’ he said. ‘I’d buy you a drink.’

She swallowed, warmth flooding her at the idea of sitting down for a cocktail with this guy. He could be just the kind of tonic she needed. ‘Yes, pity indeed.’

‘Were you on the flight all the way from London?’

She nodded. ‘You?’

‘Yep.’ He ran a hand through his lovely thick hair. He looked like a surfer, which would account for his lovely body. ‘I always I tell myself that next time I’ll stop over for a night somewhere, break up the journey, but I never do.’

Why-oh-why couldn’t she have been seated next to him instead of the two teenagers she’d been dumped next to? Apparently their parents had been up front in first class, drinking proper champagne and not supervising their sons, who kept pestering the flight attendant for soft drinks and talking loudly about the games they were playing while the rest of the passengers were trying to sleep.

‘You do this trip often then?’

‘Often enough.’ He hit her with that melt-your-insides smile again. ‘I work in London but the fam are still in Oz. I’d be written

out of the olds' will if I didn't come home for Christmas. What about you?'

'Pretty much the same.' She wasn't about to go into the details with a stranger—that one of her 'olds' had recently passed away and she technically didn't have a job anymore.

'That's my bag.' He turned away and bent over the carousel, scooping up a large navy-blue backpack just before it went in through the little hole and did another round. The action gave Abigail a rather nice view of his taut behind and she felt her tummy do that flutter thing again. She'd been so focused on her career the last few months (make that years) that she hadn't had much time for men. There'd been that brief fling with the orchestra's assistant manager, but after discovering he was married—he hadn't mentioned it of course, but she should have done her research because everyone, she later found out, knew he was—she'd been avoiding the opposite sex. She had her violin, the true love of her life, and she didn't want anything to get in the way of her career.

Unfortunately it had turned out that she didn't need anyone else to stuff it up. She'd done a perfectly good job of that on her own. She sighed as the guy turned back towards her and hit her once again with his killer smile.

'I don't suppose you want to get a drink anyway?' he said, tilting his head to one side like an adorable puppy. 'I could wait for you to get your bag and then we could...' His voice drifted off as he nodded towards the customs line and the exit that led into the rest of the airport.

Her imagination skipped forward to what he'd want to do once they'd finished their drinks. She'd never had a one-night stand before but right now the idea of a few hours in the arms of a handsome stranger was more appealing than facing her family, who would no doubt take one look at her and know something was up.

'I'd love to, but my dad and sisters will be waiting out there.'

‘Damn.’ He didn’t hide his disappointment and it echoed her own.

She was about to suggest they exchange numbers and maybe catch up when they were both back in London, but she spotted her case out of the corner of her eye and instinctively lunged past him. ‘Sorry. That’s mine.’

He didn’t help her like he had the middle-aged woman and when she turned back she could already see that the moment—the opportunity—was over. He was moving on, ready to get on with his own family Christmas and forget they’d ever met. She didn’t even know his name.

‘Well, nice meeting you. Have a good Christmas.’ He heaved his backpack a little further up his shoulder, smiled and then turned away.

‘Bye.’ Abigail watched a moment as he headed towards customs and joined the other passengers in the line. How different her holiday could have been if she’d been able to say yes to that drink with whatever his name was. It would be something hot and masculine like Jack or Adam, of that she was certain. One drink would have led to another, which likely would have led to some red-hot fun. How she longed for some red-hot fun.

But there was no point standing here and wishing things were different. The fact was, she wasn’t home for a holiday fling. She was here to help Dad get through his first Christmas without Mum. Her chest tightened at the thought, the emotion rising up into her throat, making crying in the customs line a very real possibility. It certainly put her orchestra woes into perspective.

Nothing had ever been as bad as losing Mum.

Charlotte Patterson smiled with a mixture of relief and anticipation as she waited to exit the plane. She’d almost missed this

flight, which was becoming a nasty habit and would have made her the brunt of her sisters' jokes. Again. It hadn't been her fault, though. She'd been all packed and ready to go when the little old lady in the house next door had come knocking, sobbing her heart out because she'd locked her keys inside. Of course Charlie hadn't been able to leave Mrs Gianetti until she'd called the locksmith and made sure he was on his way. As a result she'd almost been late to the airport.

It had been touch and go, but thankfully her taxi driver had been a pro at negotiating Melbourne's morning traffic and she'd arrived in the nick of time. The flight had been uneventful and now she couldn't wait to disembark and see everyone. They hadn't had a family Christmas since Madeleine had moved to America five years ago and although Mum wouldn't be there, going home to be together for this first Christmas without her felt like the right thing to do.

They'd sit around the table where she used to help them with their homework and they'd share a few wines and special memories. They'd uphold Mum's Christmas traditions—attend the local church service on Christmas Eve, maybe help Dad make breakfast for the motel guests on Christmas morning and then open their presents sitting around the tree that was decorated solely with the primitive handmade ornaments she and her sisters had made in primary school. Mum had loved them and sworn she'd never ever throw them out. Charlie swallowed the lump in her throat and blinked back the water in her eyes at the thought of going back to Meadow Brook, back to their home and the motel, without Mum there to welcome them.

The line of people started shuffling forward. For a moment Charlie froze, unable to tell her legs to move as her excitement made way for fear and dread. Fear of going home and having Christmas with a gaping hole where Mum should be. Dread that her sisters' dismissive glances would turn her into the crumbling mess she was whenever

they were around. She wished they'd come to Melbourne, visit her in Brunswick where she helped manage a very busy café and ran hula-hooping classes in the evening. She might not have university letters behind her name but that didn't make what she did any less important. Her sisters might think her an airy-fairy hippy but she happy with who she was. Most of the time, at least.

'Ahem.' A man cleared his throat behind her. 'Are you waiting for anything in particular?'

'Oh. Sorry.' Startled her from her reverie, she shot forward and forced a smile back to her face. She wanted this to be a good Christmas, a cathartic experience, a chance for her family to share their grief, which would hopefully assist them in their recovery and maybe, just maybe, bring them closer together again.

Striding forward, her bag swinging over her shoulder, she appeared at the top of the ramp and glanced around the faces of people waiting in the arrivals hall.

'Over here!'

Charlie turned at the sound of a familiar voice—Abigail's—and most of the dread and fear dissipated. Her heart soared as she saw her little sister waving wildly with one hand, her other arm wrapped tightly around their father. Dear Dad, he looked weary even from this distance and Charlie swore that however bad she felt these next few days, she'd remember that he probably felt worse. Lucinda was on Dad's other side; she was also waving but not as enthusiastically as Abigail. Her golden blonde hair was pulled back into a high ponytail whereas Abigail's perfectly straight tresses hung free, almost down to her bum. Charlie's eyes once again prickled with unshed tears as she rushed towards her family and threw her arms around them.

'So good to see you.' Lucinda squeezed her arm and pressed a kiss against the side of her face.

'Hello, my darling,' Dad said, his voice a little shaky. 'Good flight?'

Abigail didn't give Charlie the chance to answer. 'I love that bag,' she gushed. 'Did you make it yourself?'

Bless Abigail, thought Charlie. Despite their differences, she always made an effort.

'No.' Charlie pulled out of the embrace and shook her head. 'I bought it at the St Kilda markets last weekend.' A brief pause to swallow the lump that was back in her throat. 'Oh my gosh, it's so good to see you all.'

They all grinned back at her and then Lucinda gestured to a trolley beside them. 'Dad and I have put my stuff in the car but we thought we could collect yours, dump them and then go get some lunch before Madeleine arrives.'

'Sounds good to me.' Charlie glanced at the trolley, frowned and then looked to Abigail. 'Where's your violin?'

She swore she saw a look of discomfort flash across Abigail's face, but if it were there she covered it over quickly with a smile and a shrug. 'I decided to take a real holiday. Besides, I know how much you guys *love* listening to me practice.'

Lucinda snorted and wrapped her arm around Abigail, drawing her close. 'We *do*, we really do love it, don't we, Charles?'

'Oh yeah... Why else do you think I agreed to come spend a week with you lot?' Charlie retorted, secretly not believing a word Abigail said and vowing to get to the bottom of whatever was going on with her. The truth was they all loved listening to Abigail play. From the moment she'd started music lessons at all of five years old, she'd been amazing.

'Girls, girls, girls.' Dad feigned a stern tone but his chuckle gave the game away. He loved seeing his daughters together, liked it when they bantered in the way they used to do when they lived together all those years ago. And Charlie liked seeing him smile, even if it didn't quite reach his eyes.

'Sorry Dad,' they said in unison, grinning at him.

Lucinda took hold of the trolley and Abigail and Charlie linked arms with Dad as they followed the hordes towards the baggage carousel. For the first time in her life, Charlie's patchwork holdall was already doing the rounds of the carousel when they arrived. Thankful they wouldn't have to wait, she scooped it up and dumped it next to Abigail's little suitcase on the trolley.

'Dad, give me your keys.' Lucinda held out her hand. 'I'll take all this to the van while you guys go and find a table.'

Charlie couldn't hide her smirk. Although the grey shadows beneath Lucinda's eyes indicated she might not have been sleeping the best lately, she was still in top organisational form. She knew her other sisters sometimes found Lucinda's bossiness stifling and annoying but it comforted Charlie. For as long as she could remember, Lucinda had been like a second mum. Four years older than Charlie and seven years Abigail's senior, she'd often made sure her younger sisters were fed and dressed when their parents were too busy with motel guests. Madeline was the oldest but had always had her head stuck in a book, far too busy studying to bother with tiresome little sisters. It wasn't surprising that Lucinda had chosen primary school teaching as a career and been the first (and only) one of them to get married. Charlie guessed it wouldn't be long before she and Joe had children of their own to fuss over.

'There's a table over there.'

At Abigail's words, Charlie realised she'd walked from the carousels to the café without even noticing. 'Yes, that looks fine,' she said, following Abigail and Dad to the table.

Abigail slumped into a seat and picked up the menu. 'I'm having pancakes. The food on the plane was crap. What do you want, Dad?'

'Just a coffee, love.'

'What about you, Charlie?' Abigail asked.

'Give me a chance to look at the menu,' Charlie replied, not looking at Abigail but instead to her father, who looked like he'd

aged more than six months. The loss of his wife and looking after the motel by himself had obviously taken its toll and Charlie felt a stab of guilt for not being more available. Living in Melbourne, she was the closest in proximity but she may as well have been in Baltimore like Madeleine or London like Abigail for all the good it did. She reached out and took his hand across the table. 'How are you, Dad?'

He squeezed back and nodded. 'I'm as good as can be expected, but seeing you three and knowing Madeleine will be here soon helps. I've missed my girls.'

'Oh, Dad.' Abigail dropped the menu back on the table and threw her arms around him.

The three of them sat there, chairs close together, holding each other tightly, not daring to say any more for fear of shedding unsightly tears in public. That was how Lucinda found them when she returned ten minutes later.

'Have you ordered yet?' she asked.

At the sound of her voice, Abigail and Charlie pulled back from their father and looked up at their older sister.

Charlie shook her head. 'We were waiting for you.'

Lucinda smiled. 'Thanks. What do you all want? My shout.'

'Oh no, we can pay for ourselves,' Charlie protested.

'Speak for yourself.' Abigail shot Charlie a glare and then smiled sweetly at Lucinda. 'I'll have pancakes with extra ice-cream please.'

Lucinda rolled her eyes. 'What kind of lunch is that?'

'You're not my mother,' Abigail snapped.

Dad flinched as if someone had come along and slapped him on the back.

Charlie saw Lucinda swallow. 'I never said I was. Fine, have whatever you like. Dad? Charlie? What do you want?'

'Just a coffee,' Dad said.

‘I’ll have the sweet potato quiche, with salad.’ Charlie pushed back her chair to stand. ‘But I’ll come with you to order.’ She let out a deep breath as she and Lucinda weaved their way through the few tables to the front of the café. ‘How’s Joe?’ she asked as they waited to place their order. ‘It’s a pity he couldn’t come with you.’

Lucinda smiled tightly. ‘Everyone has to take their turn working Christmas on the mine.’

Which didn’t answer Charlie’s question but she decided to let it lie. Lucinda likely didn’t want to dwell on the fact she was going to spend her first Christmas without her husband since they’d been married.

‘I suppose so,’ she said and then glanced ahead at the specials blackboard.

Madeleine Patterson grunted as she retrieved her heavy suitcase from the carousel, yanked out the handle and then started towards customs. *Hello Adelaide.*

If she had to choose a holiday destination, Adelaide was one of the last places on earth she’d have considered. Meadow Brook—the town she’d grown up in—was the *very* last. Despite the fact that her family owned the local motel, there was nothing holiday-like about the place. Sure, thousands of grey nomads passed through on their journey along the Eyre Highway to or from Western Australia, but why some of them stayed more than a night had always been a mystery to her.

As far as Madeleine was concerned, the most attractive thing about Meadow Brook was its name, which she’d always thought far too pretty for the dry, rugged terrain of the northern Eyre Peninsula, in which the primary industry was agriculture, followed closely by mining and supposedly (although it continued to flummox her) tourism.

No, if she'd chosen to take a holiday her destination would be a resort where she could relax on the beach or a city where she could shop till she dropped, somewhere like Paris or New York, or—if she did come back to Australia—then Sydney or Melbourne. A place where her childhood friends weren't all married with babies, making her wonder if she'd sacrificed too much in order to climb the career ladder.

She sighed. This vacation wasn't about her, it was about Dad.

It had been Lucinda's idea to get them all together for Christmas, and although Madeleine's first instinct had been to say she couldn't get away from work, the guilt and grief had gotten to her. Despite the agony of that long-haul flight and her initial reluctance to come, she now found herself impatient to get through customs and see everyone. The location wouldn't matter, it would be good just to be together at this time of the year. To celebrate Mum and help Dad through this first Christmas alone.

She sniffed and dug into her bag for a tissue, unable to imagine Meadow Brook without her mother. She blew her nose, wiped her eyes and then continued on.

The line through customs moved surprisingly fast and when she got to the front of the queue she slapped her immigration form down on the counter and answered the routine questions, hoping nothing would hold her up. After the officer waved her through, Madeleine all but ran towards the doors that would see her into the arrivals hall.

It felt better than she could possibly have imagined when she spotted the faces of her family in the crowd and even better falling into their arms. There weren't a lot of words exchanged at first but their embraces said more than enough. She wasn't usually one for too much hugging, but this felt right. This coming together, this Christmas, was always going to be difficult but it was something they all needed in order to move on.

‘Finally, all my girls together again,’ Dad said, as he let go of her and took a step back to survey his daughters. Madeleine smiled sadly, thinking that there was one key girl missing, but she pushed that thought aside. She didn’t need to make a scene in the airport.

She didn’t consider herself an emotional person but maybe she was more jet lagged than she thought, because standing here among her three sisters, next to her dad, she felt an overwhelming love for all of them.

‘Right, where’s the van?’ she asked, tapping her suitcase. ‘I’m in dire need of a shower and a drink.’

‘Lead the way, Dad.’ Abigail linked her arm through Madeleine’s as Lucinda took the handle of her case and started to walk towards the exit.

‘What on earth have you got in here?’ Lucinda asked. ‘How long are you planning to stay?’

Everyone laughed but Madeleine shot her a warning glare. Just because Lucinda dressed like a Perth housewife, didn’t mean Madeleine couldn’t take pride in her appearance. It wasn’t like she could buy anything she forgot on the main street of Meadow Brook, so she’d come prepared for all occasions.

Ignoring her sister, Madeleine addressed Dad as they walked out into the bright and stifflingly hot South Australian afternoon. ‘Thanks for coming to collect us. We could have hired a car.’

‘Nonsense.’ Dad shook his head. ‘I’ve been counting down the days. Besides, I wouldn’t want any of you driving after travelling so far.’

Charlie laughed. ‘Melbourne’s only an hour’s flight away.’

Madeleine yawned. ‘How’s the motel? Lots of bookings?’

Dad shrugged as they came to the ticket payment machine. He dug his wallet out of his pocket. ‘It’s all right. Not as many guests as we usually have at this time of the year.’ He slid the ticket into the machine and then fumbled around looking for change.

‘Here, I’ll get this.’ Lucinda whipped her purse out of her handbag and fed a twenty dollar note into the machine, which in turn spat her out some coins. She took the returned ticket and handed it to their father.

Dad and Lucinda led the way to where the old Meadow Brook Motel people mover stood tall in the sea of vehicles around it. An ageing Toyota Tarago in faded yellow with the motel’s logo and name (also faded) plastered across the sides, it looked a sorry sight. Madeleine thought it was about time Dad upgraded, but now wasn’t the time to start discussing such things.

Lucinda rearranged the luggage that was already in the back and then heaved Madeleine’s suitcase on top.

‘Careful of Abigail’s violin,’ Madeline warned.

‘She didn’t bring it,’ Lucinda replied, closing the boot with a thunk.

‘What?’ Madeleine peered in through the open door at Abigail, who was settling herself on the back seat. ‘Why? Are you sick or something?’

Abigail glowered. ‘What’s the big deal? Did you bring a host of pregnant women so you could deliver their babies while you were on holiday?’

Madeleine raised her eyebrows. It wasn’t like Abigail to be so snarky. Charlie and Lucinda laughed as they climbed into the car, leaving the passenger seat beside their father for Madeleine. At least she hadn’t had to remind them of her travel sickness. ‘Sorry for asking,’ she muttered under her breath.

No one said anything more. Seatbelts were clicked into place. Dad started the ignition and then drove out of the airport, heading west as they began the three and a half hour journey to Meadow Brook.