

PAGES OF THE PAST

ALESSIA'S RAILWAY JOURNEY



Chapter One

Sunlight warmed the right side of Alessia's face, trying its best to snap her out of her bad mood. She had been sitting on the front steps of her new house, grumbling to no one in particular about how unfair it all was. She never wanted to move, she'd told them so many times. But they didn't listen. Her parents just kept promising a bigger house, a busier neighbourhood filled with kids and a beautiful school just down the street.

As the removalists struggled past her, she listened for the loud thump of heavy boxes hitting the wooden floorboards.

'Alessia?'

2 Her father had suddenly appeared beside her and crouched down so he could take her head in his hands.

'Alessia?' He repeated gently, without waiting for a response. 'Time for you to help us out. There's a box of books in your new bedroom, can you head up and unpack it, please?'

Alessia grumbled in response and dragged her feet up the stairs as her father watched on, worried about how unhappy she seemed in her new home.

The family had moved so Alessia's parents could be closer to their jobs in the city. But all Alessia wanted was to stay close to the friends she had known since she was a baby. With no siblings, she counted her friends as family. Now, all she had were her books.



Chapter Two

'Your new room has a huge bookshelf!' She remembered her mother excitedly telling her, the day they broke the news about the move. If it was meant to make her feel better, it didn't work. She knew, she just *knew* she would be miserable in this big house, with its big bookshelf.

Alessia sat down next to the box, ripped the tape off, and crumpled it up in her hands as the flaps sprung open. She had only packed her books away a week ago, but it felt like she was unwrapping a birthday present. Perhaps she would rediscover a favourite story that had been gathering dust back at her old house!

As she carefully lifted each book out of the box and laid them on the floor beside her, she felt her fog begin to lift. The books reminded her of home, and now *this* was her home. Maybe it wasn't going to be so bad after all.

The bookshelf took up an entire wall; it really was huge, like her mother had said. Alessia walked over and ran a hand along one of its shelves. She looked down at the dust that now coated her fingers and wiped them on her pants.

'Yuck,' she said to herself, and went off in search of a cloth.

The dust fell to the floor as she wiped each shelf and the higher her arms stretched, the more they ached. Finally, she reached the top of the bookshelf and her arm swept the cloth from left to right.

'Thwack!'

Alessia had knocked something with her hand and it came to rest on the floorboards next to her. It was old and dirty, but the rectangular shape and yellowing pages meant that it could only be one thing – another book!

Chapter Three

It didn't look like any of the books she was used to, though. For a start, it was covered in bumpy leather that Alessia imagined felt like the skin of a dinosaur. When she opened it up, the yellowing pages weren't filled with lines of typed black letters, but perfect inky words written by hand.

'What *is* this?' She wondered aloud.

As she flicked through the book, Alessia could only make out a few words here and there. Whoever had written in it had used loopy, swirly letters that seemed to join together in a dance on the page.

Scooping it in her arms, she ran downstairs and almost knocked her father over with her excitement. 'Dad! Look what I found in my room!'

He patiently waited as she showed him the brown bumpy cover, the discoloured pages and the endless lines of handwriting.

A smile spread across his face, realising what his daughter had stumbled upon. He took it in his hands and carefully turned each page; Alessia watched as his eyes danced over the paper. He hadn't said a word and she wondered what was going through his mind.

'Dad?'

'Alessia, this isn't a book at all ... It's a journal. And it's over 160 years old!'

Alessia was confused. A journal was something she wrote in when she was at school. Why was there one on top of her bookshelf?

Chapter Four

They sat against a wall and her father explained that they were holding a journal that had belonged to a boy named George. George had lived in their house in the 1850s and had written each day.

'Like a diary!' Alessia interrupted.

4 'Exactly.' said her father. 'He's actually written about a very important moment in history.'

Together they read over each journal entry and Alessia realised she recognised some of the places George was mentioning.

'Devonshire Street! That's our street!' She exclaimed.

'That's right,' replied her father, 'and it's where the first railway line in New South Wales began. Let's take a walk tomorrow.'

Chapter Five

The next morning, Alessia and her father took a short walk down Devonshire Street and through Prince Alfred Park. Pausing every so often, her father would read out snippets from George's journal.

'From my window, I have seen Cleveland Paddocks turn into Redfern Station ... the corrugated iron tin shed and long wooden platform stands where horses and bullocks used to rest.'

Alessia scanned the park and tried to imagine going back in time ... the Olympic swimming pool, the cafe, and the tennis courts disappearing and making way for a lonely train track.



Her father had walked on ahead, in the direction of the bustling Central Station and Alessia hurried to catch up to him. He had his head down, reading through the journal.

'It looks like George was on that first train journey from Redfern Station to Parramatta,' he called out. 'I have an idea ...'

Alessia knew what that meant; they were about to go on an adventure.

Chapter Six

They continued on and every now and then, Alessia's father would read aloud from George's journal.

5

'Oh my goodness! George's dad was William Sixsmith! He was the engine driver for the first service. No wonder the day was so special to George.'

Together, they worked out exactly where the train had stopped on its first trip. After leaving Redfern Station, it made stops at Newtown, Ashfield, Burwood and Homebush, before completing its 22 kilometre journey at Parramatta Station.

Alessia was familiar with all of the stations her father read out, they were all on the Western Line. When they had lived at their old house they would use the Western Line to travel to the city.

'Let's imagine we're George, Dad. We can use his journal and make the same stops he did.'

'Great minds think alike, kiddo. Lead the way!'

Alessia led her father towards Platform 18. Here, they would board the train for the short trip to Newtown. While they took their seats and waited for the doors to close, they found out that September 26th, 1855 was wet and grey and that George's father had worn a smart black silk top hat. Alessia wondered what she would have worn for the special day.



'There's a strange feeling in the air. Everyone is dressed in their finest clothes. The banks, and most of the shops have shut down for the day. The flag-staff and the ships in harbour have been decorated with bunting.'

They passed Redfern Station and Alessia became confused. Hadn't the first train started its journey at Redfern Station? Why had they begun at Central Station?

Her father looked over and saw her puzzled expression. He told her that the present-day Redfern Station was different to the Redfern Station that George had written about. Today's Redfern Station actually didn't exist in 1855 and was originally named Eveleigh Station.

'I bet it looked a whole lot different back then,' she said.

6 Chapter Seven

Suddenly, the train was pulling into Newtown Station and Alessia now had the journal in her lap. She could make out the words 'flour mill' on the page, but wasn't sure what it was.

'It's a building with machinery inside that grinds grains, like wheat, into flour,' her father explained.

Alessia couldn't picture fields of wheat where the loud, busy streets of Newtown now stood. She watched as people in suits, families and university students squeezed through the closing doors. The train pulled out of the station and she saw 'Flourmill Studios' on the side of a building.

Ashfield Station was the next stop and George had written about the train pulling into a small village within a Eucalyptus forest. Alessia looked through her window at the sea of silver and grey – concrete stairs, steel walkways and metallic garbage bins on the platform – and thought about just how different it all seemed.

'The Station House looked brand new and I wondered if any children lived there with their father, the Station Master. I felt sad looking at the vegetable garden, it was flooded due to all the rain we have been having.'

Chapter Eight

The doors closed once again and Alessia and her father continued on towards the next station. George had described Burwood as having a wooden platform with a level crossing over Neich's Lane. With each passing station, Alessia was realising how much had changed over the last 160 years. If George were here, would he even recognise this journey as the very one he took all those years ago?

She asked her father where they'd be stopping next. When he replied, 'Homebush', she excitedly began recounting the last time the family had visited Sydney Olympic Park. 'That's in Homebush, too,' she said.

'Yes, but this was a very different Homebush! For a start, the Sydney Olympics wouldn't happen for 145 years! And there was a racecourse just down the road from the station.'

Alessia's father was just as amazed at the difference between the descriptions in George's journal and what he was seeing whoosh past his train window.

Chapter Nine

Alessia knew the trip would be over soon and asked to look at the journal once again. 'What's the final stop, Dad?'

'Back then, the Great Trunk Line, as it was known, terminated at Parramatta Junction. But it doesn't exist anymore. The closest we can get is Granville Station.'

Looking up, Alessia could see that the train was slowing. George's words leapt off the page and suddenly she imagined the low hiss of the brakes, the gentle puff of steam, and the platform's edge lining up perfectly with the train's doors.

'I watched as father stepped from the locomotive and had a silver watch placed upon his wrist. People lined the streets surrounding Parramatta Junction to welcome us and damp flags did their best to flutter in celebration.'

Alessia and her father stepped onto the platform. It was the end of this journey, but it felt like the beginning of something else. Something big.

A forgotten journal, hidden away for over a century, had been found by a little girl who had discovered that Australia's rail network had begun in her very own backyard.

