

THE
BUTTERFLY
COLLECTOR

TEA COOPER



HARPER MUSE

The Butterfly Collector
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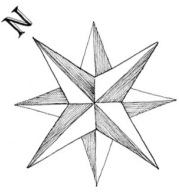
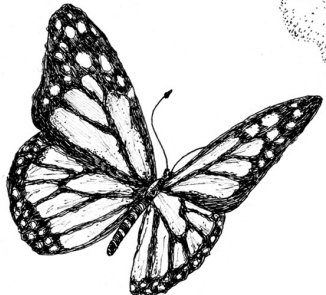
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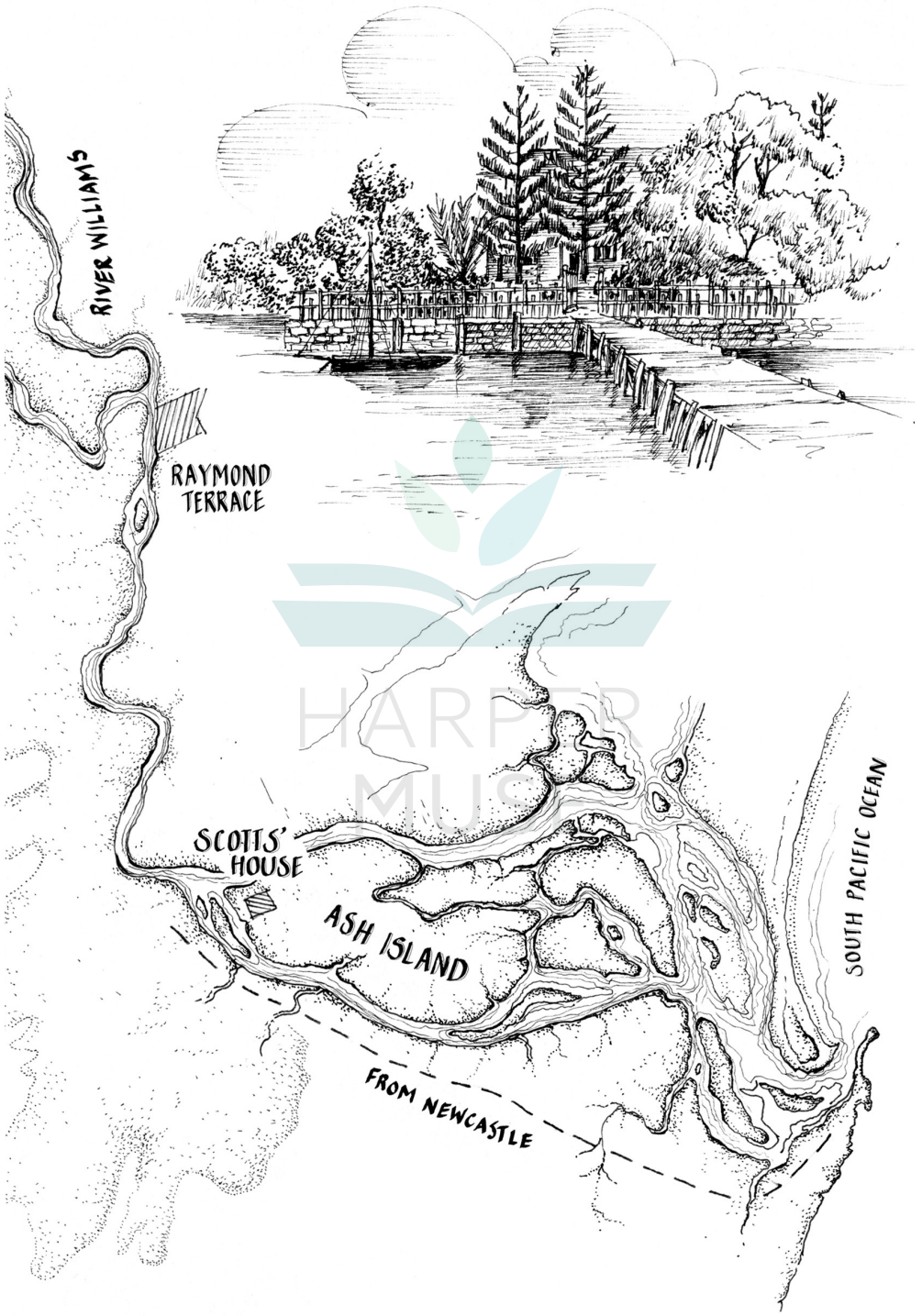
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HARPER
MUSE





RIVER WILLIAMS

RAYMOND
TERRACE

SCOTT'S
HOUSE

ASH ISLAND

SOUTH PACIFIC OCEAN

FROM NEWCASTLE



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MUSEUM

CHAPTER 1

SYDNEY, 1922

My office, if you please, Miss Binks.”

Verity flinched. Mr. Bailey sounded very serious for a Friday afternoon. Usually at this time of the day the chief editor was full of bonhomie and a hankering to get down to the Glebe Hotel before the six o'clock swill before they closed.

“Certainly, Mr. Bailey. I’ll be right there.” She dropped her coat and hat over the back of her chair and picked up her notebook and pencil.

“You won’t be needing that. Just a moment of your time.”

Verity smoothed down her skirt and crossed the floor to his office.

“Close the door behind you.” Twisting his swivel chair from side to side, his face hidden by a wreath of smoke, Mr. Bailey offered a half-hearted smile. “I was most impressed with your article. I think we can find room for it in the weekend edition. Bicycles—who would have thought? An excellent angle.”

A great bubble of happiness blossomed in Verity’s chest and she beamed at Mr. Bailey.

“Chip off the old block, hey?”

Perhaps. It was the first full-length piece Mr. Bailey had

ever accepted. Grandpa Sid would have been so very proud. “I have another idea that I would like to—”

He raised his hand. “Verity, let me speak.” With a long and rather painful cough, he stubbed out his cigarette in the overflowing ashtray. “I really don’t want to have to do this, but I’m afraid I have no option. The management”—he pointed to the ceiling with a yellowed finger—“Has decided to implement government policy to the extreme. We have so many returned servicemen out of work. They’ve fought for their country and they deserve all the help they can get.”

Of course they did. So many men, homeless, injured, and down at heel begging for money on street corners or curled up in doorways. It was a disgrace. Maybe she should think about writing a piece about that. A call for government assistance, job schemes, housing . . .

“And so, unfortunately, I am going to have to let you go. Your job has to go to one of our returned soldiers.” He handed her a small buff-colored envelope. “A week’s pay in lieu of notice.”

Her bottom hit the seat of the chair and a streak of pain shot up her spine. A week’s notice? “I didn’t write the bicycle piece during work hours. I wrote it at home.”

“I’m happy to pay you stringers’ rates, per column inch, for the bicycle article. Verity, believe me, the last thing I want to do is lose you, but I don’t have any option.” He knocked a cigarette out of the packet and twirled it between his fingers.

“What about Sadie?” She and Sadie were the only two stenographers employed by the paper, and they were run off their feet almost every day. Mostly with the classifieds that filled the front and back page of the daily newspaper and brought in a large chunk of revenue. Sadie had lost her husband, had a little

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boy, lived with her mother in rented rooms, and could hardly make ends meet as it was.

“I’ve already spoken to her. There’s nothing I can do. You’ve both got a week’s money. Verity, you’ve got a lot of promise. We could do with some more of these life interest stories for our women readers; there’s only so much food, fashion, and relationship rubbish I can stomach. You bring me anything you come up with and I’ll do my best for you. Least I can do for the daughter of one of our heroes, never mind the promise I made Sid.” Mr. Bailey stuck out his hand.

Verity sat, dumbstruck. She hadn’t expected to lose her job. At least she wasn’t as badly off as Sadie. Didn’t have to pay rent, thanks to Grandpa Sid. She had a bit put by, which would see her through for a month or two, but regular jobs were impossibly difficult to find. As a last resort she could let out a room, but she didn’t want someone else living in Grandpa Sid’s house. It wouldn’t feel right.

“Might be time to think about your personal life.” Mr. Bailey raised an eyebrow. “Sid wouldn’t like to think of you on your own.”

A wave of anger swept through her. What right did he have to comment on her personal life? At twenty-five she didn’t have to answer to anyone, was entitled to make her own decisions. She wouldn’t be the first not to marry. Many women were making the choice to forgo marriage these days; besides, there simply weren’t enough eligible men to go around.

“Keep in touch, Verity.” Mr. Bailey gestured to the door. “Don’t forget to bring me anything you think might be of interest.” He lit his cigarette and vanished behind a haze of smoke.

Her legs didn’t want to co-operate, but Verity shuffled off, trying to keep her chin up. It was only when she buttoned her coat that she noticed Sadie’s cleared desk. No teacup, no

ashtray, no pot of pencils, just the typewriter sitting in splendid isolation.

Verity scooped up the debris on her desk and dumped it in her satchel, put on her hat, stuck her nose in the air, and marched out through the sea of faces. A few muttered good-byes filtered in the air, but she couldn't bring herself to speak to anyone. Didn't dare, more like—she'd make a fool of herself and burst into tears.

A particularly gray drizzle coated the footpaths and puddles of yellow reflected from the streetlights. She slipped her satchel across her shoulder, unlocked her bicycle from the railings, and pushed off. The rhythmic motion of the pedals and the cool wind cleared her head as she meandered through the city and headed for Sussex Street.

Bicycles might have emancipated women, given them a degree of freedom and improved their physical condition, but what good was that if a woman couldn't work? She'd only managed to hang on as long as she had due to the sense of guilt Mr. Bailey harbored because he'd promised Sid he'd keep an eye on her.

Women had voted for the last twenty years, but it hadn't made much difference in the real world, especially since the war ended. Why couldn't a woman do as good a job as a man? It wasn't as though she needed to be stronger or brawnier to lift a pencil, answer the telephone, or hit the keys on the typewriter.

She coasted down the hill toward the Cut, possibly her least favorite place in the world; in fact, she hated it with a vengeance. The dank, dismal tunnel stank of rats, piss, puke, and the sweat of the thugs and petty gangsters who plied their trade in the half-light, but it took ten minutes off the trip home and saved lugging her bicycle up the steps that snaked their

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way over the road tunnel. A chill lifted the hair on the back of her neck, bringing with it the peculiar sense of being watched. A nasty shiver that had her looking over her shoulder every few seconds. The first time it had happened she'd put it down to imagination; now she wasn't sure. She slowed, listened for the sound of footsteps.

Nothing, other than her gasps and the blood pulsing in her ears.

The rough stone walls, mossy green with seepage, magnified her every breath, every sound giving life to the spirits of the convicts who'd hewn the roadway through the sandstone.

Imagination. Nothing but imagination.

She picked up her pace, forced the pedals down. There wasn't a stretch of The Rocks she didn't know, every alley, every back street, and every row of terraces. After Grandpa Sid died, she could have sold up, moved on, but she'd chosen not to. Tara Terrace, home of her heart and her history—the only remaining link she had with her family.

Without a backward glance, she flew out of the tunnel and along Argyle Street where the lights from the terraces shone a welcome. When she finally swung into the familiar labyrinth of alleys linking the terraces, her thumping heart rate settled. Bent double from the stitch in her side, she sucked in a gasp before slipping her fingers through the white-ant-ridden fence to the latch.

The gate groaned as it swung open, and she wheeled her bicycle into the yard and slumped against the shed, waiting for the blood to return to her cramped muscles. The dunny door swinging on its rusty hinges creaked its usual greeting. She cast a hurried glance around, kicked it shut, then propped her bicycle underneath the decrepit lean-to next to the copper and wringer.

Squinting into the pool of light thrown from next door's yard, she made her way under the clothesline and past the small patch of dirt that had originally been home to Grandma Clarrie's prized vegetable garden. Since she was out of a job, she'd have no excuse not to restore it to its former glory. She traipsed up to the house and retrieved the key from under the rock outside the door. It slid silently into the lock; one twist and she'd be inside, the door shut fast, bolts secured.

"You're late, love."

Verity slapped her hand to her chest to still her thumping heart. "Mrs. Carr, you made me jump."

"Not surprised, skulking around like that." Mrs. Carr squeezed through the gap in the fence. "Why don't you use the front door?"

She didn't want to confess her fear. No one who'd lived their entire life in the crazy warren of streets that made up Sydney's oldest suburb would admit to being fazed by its occupants. "I came through The Cut. It was getting late and I had my bicycle." Besides, she hated using the front door, which opened directly into the parlor. It was like inviting the world into her sanctuary.

"Wondered where you were. There's a parcel. On the kitchen table."

Ever since Grandma Clarrie and Grandpa Sid had passed, Mrs. Carr had extended her role of next-door neighbor to mother hen and general busybody, but Verity couldn't fault her—she'd provided a welcome shoulder on so many occasions. There'd been times, more than she'd like to count, when the offer of a cup of tea and a scone had saved the day. However, Mrs. Carr's habit of nipping in and out of the house rankled. Maybe the time had come to move the key to another hidey-hole. "A parcel? Who from?"

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“No idea.” Mrs. Carr shrugged. “No return address, no name, no nothing. Young lad brought it. I found him hammering on the front door. Personal delivery, he said. I’ve left it on the kitchen table.”

She wasn’t expecting anything. In fact, couldn’t ever think of a time when she’d received a parcel other than Christmas. “Thank you.”

“Right you are, love. Let me know if you need anything.” Mrs. Carr eased through the gap in the fence and disappeared into her kitchen.

Verity stepped inside, shrugged out of her coat, and hung it onto the back of the chair, then pulled off her cloche, shaking her hair free. A sliver of moonlight shone through the window; it threw quite enough light to see what was what—every step, every creaking board as familiar to her as the lines on her palm. The fragile pool of light revealed a large box—three foot by two, white cardboard. She ran her hand across the smooth surface and the strangest quiver rippled down her spine.

Once she’d stirred the coals to spark some latent warmth into the stove, she reached for the box of matches, lit the lamp’s wick, and took a long, slow look at the box. She hooked her fingers under the lid and wriggled it, releasing a tantalizing scent of the unknown, exotic—a mixture of rose, spices, and something woody. Beneath the lid she discovered a mound of soft, white tissue paper and in the center a thick cream envelope, her name scrawled across the front in black ink. The sort of envelope that would contain an invitation to a wedding—and just not any wedding, a society wedding. The sort of invitation that sat on a marble mantelpiece next to a carriage clock, not that she’d ever received one.

A matching card slipped out, the writing as bold and flamboyant as the event.

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SYDNEY ARTISTS MASQUERADE BALL

Town Hall, August 23, 1922
Dancing 8:00 p.m. to 2:00 a.m.

ADMIT ONE
TICKET £1

One pound! Almost a week's wages. She flipped it over:

TICKET NUMBER: 768
PAID IN FULL

The invitation slipped from her hand and fluttered to the tabletop. Who'd sent it? More to the point, why? Her attention flicked to the window where the scraggy fig tree in the backyard rubbed its branches against the dirty panes. Shadowy wings flitted past—bats searching for a roosting place, more than like—but her reflection hampered the view, and the recollection of the unease she'd felt as she'd cycled through The Cut returned. Stepping away from the window, she shook off her uncanny sense of dread.

Imagination, nothing more.

She repeated the mantra. The same overactive imagination that had plagued her for the last week or so.

The box lay innocently enough in the middle of the table, calling her bluff, willing her to investigate the cloud of tissue paper. She plucked at the corner, peered underneath.

Black material, neatly folded, rustled in approval as she lifted it from the box. A plain black, round-necked, sleeveless dress. She held it by the shoulders and dangled it in front of her body. The handkerchief hemline fell just below her knees.

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She swirled this way and that, admiring the simple lines and fingering the expensive material. Nothing like anything she'd ever seen, never mind worn.

As intriguing as the dress was, it didn't seem to belong to the invitation. She laid it on the back of the chair and peered into the box. Beneath the next layer of tissue, a silken haze danced: bright orange edged in black, a row of white dots accentuating the outline. She shook it free and held it high. It hung from a choker-like collar and draped down to two points like folded wings. She picked up either side of the cape. The wings spread, revealing wrist straps.

She fastened the shimmering silk around her neck and tucked her hands inside the loops, raised her arms, then lowered them. The wings fluttered like a bird preparing for flight. Her reflection stared back at her from the darkened window. No, not a bird—a butterfly.

Her curiosity drifted back to the invitation. The envelope carried her name, but the costume? Obviously intended for the ball, but who had sent it? It couldn't be a mistake; her name was emblazoned across the envelope.

The Sydney Artists Masquerade Ball. Everyone was talking about it, the first since the end of the war. Sydney's statement to the world that the dark, dreary days and the scourge of the influenza lay behind. An opportunity to celebrate and raise funds for those less fortunate. Sydney Town Hall and its basement would be transformed. All the newspapers were full of the story, more than two thousand tickets sold and every available piece of accommodation in the city booked. Dressmakers sworn to secrecy, working late into the night to produce the obligatory costumes. Once an annual event, the balls had ceased during the war, but would be spectacularly

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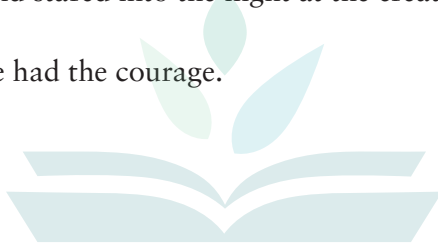
relaunched, with a modern makeover. And she, Verity Binks, had an invitation.

But did she dare to attend?

She dived back into the box, lifted the remains of the tissue paper, and discovered a smaller box. With fumbling fingers she prized it open.

A mask—of course, all masquerade balls relied on a mask, identities concealed until the midnight reveal—half-faced with elongated eyes and black ribbons to hold it in place, long eye-lashes painted to sweep like wings across the domed forehead. She lifted it and stared into the night at the creature she could become.

If only she had the courage.



HARPER
MUSE

CHAPTER 2

MORPETH, 1868

A cloudless sky of cobalt blue arched overhead, the autumn sun throwing jagged splinters of light across the river. Theodora Breckenridge picked up a dry brush and licked the fine horsehairs before adding the tiny lines needed to accentuate the depth of the flower and its stamens. Once that was completed, she could concentrate on the background. She liked to include a little of the landscape, a vignette, to show the exact location of the specimen. Today it would be the dry-stone wall surrounding Mama's garden with a view through the gothic window to the river. She'd always thought it strange that someone would go to the trouble of building a ruin; however, Mama had insisted—it was a replica of the old monastery in the grounds of her family home in Cornwall.

Time concertinaed into a tunnel of oblivion as her painting took shape. When she next raised her head, the shadows had lengthened and a chill breeze blew up from the river. She wrinkled her nose, the tight skin heralding a warning. Her face would be bright red and the spray of freckles across her nose would have popped—the price she paid for being a redhead, although quite why she was the only one of the four sisters to

suffer from the effects of the sun never made any sense. They all had the Celtic coloring of their parents but in a variety of shades. Constance, with her beautiful curtains of shimmering copper; Florence, her smooth chestnut locks drawn tightly into a bun and never a hair out of place; and Viola, with her shining cap of strawberry waves. Leaving Theodora with what her brother, Jamie, had always described as a “mop of dirty carrots.” She gathered her paints and dismantled her easel before making her way to the house. The afternoon tea ritual couldn’t be avoided. Before long, Florence would determine the weather to be too cold, but not yet. The autumn afternoons still carried a pleasant warmth.

Even from a distance the geometric precision of the chairs set in a semicircle to the right of the front doors filled her with apprehension. Despite the changes in their life, Florence clung to tradition, leaving nothing to chance.

With every step, the figures came into closer focus—Florence, as always, in the center. It had taken only a matter of days for her to assume Mama’s seat. On her right sat their housekeeper, Mrs. Barnett, upright, head tilted to one side, her black dress stark against the bleached stone walls, her small white lace collar the only concession to the fact mourning dress was no longer required. On Florence’s left sat Viola, plump as a pigeon with skin as smooth as a ripe peach, resplendent in a gown that shimmered in the golden light, and next to her Constance, her saffron-colored dress blending with the turning leaves of the wisteria. And set apart, the empty chair awaiting her arrival. Not part of the semicircle facing the house, instead overlooking the river and the wharf, like a suspect in a witness box. The solitary nature of the chair made her heart wrench. In the past, Papa and Jamie would have flanked her, but not

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anymore. She sneaked around the corner and in through the kitchen.

“Oh, miss, I’m sorry I didn’t see you there.” A very flustered-looking Bidy stood balancing the silver tea tray with its teapot, sugar bowls, cups, and saucers. “You’d better get a move on. Miss Florence is all fired up.”

Theodora sighed. The entire household tiptoed on eggshells around Florence. Since the accident she’d clung to Mrs. Barnett like a fractious toddler. “Do you think you could stall the tea tray for a moment, Bidy? I need to wash my face and hands.” She ran her fingers through her unruly locks.

Bidy stepped closer and peered at her. “Look at your poor face. Why weren’t you wearing a hat?”

“Bad, is it?”

“Mrs. Barnett will have you covered in one of her weird and wonderful concoctions before you can say Jack Sprat.”

“Hopefully she’s run out of potions. Although her chamomile cream is quite soothing.” Better than the foul mixture of sour cream and nettle she’d smothered her in last summer. “I just wish she’d leave me be.”

“I think you’re beautiful. Freckles or no freckles. I’d give anything for eyes like yours, the exact same blue as those cornflowers in the meadow, and that lovely hair.”

“Thank you, Bidy. I’d better make myself presentable. Just give me a minute, then take the tray out.” She leaned over the scullery sink and splashed cold water over her face and scrubbed at her hands before capturing her hair that had, as usual, escaped from its upswept knot. “Better?”

“Much. Off you go and I’ll be right behind you.”

Theodora made her way down the hall, pulled open the front door, and peered out onto the veranda.

“You’re late again.” Florence didn’t even lift her head from her contemplation of her buffed fingernails.

“I’m sorry.” Theodora edged past the table and perched on her chair. “The time passed so quickly.” Her voice petered out as four pairs of eyes studied her face. She interlaced her fingers and tried for an apologetic smile.

“If you had attended to the task I set you, you might have spared yourself the heat of the afternoon sun.” Mrs. Barnett studied her with narrowed eyes. The tone in her voice made Theodora want to scream, but she had promised to prepare the accounts. Mama had hated the task too, and now it fell to Theodora to organize the paperwork in date order before Mrs. Barnett entered a record of every penny spent, a list of names, wages paid, and the number of days worked in her wretched ledger.

“It’s Friday.” Mrs. Barnett let out a long-suffering sigh. “And I’m expected in Morpeth.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll organize them directly.” Theodora made to stand. The perfect excuse to escape.

“Sit down.” Mrs. Barnett’s icy voice and glacial stare kept her riveted in her seat. “Where is the tea tray?”

A timid cough answered Mrs. Barnett’s enquiry, and Bidy stood, arms outstretched, tray balanced.

“Put it down, girl. Theodora, I shall provide you with some lotion for your face when I return from Morpeth. It is better applied overnight.” Mrs. Barnett rose and swept from the verandah, leaving a hollow silence, as though no one else was capable of filling the void her absence created.

Bidy balanced the tea tray on the small wicker table. “Shall I pour?”

“Leave!” Florence’s strident tone echoed. “Theodora, the cake.”

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Theodora shot to her feet and handed out the plates and napkins, then made her way around the circle dispensing slivers of Mrs. Starling's orange cake. Since Mrs. Barnett had caught Bette pilfering leftover food from the kitchen, they'd been down to one maid, which meant the task of serving often fell to her. Quite why they couldn't employ another maid of all work she didn't know. Papa hadn't left them penniless. They were far from destitute.

Duty done, cake and tea provided, Theodora sank back into the wicker chair.

"Now is as good a time as any." Florence took a deep breath and clasped her hands together. "We have decided to visit Sydney. Mrs. Barnett and I believe it is time we reintroduced ourselves to society. There are a series of functions next month, and we will need several appointments with the seamstress to equip ourselves with new wardrobes before the season begins."

"No!" The word popped out of Theodora's mouth unbidden, producing a collective gasp of amazement from her younger sisters. No one ever questioned Florence; certainly not when she had Mrs. Barnett's support.

Sydney would mean a steamship. A river trip to Newcastle, then down the coast overnight to Sydney. Her hands grew clammy. Some days she wished she hadn't read the sole survivor's account of the wreckage of the *Cawarra* on the dreaded oyster bank, the graveyard of so many of the ships seeking to enter Port Hunter. She couldn't imagine how Mama, Papa, and Jamie must have felt to be dragged into the swirling waters before sinking, exhausted, into the churning sea and terrifying waves. The truth, when she finally read it, was far worse than the fantasy she'd spun. The vivid description of the grinding of the hull on the oyster shells, the almighty crash, and the influx

of the freezing waters still haunted her dreams. Hundreds of people had gathered on the shore, launched their boats, and tried unsuccessfully to pull the bodies aboard until there was nothing left but the bobbing remains of timber and bloated corpses.

“I would rather remain here.” Her voice carried a high-pitched, wavering note. “Someone needs to stay. What about Mama’s garden? Autumn is the busiest of times. There’s always a lot of work, pruning and harvesting, and now Hench has gone . . .”

“I’m sure Wilcox can manage.” Florence brought the teacup to her pinched lips.

“I can’t go to Sydney,” Theodora appealed. “I have to stay and tend the garden until we find someone to replace Hench.”

“The matter is not for discussion.” Florence’s red-faced bark took Theodora by surprise. “We will be leaving in three weeks and you will accompany us.”

Viola and Constance clasped hands and squealed. They had been waiting impatiently for this moment. Viola wanted nothing more than to perform on her beloved cello, and Constance longed for the city. They’d both seen the period of mourning for Mama, Papa, and Jamie as a hardship where Theodora saw it as a blessing. A time to come to terms with their changed circumstances and be thankful for the security Papa had provided. Mama and Papa had been so happy, their love shining bright, unblemished even after over twenty years of marriage and five children. At least they had died together; a small comfort, perhaps, for if only one of them had survived, the other would have been broken beyond repair. She looked across at her sisters’ glowing faces. How could their attitude to life be so different?

Florence, Viola, and Constance yearned for Sydney, the

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sense of anticipation in the air, the crush of people, and the constant noise, whereas she, Jamie, and Papa reveled in the natural beauty of the river and the surrounding country. The mere thought of the proposed trip sent a trickle of perspiration down her back. She hated Sydney, hated the way it made her feel, the air thick with foul smells and underfoot the mud and detritus of the ever-expanding city. Once she'd admitted her loathing, Papa had agreed she could stay with him in Morpeth while Mama and Mrs. Barnett took the girls to Sydney. A meaningless flurry of new dresses, recitals, tea parties, and calling cards, and now Florence wanted to reinstate the entire debacle—and include her.

“I would have thought, Theodora, you would embrace the opportunity to renew your acquaintance with the Scott family.” Florence threw down the bait. It might have attracted her but for the fact she knew from Harriet and Helena's regular correspondence they were away from Sydney.

“They're not there at the moment; they're working on a new set of illustrations for a book due for publication next year—*Mammals of Australia*.”

How could she ever hope to emulate the sisters' achievements if she had to leave? She had a series of paintings she intended to complete over the cooler months. “I have work to do.”

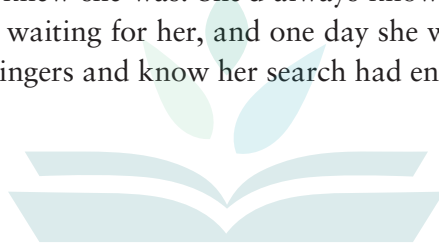
“Work!” Constance's derogatory tone made her hackles rise. “One is paid for work. You, like the Scott sisters, have a hobby. Ladies do not work.”

She opened her mouth to contradict Constance and then snapped it closed. Harriet had requested in her last letter that Theodora not let anyone know she received money for her paintings. And then, interestingly, had gone on to lament the fact that if she were a man, it would be acceptable to earn

money, as would her search for recognition. Theodora covered her mouth with her hand, trapping the snort of laughter as she remembered Harriet's concluding sentence that she might be more successful if she changed her name to Harry.

Maybe she should follow suit and become Theo. At the age of twenty-one, surely she should be permitted to make her own decisions. She couldn't hone her skills without the opportunity to pursue her passion.

The conventional feminine arts of music, polite conversation, and fluttering eyelashes held no interest. She was different; she knew she was. She'd always known. Something was out there waiting for her, and one day she would grasp it between her fingers and know her search had ended.



HARPER
MUSE

CHAPTER 3

MORPETH, 1868

You're taking your time, girl." The Reverend Lodestar's voice echoed from his study.

Clarrie bit back a retort as she carried the large wooden tray to the table. The regular five o'clock Friday afternoon "At Home" was possibly the worst part of her job as maid of all work, far more effort than the mere hour scheduled every week. Nevertheless, the ladies of Morpeth held it high on their list of social necessities, a time to indulge in some serious gossip and tittle-tattle and lay claim to a contribution to the Sunday sermon. It also gave the ladies the opportunity to dangle their unmarried daughters in front of the reverend, whom, for some strange reason beyond her comprehension, they regarded as Morpeth's most eligible bachelor. He adored the adulation. The sooner he made up his mind and chose a wife, the sooner she could hand over her position behind the tea urn to whoever won the prized role as Mrs. Lodestar.

She lifted the napkins from the plates of sandwiches, savory tarts, pastries, and the Victoria sponge she'd spent the entire morning preparing, ensured the candle was still alight underneath the urn, then straightened the last of the teacups.

Standing back, she admired her handiwork. Surely there was nothing the reverend could complain about. Not a mark on the pristine white tablecloth, upon which the bowl of freshly picked garden flowers, flanked by two candelabra, set off the silver urn and floral teacups to perfection. Scattered between the plates of sandwiches, cakes, and bonbons were salted nuts and crystallized fruits. On the right stood the tea urn and opposite a large punch bowl of lemonade.

Clarrie moved behind the table, her back to the window. The reverend liked her to stand ready, hands behind her back, and allow his chosen guest to play hostess—a highly sought-after role. The reverend entered the room and the hum of conversation stuttered to a halt and a dozen expectant faces brightened. “Mrs. Patchett, would you be so kind as to act as hostess, and perhaps Prudence and Amelia could assist our guests—”

Before he could finish his sentence, Mrs. Patchett elbowed her way through the circle of chairs and took up her station next to the urn, ensuring she wouldn’t be pipped at the post.

Clarrie masked a smile. Mrs. Patchett would be dining out on the privilege for the next week at least, as would Amelia and Prudence, whichever one managed to get the reverend his cup of tea—a slice of lemon, no milk—and his preferred asparagus rolls and Gentlemen’s Relish sandwich, crusts removed.

The general chatting and tête-à-têtes resumed, interrupted only by full plates and equally stuffed mouths, giving Clarrie time to settle. What she wouldn’t give for a chair.

Before the reverend could complain, she untied her pinafore and slipped it underneath the table. She couldn’t bend down and adjust her boots, but she could tell her ankles had swollen to a ridiculous size. She tugged at the sides of her dress, then clasped her hands and took two steps to the right until she

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stood shielded by the flower arrangement. From the moment she'd noticed the hardening of her belly and felt the first flutter of movement, she'd nursed the secret only Sid shared.

Feeling less conspicuous, she observed the room. Largely the usual ladies, although Mrs. Babinger and Mrs. Brownish weren't in attendance. The two Whitehorn girls were also absent. She'd heard tell of a new piano teacher who visited once a week from Maitland, and they were both keen on their music. Her mouth quirked. Perhaps the piano player was more of a catch than the reverend. She'd hazard a guess he would be younger.

Sitting to one side of the fireplace was a woman she'd never noticed before at the reverend's Friday At Homes—a widow, if her severe black dress was anything to go by. A small white lace collar emphasized her thick neck and somewhat mannish features. Something struck a chord, but Clarrie couldn't place her.

As though alerted to Clarrie's scrutiny, the woman lifted her head and stared. Heat flushed Clarrie's cheeks and her hands tightened across her belly.

The reverend crossed the room. "Mrs. Barnett, it's a delight to see you here."

Mrs. Barnett, of course. She lived in the big house, The Landing. No wonder she wore black after the dreadful wreck off Newcastle. Only one man had lived to tell the tale. His account had been written up all over the local newspaper, *the Morpeth Want*. Sid had told her about it. He always had the news first. It stood to reason, since he wrote it. Not really "wrote." Lined up all the letters in their neat little trays so dozens and dozens of copies of the paper could be printed and distributed. Dear Sid. They'd been stepping out for more than three years and had intended to be married by now, but their savings hadn't grown as fast as her belly.

“Clarrie!”

She jumped, miles away and caught out badly.

“Some more water for the urn.”

“Yes, Mrs. Patchett.” She masked a groan. More hot water and the afternoon would go over its allocated hour. A second cup of tea was most unusual. She edged around the end of the table, Mrs. Barnett’s continuous observation making her cringe. Just as her hand reached the doorknob, the reverend rose.

“Ladies, thank you. Thank you, as always, for your input. I have settled on the text for my sermon—Matthew 19:14: ‘suffer the little children to come unto me’; most appropriate, I believe. I look forward to seeing you all in church on Sunday. I must leave you. Attend to the Spirit while it is upon me. Clarrie will see you out.”

And with that, the Reverend Lodestar barged through the door, almost knocking her for six, and as good as galloped across the hallway into his study—most likely for a glass of long-awaited port. Not that she was one to judge. She could do with one herself. She had a good two hours cleaning up ahead of her, though the reverend only ever took a cold plate on a Friday so, if she was lucky, she might be tucked up in her attic bed before eight.

Clarrie put the finishing touches to the reverend’s supper tray and sank onto the kitchen chair to unlace her boots. The knock on the back door took her by surprise, more so when it swung open a crack and a tousled head appeared, sporting a wide grin. “Hey, Clarrie. How’re you doing?”

“Archer! What’re you doing here?”

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“Got a note for you from Sid. He says he’ll meet you on the corner at quarter past eight.” He stepped inside and handed her a scruffy piece of paper. *Meet you on the corner at quarter past eight. Sid.*

“Why did you bother with the note?”

“’Cause Sid told me to deliver it.”

“But you read it first?”

His face rivaled damson jam. “Well, yes.” He scuffed his feet.

“It might have been private.”

“Wasn’t, was it? And besides, what’s the point in learning your letters if you don’t read things?”

“There are other things to read beside private letters.”

“He’ll be waiting for you. Shall I tell him yes? Will his nibs let you go?”

Clarrie took a quick look around the kitchen, checked the reverend’s tray, and nodded. “Tell Sid I’ll be there, but I can’t stay long.” By eight thirty it would be well and truly dark. “Here, take this.” She handed him the leftover slice of sponge cake and opened the back door. “Be good.”

“And if I can’t be good, be careful, I know.” He threw her a cheeky grin and slipped out. “I’ll tell Sid.”

She hadn’t expected to see Sid until Sunday, her afternoon off. Usually she packed a picnic after she’d served the reverend his lunch and they’d take it down by the river, out past the town, and spend the afternoon there. In warm weather Sid swam, and he’d taught her, though she preferred to paddle in the shallows, and they’d eat the sandwiches she’d brought while they dried out, and in the winter they’d light a fire and have tea and toast. And that’s where the problem started. Not the toast and dripping, but what happened afterward. Once would have been bad enough, but several times . . . She knew

she'd go to hell for it, knew as sure as eggs were eggs, and the Reverend Lodestar would be there holding open the fiery gates.

She pulled her pinafore off and examined the side seams. With a bit of luck she'd be able to let it out once more, and her dress too, but after that she didn't have a hope, despite the weight she'd managed to lose in a vain attempt to keep her secret. At least the reverend hadn't noticed anything untoward, though she doubted he had much experience of women's bodies, being a man of the church and all that.

She didn't regret her condition, not for one moment. She and Sid were meant to be together. She'd come to depend on him, his comfort and humor, his kind, gentle ways. He was a real gentleman, despite his lousy start to life. From the moment she'd first clapped eyes on him she'd known he was the one. She'd been hurrying to get home, and when her foot caught on a stone, she'd dropped her basket, sent all her shopping scattering across the road, and dived after it. A pair of hands had clasped her under the armpits, dragged her back. She'd struggled free, mouth full of abuse.

"Couldn't face the thought of you going the same way." He'd pointed to the shattered remains of a dozen of Mrs. Tonks's fresh brown eggs intended for the reverend's breakfast, scrambled by the great clumping hooves of the Clydesdale pulling the lucerne dray.

Her angry words had dried and she'd sunk into the gutter, head in hands.

By the time her heart had stopped pounding and she'd collected her thoughts, he'd picked up the odds and sods of her shopping, except for the eggs, and stacked them back in her basket. She'd managed to take a decent look at him then. A young man, not much older than she was, with hair the color of sunshine and skin she had an urge to touch.

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“Most of your shopping has survived.”

But not enough to get her out of trouble. “The reverend’s not going to be happy.”

“Reverend Fire and Brimstone? He’s never happy. Not unless everyone’s listening to him.”

She’d raised her hand and he’d flinched, then they’d both burst into the most ridiculous laughter, rocking and rolling, grinning at each other like fools. He’d cupped her cheeks in his hands, looked deep into her eyes. “What a waste.”

“It is.”

“Not the eggs—you. What a waste it would be if you’d got scrambled.” He stood up, towering over her, and held out his hand, black and stained by the ink from the printing press, though she hadn’t known it then. “Up you get. I know where we’ll find some more eggs.”

And true to his word he’d scored a dozen eggs free of charge from someone down the road and fixed her problem, just the way she knew he’d fix this one.

Once Clarrie had taken the reverend his tray, banked the fire, doused the lights, and left the kitchen ready for the morning, the clock in the hallway had struck eight. She thumped up the stairs and closed the door to her little attic room with a bang. The reverend never disturbed her once he had his supper tray, especially not after his At Home—too busy writing down notes and ideas he’d gleaned from the ladies for his sermon.

With the hood of her cloak hiding her face and her hands buried in its folds, she slipped back downstairs and out of the door into the lane behind the parsonage. Sticking to the shadows, she made her way along Tank Street to the corner of Swan. She knew exactly where Sid would be waiting, back pressed against the wall, legs sprawled, and a mischievous grin on his face. He was Newcastleborn, and after a childhood

growing up on the wrong side of town, he'd quickly learned every one of Morpeth's nooks and crannies when he'd got his apprenticeship with the newspaper. Right from the start the boss, Mr. Kendall, let him have a corner of the basement for his own. Ten years on and the reek of printers' ink had soaked into his pores and Clarrie would swear his hearing was off because of the constant thumping of the presses. Still and all that was the least of her worries. What she liked most were the plans and dreams they shared.

Her heart flew to her mouth when a hand landed on her shoulder and the smell of printing ink clouded her senses.

"What's a pretty young lass like you doing skulking around here?"

"Sid! How many times do I have to tell you"—her belly gave a lurch and her hands cupped it protectively—"You can't do that anymore." The ground swayed beneath her and she slumped against him. "You'll frighten my baby."

He slipped his arms around her and pulled her into the darkness. "My baby too," he murmured. "How is he?"

"*She's* fine, but she won't be if you carry on like that."

"How much longer, do you reckon?"

She lifted her shoulders. She had no idea. She hadn't even known she was carrying until the funny blue veins started to show on her breasts and her back kept aching, then she'd had to let her dress out, not once but several times. "Two, maybe three months." Before he could give his usual "she'll be right" reply, she added, "We're going to have to make some plans. Soon, very soon. Once the reverend notices I'll be out on my ear and then what?"

"Then I'll look after you. I told you I would, and I mean it."

She couldn't argue with that. They'd made long-term plans,

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but nothing for the right now, which seemed to be galloping closer every moment.

“As soon as we’ve got some more money together we’ll rent one of the cottages down by the river. I’ll have a word with Mr. Kendall, ask him to keep an ear to the ground.”

It all sounded so lovely, but no matter what he might dream, the baby would be with them a lot sooner than their savings would allow. “But where am I going to have the baby?”

“I’ve been thinking about that and I’ve got a few ideas.”

The tingling in her chest settled and she relaxed into him, resting her cheek against his broad chest.

“What say you ’fess up and tell the reverend? After all, he’s a man of God. He’s not going to turn you out.”

For goodness’ sake. “Sid! Don’t be ridiculous.” She pulled away from him, not wanting his hands on her. That’s how she’d come to be in this mess in the first place. “That’s not going to happen, and besides, I’ll need help. A midwife or someone, and that costs money too.”

“What about your mother?”

“My mother?” She wouldn’t do anything to help. She’d chuck her out faster than the reverend. The last time she’d wasted a whole five shillings of her hard-earned savings to take the steamship down to Sydney in an attempt to make her peace with Mother and tell her about Sid, she’d returned with nothing but a flea in her ear. And that was before the baby. “Not a hope. She’d be too worried about her precious clients and her reputation.”

“Just as well I’ve got another solution then, isn’t it?” He placed his hands on the warm, round mound of her belly.

In the darkness she couldn’t read his face, but his voice held a triumphant note. And for a moment she imagined the little

cottage by the river and a baby tucked in a basket in the sunshine under the trees while she sat mending Sid's shirts, waiting for him to come home from work.

"I've got this."

A pale outline fluttered under her nose. A piece of paper and the smell of printers' ink. Or was that Sid? "What is it?"

"A classified. Found it in the newspaper. Someone who'll help."

"I've heard about those awful women. They take your baby and sell it, or worse. Forget it. I'm not giving up this baby." If she'd wanted to do that she would have gone and had herself sorted long ago. Though she'd never been too sure whether it had been fear for herself or love for the wriggle growing inside her that had prevented her. "It's our baby, Sid. Surely you don't want . . ." A sob stifled her words.

"Shh. No, it's not that. I'll tell you what it says. It's too dark to read it. The woman's a midwife and she offers a lying-in service. You go there, have the baby, then she'll look after it and you can go back to work."

"And how much is that going to cost?"

"I don't know. I didn't want to find out until I'd run it past you. Says here she's a loving, caring woman." He fluttered the paper, then folded it in half and pushed it down into his jacket pocket. "What do you think?"

A bubble of lightness lifted her mood. Not the perfect solution, but better than any alternative. Better than crawling on her hands and knees to Mother and having the door slammed in her face.

"And maybe, if we got married before the baby came, the reverend would keep you on. This woman could look after the baby, and we'd go visit him on our days off . . ."

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“Her.”

“What?”

“It might be a her, not a him. We need to think of some names.”

“What about Maud?”

“Maud?” Her lips stretched wide, almost a scream. “That’s a horrible name. Why Maud?” She drew the word out and couldn’t help a shudder.

“That’s the woman’s name. The midwife, Maud. If she helps us, it would be nice.”

“Does the classified give her name?”

“No. I did some asking around. She lives in one of the cottages down the far end of Swan Street.”

She’d badly misjudged Sid. “You did?”

“It’s my responsibility too, not just yours.”

And that was why she loved him. She stretched onto her tiptoes and dropped a kiss on his bristly cheek, inhaling the sweet smell of ink and Sid.

“And I’d like to call him Charlie.”

“Why Charlie?”

“’Cause he can be Charlie when he’s a kid and Charles when he grows to be a fine man.”

“Let’s just get him born, shall we?”

“Him.” He moved to give her a dig in the ribs, then stopped. “Sorry, Charlie. Best be careful. Your job, my love, is to pick the time to talk to the reverend, then tell him you’re going to need a week or so off work. It ain’t the normal way of things, but you never know, the reverend might have a heart underneath that stuffed shirt of his. I’ll have a word with Maud and find out her charges. And don’t worry too much about it. I’ve got a bit of a money-making idea too. Mr. Kendall reckons

TEA COOPER

he'll pay me a bit for anything I write that he can use in the paper. Thruppence for every string of words. I just need to find a decent story." He grasped her hand and brought it to his lips. "Happy with that, Mrs. Binks?"



HARPER
MUSE