

The
RADIO HOUR

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Victoria Purman



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This book is dedicated to

Caitlin, Rhiannon, Victoria (aka Little Vic), and Matilda.

I love it that you ask yourselves WWVD.

What an honor it is to be your mentor and friend.



“Literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life, and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure she will have for it even as an accomplishment and a recreation.”

LETTER FROM ROBERT SOUTHEY TO
CHARLOTTE BRONTË, MARCH 12, 1837

“Her word had no weight, her convenience was always to give way.”

Persuasion, JANE AUSTEN



It’s never too late to be what you might have been.”

GEORGE ELIOT (ATTRIBUTED)

Chapter 1

APRIL 1956

Sydney, Australia

IN WHICH OUR HEROINE—SPINSTER,
SECRETARY, AND LOYAL DAUGHTER MISS
MARTHA BERRY—DISCOVERS SHE'S ABOUT
TO EMBARK ON A NEW ASSIGNMENT.

Miss Berry, I'm sending you to work with one of our new radio producers."

Sitting across from Mr. Rutherford Hayes, Martha Berry could almost see her reflection in his gleaming mahogany desk. She'd made sure to shine it with furniture polish that very morning—just the way he liked it—and had double-checked that the black Bakelite ashtray onto which he tap-tap-tapped his ubiquitous pipe was empty too. It had been clean as a whistle first thing that morning but now resembled the ruins of Pompeii. The national broadcaster's head of drama was rather fond of his tobacco.

"I see," Martha replied, holding a smile on her face. She sat perfectly still, the way she'd been taught as a girl. Her hands were cupped politely in her lap, her legs crossed at the ankles just like

the queen's. That way, there was no risk of her underwear ever being exposed. Her back was ramrod straight even without the aid of a corset. These were skills she had learned thirty-five years before at secretarial college. Don't fidget. Only speak when spoken to. Never, ever take a risk that someone might see your underwear. And always—always—remain polite.

While Mr. Hayes puffed and stared into the middle distance, Martha's attention drifted to the framed photograph of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II on the wall behind him. It needed straightening. How could she have missed that?

"This young chap is kicking off a new radio serial. Quentin Quinn's his name." Mr. Hayes sucked deep on his pipe, leaned back in his chair, and exhaled a locomotive engine's worth of smoke right across the desk and directly into Martha's face.

She swallowed a cough.

"Everyone at the ABC is in a permanent state of apoplexy about the arrival of television. It's only months away, Miss Berry. It's television this and television that. Personally, I don't think it'll take off here in Australia. People will always want their radios. You can bet on that." Mr. Hayes aimed his pipe at Martha as if to prove his point and then took another puff.

Martha had seen photographs of televisions. They were little movie screens in wooden cabinets with legs; fancy new pieces of furniture for living rooms that would soon compete with the radio cabinets that had until now taken pride of place. The British and the Americans had had television for years, of course, and while some in Australia had been pushing for it, others weren't quite sure about the whole newfangled medium.

"I myself believe it'll be nothing but a conduit for mediocrity and vulgar sensationalism," Mr. Hayes continued, staring up at the ceiling as he pontificated. "The very novelty of it will encour-

age people to look at anything, no matter the quality of what's served up to them. Goodness me, the television chaps are telling me that judging from what they've seen in America and England, they could broadcast a film of a cat licking its paws and people would watch. What about the children, Miss Berry? What if they develop an addiction and forget how to run and play? What will happen if people stop conversing with each other because they're too busy watching a box? Or if they stop going to lectures or musical performances or the theater or concerts. And, god forbid, reading. What if people stop reading?"

Martha almost forgot to breathe. Would people really stop reading? What would happen to their imaginations if they stopped reading books?

"And . . . and," Mr. Hayes spluttered, "worst of all, what if people permanently turn off their radios and start watching television instead? Where will we be then? No, Miss Berry, I don't believe this supposed balm for the masses will take off. Radio will always reign supreme. The good women of Australia won't be able to chop up their vegetables and fry up their chops for dinner while they're watching television, will they?"

"I don't believe they will, Mr. Hayes."

"Let us simply put aside all this television-will-be-king thinking. We can't let those chaps working over in the television department get the upper hand, can we? That's why we will continue to invest in original productions. Like this new radio drama."

"I can't wait to hear more about it."

He put down his spent pipe, leaned back in his chair, and linked his fingers together, resting them in a tangle in his lap. "Since Miss Jones returns from her holiday next Monday, I've been wondering what to do with you now your temporary assignment with me is over." He smiled. "I thought perhaps working

with this Quinn fellow could be your next position. You've done a marvelous job looking after me while Miss Jones has been away, Miss Berry." He paused to search his memory. "Tasmania, I believe."

"Tasmania?"

"That's where Miss Jones has been. With a group of her girlfriends. On a bus trip."

"I see."

"Have you ever been?"

"On a bus trip?" Martha asked by way of clarification.

"To Tasmania."

"No, I haven't, Mr. Hayes. I hear Mount Wellington is a sight to behold. Especially when the peaks are kissed by snow as winter beckons."

Mr. Hayes gave Martha a curious look and held it for a long moment, then shook his head. "Yes, quite. Anyway, this Quinn fellow. He's very bright indeed. A wonderful writer, so I'm told. He's young, but aren't they all these days?"

Martha chuckled at the acknowledgment of their vintage. It had been no trouble at all working for the kind, gray-haired man. More than a decade older than she was, judging by the wrinkles around his eyes and his sagging jowls, he was an old-fashioned gentleman in the best of ways. He had a mature sensibility that she liked and a gravitas she both understood and appreciated.

"They are indeed, Mr. Hayes. But, as they say, youth is often wasted on the young."

"Ah, Oscar Wilde," he replied with a knowing smile.

Martha was far too polite to point out that it wasn't Oscar Wilde. Or George Bernard Shaw either, as many thought.

"We want this young chap, Quinn, to come up with another *Blue Hills*."

Martha startled in her chair and gripped the armrests. “What’s happening to *Blue Hills*?”

“Goodness, nothing at all, Miss Berry. That marvel Gwen Meredith has turned *Blue Hills* into such a success story that the powers that be”—Mr. Hayes pointed to the ceiling—“Want something else just like it. But not *exactly* like it.” He sighed. “The truth is, we had something else in mind to fill the fifteen-minute time slot after *Blue Hills*, but it’s fallen in a rather deep hole, I’m afraid. We had such high hopes for *Detective Reeves Investigates*. Imagine—a real detective on the radio hosting his own program. But, unfortunately for all concerned, the detective”—Mr. Hayes cleared his throat—“Has been assigned to a very important police matter and is now unable to host the program and share his true-life detective stories.”

That wasn’t exactly true, but Martha was far too polite to tell Mr. Hayes what she’d heard through the unofficial grapevine: Detective Reeves (Detective Smith in real life), a respected officer with a long career in the force, had been exposed as a bigamist. He’d apparently left a wife—and, shockingly, three young children—behind in Adelaide twenty years earlier and had never bothered to get divorced, or even tell his new wife, Faith, the very much younger than him shopgirl he’d met while buying socks. When the first Mrs. Smith read about the brand-new program featuring a real-life detective in *ABC Weekly* magazine, she was astonished to see a photograph of her missing husband. She had quickly turned up in Sydney with a long-overdue account in one hand for all she believed she was owed for raising their children on her own and a sturdy umbrella in her other hand. The new Mrs. Smith had been so horrified by the realization her marriage wasn’t legal that she’d hopped on a train to Thirroul to her parents to await the arrival of her child.

Interestingly, the scandal had never made the papers. The police swept it under the carpet because Detective Smith was one of their own, and the broadcaster announced that radio's Detective Reeves had been called away on an important assignment fighting crime, and the whole thing had been shelved. Everyone in management and in the police force was confident the embarrassing episode would just go away. And funnily enough, it did. At her age, Martha couldn't be shocked that men's scandals remained secrets. It was the way of the world, after all.

"A policeman must always go where the crime is," Martha said, "even if the bright lights of radio are beckoning."

Mr. Hayes chuckled. "Indeed."

"So," Martha said, knowing he would be grateful for the change of subject, "the new serial will follow *Blue Hills*?"

"That's right. At a quarter past one in the afternoon and then again in the evenings. Gwen Meredith and her town of Tanimbla and her characters are staying put, but we feel there's an audience for another drama at that time of day. Do you know, Miss Berry, that Mrs. Meredith writes every single episode? Fifteen minutes of original drama. A bloody marvel. A terrific lady writer. She's one of a kind. A singular talent. I don't think there's another woman in the world who's as accomplished as she is in radio drama. We were lucky enough to find the only woman with the talent, determination, and grit to be that prolific and that clever. The letters we get from listeners about *Blue Hills*—why, you wouldn't believe it, Miss Berry."

Martha did believe it. She'd been an avid listener herself since the drama had first gone to air in 1949, and she'd been a fan of its predecessor, *The Lawsons*, which had started in the last years of the war. Mrs. Meredith was an accomplished playwright and emerging theater identity when she'd entered an ABC play com-

petition in 1940, and even though the judges had selected someone else as the winner, Mrs. Meredith was the clear favorite in a listeners' poll. Of course, there had been grumblings that she was married and surely a married woman wouldn't have the time to devote her attentions to her job when she was busy devoting them all to her husband, but Mrs. Meredith had proved the naysayers wrong and *The Lawsons* and then *Blue Hills* became smash hits, and Mrs. Meredith became radio's brightest star.

Martha had never been able to listen to the daytime airings as she'd always been at work, but her mother, Violet, listened avidly at 1:00 p.m. over her lunch and never complained about hearing it all over again when it was repeated in the evenings, as had become a habit for Martha and Violet and households from Perth to Townsville and everywhere in between. After dinner, the nation would quiet, cups of tea would be made, and a biscuit or two would be consumed while the symphonic strains of the opening theme of *Blue Hills* filled the living rooms and kitchens of Australian households.

"I did a stint in the mail department last year. I saw the correspondence with my own eyes."

"Then you'll know they pour in from everywhere, from the back of Bourke to Western Australia. The powers that be want to surf on that success." Mr. Hayes leaned back in his chair and fiddled with his empty pipe. "We want to see what Quinn comes up with. He'll bring a younger perspective, you understand. We want it to be set right here in Sydney. In the suburbs. The ordinary suburbs. It will encompass all the things young people like these days, music and dancing and so on."

Martha nodded politely.

"Not that we want to lose the housewives, mind you. They love their sweep-while-you-weep dramas. *Portia Faces Life*. All those

dramas on *Lux Radio Theatre*.”

“*When a Girl Marries*,” Martha added. She and Violet loved “radio’s most appealing human interest romance,” as it was billed.

“Yes, quite. And, of course, the commercial broadcasters have their lady lawyers and doctors, that sort of thing. As the national broadcaster, we very much see it as our duty to provide entertainment for the ladies of Australia. The men, of course, have their news and current affairs and discussions of serious literature, opera, and theater in the evenings when they get home from the office and are looking for some relaxation. But it’s only right that we cater to the fairer sex too.”

“It certainly is, Mr. Hayes.”

“And you, Miss Berry, will be a vital cog in the new serial. I know you’ve worked with many of our producers, all those talented chaps who’ve gone on to bigger and better things. That young Peter Fellowes started here at seventeen, you know, and has flown the coop to London. He’s writing for the BBC.” Mr. Hayes’s face lit up. “The original Auntie herself!”

“He was a prodigy indeed,” she replied. And one who never once managed to land a screwed-up script in the wastepaper basket next to his desk.

“You know the ropes here. Show them to Quentin Quinn. Make sure he fills in all the right forms and so on. You’ll be good for him.” Mr. Hayes looked to the ceiling and she sensed a pontification coming on. “Miss Berry, you’re one of a special breed here.”

“Special?” She’d never heard herself described in such a way and was suddenly perplexed by the compliment.

“You’re a female.”

This was hardly news to her, but she was far too polite to interrupt Mr. Hayes’s soliloquy.

“We have found, over the years, that female secretaries such as

yourself are easier to supervise. You're very tolerant of routines—which men might find frustrating, if not a little boring—and you accommodate those routines with care and a certain equanimity.”

“That’s very kind of you to say, Mr. Hayes.”

“Yes, we have found that the more creative types—the men—can be somewhat hotheaded and demanding. But you women? It’s something to do with your natural tact, your patience, and your overall diplomacy that makes you excellent workers. You’re so well suited to managing the men and transcribing their words, as typing at speed does seem to come naturally to you all. And, of course, we find that because women have helped their mothers with the household chores and with the task of looking after the men of the household, they develop a natural tendency to look after their bosses too.” He narrowed his eyes at Martha and cocked his head to the side. “You’ve worked here many years, haven’t you, Miss Berry?”

“Yes, Mr. Hayes.”

“How many exactly?”

“From the beginning—1932.”

“Goodness. The very year we began broadcasting.” He picked up his pipe, made a huge fuss of lighting it, and puffed it back to life. “You must be thinking about retiring then.”

“No thoughts in that direction, Mr. Hayes.” Thoughts of retirement? She was younger than Mr. Hayes, and he still occupied his comfortable leather chair.

“No grandchildren to look after, then? No . . . knitting for them? Or baking biscuits, that kind of thing?” Wasn’t the fact that she was still “Miss” any kind of clue to him? If she were married, she would not legally be allowed to work in the Commonwealth Public Service and many other places. She wasn’t Mrs. Meredith, after all. No, she was the perfect working woman. She was hus-

bandless. Childless.

“No grandchildren, Mr. Hayes. And I don’t bake.”

“You don’t bake?”

“No. I’m terrible at it. Whatever I attempt I always seem to burn. I blame my oven.”

“I see.” The conversation had strayed uncomfortably into the personal, and Mr. Hayes’s cheeks reddened in response to the transgression.

“When does Mr. Quinn begin?” Martha asked.

“Next week.” He paused. “You’ve moved from place to place quite a lot, as I recall. Filling in for others, working on new programs, that sort of thing.”

“Yes, Mr. Hayes.”

“Why is that?”

Martha was far too polite to point out that despite all the assistance she’d provided to her male bosses over the years, she’d never been offered a permanent position with any of them. Perhaps she had been too hesitant to ask for one. Perhaps she had rubbed people the wrong way. She had never been able to figure it out.

“Moving from department to department has certainly kept me on my toes. No day is ever the same,” Martha replied. “If there’s nothing else, Mr. Hayes?”

“No, that is all.”

“Thank you, Mr. Hayes.” Martha stood to go, nodding ever so slightly in deference to her boss.

“There is one thing before you go, Miss Berry.”

She waited.

“We have high hopes for *As the Sun Sets*.”

“That’s the title of the new drama serial?”

“Yes. Spot on, don’t you think?”

“Yes, very catchy indeed.” Martha paused. “Can I fetch you another cup of tea?”

“Why yes, that would be lovely. Thank you, Miss Berry.”

Martha closed his office door as she left.



Chapter 2

IN WHICH MARTHA BERRY SHARES
HER NEWS ABOUT *AS THE SUN SETS*
AND RECEIVES SURPRISING ADVICE
FROM HER MOTHER, VIOLET.

Hello, Mum. Good evening, Mrs. Tilley. Mrs. Ward.”

The three gray-haired women sat on Mrs. Tilley’s front veranda in three identical wicker chairs sipping tea from bone china cups that were as old as they were. On a low table in front of them sat an empty plate with a scattering of telltale crumbs.

The three neighbors’ homes in Randwick in southeast Sydney were identical: single-fronted, built from red brick, with hallways to the left that ran along three main rooms on the right and then opened to a kitchen, with a laundry and bathroom via a trip out to the back veranda. If the women were like peas in a pod, so were their homes.

“Hello, dear,” Violet said with a warm smile. “Had a good day?”

“I did.” Martha smiled back as she stopped on the footpath and looked up at the women. She could set an alarm clock by this scene.

“You’re too late for any biscuits.” Mrs. Tilley tut-tutted, checking her wristwatch for added dramatic effect. “We’ve been here for an hour waiting for you to walk up the street, and in the meantime your mum’s eaten ’em all.” Mrs. Tilley chuckled and patted Violet’s hand.

“Get that bony thing away from me, Nance!” Violet burst into laughter and pretended to shove her friend.

Mrs. Ward rolled her eyes and set her cup on the tiled veranda. “These two are worse than schoolboys”—she winked—“Fighting all the time.”

In weather both good and bad, Violet, Mrs. Tilley, and Mrs. Ward gathered every afternoon—in that brief period of respite between preparing dinner and cooking it—to watch the world go by.

Mrs. Tilley and Mrs. Ward weren’t blood relatives, but they were the closest thing Violet had to sisters. They had always been surrogate aunts to Martha, with their children more like cousins than her own. Martha had never really had the real thing, the blood kind. There’d been one uncle who moved to Brisbane after he served in the First World War and whose untimely death and small inheritance had enabled Violet and Martha to buy the house they’d lived in since. While her father had two brothers, Martha didn’t know them and they had no interest in knowing her or Violet. Sometimes a person just didn’t warm to their relatives. And if it wasn’t estrangement, it had been the First World War and the Spanish flu. Those twin horrors had left a generation of Australians with missing branches on their family trees.

Martha still remembered the fear that swept through Sydney when the flu was detected, spreading almost faster than the contagion itself. Public places had been closed. She’d particularly missed the library and her precious books. Their neighbors and

friends remained at home behind locked doors, and if they did have to venture out, they covered their faces with white handkerchiefs. Looking back, it seemed every second person had caught the flu in 1919, including Violet. Thank god she had survived it. Martha was only thirteen years old and, with her father already dead, she had never forgotten her bone-shaking fear of being left an orphan.

“If you didn’t want me to eat all the biscuits, you shouldn’t have baked them, Mrs. Tilley!” Violet laughed.

“If you didn’t eat my biscuits, you’d have wasted away by now. We know you can’t trust Martha’s cooking.” Mrs. Tilley winked at Violet and all three women laughed again with Martha joining them. It was no secret she lacked something vital in the kitchen department: interest.

Martha understood how important this afternoon routine was to her mother. It was the comfort of the familiar. She knew her daughter was on her way home, that Martha would prepare dinner—even if it was a simple meal—while they chatted about her day, that it wouldn’t be long before they both retired to the living room, where they would bask in that lovely and comforting radio hour while the sun was setting and familiar and friendly voices from the wireless filled their living room and their hearts. Mother and daughter would sit in companionable silence, sipping their tea, hanging on every word of the action and drama and romance of *Blue Hills* and the other serials Violet loved. After, they would dissect the characters’ dramas as if they were real people, neighbors perhaps, instead of actors in a studio playing pretend. And later, when the music programs began, the orchestral strains would lull Violet into drowsiness, and after she’d urged her mother to bed, Martha would return to the living room, pluck the bookmark from one of her beloved worn volumes, and

immerse herself in George Eliot or the Brontës or Jane Austen all over again until she, too, had to go to bed.

Violet and Mrs. Tilley and Mrs. Ward were a willing audience to life on the street. They were there for the slow and then hurried trickle of children hauling their satchels and cases home from school in groups of twos and threes, stopping to play marbles on the footpath, shouting in horror when one of them veered its way toward a drain before being rescued just in time by someone's nimble fingers. Girls played hopscotch on hastily scrawled grids on the road, knowing that nothing would remain permanent with Sydney's rain and car tires smudging their chalk-marked squares. In waves behind the children came mothers pushing prams, calling out, "Just on my way back from the shops, Mrs. Berry." Or "How are you, Mrs. Tilley? You baking, Mrs. Ward?" And the women would answer, "No complaints," or "Melting moments today," and they would exchange waves and smiles and the pudgy-cheeked babes in their prams would stare up in awe.

"Did you get some of the rain today? There was a downpour in Kings Cross." Martha opened the low gate and stepped onto the path bordered by beds of neatly trimmed lavender. Mrs. Tilley sewed the seeds into cloth bags to keep moths out of the wardrobes of every bedroom on the street. Martha smoothed a hand over the leaves and breathed in the wafting scent.

"Oh my word, we did. It is May after all and winter's just around the corner. Which reminds me. Mr. Tilley had better get up on his ladder and clean the gutters. No one wants overflowing gutters, do they, Mrs. Ward?"

Mrs. Ward nodded in agreement.

"I was planning to get all my washing done today, on account of my granddaughter bringing her little ones for me to look after on Monday while she has her hair set, but look at me now!

All discombobulated, that's me." Mrs. Tilley raised her arms in mock exasperation and let them fall into her lap. She reminded Martha of Olive Oyl from the *Popeye* cartoon strip. She was almost six feet tall and as thin as a string bean. She was like Jack Sprat in the nursery rhyme—the one who could eat no fat—but she did and never seemed to gain a pound. She wore a headscarf tied at her forehead in a dainty knot, and for special occasions she twisted her hair into a low bun at her collar. Her daughter and granddaughters were just like her. One of Mrs. Tilley's granddaughters had begun walking the catwalk as a model for the David Jones department store.

"Tell me, Martha," Mrs. Ward called with a hand cupped to her mouth as if they were fifty feet from each other, not five, "what's that Fleur up to now on *Blue Hills*?" She shook her head. "She's trouble, that one."

Martha shrugged. "I'm sorry to say I don't know any more than you do, Mrs. Ward. Mrs. Meredith writes that serial and she keeps things quite secret." If Martha had heard rumors about what was going to happen to Fleur, she was far too polite to spoil anyone's anticipation, not to mention she was bound to keep it confidential. "But I have some news, if you'd like to hear it."

Mrs. Tilley and Mrs. Ward were suddenly silent. After all these years, they knew better than to ask if the news involved a man. They'd asked her about her love life seemingly every day until she turned thirty-five, but when that birthday passed, asking the spinster next door about her romantic affairs must have felt less like curiosity and more like rubbing salt into a wound, so they'd stopped.

"I'm all ears, Martha," Mrs. Tilley said, leaning forward in her cane chair. She crossed one leg over the other, her limbs twining together like tendrils on a choko vine.

Mrs. Ward raised her eyebrows expectantly, her rosy cheeks as plump as new season apples.

“What’s this news then, dear?” Violet asked.

“There’s going to be a new serial. It will be on the radio every lunchtime and every evening just after *Blue Hills*.”

“Oh, that’s exciting,” Mrs. Ward said with an appreciative nod. “I do like my shows. Especially that *Mary Livingstone, MD*. But goodness me. Her mother! Such a shrew. And that Mary herself, always putting her career before love. It only leads to loneliness, you know.” She tut-tutted. “But really, Martha. Could anything be better than *Blue Hills*?”

Mrs. Tilley nodded firmly. “Nothing will ever top *Blue Hills*.”

“Nothing ever will,” Violet agreed.

Martha hadn’t realized this was going to be such a hard sell. “I’ve been asked to be the secretary to the producer of the new show.”

Mrs. Tilley suddenly smiled and reached over to nudge Mrs. Ward. “I’m sure if you’re involved, Martha, love, it’ll be almost as good as *Blue Hills*.” She turned to Violet and winked. “You know how much I like that Dr. Gordon. Oh, that voice! He can put his shoes under my bed anytime.”

Mrs. Ward gasped. “Mrs. Tilley! What would Mr. Tilley say?”

She cackled. “Who cares!”

Violet struggled to her feet and Martha went to her, holding her mother’s forearm to steady her.

“That’s all very exciting, dear. To be there at the beginning of a new program.”

“What’s it called, this new show?” Mrs. Tilley asked.

“*As the Sun Sets*.”

Violet looked quizzically at Martha. “Is it set on a tropical island, dear?”

“Like *From Here to Eternity*,” Mrs. Tilley added. “Remember Burt Lancaster and that Deborah Kerr rolling in the waves?” She fanned herself. “Mind you, they probably got sand up every which way.”

Martha was sure their girlish laughter could be heard up and down the entire street and loved that they didn’t seem to care.

“*From Here to Eternity* was filmed in Hawaii.” Mrs. Ward sighed. “I’d love to go there one day. All those palm trees. And Burt Lancaster.”

“*As the Sun Sets* will be set right here in Australia. In a suburb just like Randwick, as a matter of fact.”

The older women exchanged confused glances.

“Here?” Mrs. Tilley said. “In a street just like this one?”

“That’s right,” Martha replied.

Mrs. Ward screwed up her face. “Don’t know what they’re going to put in the show. Nothing interesting ever happens ’round here. Except the horse races, of course.”

“Who are the characters going to be, Martha, dear?” Violet asked. “What’s going to happen to them?”

Mrs. Tilley leaned in. “Will there be scandals? I love a good scandal.”

As Martha guided Violet slowly down the steps and through the front gate, waiting patiently for her mother to negotiate her pain with every movement, she turned back to Mrs. Tilley and Mrs. Ward and flashed them a smile. “You’ll have to listen to find out, won’t you?”

“Ooh, you’re a cheeky one.” Mrs. Ward laughed. “If you don’t behave, I won’t bring my scones to your birthday party on Saturday.”

“I would be heartbroken if you didn’t.” Martha smiled.

“Don’t listen to her.” Mrs. Tilley cackled. “She knows we can’t

leave you to the catering, can we?" Mrs. Tilley's and Mrs. Ward's laughter rang in Martha's ears as she and her mother made their way up their own front path.

"It's going to be a lovely party, dear," Violet said as she pushed open the front door. "I can't wait."

Martha dropped three peeled and chopped potatoes into a pot of water and lit the stove.

She was about to turn fifty years old. Martha thought it over for a moment as she covered the aluminum saucepan with its pale red lid. She hadn't planned to live out her life as an unmarried woman. She'd had girlish dreams once of marriage and children and a home and washing on Mondays and baking on Tuesdays and ironing on Wednesdays and roasting lamb on Sundays and all the rest. She'd held on to those dreams in the absence of anything else for a long, long time until she realized how foolish it was. Dreams could so easily be snatched away, and no matter how much she would have loved to have a husband and children, life didn't always bring what a person wished for.

There were worse things than being a single woman and looking after her mother. It wasn't a big life, but it was hers.

"Martha, dear. You can't tell me anything else about the new serial?"

"Not yet. I'll find out more tomorrow when Mr. Quinn starts."

Seated at the kitchen table, a warm cup of tea in front of her, Violet smiled. "*Mr. Quinn*, did you say?"

Martha scoffed as she closed the cafe curtains above the sink. "You're worse than Mrs. Ward. Don't go getting too excited on that front. He's at least half my age, I understand. Possibly younger.

Directly from university or some such. He's probably not even shaving yet. Or ironing his own shirts."

Violet laughed. "Since when has a man ever ironed a shirt?"

Another upside of being unmarried, Martha thought. She would never have to do her husband's ironing.

"All the young men these days, going off to university." Violet tut-tutted.

"And young women too."

"You could have gone to university, Martha. You were smart enough. You're still smart enough. But"—she shrugged—"Things were different for girls like you back then."

"There's no point wishing for anything other than what we have," Martha replied. "I'm very content with my lot in life. We have a home that's ours, even if it needs new gutters. I have a job and we have food on the table three times a day. And treats on weekends."

"You're like a fried egg, you know that, Martha? Sunny side up, that's you. Always have been."

"And always will be." Martha went to her mother and squeezed her arthritic hand gently. "We've a lot to be thankful for, even though you have your challenges. But you don't have to worry. I'll always be here, Mum. Always."

Violet lifted her other hand and cupped her daughter's cheek. "You're the best daughter a mother could ever have, dear."

"I don't have much competition on that front, do I?" She kissed the top of her mother's head and then went to the sink to wash the carrots.

"I don't mean to be morbid, Martha, but when you're my age, you do look back over all the years and wonder . . . what would our lives be like now if things had turned out a bit different?"

"You mean if you and Dad had had the money to see a dentist?"

Violet sighed and shook her head. "He was as stubborn as a mule, our Perce. I would have sold all our silver to pay for the dentist if he hadn't been so . . . Anyway. Every penny counted back then." She dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief. She always had one on her, whether tucked up a sleeve or secreted inside her bra or in a pocket of her apron. Had her stoicism come naturally or had it been ground into her, given the litany of burdens she'd been forced to bear throughout her life? She'd lived through two wars, had lost a brother in France in the first one and then her parents within a year of each other in 1946. No one really knew what they died of. They were just old, worn out, and brokenhearted.

Violet had married at twenty and become a widow two days before her twenty-first birthday. Her husband—a father Martha didn't remember and for whom Violet would always carry a torch—had died from a toothache. At least it started out as a toothache. It wasn't long before that toothache became an abscess that led to Perce tugging the troublesome gnasher out with a pair of pliers he kept in the shed because "No point wasting money on a dentist, is there, love?" The truth was that they didn't have the money for a dentist in the first place. When the hole in her father's jaw became filled with pus, the trouble really began.

He'd died slowly and then all at once. The infection spread to his blood and was carried around his body in a few thousand heartbeats, and when the doctor came, Perce's shivering and moaning had stopped and he was lying dead as a doornail in the bed he'd shared with his wife since the day they'd married in 1905.

Violet had then moved baby Martha's bassinet into her own room and let the front room out to lodgers, insisting on only taking in single girls. There was a ready supply in those days, young women who'd traveled from the country into Sydney to work as

shopgirls or to attend secretarial college. The girls' parents had been happy to discover that their daughters were lodging in a home with no husbands or sons, reassured they would be cared for by a mother figure.

Martha made the most of growing up in a quiet house of women. She'd liked her own company when she was young and didn't have any lonely times because books were her friends. Martha believed Jane Austen was right when she said that any person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel must be intolerably stupid. At school, she'd been a perfect student. She was never in trouble for chatting in class, never had a wooden ruler slapped over her knuckles, and never scraped her knees because she'd been running across the asphalt yard when she wasn't supposed to. She'd liked etching out a hopscotch grid on the street outside her house and hopping and jumping up and down the squares, not minding if she was joined by other children from nearby homes. Her own company had always been enough.

Maybe that was where Violet had come up with the idea in the first place that her smart and bookish daughter should become a secretary. She'd certainly seen a cavalcade of girls with not half the wits of her own daughter take up positions in offices. Martha couldn't remember a discussion or a debate about it when she was growing up. Perhaps she'd simply agreed to go to secretarial college and then into the workforce with the full knowledge that her mother was scraping every penny together and had opened her home to strangers simply to put food on the table.

Life was life and Martha had coped with the slings and arrows of its misfortunes with a calm equanimity. What use were regrets? They couldn't bring soldiers back from the dead or fathers back from their early graves. Regrets wouldn't make her mother

healthier. Wishing for something different didn't make it happen any more than praying to a god might.

She had made a life for herself. Others might judge it to be small or unimportant, but that didn't matter to Martha. She had her health. She'd been kissed more than once, although she had never made love to a man. That was one thing she did look back on with some regret. She would have liked to have known what it felt like to lie with someone, skin to skin, whispering words of love in the quiet dark of the late night or early morning. To share breakfast with someone while reading the papers and then take a leisurely stroll together in the afternoon. But never mind. She thought of all the widows from both wars who had faced the harsh reality that they would never again share such intimacies with the men they loved. There was much loneliness in the world. She wasn't an orphan in that regard, as the saying went.

She had her work. She still had her mother, which she would consider a blessing if she believed in the divine. It was luck, mostly, she truly believed. Did one make their own luck? Was luck being in the right place at the right time, or being in the right place for so long that eventually luck had to happen?

Martha fried the sausages and cut them—and the potatoes and carrots—into pieces small enough that Violet could manage them with a spoon, rather than having to negotiate a knife and a fork, something her arthritis rendered impossible. She could use a spoon quite nimbly, and Martha had adapted her tried-and-true recipes to suit.

Although Martha didn't like baking biscuits or cakes, she quite liked cooking breakfasts and lunches, which was fortunate because she'd been running the kitchen—and the whole house—for more than twenty years. When Violet had no longer been able to take in washing and mending, something she'd done in her later

years when they'd simply had enough of having strangers living in their house, Martha had stepped up and the partnership they'd navigated together had slowly transformed into a one-woman band, with Martha conducting and playing all the instruments. The pain in Violet's hands and back and knees had slowly become more immobilizing, and she needed more rest than she ever had before. The doctors said she had simply worn out her body after so many years of physical hard work and it was time to stop. Martha believed it was the rheumatoid arthritis taking its ever-increasing toll, but she was too polite to point that out.

Violet was now unable to dress herself or comb her hair without pain. Walking was a struggle most days, and although she was made of stern stuff and had never complained about her lot in life, Martha saw her mother's discomfort and her agony. Violet's pain was in every exhalation, in the way the color sometimes drained from her face, in the sleep she needed during the day to make up for what she struggled to find at night.

"Getting old's not for the fainthearted, Martha, dear." It had become Violet's mantra, and Martha's too. For in her mother's agony, Martha saw her own future, when her fingers might ache too much to type, when even lifting a telephone receiver might hurt. There had been no signs yet of the plight that plagued her mother, but Martha couldn't be sure she wouldn't be afflicted in the same way.

Sooner or later.

Chapter 3

IN WHICH MARTHA BERRY MEETS HER NEW BOSS, QUENTIN QUINN, AND HEARS SOMETHING SHE SHOULDN'T.

Martha Berry was quite used to people talking about her as if she wasn't there.

She just hadn't been expecting it on Quentin Quinn's first official day as the producer and writer of *As the Sun Sets*.

He'd barely introduced himself the next Monday morning before assigning Martha her first task. He had insisted on having a new nameplate created for the door to the office bearing the words *As the Sun Sets*, with *Quentin Quinn, Producer* in larger type underneath.

He was a compact young man, trim and boyish, with a smattering of pimples still scattered over his chubby cheeks. His short brown hair was slicked back neatly like all of Sydney's young men wore their hair, and instead of a long tie knotted sensibly in a Windsor, he wore a bow tie, no doubt believing it made him appear creative and interesting.

When he'd strolled into the office that morning swinging a

leather briefcase and sporting a deep brown fedora that matched his obviously new suit (he'd forgotten to snip the stitch holding the vents together at the back), he'd also immediately noticed that Martha was half a head taller than him. He'd slowly raised his eyes to the top of her neat hair, and she hadn't missed the blush in his round cheeks. It was a reaction she was familiar with, but she had long ago realized it was not her job to make men feel better about their shortcomings. He'd kept his hat on for the first half hour to maintain the illusion of a few extra precious inches.

"There's no point hiding your light under a bushel, Mrs. Barry," he insisted as he'd stood to admire the new door sign, rather like a governor might admire a city's plaques on which his name had been engraved on the occasion of something or other of great civic importance. Clearly, *her* light as well as her name were to remain hidden firmly under her bushel.

"Right." Quentin Quinn nodded in Martha's general direction and then turned his attention back to the door. "Now everyone who walks up and down this corridor on their way to Rutherford Hayes's office will know that this is the room where *As the Sun Sets* happens." He'd rocked back on his heels, pushed his hands into the pockets of his trousers, and smiled so widely Martha thought he might split his chubby cheeks open right at the point where two boyish dimples pockmarked them.

He then stepped outside the main office door and peered all the way down the long corridor to the very end, where the office of the head of drama was located. It was lore within the national broadcaster that the closer one's office was to Mr. Rutherford Hayes's office suite, the more important one was in the general scheme of things. At the moment, the *As the Sun Sets* offices were situated opposite the noisy, clunking lifts.

"The sign certainly leaves no doubt, Mr. Quinn, about whose

office this is," Martha replied with equanimity.

Martha hadn't known Quentin Quinn for more than two hours before she realized he would step over whosoever he needed to on his quest to be closer to Mr. Hayes. Martha understood—a result of many years of experience—the way power worked in organizations. Some believed there was no point in doing good work unless one's superiors were aware of it. There was only one group of staff members who seemed to think the opposite was true, and they were the reporters in the newsroom. The newsmen worked hard to fly under the radar, rather like spies might, far away from interfering managers who were put on this earth to stymie every good yarn and reject every expenses claim. She'd always thought they were rather peculiar.

"Right. I shall get to work." Quentin Quinn fumbled in his pocket for a pack of cigarettes.

"I do believe they're on your desk."

"Goodo. Right. A cup of coffee, Mrs. Barry." It wasn't an offer. It was a request.

"It's Miss *Berry*, actually." While it would normally be impolite to point out his error, she also believed it was important to get things right in the beginning before they were set in stone and too hard to change.

He looked her up and down. "Rightio."

"One sugar?" she asked.

"Three. And make it black."

The second thing Quentin Quinn had done on his first day at his new job was complain about Martha.

She'd made his cup of coffee and placed it in front of him on

his desk when the telephone on hers rang. As it was for him, she'd put the call through before sitting down to her list of tasks. Martha hadn't intended to listen in on his conversation, but how could she not hear him when he hadn't bothered to close the door to his office and he was so loud? Perhaps he believed her to be slightly deaf as well as partially gray and slightly wrinkled.

"Thanks, old chap. This is my big chance, Ken. I'm going to blow *Blue Hills* out of the water. Gwen Meredith's a bit old hat, isn't she? All that country town stuff. I want that prime time slot, you know." There was a pause and Martha heard the clink of his cup in its saucer. "Casting? You think he'd be any good? Sure, I'll look at him. There are quite a few roles for men and, I think, two girls? Although we could perhaps get away with hiring just one woman if she's versatile and can play young *and* old." He cackled uproariously.

"Not grandmother old. I'm talking mid- to late thirties? She's the wife of the chap who runs the butchers. I know. We're doing the common man in this one. No, not many. I must say I thought I would have more people. You know, a whole team. There's a secretary. Some old bat who's been here a million years, judging by the look of her. Stuck in her ways, like every other old woman I know. God, it's like working with my mother. But what can I do? I've been lumped with her." There was a long pause while he listened.

"What am I looking for? You know, the perfect secretary. One who types fast and walks slow." He cackled again. "I will. I'll march right into Rutherford Hayes's office and tell him, 'Look here, man. I don't know what you were thinking, but you've saddled me with someone who should be at home baking cakes and looking after her grandchildren.' She must be sixty, at least." He laughed and Martha heard his lighter flick open.

Martha's fists clenched of their own accord. She looked down at them. Her knuckles were white.

"Damn right. I mean, a bloke needs some pleasant scenery to help while away the hours when he's slogging over a typewriter, don't you think?"

Slogging over a typewriter? Quentin Quinn didn't even have one sitting on his desk. He liked to think out loud, he'd told her earlier that morning in between bouts of admiring his name on the door. She'd offered to find him a typewriter of his own, but he'd resisted.

"I like to hear the words floating through the air, just like they will float through the air from a listener's radiogram or transistor to their ears. It's an aural experience, Mrs. Barry. I'll dictate. If it's good enough for that woman Gwen Meredith, it's good enough for me."

Martha was familiar with the belief held fiercely by most men that typing was beneath them. Except for the newsmen, who treated the task like a brute endeavor, a battle of man against machine; the harder they pounded the keyboard, the more serious the story they were writing. The others seemed oblivious to the fact that women had spent hours and hours at secretarial college and then years more in the workplace perfecting such a skill.

"I'm waiting for her to crack under the workload. She won't be used to dealing with someone like me." Quentin Quinn laughed again, his voice a high-pitched cackle. "Anyway, must dash. I've got a script to write. And actors to cast. Gee, I like the sound of that. What about you? A radio commercial? What for? Antacid tablets? I know where I'd rather be, Ken. See you tonight. My treat."

Quentin Quinn slammed down the handset of his telephone as if his negotiations for world peace had just been cut brutally short

and shouted, “Mrs. Barry! It’s time to write.”

Was he going to remain seated and bellow to her as if he was calling the cows home? She slowly got to her feet, smoothed down her skirt, and walked into his office.

“Shall I boil the kettle for another cup?”

“Good idea. Coffee will help get those creative juices flowing.”

He stood, removed his suit jacket, and held it out on two fingers.

She stared at him. He stared back.

“Yes, Mr. Quinn?”

“My jacket.”

“I believe you’ll find a hanger on the back of your office door.”

When he continued to stare at her, she took the jacket and hung it on the aforementioned hanger on the hook on the back of his office door.

“What’s this?” He tapped a finger on a manila folder in his in-tray. On it, Martha had written the word *Casting*. She’d compiled the biographies and headshots of the actors he was being asked to consider for various roles in the new drama. Mr. Rutherford Hayes had sent a memo to Quentin Quinn with his suggestions.

She lifted it from the tray and passed it to him. When he flipped it open, the photographs and papers slipped out onto the carpet. He made no effort to pick them up. As she gathered them together, Martha said, “You’ll need to choose the cast. You will also need to book the studio to record the first week of episodes, working back from the airtime schedule. Our first episode goes to air on Monday, June 25. So we’ll need to record the first week’s episodes four weeks from tomorrow. That’ll give us a week of post-production time.”

No response. Quentin Quinn’s Adam’s apple bobbed at his throat like a sailboat on the harbor. “Four weeks tomorrow? That’s sooner than I expected. Especially since we don’t have

scripts. Or actors.” He held a hand to his forehead as if a sudden headache were about to crack his skull wide open.

Martha had learned over the years, perhaps as a mother might from teaching her children, that most often it paid to let others discover things for themselves. Those who believed they had already mastered a skill or pastime or activity that they were in actual fact undertaking for the first time—those who believed that confidence alone would see them triumph—needed to understand from the outset exactly how much they *didn't* know. And how much they had yet to learn.

She was quite experienced in rescuing men who had been appointed far above their level of competence and had made a vow to herself on the tram into work that morning that she would let Quentin Quinn learn for himself. After all, she wasn't his mother. He had already spent far too much time skylarking about with nameplates on doors and complaints to friends about aged secretaries and not enough actually looking at everything in his in-tray.

But she was far too polite to point that out.

She sighed. “I suggest we book the studio and a technician for four hours to record five fifteen-minute episodes. Will that be sufficient, Mr. Quinn?”

Quentin Quinn's legs seemed to wobble and he leaned forward, gripping the edge of his desk. “Four hours, did you say? Four weeks tomorrow? We can't push it out a little more? And we can make the episodes longer, I'm sure of it. I mean, fifteen minutes isn't long enough for a decent drama, is it?”

“Each episode is very strictly fifteen minutes, Mr. Quinn. Not sixteen, not fourteen minutes and fifteen seconds, not even fifteen minutes and thirty seconds, or there will be letters to parliament.”

“Letters to parliament?”

Martha nodded. “Nothing must interrupt the timing of the program after ours. If that starts late then the news might run late and it absolutely, positively must go to air at two o’clock on the dot. People set their watches by our news, you know.”

He huffed. “Of course I know that.”

“And once you’ve cast the roles, there will be contracts to draw up and get signed. It will be important to take into account that if some of our talent are working on other programs, which they often do because the actor’s life is a peripatetic one, they’ll have to juggle any recordings and rehearsals they might be committed to for the commercial radio broadcasters.”

Quentin Quinn perched on the edge of his desk and lit a cigarette with jittery fingers. He then swore creatively under his breath.

Martha was no longer upset by such fruity language. It was the lingua franca of hotheaded and demanding creative types. Every beautiful flourish and economical sentence that fell from the lips of a writer seemed to be accompanied, in the next breath, by a short, sharp exclamation. They were words that would never in a million years appear on the radio. Free-flowing language came with the territory, she had realized many years ago, having worked so long with men under pressure from deadlines and writer’s block and complaints and sore heads from too much beer the night before and apparently demanding girlfriends or wives and bosses who’d never made a program in their life weighing in on creative decisions. Then there were the constant grumbles about pay, which amused Martha because they were paid men’s rates, not women’s, and in her opinion they should be more than happy about that. No, she’d come to believe creative types simply liked to complain.

“I suppose I’d better get to work.”

Martha nodded to her desk in the adjoining room. “Ready when you are, Mr. Quinn.”

.....

Two hours, four cups of coffee (him), one cup of tea (her) later, and Martha was still sitting in front of a blank page.

For his part, Quentin Quinn had almost worn a running track in the carpet.

“I’ve got it!” He suddenly stilled and snapped his fingers, opened his mouth to speak. And then promptly lost his inspiration.

After another ten minutes, and against her better judgment, she threw him a bone. “There needs to be an opening announcement, Mr. Quinn. So people know what they’re listening to. For instance, before *Blue Hills*, the announcer says, ‘The ABC presents *Blue Hills* by Gwen Meredith’ and then that lovely, stirring theme starts up. The music tells them it’s time for *Blue Hills*. What do you have in mind for *As the Sun Sets*?”

Quentin Quinn chewed on his bottom lip. “The ABC presents *As the Sun Sets* by Quentin Quinn?”

“That’s a start, certainly.” Martha pressed her fingers to the keyboard and typed his first ten words. What a cracking beginning.

“And what do we do about the music . . . ?”

She sat back in her chair. “Perhaps you can search the music library for a piece that encapsulates what you imagine for *As the Sun Sets*.”

Quentin Quinn’s eyes widened as if a light bulb had gone off over his head. “I’ll do just that.” He paused. “How do I do that?”

“The music library is on the second floor. Ask for Mr. Pattison, and if you can’t find him, ask for April.”

“Right. Of course.”

To men like Quentin Quinn, Martha was nothing but an old woman with her hair in a neat bun at her neck, a brown woolen suit, and sensible shoes. He would have no idea—and no curiosity—about the fact that she had worked everywhere and knew almost everything about how the broadcaster operated. No, he would not think that about her at all. How had she become invisible and indispensable all at the same time?

He snapped his fingers and then jabbed a finger in the direction of Martha’s typewriter.

“Get ready,” he announced.

“I’m ready,” she replied.

“Type,” he mumbled and then paused. “I need a cigarette,” he said before scurrying back to his office looking like a young boy who’d just lost his puppy.

One of the most important jobs of the producer and writer was to actually write the scripts and run the production. It was as simple and as complicated as that.

And this was only day one.

.....

By Friday, they had two pages of script, which would equate to—Martha worked it out at three words per second—four and a half minutes of drama.

It was becoming evident to Martha that Quentin Quinn was almost fatally ill-equipped for the job. She allowed herself to feel a pang of sympathy for him. No, it wasn’t exactly a pang. A mere twinge, perhaps. He was a young man thrown in at the deep end

and, given his lack of experience, both in drama and in life, it should have been no surprise to anyone that he was floundering.

Martha took a clean sheet of paper and slid it into the typewriter, turning the carriage until it appeared at the front. She hit the carriage return and began typing a list of all that still needed to be done—things she was certain Rutherford Hayes would ask about when he sauntered past the office and popped his head in, as he was wont to do, and which more often than not set the producers and writers into spasms of anxiety.

Budget breakdown

Cast

Auditions

Offers and contracts

Book studio

Rehearsing and recording schedule

And then she sighed and let herself feel a prickle of anxiety about the next one:

Scripts

“Miss Berry.” Martha looked up from her typewritten list. Rutherford Hayes was standing in the doorway, his eyebrows raised and a question on his lips. She clutched a hand to her chest. Had she conjured him out of thin air?

“Yes, Mr. Hayes?” That prickle of anxiety became a shudder of doubt.

“Is Quinn in?”

“I’m sorry, no. He’s at lunch.”

Mr. Hayes checked his watch. Martha knew without glancing

at her own that it was already half past two. Quentin Quinn had disappeared at half past eleven and hadn't returned to the office. He'd been in his new job for five days and had already made a habit of the long lunch, and while it was none of Martha's business, he had taken to returning from lunch in his cups.

"Still?"

Martha neither confirmed nor replied.

"I see. I need to talk to him about scripts for *As the Sun Sets*."

She nodded.

"Just to have a look over them. See he's on the right track, that sort of thing. Has he talked to those actors I recommended?"

Martha held an impassive expression. "I believe that's next on his agenda."

Mr. Hayes pushed his glasses up his nose with an index finger. "Right."

"Shall I make a note for Mr. Quinn to come to your office when he returns?" Martha had covered for men so many times before that the rules of being a secretary were ingrained in her. Pretend to know nothing. Don't pass on any information that might get you into trouble with those who had secrets to hide. Mum's the word and all that.

Mr. Hayes cleared his throat. Since she'd worked for him when Miss Jones was on her Tasmanian bus holiday, she'd learned it was his way of masking his annoyance.

"Thank you."

"Have a good weekend, Mr. Hayes."

"You too, Miss Berry."

As soon as he'd walked into the corridor, Martha sat back in her chair and wished she was religious so she could pray for some progress.

Where on earth was Quentin Quinn?