

## CHAPTER ONE

The train burst from the tunnel and the bay came into view. Rebecca squeezed her eyes shut before opening them again, and twisted the gloves in her lap. She had not expected the scenery to be so magnificent. Mountains, verdant with lilli pilli, wild cherry and cabbage tree palms, shadowed the town, which was tucked into the elbow of the bay like a babe in the crook of his mother's arm. On the other side of it, flat rock platforms jutted out into the ocean. The sea beyond the bay was vast. It spread to the horizon and shimmered with a spectacular shade of sapphire blue. The surface was calm but Rebecca knew there was nothing more treacherous than the sea. A fluttery feeling disturbed her stomach and she looked away. It was ironic that she should have been assigned this coastal town when there were hundreds of inland centres equally in need of her services. Perhaps it was fate. Perhaps a divine reminder of mistakes made that could never be forgiven.

The train slowed and came to a stop in front of a station with a weatherboard office and waiting room. The 'Welcome to Shipwreck Bay' sign was sun-bleached and in need of paint, but below it somebody had planted a bed of purple pigface which was vibrant with spring blooms. Rebecca tugged down her suitcase from the rack and pulled her gloves over her hands. She stepped onto the platform at the same time the stationmaster appeared from his office, rubbing his bald pate before he replaced his cap and hitched his trousers over his substantial belly. He stopped in

his tracks and widened his eyes when he saw her. 'Are you on your way to Melbourne, Miss?'

His gaze slowly ran over Rebecca from her pump shoes to her calot hat. She was used to that look. Even girdled and clothed for business in a nipped-waist tweed jacket and pencil skirt she couldn't hide her curvaceous figure. Men – young, middle-aged, old, ugly or handsome – always regarded her like a delicious cake they wanted to gobble up. It bemused her now that she was no longer young. At thirty-two years of age she was as good as a spinster. And with her round face and hooded grey eyes, she did not consider herself especially beautiful. Yet men always stared even when there were far more attractive women in the room. 'You've got something magnetic about you Becky,' her friend, Marion, always told her. 'Men just can't look away.'

The train guard blew his whistle and the train chugged out of the station to continue its journey south. Rebecca's eyes followed it.

'Are you visiting someone then?' the stationmaster asked her, as if he still refused to believe that she had got off the train intentionally.

She turned to him. 'No. I am the new postmistress. The Postmaster-General's Department sent me.'



Rebecca hadn't wanted a lift and asked about a taxi, but the stationmaster had informed her that in a town as small as Shipwreck Bay there was no such thing.

'The house Doris is renting you is up that hill,' he said, taking his eyes from Rebecca's legs for a moment and indicating a street that ran straight from the town and disappeared somewhere among the trees on the mountainside. 'It's too far to walk, Miss ...'

'Wood.'

He nodded. 'I'm Ernest Mullens. But everyone calls me Ernie.'

He swung her suitcase into the boot of his black Holden and

Rebecca flinched. 'You travel light,' he remarked. 'Are you sure you remembered to pack? Doesn't feel like there is anything in there.'

'The rest of my things are coming later.'

Ernie opened the car door for her and watched her slide in before running around to the driver's side. The car dipped when he got in and sat down. Rebecca wound down the window, trying to create more space between them. The breeze blew in a sudden stench of fish oil and rotting seafood. The smell was so pungent it left a foul taste in her mouth and she gagged. She reached into her purse for a handkerchief and brought it to her face.

Ernie looked puzzled then realisation dawned on him. 'Oh that? You'll get used to that soon enough. The whalers caught a big blue earlier today. They're processing it down at the station.'

'I thought this was a mining town,' Rebecca said, winding the window up again. Ernie turned the ignition. 'It is now but it was built on whale oil. The road into town is made from crushed whale bone.'

The town centre could have been missed in the blink of an eye. The sun was setting and the shops' shutters were closed. There was the ubiquitous memorial hall, as well as a pub, church, grocer, butcher and general goods store. The post office, where Rebecca was due to start work the following day, was on the corner of the main street. It was a single-storey dwelling of rendered cream brick with chimneys and a filigreed porch. A large fig tree stood in front of it. The foundation stone read 1887.

'The town will be glad to have you,' Ernie told her. 'It's been chaos for the past few months without an official postmaster. The delivery boy, Johnny, is a good soul but a bit of a ding-a-ling. People have been travelling to Twin Falls to post their mail just to make sure it arrives at its destination.'

The road to the top of the hill was bordered by cottages with corrugated iron roofs. Some of them had neat gardens of geraniums and daisies while others were unkempt with chickens picking their way through the overgrown lawns. About halfway

up the hill Ernie came to a stop outside a freshly painted cottage with a gabled roof. An elderly woman in a floral belted dress and powder blue cardigan was waiting on the veranda. She seemed to be deep in thought but as the car cut out she moved like a statue coming to life. Rebecca got out of the car before Ernie could open the door for her. She looked back towards the town and realised from this point she had a view of the ocean beyond it to the horizon, as well as the train station. The woman must have seen her arrive. She shivered, not liking the idea of having been watched.

‘I’m Doris Campbell,’ said the woman, stepping through the gate and reaching her age-spotted hand out to Rebecca. ‘Welcome to Shipwreck Bay, Miss Wood.’

Doris was about sixty years of age, with a ramrod straight spine. As tall as a man, she towered over Rebecca. But the masculine effect was softened by her large protruding eyes and the sweet notes of Arpège that wafted from her each time she moved.

Ernie carried Rebecca’s suitcase to the front veranda. Then he returned to the car and straightened his cap. ‘I’ll be off, then,’ he said.

‘Thank you, Ernie,’ Doris told him. ‘Tell Marge I’ll drop in and see her tomorrow about the flowers for Sunday’s service.’

Doris turned back to Rebecca. ‘Well, you are a pretty thing,’ she said, admiring Rebecca’s clothes and figure. ‘My granddaughter has hair the same red copper tone but with your pale complexion I would say yours is natural.’ She took Rebecca’s arm and led her up the path to the house with an ease that made it seem as if they had known each other for ages. ‘I hope you will find the house comfortable,’ she said. ‘You’re from Sydney, aren’t you?’

Doris opened the front door and led Rebecca straight into the living area of the cottage. A wood stove stood in one corner and the walls were Baltic pine, painted cream-white. The entire house took less than a minute to walk around. Its two small bedrooms each contained a single bed covered in a rose quilted spread, and white frilly curtains. Between the two bedrooms was a grey and

pink tiled bathroom. The house was half the size of Rebecca's old apartment in Potts Point which had looked out over Rushcutters Bay Park and been decorated in silver velvet with slipper chairs and a teak cocktail cabinet. The walls were papered in teal blue damask. She wondered what her Sydney friends would make of this tiny doll's house with its cord light switches and laminated plywood furniture. For a moment she was sure she heard Ned laughing. 'Come on, Becky! Has it really come this?' But she knew it was her imagination because she doubted Ned was giving her a moment's thought. She hid her grimace from Doris but then lifted her head and regarded the house with greater courage. Wasn't this exactly what she had wanted? A sanctuary? A hideaway? It was not the kind of place people would come looking for her.

'It's lovely,' she said, pressing her hands together. Doris led her into the eat-in kitchen.

'I've put milk in the fridge and there is bread and jam in the cupboard,' the older woman told her. She pointed to some plastic canisters on a shelf. 'You'll find tea and sugar in those.'

Rebecca nodded and Doris eyed her with sympathy. 'I'm sure you must be tired after your journey so we'll have a chat tomorrow. I'll come by the post office at nine o'clock.'

A pair of sulphur crested cockatoos landed on the lawn at the back of the house and began eating the grass seed. Rebecca forgot where she was for a moment and stared at them foraging together. Hadn't she heard somewhere that the birds mated for life? And that if one of the pair died the other often stayed alone for the rest of its life? How come animals managed monogamy better than humans? Then, screeching, the rest of the flock flew overhead and the pair took flight to join them. Rebecca's eyes followed the birds' ascent until they disappeared into the distance. She turned to Doris. 'When I was given the assignment I was told that the last postmistress only stayed two weeks.'

Doris's face clouded. 'Yes, she was a nervous, jittery thing. Too young for the responsibility.' A slight frown wrinkled her forehead. 'I shouldn't have told her about Mabel, I suppose.'

‘Mabel?’

Doris picked up her handbag from the table. ‘Mabel was the town’s postmistress for over twenty years. She spoiled us with her efficiency which we didn’t fully appreciate until she suddenly passed away earlier this year.’

Rebecca followed Doris to the front door. The landlady reached into her handbag and slipped Rebecca the house key and another key with a tag that labelled it as belonging to the post office. ‘I do hope you are not foolish enough to believe in ghosts, Miss Wood. People imagine such silly things. That last young girl was convinced the post office was haunted.’

Rebecca noticed the subtle change in Doris’s posture, the shifting of her feet. Country people could be so superstitious. ‘The foundation stone for the post office says 1887,’ she said lightly. ‘I’m sure there are plenty of ghosts haunting the place and I should be very glad of the company.’

Doris’s face pinched and she looked away. Rebecca sensed she had missed some important point that her landlady had been trying to make. But before she could ask anything further, Doris was stepping out the door. ‘Well, I shall meet you at the post office in the morning,’ she said. ‘If there is anything else you need please let me know.’

She watched Doris walk to the gate and turn for a last brief wave before heading down the hill. Rebecca was about to shut the door when she noticed her suitcase was still on the veranda where Ernie had left it. She brought it into the living room and undid the locks, rummaging through the silk underwear and nightgowns and uncovering the package wrapped several times in brown paper. She took it to the kitchen and unwound the paper to reveal a Vallauris vase enamelled in black and hand-painted with pink, yellow and blue flowers. She had bought it in Monaco one heady summer. She carried the vase to the kitchen and placed it on the table. She studied it from several angles before her hands clenched into fists. The vase was as out of place in the Formica kitchen as she was in Shipwreck Bay. This time Ned’s voice

sounded louder in her head: 'It was good while it lasted, wasn't it, Becky?' Filled with a sudden rage, she swatted at the vase and sent it crashing to the floor. The shattered pieces scattered over the linoleum and some slid under the fridge and stove. Rebecca stared at the fragments for a good minute before she rushed out of the room.

'Go to hell, Ned!' she hissed, slamming the door behind her.

## CHAPTER TWO

The back door to the post office wouldn't budge so Rebecca tried the front door. It swung open to reveal a polished wooden floor littered with postal forms and a long counter covered with dust. A set of cast-iron scales stood in the centre of it. She scanned the room and her eyes settled on an oil portrait of the young queen who had only recently ascended to the throne. It hung at an odd angle from the picture rail. Rebecca's nose twitched. The air was stagnant with the odours of an old public building: damp paper, aging leather, and the burnt smell of hardened beeswax. The previous postmistress must have left weeks ago – and in a hurry too by the state of the place. She sighed and fingered the bow on the neckline of her blouse. She had dressed in her best for her first day at work. She hadn't expected that a major cleaning job would be required.

Beyond the counter were the sorting boxes and she was relieved to see that at least these had been emptied. Johnny must have been seeing to that. Perhaps he wasn't the 'ding-a-ling' Ernie had suggested. She glanced at the clock on the wall. The hands hadn't moved since her arrival. They were stuck on half past eight. She reached into her handbag and took out her Bulova watch: fourteen-carat white gold with diamonds around the face. She hadn't been game to wear it – too showy. She would have to send away for a catalogue and get something simpler: something officious-looking, a watch that wouldn't inspire questions.



She lifted the counter flap and stepped into the sorting room. The blinds were closed so she switched on the light. On a large square desk in the middle of the room sat a stamp cancelling machine, an accounting machine and a typewriter. Along one side of the wall was a bench with a telephone and a telegraph machine. On the opposite side was a miniature telephone exchange. She leaned towards the noticeboard and squinted at the numbers written there. There were only a handful of subscribers in the whole town! She recalled the busy exchange at the Sydney General Post Office where she had worked as a telegraphist during the war. The service was available twenty-four hours a day and the crew of telephonists worked in shifts. Marion had been employed there and Rebecca had enjoyed watching her friend handle one of the switchboards: bells ringing, plugs flying in all directions, and Marion as calm as a millpond in the centre of it all. 'What number please?'; 'Do you want to extend your call for another three minutes?' Housed in a magnificent sandstone Italian Renaissance building, the General Post Office had been a town unto itself, with teams of deliverymen, clerks and telegram boys. She'd probably still have been working there if it hadn't been for Ned.

Rebecca leaned her head against the doorframe. The post office had the same effect on her as when Doris had shown her around the house she was renting the previous day: incredulous disbelief that she had ended up in this place at the end of the world. Part of her wanted to laugh and part of her wanted to cry. The stuffy air was oppressive and she strode to the window and rolled up the blind. She gasped when she realised she had uncovered an enormous picture window with a view straight out to the ocean. Was God punishing her? She turned the stiff latch and pushed open the window. A gust of wind sent papers and forms fluttering over the floor. She closed her eyes and inhaled the salty breeze. 'You won't beat me, you know,' she said to the almighty creator she only half-believed in. 'Nor will men, nor this town, nor memories!' At the sound of a boat's labouring engine she opened

her eyes again. A long black vessel was motoring into the bay. At its bow stood a harpoon gun and fastened to either side of the boat were two whale carcasses. Their tail flukes had been hacked off and their bleeding bodies were bloated with air. One of the whale's tongues floated like a gigantic balloon in the water. The sight disturbed Rebecca. Only a few hours ago those majestic creatures had been living things, the royalty of their domain – and now they were lifeless and grotesque. She shivered.

‘Well, good to see you are here bright and early! I hope you had a peaceful night's rest?’

Rebecca turned to see Doris standing in the doorway. She was wearing a polka dot blouse with a full skirt, pearls and heels. For an elderly countrywoman she certainly knew how to dress.

‘Have you looked in your office yet?’ Doris asked. ‘I made sure Johnny had at least left that in good order.’

Rebecca turned to the door at the end of the room marked ‘Postmaster’. She bit down on a smile. This post office might be a very small operation but she would be the queen of it. She liked that idea more than anything. Doris pushed open the door and Rebecca followed her inside. The room was tiny, with nothing more than a desk and a swivel chair. There were two windows: one large and one shaped like a ticket window at a train station. To Rebecca's relief neither of them faced the ocean. The large one looked over an unruly patch of garden while the other faced the street. The room stank of bleach. She wondered why special attention had been paid to cleaning it while the rest of the post office was filthy. Doris twisted the catch and opened the smaller window. ‘In the old days the townspeople would ride up on their horses and collect their post here,’ she said.

Rebecca moved around the desk and sat in the chair. The office would be quite nice with a painting – something formal like a pastoral scene or a landscape – and a potted plant. As the postmistress of a small town with no bank she would be the representative of not only the Postmaster-General but the Commonwealth Bank as well. She would be a respected government official. She swivelled

in the chair and her foot kicked something. A box. She pulled it out and placed it on the desk. It was labelled: *Personal and Private: Property of Mabel Peberdy.*

‘Oh that,’ said Doris, glancing at the box. ‘That’s some of Mabel’s personal correspondence and other things. We’ve been waiting for the family to come pick that up but nobody has yet. They live in Melbourne and I dare say they are too heartbroken to do it. Two tragic deaths in the family within a year would be too much for anybody.’

‘Two?’

Doris stared a moment at Rebecca then shrugged. ‘You are going to hear about it from somebody in the town, so I may as well be the one to tell you. Mabel hung herself here in this office.’

Rebecca followed Doris’s gaze up to the ceiling. A single rafter stretched across the span of the roof. Had the previous postmistress really fastened a rope to it and killed herself? In a flash of imagination, she saw a woman hanging there, legs swinging, tongue bloated like the whale’s. Suddenly being in this office by herself didn’t seem so appealing. She turned to Doris, aghast. ‘Why?’

Doris pursed her lips. ‘Mabel went a bit funny in the head after the death of her adolescent daughter. The poor girl drowned. She was all Mabel had in the world. Her husband died young and the rest of Mabel’s family lives in Melbourne.’

Rebecca’s throat constricted as if she was suffocating. She tore her eyes away from the ceiling. Hanging was better than drowning. Mabel’s demise had been quick and efficient and by her own choice.

Doris pressed her finger to the corner of her mouth. ‘You seem like a sophisticated young woman, Miss Wood. I’m sure you will quickly put it out of your mind.’ Her eyes narrowed and her voice took on a kind, soothing tone. ‘I know it’s not easy ... Well, I know it’s not easy to be alone. At least I had my Reggie for forty years. But your generation ...’ Doris shook her head. ‘You lost so many young men, didn’t you?’

Rebecca's jaw clenched. Doris was fishing. She imagined everybody in the town would probably wonder the same thing. Why wasn't she married? She wanted to tell the old biddy to mind her own business, but instead she lowered her eyes. 'Yes, that's true,' she said quietly. 'Robert ... well, he was an aircrew navigator. He went down over the Arafura Sea.'

Doris sighed. 'Well, my dear, we women carry on, don't we? You are still young. A pretty thing like yourself won't be alone forever. Time heals all wounds, eventually.'

Robert had not been a straight-out lie. He and Rebecca had seen each other for six weeks before he had been posted to the RAAF. He had been nice to her, always picking her up on time and bringing her flowers from his mother's garden. She had been heavy-hearted when she had learned of his death. But that memory was not as painful as some of her others, so she felt safe to share it. From Doris's sympathetic expression it was clear that the story of Robert had created a kind of intimacy between them. Rebecca knew that when it came to women it was better to confide *something* rather than nothing at all. Mystique in a woman was alluring to men but it was throwing yourself to the dogs if you tried it with women. A woman who did not share her deepest, most painful secrets with other women was immediately under suspicion. Rebecca understood it would be better for the townspeople to view her as a heartbroken spinster rather than the truth.

The foul fishy smell that she had caught the previous day drifted in through the window. Rebecca flinched. 'They are boiling those whales they caught this morning, obviously,' she said, getting up to slam the window shut. 'It's like having day old tuna and sweaty socks stuffed into your nostrils. I hope the town is not always going to smell this bad.'

Doris shot her a glance. 'Oh yes it will ... at least from now until November. Each of those whales represents a thousand pounds in oil. That money makes a lot of difference to families in this town.'

Rebecca stiffened, not liking the feeling of being chastised for something as reasonable as objecting to a putrid smell. She flashed a smile to hide her annoyance. ‘Well, I shall try to bear it better then,’ she said.

Doris didn’t take her eyes from her face. ‘That’s the right attitude, Miss Wood. Because to us that *bad* smell is the smell of people’s livelihoods. And it would do no good to let people here believe that you thought otherwise.’

## CHAPTER THREE

After Doris left, Rebecca returned to the office and plonked herself down in the swivel chair. Her hands formed into a steeple under her chin and she listened. The post office itself was silent but the boughs of the fig tree outside were creaking in the sea breeze. She raised her eyes to the ceiling. The woman's death had nothing to do with her so why should she spoil her peace of mind pondering it? But that noise ... At first Rebecca hoped she was imagining it. Could she bear it every day? The wind was making the sea choppy and Rebecca's skin prickled with the sound of the waves rolling and whooshing onto the sand. As a child she had loved that rumbling; now she dreaded it. For a moment she saw herself at ten years old again on the long hot ride from Sydney to Whale Beach. The solid tyres of the motor bus made the shock of every stone and rut shudder through the vehicle. She pictured Debbie sitting next to her, her plump legs swinging from the seat. Their parents were sitting across the aisle: relaxed and sun-kissed, younger-looking than she would ever see them again. Debbie opened her mouth and let the bus's vibration hum through her body and out her lips. 'Ahhhhhh!' Rebecca wanted to laugh but took her responsibility as the older sibling seriously. 'Stop it!' she scolded. Debbie frowned and curled her lip. 'Make me!'

A loud *bang* came from the sorting room. Rebecca jumped. A young man in a delivery boy's uniform and cap had thrown a heavy-looking canvas bag onto the table and was now in the

process of emptying it. He whistled 'Mockin' Bird Hill' out of tune as he did so. It was like nails on a chalkboard. She cleared her throat.

'You must be Johnny?'

The young man dropped a parcel and gaped at Rebecca. He couldn't have been more than seventeen but his freckled cheeks were gaunt and lined. His mouth twisted into a number of expressions ranging from surprise to puzzlement before settling into a lopsided smile. 'Stone the crows, Miss! You gave me a fright! I wasn't expecting anyone to be here today!'

Rebecca walked into the sorting room. 'I'm the new postmistress,' she told him, reaching out her hand. 'Rebecca Wood.'

Awe flashed across the young man's face. He wiped his hand on his trousers before taking hers. His skin was cold and clammy and his palm was rough. The sight of his nails, black with what she hoped was bicycle grease, had Rebecca withdraw her hand as quickly as she had offered it. Although Johnny stared directly into her face it wasn't with the lasciviousness with which men usually regarded her. His eyes danced with a kind of silly innocence as if he were regarding his schoolmistress rather than a woman. He was more twelve than seventeen.

'Well, I am glad that you are here, Miss Wood,' he said. 'I've had a heck of a time trying to manage the office on my own as well as keeping up the deliveries. I've had nothing but complaints.'

Rebecca eyed the envelopes and parcels strewn across the table. 'Did you pick these up from the train station this morning?'

'Yes, on the nine o'clock. I can sort them now or do you want me to chop the wood for the fire first?'

The question stopped Rebecca short. 'Fire? It's not cold enough for a fire.'

Johnny blinked at her. 'Not now, but later in the afternoon the post office can get pretty chilly, even now, in spring. The last postmistress – the young lady from Wollongong – always complained of it.'

Rebecca rarely felt the cold. Even on brisk winter days in Sydney she hadn't worn a coat or scarf. Ned liked to joke that Rebecca could always raise the temperature of a room and he didn't need a blanket when she slept beside him. She couldn't fathom having a fire burning in spring. She was about to tell Johnny not to bother, but when he turned back to the post and began his tuneless whistling again, she thought she might bite through her own lip if he didn't stop that irritating sound.

'Yes, wood for the fire is a good idea,' she said, giving him a tight smile.

Johnny nodded. He whistled while he took off his jacket and hung it on a hook, and whistled while he rolled up his sleeves. He continued to whistle as he walked to the back door, found it jammed and went looking under the sink in the tearoom for some grease which he used to lubricate the hinges. When he finally left, Rebecca returned to her office with her temples throbbing. The delivery boy seemed amiable enough, but he was the kind of happy simpleton that often got on her nerves. She'd have to make sure to keep him busy and not under her feet.

While the rhythmical *thwack* of Johnny chopping wood came from outside, Rebecca sorted the day's post. Each family had their own slot in the sorting shelf. Those in town would have their mail delivered once a day, those who lived on the outskirts or further afield would have to come to the post office to collect theirs or else wait for the contractor who would deliver twice a week. Rebecca studied the family names as she worked, memorising them: Dolan, Ludlow, Ryan ... The Pike family, at 4 Ocean Road, seemed to receive the most mail of all. Mrs Pike subscribed to a number of periodicals ranging from the dull Home Journal to the audacious Harper's Bazaar to the brazen True Confessions. She also received the sensationalistic periodical True Detective. Her husband was more prosaic in his tastes, subscribing to the major newspapers from Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra. Rebecca's stomach knotted when she saw the front page of The Sydney Morning Herald: 'Mystery Woman at Centre of McKell Scandal



Remains Elusive'. She held her breath, barely able to move, as her eyes raced over the article:

*The latest revelation in the many-sided life of the Minister for External Affairs, Ned McKell, appears to be a long-standing relationship with a woman who was neither his wife nor his personal secretary. It is believed the relationship commenced some time before his appointment to the cabinet and ended earlier this year. After the scandal broke out last month when it was revealed that Minister McKell had taken Miss Thelma Marr to a Surfer's Paradise motel, the theatre actress was quick to dispel rumours that she was a homewrecker. 'I am not the first mistress he has had in his life!' she exclaimed. 'There was another woman long before me.' While Minister McKell has not been returning telephone calls, and his wife of 20 years, Cynthia, has declined to comment, the prime minister has been quick to defend one of his favourite cabinet members. 'He has made extraordinary achievements at an important time in Australia's post-war development and was key in the official peace treaty with Japan. I do not believe a man's personal affairs should be aired in the press.'*

*While those in high places may be unwilling to criticise Minister McKell's behaviour, the identity of his first mistress is the subject of conjecture in pubs, hairdressers and parlours everywhere. It seems everyone knows someone who believes they know who she is and there is hardly a glamorous woman in Australia who isn't currently under suspicion ...*

Rebecca felt the burn of bile in her chest. Damn you, Ned! She cursed under her breath and then glanced out the window to check Johnny was still outside. At the sight of the young man swinging an axe to split a log she turned back to the newspaper. Although the journalist seemed to be hinting at actresses and singers, all it would take would be one dogged reporter to catch a scent leading directly to her.

Rebecca squeezed her eyes shut. The sounds of whistles and

cheers intermingled with jazz music filled her head. V-J Day 1945. There had never been so many people gathered in Martin Place. The news of the Japanese surrender had sent Sydney into a frenzy of gaiety. Everyone was celebrating, waving streamers and flags, and dancing in the crowded streets. Her mind travelled to that party in Rose Bay, when she had first spotted Ned McKell eyeing her across the room. He'd approached her with a seductive smile on his square-jawed face. 'The one thing your eyes haven't told me yet is your name ...'

Seven years! For seven years, Rebecca had been discreet while Ned had squired her to the most fashionable nightspots: not just Sydney, but also London, Paris and New York. She had sat up with him for hours after their lovemaking, listening to his political ambitions and suggesting campaign strategies. She had hosted parties for high-profile men in the apartment Ned had rented for her and garnered support for him. She had spoken with the skill of a press secretary to the political reporters who in turn never once breathed a word of the affair in their articles. Rebecca had been not only well-liked but also respected and listened to by the party's inner circle, including the prime minister himself. Marion, who was in a similar relationship at the time with the attorney-general, likened their roles to those of women like Cleopatra and Diane de Poitiers: women who held influence over powerful men. In that whole time Rebecca had never revealed her relationship with Ned to anyone outside the inner circle. She had never even made him promise to leave Cynthia, so assured was she that they were meant to be together forever. A wedding ring would make no difference. Then Ned let his vanity get the better of him and fell for the charms of nineteen-year-old Thelma Marr, oozing with sex and youthful vitality but not possessing one ounce of common sense – or loyalty, it seemed. Even when Ned had dumped Rebecca and she was turned out of her apartment because he was no longer paying the rent, she had not betrayed him. She'd slipped away and nursed her wounded heart in a bedsitter in Neutral Bay. She'd been shocked enough by his

fickleness then. Now this? To leave her potentially exposed to the press was unfaithfulness of the worst kind! The prime minister was right when he said that the personal lives of his ministers were off limits to public scrutiny. That had been the case until stupid Thelma Marr. Thanks to the starlet's desire for notoriety the newspapers now saw the scandal as an opportunity to increase their circulations. Thelma may not have been aware that Rebecca had been Ned's previous mistress, but the gossip columnists were now after her like hounds after a fox. If they found her she would be torn to shreds as a paramour, a seductress, a femme fatale. It wasn't lost on her that the word for female fox was 'vixen'.

She studied the photograph below the article and cringed at the caption: 'McKell leaves The Celebrity Club with the striking blonde mystery woman'.

In the picture Rebecca had her hand wrapped around Ned's arm but her face was hidden in the shadows. Blonde was the hair colour she had been born with. When Doris had mistakenly thought her flame-red hair was natural it had only testified to her skill with Du Barry's Color Glo in Tiger Lily.

She folded the newspaper and placed it in the Pikes' pigeon hole. Whether her disguise was going to give her the anonymity she longed for, only time would tell. She hoped she was a good enough actress to avert suspicion – and that there wasn't anybody in town who would ask too many questions.