



*The*  
BUTTERFLY  
COLLECTOR

Sometimes the  
darkest mystery  
sheds the most light.

TEA COOPER  
BESTSELLING AUSTRALIAN AUTHOR

## *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.

'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—'have 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-coloured 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.'

'Verity, believe me, the last thing I want to do is lose you but I don't have any option.' He knocked another 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 boy, lived with her mother in rented rooms, 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 and I'm happy to pay you stringers' rates, per column inch, for the bicycle article. 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. 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 her hat on, stuck her nose in the air and marched out through the sea of faces. A few muttered goodbyes 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 grey 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 harboured 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 she hold down a job because of

her ability? 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 towards The Cut, possibly her least favourite 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 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 wel-come. 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. 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 the 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 parlour. 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 neighbour 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?'

'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.'

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 tantalising 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 centre 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—not any wedding, a society wedding. The sort of invitation that sat on a marble mantelpiece next to a carriage clock, though chance would be a fine thing.

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

SYDNEY ARTISTS MASQUERADE BALL  
TOWN HALL, AUGUST 23, 1922  
DANCING 8PM TO 2AM  
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, tantalising, 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. 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 lay 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 fluttering 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' Ball—everyone was talking about it—the first since the end of the war. Sydney's statement to the world that the dark, drear 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 trans-formed. 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 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 prised 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 eyelashes 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.