

CHAPTER 1

The Honourable Phryne Fisher stared moodily out the window of the Bendigo train. It is generally admitted that the Australian countryside has insufficient geography to go around, and the flat basalt plains outside Melbourne to the north and west have not a great deal to commend them. She remembered the lush paradise of Daylesford's spa country she had encountered in February and March. In contrast, the wide lands beyond Clarkefield were empty of distinguishing features other than hardy eucalypts and isolated farmhouses. Through the window Phryne watched the late-autumn sun slowly melt the frost on the grass. Far in the distance she could see a flock of sheep munching on a low hilltop, which had been the beneficiary of some earlier sunlight.

Sitting across from her was her companion, Dot, engrossed in a brown-covered booklet entitled *Catholic Marriage*. Phryne did not dare to guess at its contents. Dot's nuptials drew ever closer, and they were the cause of increasing anticipation, with just a frisson of dread. Dot had secured agreement from her intended (Detective

Sergeant Hugh Collins) that she would carry on assisting Miss Fisher even after her marriage. Further than that, none of the affected parties cared to speculate. ‘Let the future bring what it will’ seemed to be the prevailing consensus.

Finding little to appreciate in the scenery, Phryne took out Lionel’s letter and perused it once again.

Dear Phryne,

Well, this is a lark! I’m to be Bishop of Bendigo, no less. Baker has unexpectedly popped off—a heart attack, poor chap—and it seems the Black Spot has passed to me. It’s a jolly strange cathedral, I must say: really no bigger than a parish church. The odd thing is that St Paul’s, down on the flats, is much bigger and more impressive. It really ought to be the See, I would have thought. But Bishop’s Court—the palace, no less—is a splendid house next door to my little charge. Please come if you’d like to see the glad event of my enthronement on Sunday 19 May. Do travel the day before, though. It’s an awfully long drive, of course, but the trains are good. For heaven’s sake avoid the six-forty. It stops everywhere and it’s full of gadarening schoolboys. The 8.30 express stops only at Clarkefield and Castlemaine and gets you here at 11.30. I can pick you up in the old Bentley. I recommend the Shamrock Hotel. Feel free to borrow my car while you’re here.

Toodle-pip. I hope to see you and Dot on the glad day of my ascension, so to speak.

Best love,

Lionel

And that, Phryne reflected, was Lionel all over. Gentle self-mockery concealing considerable humility. The episcopal stationery was a nice touch; the diocesan coat of arms a complete hoot. The mitre in gold and red surmounted four quarters: a stylised blue river, a crossed spade and pickaxe, a sheaf of wheat and a bunch of purple grapes.

Phryne put the letter back in her purse and pondered the mystery of Bishop Lionel Watkins. The Anglican Church frowned upon unmarried clergy—yet Lionel had never married. Phryne had met him in traumatic circumstances in the trenches, and she smiled to herself, recalling the warm embrace of his body. He had much to offer any woman. Was it his war wound that had held him back? Insistent suggestions of suitable widows and spinsters had been urged upon him to no avail. Lionel had confided to Phryne that the Dean of St Paul's in Melbourne had disapproved of him profoundly, suspecting him of inappropriate levity.

Yet there was a greater mystery that Phryne pondered. Lionel's rise through the church had been rapid. Yes, he was of the patrician class, and that still counted for a fair bit in Australia. Archbishop Harrington Lees of Melbourne strongly supported him. Was an archbishop's word a law unto itself? Phryne doubted it. No organisation could afford that much cronyism. What did it say that Lionel had progressed from neophyte to episcopal purple in a mere ten years? Perhaps the Archbishop knew something was amiss in Bendigo and wanted an outsider to intervene? Phryne suspected as much. She knew about country towns. They incubated secrets like greenhouse tomatoes. Why else had Lionel urged her to witness his consecration? It wasn't something she would normally cross even quite a narrow street to observe. No, it made more sense that

Lionel knew that something was brewing in Bendigo, and that Phryne would feel the itch to investigate if he enticed her there.