

BASED ON THE HIT TV SERIES
MS. FISHER'S MODERN MURDER MYSTERIES



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A NOVEL

JUST MURDERED

KATHERINE KOVACIC

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The Portrait of Molly Dean

**JUST
MURDERED**

JUST MURDERED

A MS. FISHER'S
MODERN MURDER MYSTERY

KATHERINE KOVACIC



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FOR ADVENTURESSES EVERYWHERE

ABOUT MS. FISHER'S MODERN MURDER MYSTERIES

Just Murdered, written by Katherine Kovacic, is based on *Ms. Fisher's Modern Murder Mysteries* television series, Episode 1, written by Deb Cox.

The television series, *Ms. Fisher's Modern Murder Mysteries*, was created by Deb Cox and Fiona Eagger and inspired by *Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries*, the TV series based on the Phryne Fisher mystery books by Kerry Greenwood.

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PROLOGUE

Adversity and challenge were nothing new to the members of the Adventuresses' Club of the Antipodes, but disturbing events had plunged them deep into unfamiliar territory.

That morning a package had been delivered. This wasn't an unusual occurrence, and nor was this particular package entirely unexpected. Unwanted, yes, but not unexpected.

Samuel Birnside—honorary member and odd-job man—had answered the postman's ring and met him at the solid iron gate set precisely halfway along the perimeter wall. Having intercepted the package, he'd intended to take it straight inside, but instead found himself unable to move, staring at the brown paper, the numerous stamps that identified its point of origin and the spidery black handwriting. The unfamiliar scrawl hit him like a punch to the stomach, and Samuel realised a part of him had been hoping to see the address written in the firm, flamboyant style he knew so well.

But no.

Giving himself a mental shake, Samuel pushed his glasses firmly up the bridge of his nose, rolled his shoulders, and tugged

at the hem of his cardigan, settling it more comfortably. Then he turned towards the grandiose mansion and prepared to deliver the news.

He had hoped to make it all the way to the Camelot Room, the nerve centre of the Adventuresses' Club, but Birdie met him in the entry porch. Dressed in her customary jodhpurs and turtleneck, the club president's face was pale, the lines radiating from the corners of her eyes more prominent than usual. Today she seemed just as weighed down as the statues that supported the arch above her head.

She looked at the package and then at Samuel. 'So it's arrived.' Meeting her eye, Samuel could only nod.

Without another word, she turned and preceded him into the house.

Inside the Camelot Room, Birdie moved to stand behind her assigned chair, gripping the backrest upon which was affixed a small brass plaque that proclaimed it the rightful place of *Adventuress Birnside*.

Samuel placed the package in front of her, then retrieved a pair of scissors from the bureau. 'You'll want to open it first.' He passed her the scissors, and Birdie prodded the parcel with the tip of the blades, reluctant to discover its contents.

'She only took that case because of me.'

'Birdie! You can't blame yourself. Since when did Phryne Fisher do anything she didn't want to do?'

Birdie shook her head slowly, eyes glistening. If it had been anyone else, Samuel would have called them tears. But crying was not something Birdie tended to indulge in. Nonetheless, he moved a little closer, standing behind his sister's shoulder in silent solidarity.

'Right.' Birdie took a deep breath and slashed through the

string in a single motion. The outer layers of brown paper fell away, revealing a battered tin of the type that usually contained an assortment of chocolates or sweet biscuits. Placing the scissors carefully to one side, she prised off the lid and pushed back the banana leaves that had been used as padding.

Samuel and Birdie both leaned forward and peered at the contents of the tin. A revolver, its gilt barrel and pearl handle stained with mud.

Birdie slammed the lid back down with a dull clunk. ‘Meeting. Here. Now,’ she said.

Samuel nodded once and hurried from the room to summon the other Adventuresses.

Founded in 1900, while women in most parts of Australia were still fighting for the right to vote, the Adventuresses’ Club of the Antipodes was variously home or home-away-from-home to a number of women from all walks of life: women of outstanding achievement, women of skill and talent, women whose courage and tenacity were beyond question. In short, women of vision—who pushed against the limits of 1964 society—found kindred spirits within the walls of the mansion on Greenwood Place.

Samuel traced a path through the building, opening doors, knocking discreetly, or raising his voice depending on the Adventuress he was trying to rouse. In the ballroom, two women were engaged in a fencing bout, almost dancing across the floor in a series of parries and ripostes. At the sight of Samuel they stopped and raised their masks.

‘Meeting. Camelot Room,’ he said.

Leaning out a window, he spotted botanist Minnie Bell kneeling among the plants. ‘Dr. Bell! Camelot Room.’

As word spread, Adventuresses began to appear, alerted by

their colleagues or by the atmosphere now filling the house: anxiety, anticipation, and a sense of foreboding.

Samuel knocked on one last door, swinging it open without waiting for a reply. Inside, Violetta Fellini was engrossed in an experiment. Not wanting to interrupt, he paused and watched for a moment. Violetta was a study in contrasts: a classic beauty with a strict Italian upbringing who had never married, a warm and generous personality disguised by a severe hairstyle, and a shyness that at one time had tended to hide a brilliant scientific mind. It was only when she found the Adventuresses' Club that Violetta had begun to be comfortable in her own skin. Now, in her state-of-the-art laboratory, every movement was deft and assured, and her face was continually lighting up with the joy of discovery.

A beaker of blue liquid bubbled over a Bunsen burner. Violetta drew a minuscule quantity of something brown from a test tube and, using a long pipette, carefully added two drops to the beaker. There was a whoosh as the liquid turned clear, and her face was momentarily hidden by a cloud of smoke. When it dispersed she was smiling. But then she saw Samuel and the smile fell away.

'Has it arrived then?' she asked, replacing her safety goggles with a pair of glasses.

'Just now. Birdie's called a meeting.'

Violetta removed her white coat, then together they made their way through the building.

There were only two empty chairs remaining when they arrived in the Camelot Room. Violetta slid into the one bearing her name as Samuel softly closed the door and took up a position in the corner, shoulders resting against the gilt-embossed wall.

'This is all they found.' Birdie addressed the room as she

lifted the mud-smearred gun from the box and placed it gently on the table in front of her.

The air in the Camelot Room rippled with the collective sigh of the assembled women.

‘But surely...’ began one of the Adventuresses before subsiding, her question unasked.

‘So they’ve given up,’ Violetta said.

Birdie held up a hand in a gesture that was half calming, half resigned. ‘Officially, the search for the crash site is over. However, Tribal Chief Kabui said he is eternally grateful that his son’s murder was solved, and he assures us he will never stop searching the highlands of Papua New Guinea for Phryne Fisher.’

‘And if anyone could survive a plane crash in the jungle, it’s Phryne.’ Samuel’s consoling words did nothing to raise the spirits of the assembled women.

‘But without her gun...’ someone murmured.

‘Even without a gun—and regardless of the situation—Phryne Fisher would have plenty of resources at her disposal. And, above all, she has her ingenuity.’ Birdie placed both fists on the table and leaned forward.

Around the room, heads nodded: there were murmurs of approval and even a faint, ‘Hear, hear.’

Out in the hallway, the grandmother clock began to strike, and the gathering fell still as the Westminster Quarters rang out and the hours tolled. The ensuing silence was heavy with portent.

Finally Violetta cleared her throat. ‘Has a letter already been sent?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ Birdie replied. ‘Once six months had passed with no contact from Phryne, I spoke to her solicitor. She’d left detailed instructions in the event something should happen,

and following her wishes a letter—worded in a suitably...enticing manner—was dispatched weeks ago.’ Birdie swallowed hard.

‘However’—Samuel came to her rescue—‘we could only send it to the last known address, and as you’re all aware, past attempts at communication have been unsuccessful.’

‘But even if we do get a response, what then? Without Phryne, who will expose the corrupt? Champion the underdog? Challenge the bullies and bigots? Who in this town will protect the vulnerable and fight for what is right?’ Violetta’s voice cracked with emotion.

‘As ever, each of us will have her part to play, but we also need to remain hopeful, Violetta,’ said Birdie. Her gaze travelled round the room, taking in every Adventuress. Then it fell on the single empty chair. A chair bearing the name *Adventuress Fisher*. She stared at it for a long moment. ‘We *must* remain hopeful, because, God knows, we could scour the earth from pole to pole and never find another woman like Phryne Fisher.’

One

‘Are you trying to kill me?’

Peregrine’s attention snapped back to the woman sitting in front of her. Outside the sun was shining brightly, but in the hair salon, storm clouds were gathering.

‘Sorry, Mrs. Judd!’ As she loosened the perming rod, Peregrine risked a glance in the mirror. The manageress, Mrs. Morgan, was staring straight back at her, lips pursed, one eye narrowed.

‘Everything all right over there?’ Mrs. Morgan asked, scissors poised mid-snip.

‘Yes, thanks!’ Peregrine forced a smile at her client’s reflection, but Mrs. Judd wasn’t fooled.

‘You’ve only been here a few months, haven’t you, dear? And before that it was...what were you doing before you started hairdressing?’

Peregrine blew a stray lock of dark brown hair from her eyes. ‘Working at the bakery.’

‘I thought it was the pharmacy.’

Peregrine had doused three-quarters of Mrs. Judd’s head

in perming solution, but now she paused. Suddenly the frilly smock she was wearing felt unbearably hot and constricting.

‘I’ve just been looking for the right job; somewhere I can express my creativity.’

Mrs. Judd opened her mouth to reply, but her words were drowned out by the revving of a powerful engine.

All heads turned towards the salon window. There was a station wagon idling just outside: a cream station wagon, trimmed with distinctive faux wood panels.

Peregrine set a record applying the rest of the perming solution, then tucked a plastic cap on Mrs. Judd’s head. ‘Do you have plenty of magazines there? This needs to process for a while.’ She started towards the door, peeling off her gloves and smock as she went. ‘Is it okay if I take my tea break now, Mrs. Morgan?’

‘Fifteen minutes, Peregrine!’ ordered the manageress, but all she got in response was the tinkle of the bell as the door closed on Peregrine’s retreating figure.

In the car park, Eric Wild dangled an arm from the open window of his Ford Falcon Squire. Eric had been trying to look cool, but the moment he saw Peregrine a broad grin broke through the veneer of casual indifference, lighting up his handsome face.

‘Eric!’ Peregrine trailed a hand across the car’s bonnet, then leaned in and planted a lingering kiss on his lips.

‘Hop in.’ He cracked the door for her, sliding across the bench seat as Peregrine climbed behind the wheel.

‘I’ve only got fifteen minutes.’

‘You can do a lot in fifteen minutes.’

Peregrine quirked an eyebrow at her boyfriend then floored it, squealing with delight as they peeled out onto the road. At the speed she was driving it only took them a couple of minutes to get

to the beachfront car park, which—at 11 a.m. on a Wednesday—was delightfully deserted. Peregrine saw her chance and, with Eric shouting encouragement, she put the wagon through its paces, fishtailing through the gravel, accelerating and braking hard as dust billowed around them. Finally she brought the Ford to a stop overlooking the ocean. Switching off the engine, Peregrine sat for a moment, hands on the wheel, savouring the feeling of power and control. A girl could get used to this.

‘So what do you think?’ Eric’s arm slid along the backrest until the tips of his fingers rested lightly on the nape of Peregrine’s neck.

‘I love it. Where did—’

His hand brushed the edge of her jaw, cutting off the rest of the question.

‘How much do you love it?’ he asked, eyes never leaving hers.

Peregrine pressed her cheek into his palm and inhaled slowly, a feline smile curling the edges of her mouth.

‘This much,’ she said, pivoting towards him and pressing her lips hard against his.

The next few minutes were a tangle of limbs that came to an abrupt end when one of Peregrine’s kitten heels, which had somehow come adrift from her foot, found its way to a point beneath Eric’s shoulder blades. He sat up suddenly and their foreheads collided.

Peregrine put a hand to her temple, and the feel of her dishevelled hair reminded her of something.

‘Oh, no! What time is it?’ She straightened her top and began re-pinning her hair. ‘Drive! I have to get back!’

‘Peregrine...’ Eric implored, walking his fingers up her long, bare thigh to the cuff of her short shorts.

Peregrine playfully slapped Eric’s hand away and gave him a shove in the general direction of the steering wheel. ‘Come on!’

Eric sighed heavily, but he knew when Peregrine meant business. Giving up, he got the car started and they drove back to the salon in comfortable silence.



There was always a chance her extended absence would pass unnoticed, but as Peregrine hurried—with as much nonchalance as she could muster—through the door of the hair salon, she found the manageress waiting for her.

‘Peregrine Fisher!’

‘Sorry I’m a bit late, Mrs. Morgan.’ She ducked her head and tried to sidle past, but the manageress grabbed her by the arm.

‘Just how long was that perming solution left on Mrs. Judd’s hair?’ Mrs. Morgan hissed. Her face, inches from Peregrine’s, was white with fury.

Peregrine’s eyes widened. ‘Well, that depends.’

‘On?’

‘On...when you rinsed it off and applied the neutraliser?’

They both looked over at Mrs. Judd, her head now wrapped in a towelling turban, idly flicking through a copy of the *Women’s Weekly*. Then Mrs. Morgan marched across and slowly unravelled the towel. As it came away, Mrs. Judd’s nearly-dry hair was revealed: it looked like she’d stuck her finger in a power socket. Mrs. Judd glanced up and the smile of anticipation froze on her face, turning into a full-throated wail as she stared at the mirror in horror.

Mrs. Morgan rounded on Peregrine. ‘That’s it. Out!’

‘But—’

‘But nothing. I gave you a chance—against advice, mind you—because of your mother. She had her troubles, but she

was a good woman who helped me when I needed it. Giving you a leg up seemed the least I could do, but this is the last straw. Now get your bag and get out.'

'I'm sorry!'

'Sorry won't fix this!' Mrs. Morgan gestured towards her client's head and, in response, Mrs. Judd let out another wail. 'The trouble with you, Peregrine, is you don't make an effort. How old are you now? Pushing thirty? You can't expect other people to look after you forever. I know you've had a hard time since your mother died, but unless you wake up to yourself quick-smart, you're going to end up just like her!'

Stung by the words, Peregrine began to slowly gather her things. She couldn't remember a time when she'd had someone to really look after her, least of all her mother.

'And here.' Mrs. Morgan thrust a pile of envelopes towards her. 'I won't be holding post for you anymore either.'

Peregrine took the pile of letters and crammed them into her tote bag. Mrs. Morgan jerked her head in the direction of the door then turned back to her distraught client, soothing and clucking even as strands of hair drifted slowly to the floor.

Squaring her shoulders, Peregrine left the salon for the last time, giving the door a defiant shove with her hip as she went. Needing something to boost her spirits, she stopped to buy a blue heaven milkshake before starting the slow walk home, the light breeze cool on her bare midriff. Her shorts and bikini top were far more suited to the beach than the centre of town, even if the entire business district was just a few sandy streets book-ended by a petrol station and a fish-and-chip shop. But Peregrine was used to ignoring frowning shopkeepers and tutting matrons. She had never been one to play by the rules—at least, not unless they suited her.

On the unfashionable edge of town, farthest from the seashore, Peregrine turned into the Paradise Caravan Park and slowly made her way past empty sites and deserted vans until she reached the section where the waifs and strays—the permanents—resided. The sun-bleached caravan she rented was hotter inside than out, so Peregrine took her milkshake and sat on the van's step, the pile of letters in her lap.

There were quite a few, and Peregrine flicked through them, seeing on most her mother's name and the familiar crossing out of one address after another. Annabelle had never liked to stay in one place for long and had been constantly on the move. Sometimes she had been fleeing a debt; at other times she'd expressed an urge to wake up to a different view. In hindsight, it seemed to Peregrine that Annabelle had in fact been trying to outrun her own personal demons. In the end the reasons didn't matter, but growing up, Peregrine had come to dread the moment when her mother would appear, empty suitcase in hand, and tell her to start packing. It meant her schooling had suffered, but she'd learned a lot of other stuff along the way, the sort of things you could never find in a textbook. Peregrine knew that now, but back then the only thing she'd felt was the agony of leaving friends behind and having to start afresh in a new school, a new town.

Her mother would have thrown most of the letters away unopened, and Peregrine was about to do the same when one at the bottom of the pile caught her eye. Addressed to her mother, it too had come via a roundabout route, crisscrossing Australia until finally someone had written, *Try Budgiwah*, and underlined the words heavily. But unlike the flimsy paper and onionskin of the others, this envelope was a thick, cream-coloured piece of stationery, and there was an elaborate shield printed on the upper left-hand corner. It looked expensive—and important.

Peregrine brought the envelope close to her face, trying to make out the tiny words on the shield.

'*Gloria in...Gloria in Con-spectus...Hominum?*' She wrinkled her nose and flipped the envelope over. The back was even more intriguing. A large blob of red wax sealed the envelope and there was also a return address: *Greenwood Pl., Melbourne, Victoria, C1.*

Peregrine stuck her finger under the flap and pulled it loose, then extracted a single sheet of paper. There was no salutation or signature, just the same crest and address at the top of the page, but this time with a name: *The Adventuresses' Club of the Antipodes.* Beneath that was a terse, handwritten message:

Please attend urgent meeting regarding inheritance.

'Inheritance? I wish!' Peregrine snorted and was about to throw the note away, but there was something about the heavy paper and elaborate writing that made her hesitate. She read the message a second time, turned the paper over to check there was nothing on the back, then returned to the front and read it again.

Peregrine dropped the letter into her lap and looked up, her gaze wandering over the faded and rusting caravans. Even if it was some sort of trick, what did she have to lose? And if it was real...

She stood abruptly, sending the remnants of her milkshake flying, and hurried inside. There she pulled out a flimsy suitcase, the only one she owned. Peregrine didn't really have much to pack, but the caravan rocked as she slammed drawers open and closed. The narrow wardrobe had room for just an armful of clothes, and she pulled them all out and dumped them straight into the case. Somehow Peregrine managed to make everything fit, although she did have to sit on the case to get it closed. Then she had to open it again and find something more suitable to wear. After

some deliberation, she changed into pink stovepipe trousers and a patterned shirt, adding a mini-length coat to the outfit.

Before wrestling the suitcase closed for the second time, Peregrine realised there was one more thing she had to pack. Reaching above the narrow bed, she unpinned a photograph from the wall. The small snapshot, bleached from the sun, showed Peregrine and her mother, arms around each other and heads tipped together as they laughed at the camera.

'Time to move again, Mum,' Peregrine whispered, touching a finger to the faded image. She tucked the photo carefully inside the suitcase and thumped the lid closed.

Standing in the middle of the tiny space, Peregrine turned a slow circle. There was nothing left for her here, not in the caravan or in town. There was one last thing she had to do, however. Sitting down at the scratched Laminex table, she unfolded one of the envelopes from the day's post and exposed its unmarked interior. Then she used the stub of a pencil to write a note to Eric.

Five minutes later, Peregrine slammed the door of the caravan for the last time and tucked the note into the wire screen. She walked through the Paradise without a backward glance, tote bag slung over her shoulder, suitcase bumping against her thigh.

Out on the main road, she felt her resolve waver and pulled the envelope from her bag. Peregrine read the message one more time and ran a finger across the crest before carefully tucking the letter away again.

'The Adventuresses' Club,' she whispered.

Then, turning south, Peregrine Fisher stuck her thumb out and began to walk.

Two

Some days later—her limbs stiff from nights spent sheltering in barns and churches—Peregrine Fisher stood outside the Queen Victoria Market in Melbourne, waving goodbye to the driver of the fruit truck who had brought her the last hundred miles to the city. Despite having an opinion on everything—and sharing them all with her throughout the drive—he'd never heard of the Adventuresses' Club or Greenwood Place. They'd arrived in the city just as dawn was beginning to colour the horizon, so Peregrine spent several hours wandering the market sheds. She'd talked to numerous stallholders, gracefully accepted the occasional apple or orange, charmed her way to several cups of coffee and laughed off three light-hearted yet flamboyant proposals of marriage (all made by Greek and Italian gentlemen with an average age of sixty). Unfortunately, even though many of the market families had lived in Melbourne for two or three generations, each time Peregrine asked about the Adventuresses' Club, she got the same answer. No one had heard of it.

Once the sun was fully up, the trickle of customers rapidly

became a flood, and the market soon rang with the shouts of competing greengrocers.

‘Broccoli! Best in the market!’

‘Potatoes! Seven pence a pound!’

For a while, Peregrine watched, entranced by the theatrics of both the vendors and the housewives who first feigned disdain at the sight of the fruit or vegetable on offer, only to capitulate when the price was right. Her new acquaintances cast the occasional smile in her direction, but the time for talking had passed, so, sketching a wave to anyone who might notice, Peregrine picked up her suitcase and made her way out of the market.

On the street, she took a moment to orient herself, then began walking in the direction of the city centre, guided by the height of the buildings and the flow of pedestrians in their smart suits and demure dresses, hurrying to begin another day in the office. Surely one of them could direct her to the Adventuresses’ Club.

‘Excuse me.’ Peregrine reached out a tentative hand as a man strode towards her, briefcase thrust forward purposefully.

He brushed past.

‘Excuse me.’

Another one did the same, huffing with displeasure.

‘Excuse me.’ Peregrine stepped in front of a man in a brown suit, forcing him to stop and creating a near pile-up among the walkers behind him. ‘I’m looking for Greenwood Place.’

‘Never heard of it,’ he snapped, stepping around her and away.

She walked a little farther, carried along by the crowd, before inspiration struck. Moving to the edge of the footpath, Peregrine watched the traffic then abruptly stuck out her arm. ‘Taxi!’

A car screeched to a stop beside her.

‘Where to, love?’ the driver asked.

‘Oh, well, I don’t actually have any money, but I was hoping you could tell me how to get to Greenwood Place.’

The taxi driver gave her an incredulous look. ‘Ya flamin’ kiddin’ me?’ he spluttered.

Peregrine shrugged, smiled, and waited, while the driver stared. Then he gave a snort of disbelief. ‘Top end o’ town. Collins Street.’ Still muttering and shaking his head, he wrenched the steering wheel and steered the taxi back into the stream of traffic.

‘I guess that means this must be the bottom,’ Peregrine said to herself. She pulled the envelope from her bag, more as a talisman than because of any need to check the address again, and struck out with renewed energy. At least she knew now that the street existed.

Peregrine walked slowly up one of Melbourne’s main streets, thrilled by the energy and bustle, awed by the buildings, delighted by the trams, and excited just to be alive in the city. She was in no hurry as she dawdled past boutiques with alluring displays of clothes and shoes, cafés filled with steam and the aroma of coffee, and hole-in-the-wall cobblers, their tiny rooms piled high with leather. The letter had been chasing her for weeks, after all, so what difference would an hour or two make? She stopped to watch a girl dressed in a red-and-white Mary Quant-style mini striding along on the other side of the street, her arms swinging freely. In each hand the girl carried several shopping bags, all adorned with a bright pattern and the name *H. R. White*. Peregrine couldn’t decide what was more attractive: the girl herself or the sight of those colourful bags, swaying back and forth. She kept looking until the girl disappeared around the next corner.

Trailing slowly along the footpath, Peregrine came to a series of elaborate windows, each one emblazoned with the name *Blair's Emporium* and all filled with a dazzling array of products. She lingered at each display and when she finally arrived at the door, Peregrine hesitated, tempted to dive inside and see if the store lived up to the promise of its windows. But she was on a mission and, besides, trying things on would be much more fun if she had an inheritance to buy them with. Peregrine stepped away from the door, squared her shoulders and, after asking a police officer for directions, made her way to Greenwood Place and the Adventuresses' Club.

Three

Inside Blair's Emporium, a fashion parade was underway. Today's spectacle was the crowning glory of the season: a bridal extravaganza featuring the gowns of the brightest star in the Australian fashion and design scene, Florence Astor.

Blair's Mural Hall was a fitting venue for a presentation of such style and elegance. Sitting on the top floor of the emporium, the Mural Hall was a sumptuous ballroom, regularly used to host functions for the *crème de la crème* of Melbourne society. The ten murals that gave the grand room its name each had a different theme, from *Opera Personalities* to *Sport Through the Ages*, and, although men appeared in some scenes, they leaned heavily towards a celebration of women and their achievements. While most of the figures depicted were historic, an astute observer could find several familiar faces among the illustrious sisterhood, including soprano Dame Nellie Melba, novelist Katharine Susannah Prichard, and Adventuress Phryne Fisher.

At one end of the hall, a pair of staircases swept down from opposite sides of the room, the perfect setting for Florence Astor's show. The landing where they converged was a few

steps above the parquetry of the main floor, and today it had been extended out to create a catwalk where, one by one, the house models paraded. Just in front of the landing and suspended from the ceiling above, a ruched amethyst curtain hung in a perfect circle. It formed a dramatic backdrop for the cream, white, and ivory tones of the gowns and, just as importantly, concealed behind its folds the breathtaking *pièce de résistance* of Florence's show.

The catwalk itself was flanked by several rows of small gilded chairs, the majority occupied by mothers and daughters. The more mature women were dressed for the occasion in well-cut suits, while the younger generation sported hemlines that were fashionably short. Or as short as their mothers would allow. All gazed with rapt attention at the catwalk as each creation made its debut.

In the front row, Terence Blair, proprietor of Blair's Emporium, smoothed the silver hair of his temple and discreetly glanced at his watch. The highlight of the store's calendar of events, and they were late. He smiled as he caught the eye of a fashion columnist on the opposite side of the catwalk, but inside he was seething. Just as a burst of polite applause greeted the latest Florence creation—a tea-length dress with a boat neck and three-quarter lace sleeves—there was a murmured apology from Terence's left, and his wife and son appeared. Colin Blair, sharply suited and with his slicked, black hair shining in the light, was solicitous as he helped his mother into a chair and waited while she arranged herself carefully next to her husband. From her understated hat to the pointed toes of her colour-coordinated pumps, Maggie Blair was the epitome of elegance. Today, however, her classic features remained hidden behind large, black-framed sunglasses.

‘Blair’s most important show, Maggie!’ Terence hissed, bending close to his wife’s ear. ‘I reminded you last night! Is it too much to ask you to conjure up a modicum of interest?’ He smiled broadly and clapped for the model currently gliding past.

Leaning in from the other side, Colin placed a reassuring hand on his mother’s arm. ‘Not to worry. We’re here now, Mother, and it looks like Florence Astor has outdone herself.’



Backstage, Florence herself was feeling far less confident. In honour of the occasion her bobbed hair had been styled to greater fullness, making her look like a blonde Jackie Kennedy. Her black shift—simple yet timeless—was, of course, one of her own designs. Florence had earned her fashion stripes in the ateliers of Paris and Milan before returning to Melbourne and launching her own eponymous label, so staging a fashion parade was something she’d done dozens of times before. But that didn’t stop the nerves or sleepless nights. Each collection was a gamble, requiring just the right mix of the familiar with the bold design innovation that had made Florence Astor a household name. Today’s bridal show in particular had to be perfect and, to her discerning audience, everything they had seen so far had exceeded expectations. But Florence knew illusion was everything, and behind the scenes, tension was increasing as the finale drew close.

‘Keep it up, ladies. Remember, look triumphant! You’re getting married!’

Florence sent the next model down the runway, watched for a moment to see how the bridal mini dress was received, then turned to the next girl, adjusting the ivory pillbox she was

wearing to a more jaunty angle and fluffing out the bejewelled veil. Satisfied, Florence stepped away and surveyed the backstage area.

‘Has *anyone* seen Barbie? Has she even had the good grace to telephone?’ she asked.

Lewis Knox appeared from behind a rack of gowns. Employed by Blair’s as a storeman and occasional window-dresser, Knox had made it his business to ensure everything—from shoes and stockings to hats and accessories—was where it should be for the fashion show. Now, slightly out of breath from his latest search for the missing model, he shook his head.

‘Sorry, Miss Astor,’ he said. ‘I’ve looked everywhere, but there’s no sign of her.’

Florence threw up her hands. ‘I simply cannot believe this! So unprofessional. We’ve had to cover for her for the entire show. I’ll be damned if I let her ruin the finale! Pansy!’

Pansy Wing emerged from the corner where she’d been perched on a stool, waiting for her last turn on the catwalk. Dramatic sweeps of heavy black eyeliner and long false lashes accentuated her already-stunning eyes, while cherry red lipstick enhanced the cupid’s bow of her pout. She hurried over to Florence, working every one of her natural assets, fully aware of the intensity of Lewis Knox’s gaze.

‘The showstopper, Pansy, the final gown—it’s yours. Hurry and get dressed,’ Florence said, one eye still on the catwalk.

‘Yes! At last!’ Pansy whooped, her cool facade slipping as she rushed away. She’d been one of Blair’s house models for several years, but, despite her poise and beauty, Pansy had always come second to Barbie Jones.

Florence clapped her hands. ‘The rest of you ladies, find your places, check your teeth for lipstick, and get ready to roll!’

The models arranged themselves in order, straightening hems, tweaking veils, and resettling bustlines as necessary. Florence gave Pansy as much time as she could before sending the line of women sashaying down the catwalk, accompanied by the rustling of fabric and the sighs of the audience. Even so, the last model had completed her turn and the dramatic pause was becoming slightly awkward before Pansy stepped around the amethyst backdrop.

The dress was a triumph. Floor-length white silk with a full train, the strapless bodice and elegant straight line were transformed into something indescribably chic by the addition of an oversized bow, angling down from Pansy's shoulder to her opposite hip. There were gasps of delight from the audience and the polite applause swelled into heartfelt admiration for a designer at her peak.

Pansy, her black hair arranged in an elegant chignon, smiled radiantly as a male model stepped towards her and offered his arm. She and her escort advanced slowly along the catwalk, giving the audience time to appreciate every detail of the design and the brides-to-be a chance to picture themselves walking down the aisle in Florence Astor's gown of the season.

'Bravo!' Terence Blair's grin was all teeth. Beside him, Maggie Blair also applauded, though her smile was tentative and quick to fade.

Backstage, Florence Astor prepared to step into the spotlight while Lewis Knox, peering around a corner so he could see the main room, waited for the right moment. At the far end of the catwalk, Pansy stepped away from her escort and struck a pose.

Now.

Knox pulled a lever and the amethyst curtain at the back of the catwalk began to rise.

Bit by bit, the tiers of a gigantic faux wedding cake were revealed to the delighted oohs and aahs of the audience. Over eight feet tall—and with each layer festooned with swags and flowers crafted from strips of plaster-soaked linen—the cake had taken the Blair’s window-dressers weeks to construct.

Florence Astor was moving around the base of the cake as the curtain rose the last few feet, exposing the topmost tier. As she stepped to the centre of the catwalk, she was conscious of the crowd’s approval of her and the collection. Florence smiled graciously and watched as Pansy, one arm curved elegantly towards the sky, began to turn a slow circle.

A hush fell over the audience.

Then someone screamed.

In an instant, the room descended into chaos. Chairs scraped across the parquetry and fell, more screams and shouts pierced the air and one matronly woman slid to the floor in a dead faint, her Oleg Cassini suit in disarray.

Florence, glancing desperately left and right, realised the audience’s attention was no longer focused on Pansy or the designer herself but on something behind her. Pansy’s slow turn had become a shocked pivot, and now she stared at Florence, eyes wide. Then her gaze moved up and she let out a blood-curdling shriek before swooning into the arms of her handsome escort.

Florence spun around. The giant wedding cake towered above her in all its ostentatious glory, except for the top. Instead of the delicate tulle heart she had asked for, splayed across the top of the cake was the missing model, Barbie Jones. She was wearing a short wedding dress, but her staring eyes, protruding tongue, and blue complexion made it clear that Barbie was very, very dead. A long veil fixed in her copper-red hair had somehow

become caught in the curtain's mechanism, which was still in operation. Florence watched in horror as the curtain continued to rise, pulling on the dead model's head and causing her stiff body to jerk about like a broken wind-up toy.

'Bring it down! Bring it down!' Mr. Blair was shouting, his stentorian voice finally cutting through the din.

But the mechanism had jammed and the amethyst curtain did not fall. Barbie Jones remained in full view. Flashbulbs popped as newspaper photographers, sent to capture the parade and its attendees for the society pages, found themselves on the scene of a far bigger story.

'Everyone out!' Having failed to shield his well-heeled clients from the appalling spectacle, Terence Blair had decided his best option was to clear the room as quickly as possible. 'Everyone out! Now! *Please!*'

He began trying to herd women towards the doors at the far end of the hall and gestured for his son to do the same. Maggie Blair remained seated in the front row, forgotten. Her sunglasses were still in place, masking both her expression and the direction of her gaze.

Florence took charge of Pansy and the other models, corralling them backstage out of sight of the wedding cake and helping them into street clothes. She sent Knox in search of hot tea, but before he returned, one of the girls produced a small flask which passed rapidly from hand to hand. Florence was tempted to take a decent slug herself, but the last thing she needed was to face Mr. Blair and the police with alcohol on her breath.

Closing her eyes, Florence tried to forget the sight of Barbie, dead, on top of the cake. *At least she's not wearing one of my creations*, she thought, then hated herself for thinking it. It hardly mattered anyway. The show was ruined. Suddenly it felt like the

walls were closing in: she needed fresh air, and the police could find her outside. Florence snatched up her bag and ducked out through the nearest door.

Gradually, the sound of shocked voices and hurrying feet diminished as the staff and management of Blair's Emporium cajoled and soothed their customers while bundling them out of the Mural Hall and away.



The quiet was quickly replaced by the heavy thump of police boots. Terence Blair, standing off to one side with his secretary, watched morosely as the police photographer began setting up his camera, and pointed mutely when a couple of uniformed officers asked where they might find a ladder, in preparation for bringing Barbie down. He contemplated the scene in front of him. All the doors to his magnificent Mural Hall were now closed, and in front of each one stood a policeman, ready to deny entry. Or exit. The gilded chairs on which the cream of Blair's clientele had so recently perched were a scattered mess, as though someone had suddenly announced a sale in the shoe department. He glanced at his secretary. Behind her thick glasses, Joyce Hirsch's eyes glittered with tears, but she stood with notepad and pencil poised, just in case he had any orders to issue.

'Poor Barbie,' Joyce murmured.

'The customers!' Terence Blair groaned.

Colin Blair approached his father. 'Mother...'

'She's over there.' Blair senior gestured to where his wife now stood at the back of the Mural Hall, either fascinated by the goings-on or shocked into immobility. 'Get her out of here, Colin. Take her home.'

Colin opened his mouth to respond then snapped it shut again. Collecting his mother, he put a comforting arm around her shoulder then, after a brief discussion with one of the police officers, ushered her out of the nearest exit. The door had only just closed behind them when it was flung open again and a heavy-set man pushed through, overcoat flapping. He paused to take in the room, settled his greasy hat more firmly on his head, then stomped directly towards Terence Blair.

‘Blair? Chief Inspector Sparrow. Central Police.’ He stuck out a meaty hand.

Blair hesitated a moment before shaking it. ‘Did you say Central? I went to school with your superior. Had dinner with him just last week.’

Sparrow forced a tight smile then turned to survey the scene. ‘Bit of publicity! This’ll be front page in the evening edition. Congratulations! The whole town will be talking about your store.’

‘You can’t seriously think I want Blair’s Emporium linked with a story like this? The only person who’ll be happy about this is the competition. Harvey White will expect my customers to beat a path to the door of his second-rate store now! If this isn’t cleared up quickly, and with a minimum of fuss, it’ll be a disaster.’

Another man entered the Mural Hall in the inspector’s wake. Tall, with a chiselled profile and conservatively cut brown hair, everything about his appearance screamed ‘police,’ but his approach was far more subtle than that of Inspector Sparrow. Detective James Steed had already taken statements from several witnesses, including Florence Astor, whom he’d found outside smoking one cigarette after another. Now he went straight to the wedding cake and watched as Barbie Jones was

brought down and laid on a stretcher. He waited until a sheet was arranged over her lower body before bending in for a closer look at the angry red mark around her neck. After several minutes he stepped back and signalled to the ambulance attendants, then watched respectfully as they covered Barbie's face and slowly wheeled her from the room. Detective Steed made a slow circuit of the wedding cake, examining its construction while wondering how—and why—the victim had been placed on top. On the floor behind the cake he was surprised to find a few items of women's clothing, dumped in a pile. Steed used the tip of his pencil to pick through them, lifting each garment and scrutinising it carefully.

'Steed? Steed!' The shout came from the other side of the cake and was followed quickly by Inspector Sparrow himself.

'Sir.' The young detective stepped forward smartly.

'Do we know how Barbie Doll died?'

'From the mark on her neck it looks like Barbie *Jones* was strangled with something—a cord or belt of some sort, perhaps—but there's no sign of the murder weapon. I'll organise some officers to conduct a thorough search of the hall and the backstage area.'

'What about when? Do you have any idea when she died, Steed?'

Detective Steed sucked in a breath and kept his voice controlled. 'I'll have to wait for the coroner's report and confirm her movements last night, but at this stage I'm working on the assumption that Miss Jones was killed in the early hours of the morning, before the store opened.'

'You're working on an assumption.' Inspector Sparrow rocked back and forth on his heels as he studied Steed's face.

'Until I can confirm more details, yes. Sir.'

‘Right. Good. What about this morning after the store opened? Who was around?’

‘Quite a few people actually. According to the witnesses I’ve spoken to so far, Miss Astor, the designer, was here early, as were Mr. Terence Blair and his secretary, Joyce Hirsch.’ Steed consulted his notebook. ‘The models were backstage in the dressing room and the storeman, Lewis Knox, was mainly in the loading dock but was also up here on and off, attending to a few final details for the fashion parade.’

‘What about Blair’s missus? Saw her on the way in. She looks a bit...’ Sparrow held out a hand, palm down, and waggled it. ‘Rather him than me!’

‘Maggie Blair and her son Colin—who’s the assistant manager—were running late. They arrived together after the fashion parade had started.’

Sparrow stared at him for a moment, but there was nothing missing from Steed’s report, nothing to criticise. Instead, the inspector poked the scuffed toe of his shoe at the pile of clothing on the floor. ‘What about this lot then?’

‘Undergarments—slip, corset, and brassiere—that appear to belong to the victim, sir, but they’re badly torn, as though they were removed with force.’

‘So our killer ripped her clothes off, then dressed her like a fairy.’

‘A bride, sir.’

‘Bride, fairy...’ Inspector Sparrow shrugged. ‘Either way, whoever did it is clearly a fruitcake. Give me a straightforward shooting during an armed robbery any day.’

Sparrow took another look around, his gaze lingering briefly on Pansy Wing as she leaned in the dressing room doorway, a slim cigarette held between her fingers. ‘Right. I’ll

leave you to it, Steed,' he said, 'but I'm expecting a report on my desk today.'

'Sir.'

'And I want to hear what that Astor woman has to say with my own ears. Get her to come into the station at her earliest convenience. Actually, forget the convenience part.' He pushed his fists deep into the pockets of his rumpled coat and turned away.

James Steed watched his boss depart then tipped his head from side to side, trying to get rid of some of the tension in his neck. He looked across and caught Pansy Wing's eye. She met his gaze for a moment, then abruptly stubbed her cigarette on the sole of her shoe and disappeared into the dressing room. By the time he got there, she was already putting on her coat.

'A few questions before you go, Miss...Wing, is it?' He pretended to glance at his notebook.

Pansy sighed and waved a hand at him to continue.

'Were you and Barbie Jones close?'

Pansy shook her head. 'Only in the sense that we've modelled together at Blair's for ages.'

'Can you tell me what happened?' he asked.

'All I can tell you is that she didn't turn up for the show. And then...'

Pansy gestured towards the Mural Hall.

'And you took her place as star of the show?'

'Just what are you—' she began, hands on hips.

'Someone had to.' The soft voice came from behind Detective Steed and he spun around.

Lewis Knox emerged from among the racks of wedding dresses.

'You're the storeman, aren't you?' Steed asked.

Knox nodded as he moved to stand next to Pansy. 'Someone had to take Barbie's place. The show would have been ruined otherwise.'

The detective winced, but Knox seemed completely oblivious to the irony of his words.

‘Did either of you see Miss Jones this morning?’ Steed looked from one to the other.

‘We were all busy getting ready for the show,’ Pansy said.

‘And you weren’t concerned when she didn’t turn up?’

‘It wasn’t a problem until about half an hour before the show, when Miss Astor started asking for Barbie. Models just come and go whenever they like.’ There was a note of belligerence in the storeman’s voice.

‘I just thought she was running late...as usual!’ Pansy shrugged. ‘Barbie never cared about holding everyone up, and she loved to make an entrance.’

Steed’s eyebrows rose and he stared at Pansy. ‘I see.’ He scrawled something in his notebook and let the silence stretch before asking his next question. ‘Why didn’t anyone notice Miss Jones on the cake until the end of the parade?’

‘The curtain was in place, and after Miss Astor made her final adjustments at yesterday’s rehearsal she gave us all strict orders not to touch anything,’ Knox said.

‘Florence Astor is always very particular.’ Pansy rolled her eyes. ‘You should have heard the argument she had with Barbie yesterday!’

‘Really? They were arguing? Miss Astor didn’t mention that.’ Detective Steed flipped his notebook closed. ‘Is she still here?’

Pansy Wing and Lewis Knox looked at each other and shrugged helplessly.

‘Never mind. I know where to find her.’ Steed slapped the notebook into the palm of his hand and, with a nod, took his leave.