

The
MYSTERY
WOMAN
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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 a 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 to this coastal town when there were dozens 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 blooms. Rebecca tugged down her suitcase from the rack and pulled on her gloves. She stepped onto the platform at the same time as the stationmaster appeared from his office, rubbing his bald head before he replaced his cap and hitched his trousers over his substantial belly. He stopped in his tracks and his eyes widened 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 devour. 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.’

The Mystery Woman



Rebecca hadn't wanted a lift and asked about a taxi, but the stationmaster had told 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 waddling 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 realised what the problem was. '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, greengrocer, butcher and general 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 dope. 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 and chickens picked 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 belted striped dress and blue cardigan was waiting on the veranda. She seemed to be deep in thought but as the car engine 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

The Mystery Woman

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 floral scent of Lux soap 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 pine, painted cream. The entire house took less than a minute to inspect. 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

tilled bathroom. The house was half the size of Rebecca's old apartment in Potts Point which had looked out over Elizabeth Bay and been decorated in silver velvet furnishings and a teak cocktail cabinet. The walls had been papered in teal blue damask. She wondered what her Sydney friends would make of this tiny doll's house with its hanging 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, glad her landlady had provided some basic supplies. She hadn't given any thought to what she might eat that evening, or the following morning. 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 replied 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 there was more to the story than Doris was letting on. 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.