



THE GIRL  
*in the*  
PAINTING

A NOVEL

TEA COOPER

# ONE

MAITLAND TOWN, AUSTRALIA, 1906

The bell rang late. Not until after 7:18. This didn't bode well. Jane scrambled out of bed, clambered into her Sunday best, and wrangled her hateful lisle stockings up above her knees. Sister Mary Ann wasn't one for patience. "*Before breakfast*," she'd said.

"What're you galloping around for—you're not going to miss out. It's Sunday. Wine and wafers first." Lydia Lie-All-You-Like Lewis rolled over and buried her head under her pillow.

"She wants me downstairs." Leaving her unmade bed, Jane clattered down the twenty-nine timber stairs to where Sister Mary Ann stood waiting, her black habit flapping like a bedraggled crow.

For the first time in her memory Jane had a clear conscience, although she'd known from the moment the bell rang the day wouldn't go well. Three minutes and twenty-four seconds could make all the difference.

Sister Mary Ann stood beneath the wall clock waiting. She gestured to the bottle-green door across the landing. "Don't speak until you're spoken to and mind your manners."

Encouraged by a hefty shove between her shoulder blades, Jane catapulted into the room.

A man sat at the desk, head bent, studying a piece of paper. Did

*“Don’t speak until you’re spoken to and mind your manners”* mean Jane shouldn’t move? She hadn’t a clue. Wouldn’t it be good manners to invite a girl in, especially after you’d demanded her presence before Communion?

The man lifted his head, and eyes, deep and dark, drilled into her. “Come in! Come in! Don’t be hanging around like a hoverfly.” The Irish brogue came as a bit of a surprise. He didn’t sound anywhere near as fierce as he looked.

Jane ran her tongue over her lips and tried to speak, but nothing wanted to come out. Not a single word. Jane was never stuck for words. Not ever. At least not that she could remember. The thick carpet cushioned her feet as she took a step into the room and closed the door behind her.

“Sit down.” He pointed across the desk to the chair opposite, his unsettling gaze fixed on her. If she sat down she’d be lucky to be able to see over the top of the desk.

Without raising her eyes from the tips of her boots, she mumbled, “I’ll stand.”

“Very well, Jane.”

Good grief! He knew her name. Who was he?

“The name’s Michael, Michael Quinn.”

Michael Quinn! She’d seen that name, seen it on the big polished board in the hallway along with the names of all the governors and other important people in town. He was nothing like she imagined. The creases around his eyes made it look like he did a lot of smiling, and his voice held more than an echo of Ireland, a bit like Mrs. O’Rourke in the laundry but deeper, richer. He stood and held out a hand about four times the size of hers.

She gave her palm a surreptitious swipe and took it. “I’m Jane.” He knew that; he’d called her by name. “Pleased to meet you.”

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“Please sit down.” He inclined his head toward the chair and fidgeted his hand.

Oh no! She loosened her fingers, let her hand drop from his, then perched on the edge of the chair.

Once he’d stopped rubbing his squashed fingers, he interlaced them under his clipped beard. It was strange: he had black hair but a beard the gray of the old pots in the scullery.

“Now, Jane, how old are you?”

Not so bad a start, she could manage that. “I’ve been here for nine years, three months, one hour, and twenty-three minutes. Maybe twenty-seven, the breakfast bell was close to three and a half minutes late.” And in all that time, no one had claimed her. “See, that’s how long ago I was dropped off on the doorstep, in the dead of night.” Three thousand, three hundred and seventy-eight days ago. “November the first. It was a Sunday. I was two weeks old.” Not that she could remember. Sister Mary Ann had told her in the end, after a deal of prodding and poking, though how she knew was anyone’s guess.

Jane always dreamed that one day Florence Nightingale would glide through the dormitory door, light in hand, and spirit her away, the child of her heart she’d been forced to relinquish while she went off saving people.

“So you’ve been here ever since?”

“Yes, sir.” Why was he asking her these questions? Sister Mary Ann could’ve answered them. She’d got everything about every one of the foundlings written in that big leather book of hers, the one with the brass key that she kept dangling from the chain around her waist, same as the one to the cupboard under the stairs.

“And you have no idea who your mother or father may be?”

Her heart gave a little leap. Was he going to tell her Miss Nightingale had come to claim her? Rubbish. That wasn’t going to

happen. Not to her. She wasn't going to get a new family either. Last time someone had tried they'd sent her back, claimed she talked too much. They'd taken Emmaline instead. It was because of her name. She knew it was. Jane, plain Jane. Couldn't Sister Mary Ann have done any better?

"Jane?"

And Piper, what kind of a surname was that? She had no intention of taking up the bagpipes. Nasty, squealing things made from sheep's innards fiddled with by men in skirts.

"Your mother or father? You've no idea?"

"No, sir. None at all." She sat up a little straighter.

"Your aptitude with numbers must have come from somewhere."

*Aptitude.* What was that? Was it good or bad? "I don't know nothing about my aptitude, sir."

"My mistake. Let me try again." He picked up the sheaf of papers from the desk and flicked through them. The sun glinted on the stained glass window behind him. So many delicious shapes and such perfect symmetry: six diamonds, four rhombi, sixty-two perfect small green squares, an equal number of rectangles . . .

"Jane!"

The patterns blurred. "Yes, sir."

Mr. Quinn tapped the top paper. "When you completed this evaluation, who were you sitting next to?"

It wasn't an evaluation. It was a test, plain and simple, like they did at the end of every year so Sister Mary Ann could tell who'd done their lessons right and could go to the next class. "Emmaline, sir. I always sit . . . no, sat—she's gone now, gone to her new family—next to Emmaline. She comes before me in the alphabet see, sir."

Jane never could understand that, why there was no one whose name began with *F*, *G*, *H*, or *I*. Whatever happened to all the Florences,

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Glorias, Harriets, and Irises? Maybe they didn't give names like that to girls dumped on the doorsteps of orphanages.

The frown lines on Mr. Quinn's forehead wriggled up and down as he flicked through the papers. "Can't be that. Who sits on the other side?"

"No one, sir. Sister Mary Ann makes me sit next to the wall, says I'd talk the hind leg off a donkey, so it's the safest place." She clamped her hand over her mouth. Not the right thing to say, not at all. Not in polite company, and sure as eggs Mr. Quinn was polite company, with his neatly folded cravat and high-winged collar. He made an impolite snort and his lips curled, a smile perhaps.

"Is this work all your own?"

Now he thought she was a hoaxer! "I'm no cheat, sir." She clamped her back teeth. Not a good thing. She mustn't get angry, not like she did when those people had taken her home for tea. That hadn't ended well—it had for Emmaline, though.

"I'm not suggesting you are, Jane. I am trying to discover if this is all your own work. You haven't made a single error. I've never seen a set of results like these. You should be very proud of yourself."

Next thing she was standing, leaning across the desk. There it was in black and white: 100 percent. "Ha! I thought it was easy." She'd told Sister Mary Ann and got her knuckles rapped for her trouble. "Sister Mary Ann says pride comes before a fall."

"Well, you haven't fallen. No one else has achieved such a remarkable score. Not even in the senior class. Congratulations!"

She sat back down on the chair and gave Mr. Quinn her biggest smile. "I like numbers, sir. See, they don't lie, sir. Not like people. There's only right or wrong, no in-betweens."

"An excellent summary. You and my sister would get along just fine. Perhaps you'd like to meet her, come to tea."

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His sister! No! It wouldn't be fine. "Oh. No, thank you, sir. I'm not good at tea. See, I spill things and I can't keep me mouth shut. I talk too much. I can't help it. I have all these ideas rushing around in my head and they fall out, like Wallaman Falls."

"Wallaman Falls?"

"The highest permanent single-drop waterfall in Australia. Almost a thousand feet." Surely he knew that. "It's in Queensland."

He made that funny snorting sound again so Jane sat on her hands and shut her mouth.

"There are four scholarships available at the girls' school here in Maitland, and my sister and I would like to offer you one."

"I'm already at school, here at the orphanage. I've got two more years, then I start me apprenticeship so I can find a job." Get away, begin her real life, away from the nuns and their flapping black robes and plaster faces.

"I understand, but what we are proposing is sending you to St. Joseph's Girls School to complete your education. After that you'd be able to find worthwhile employment, perhaps as a governess or even a teacher at the school."

The thought didn't fill her with a huge rush of excitement, although it sounded better than working in the laundry and the piles of mending she never got through. Sewing buttons was fine, she'd worked that out, four nice little symmetrical holes, but she detested darning!

"So what do you think of that idea?" Mr. Quinn's eyes twinkled at her from the other side of the desk.

"I don't want to be a governess or a teacher. I wouldn't be any good at that."

That made him frown. She'd done it again, spoken her mind. He'd offered her an escape and she'd as good as spat in his eye.

"You're young yet."

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“I’ll be ten in eight months, twelve days, twenty-two hours, and . . .” —she glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece—“and twenty-three minutes.” Providing Sister Mary Ann had told her the truth. “All the girls begin their apprenticeships when they’re twelve.”

“Jane, this isn’t going to be an apprenticeship. This’ll be all about furthering your education—history, geography, literature, the classics.”

“What about arithmetic? That’s what I like, but there ain’t no apprenticeships for arithmetic.”

He grabbed at his chin and gave his beard a scratch; it made a rasping sound, a bit like the antechinus in the roof above the dormitory. “There are jobs that involve arithmetic.”

A jolt ran right up her spine and made her scalp prickle. Lice or excitement? She wasn’t sure. What jobs? Working in a bank maybe, counting other people’s money. Nobody would give her a job like that, not after the muddle about Bertha’s sixpence. Jane hadn’t taken it; she’d found it on the floor and didn’t know who it belonged to. She’d handed it over the minute Sister Mary Ann had told her it had gone missing. “What sort of jobs?”

“I mentioned my sister. Do you remember?”

“Yes, you said we could have tea.” She slumped back in the chair. Would it be rude to ask again about jobs that involved arithmetic?

“My sister is the accountant for our business.”

“Accountant?” It wasn’t often people used words she didn’t know, but he’d come up with two. *Aptitude* and now *accountant*. Strange that both should start with the first letter of the alphabet. What was an accountant? Sister Mary Ann often said “on no account.” Perhaps he meant she’d put her foot in it. Lost this scholarship before she’d even discovered what it was about.

“An accountant is a person whose job it is to keep or inspect financial records.”

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“Like a bookkeeper, you mean?” Now, that wouldn’t be a bad idea. But she’d never seen a girl who kept the books. The well-named Mr. Noseworthy, who was about a hundred and came once a month to sit in Sister Mary Ann’s cubbyhole and made it smell of sweat and ink, called himself a bookkeeper.

“Not the same, however some of their duties do overlap. You’d need to have an excellent grasp of bookkeeping before you could call yourself an accountant. An accountant’s job is broader; they analyze figures and offer business and financial advice.”

Offer advice? Who’d take the advice of a girl like her, a foundling?

“I think it would be a good idea if you talked with my sister.”

The tinkle of the bell on his desk brought Jane up short. Two seconds later Sister Mary Ann stuck her bulbous nose around the door; odds on she’d been listening to every word. “Come along, Jane. We can’t be wasting anymore of Mr. Quinn’s time.”

“On the contrary, Sister Mary Ann, Jane and I have been having a delightful discussion, which we wish to continue tomorrow afternoon at my home. Would you be so good as to ensure she is delivered to the house at 4:00 p.m. sharp? I shall escort her back here afterward.”

“Yes, sir.” Sister Mary Ann performed a series of head bobs that she must have learned from the apostlebirds in the park over the road.

“Off you go, Jane. Elizabeth and I will look forward to seeing you tomorrow afternoon.”

Jane opened her mouth but no words seemed to want to come out.

“You have heard of my sister, I’m sure.” Good grief! Of course she had.

Everyone knew Miss Elizabeth Quinn.

## TWO

BIRKENHEAD, ENGLAND, 1862

Ó'Cuinn. Michael." The clerk studied the sheath of papers in his hand, then spat toward the rail. The globule missed, landing with a plop on the deck. "Where's your sister?"

A small hand crept into Michael's palm and his sister turned her face up, leaned against his legs.

The mismatched group of people—men, women, children—standing behind him pushed closer, impatient to present their papers and secure a berth.

"Get a move on. Answer the question."

He stared up at the mast, his mind in turmoil. The crowd behind him rumbled. "She's here."

The clerk scribbled a series of unintelligible marks on their papers and glared down. "Got you down for the single men's accommodation." He flicked his thumb over his shoulder, down into the bowels of the ship. "No berth for her down there. Says here she's in the family accommodation with Nuala Ó'Cuinn."

"That's me aunty. She died six months ago. I told them in the office." A bloke behind him gave a shove, releasing the festering coil of anger deep in Michael's gut. "We've been on the manifest for almost

a year, down for family accommodation.” He stabbed at the papers. “Says so right there. You sort it out. You’re the one pushing your weight around, keeping everyone waiting.”

“Remarks like that ain’t going to get you anything special. No single men in family accommodation. How old are you?”

“Fifteen.”

“Over fourteen. Too old for family accommodation.”

Michael drew in a slow breath. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph! What was a man supposed to do? It couldn’t be the first time a brother and sister had immigrated to Australia.

A stout woman who barely reached his shoulder pushed forward. “I’ll take the little angel with me.”

Michael reached down and hitched the mop-headed little bundle of bones up against his shoulder.

“Who are you?” The clerk rolled his eyes and leaned on his elbow.

“Mrs. Cameron. Mrs. William Cameron. Full fare-paying passenger.” She thrust her ticket at the clerk and smiled down at Michael’s sister. “You’re a pretty little thing, ain’t you, with them big blue eyes and lovely curls. Lucky you didn’t get your brother’s black looks.”

What was a man to do? The woman looked kindly enough.

“I’ll get her settled with me. Be good to have some company. What’s your name, poppet?”

“Elizabeth. Her name’s Elizabeth.”

She buried her worried little face in his neck and gave a snotty sniff.

Michael set her down and hefted the bag, the one he’d packed with care when the immigration office had handed out the clothes. Two dresses and a bonnet for Sunday best, new boots and stockings. “One moment.” He squatted down, felt along the back. It was there, tucked in the back as he remembered. The rag doll Mam had made from scraps; he’d saved it for this very moment. Grief snatched at the

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back of his throat. He pulled the doll out. Gave it a shake. "I've got something for you. Mam made it."

For a moment Elizabeth didn't respond; she just looked at him with those ancient eyes. Then her mouth formed a little circle of surprise. She reached out her hands and clutched the doll tight to her chest.

"What will you be calling her?" Mrs. Cameron bent down and smoothed the doll's woolen hair.

She hesitated for a moment, opened her mouth, and as clear as a bell said, "Lizzie."

"Aye. That's a pretty name. Is that what your mam calls you?"

She turned her wide, watchful eyes to Michael and nodded.

"Come along. We'll go and get matters sorted. You bring Lizzie and we'll see your brother once we're settled."

Without a word, she tucked the doll beneath her chin and slipped her hand into Mrs. Cameron's, and they disappeared into the crowd.

The two men behind him hoisted their trunks onto their shoulders and peeled off in the direction of the lower decks. It was as much as he could do to put one foot in front of the other. His heart bled, everything around him a distant blur of noise and disharmony. For a long time he'd begrudged Mam and Da's decision to leave him and Lizzie behind with Aunty Nuala and take advantage of the free passage for married couples without children. This was supposed to be the first day of their new life. The life Mam and Da had planned, scrimped, and saved for.

The pathetic queue of humanity shuffled forward as their names were crossed off yet another list, papers checked again before they were allocated a spot. "Last one on the left."

Michael eased his way between the cramped bunks and threw the bag down, the stench of sweat and bilge water turning his gut. They hadn't even left the river yet. He never thought he'd be seasick, hadn't

been when they'd crossed from Dublin to Liverpool. Air, he needed fresh air. He slipped back onto the deck.

The clouds had darkened and a biting wind swept across the river. It matched his mood. He doubted he'd ever be warm again. He leaned over the rail, squinted into the distance trying to pick out the ravaged spire of the workhouse chapel.

Someone behind jostled him. He straightened up, felt a tug at the back of his jacket. Unbelievable. They'd no patience. Let a man alone to grieve.

He whipped around, intent on delivering a mouthful, then felt a nudge against the back of his knees. "What are you doing here?" He darted a glance around and squatted down. "Darlin', you can't be staying with me."

Her face crumpled into a ferocious frown and her bottom lip quivered. He scooped her up and she burrowed into his chest. "I can't change anything, darlin'. The ship's sailing."

He nudged her forward through the stinking, cloying crush. Where was Mrs. Cameron? She said she'd take care of her. He set her down and she wedged herself between his boots, eyes pleading.

The ship juddered and groaned in the river current as the steam-tug came alongside. Before he could release the swell of frustration building in his chest, a series of scuffles broke out, then a splash as a body hit the water.

"What's going on?" He turned to the bloke standing next to him at the rail.

"Stowaways. They'll take 'em ashore while they can. On the pilot boat, along with the officials."

Six men, hardly more than boys, hands manacled, bumped along the deck.

"Stowaways?"

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“Trying to get themselves a free passage, or worse, paid their money to the wrong person, to the runners. If they got aboard and managed not to show themselves for three or four days, the captain ain’t going to turn the boat around.”

“Hadn’t occurred to me.” Michael’s gut churned, then lightened. Their papers were in order.

“Heard tell of a lass who hid herself in a box. All well and good, but she hadn’t taken mind of the lack of air. Found her body amongst the cargo when they docked. Gruesome sight, that would be.”

Michael watched as the motley band of stowaways were prodded and pushed down the rope ladder into the row boats. Not bound for the colonies but for Canning Half Tide Dock, then Walton Gaol. His stomach gave another lurch. It was fine. They’d passed the check.

Michael stepped to one side and crouched down. “Look at me, darlin’.”

She gazed up at him, big blue eyes, trust shimmering bright. A wan smile tugged at the corner of her lips, tugged at his heart, more like.

“We’ll forget all about the workhouse. Can you do that?”

She nodded her head and rested against his leg, her smallness and vulnerability killing him.

“Look, darlin’, trust me. I’m taking you home. Mam and Da will be waiting for us. Until then I’ll look after you.”

Tears welled.

Biting back his frustration, he drew in a breath. “Pretend it’s a game. You know how to play a game?”

Curls bouncing, she brightened.

Consumed by the need to do right by her, he squatted down on his haunches and drew her close. “You’re safe with me.” He held her tight as the ropes tethering the ship slipped into the water, leaving behind his heart and all he held dear.

## THREE

MAITLAND TOWN, 1906

Still glowing from the scrubbing Sister Mary Ann had administered, Jane stood quaking on the doorstep of the Quinns' Church Street house and rang the bell. Noisier than a fire engine, it filled the entire street. She whipped around in case anyone came running.

No one did, so she turned back to the door. It opened to reveal a red-faced girl done up like a leg of lamb in the butcher's shop, her frilly little cap and ruffled apron so white it made Jane squint. "Better come in. And none of your nonsense. Think you're some kind of clever sticks, I'll bet."

Lucy Smith! So that's what had happened to her. The Quinns must make a habit of choosing girls from the orphanage. Well, Mr. Quinn could forget it. She wasn't going to prance around in a get-up like that; besides, she'd be no good at it. All that bobbing and curtsying.

Before Jane had time to respond to Lucy's smart remark, Mr. Quinn's booming voice echoed down the long hallway. "Right on time. Good girl. Off you go, Lucy."

With her nose twitching, Lucy scurried off, leaving Jane in the doorway with no idea what to do next.

"Come along, come and meet Elizabeth."

Mr. Quinn beckoned and Jane tiptoed along the patterned carpet

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runner down the hallway, hands clasped tightly. Some sort of paper covered the walls on either side of her, painted with what looked like flannel flowers. There had to be at least five hundred and twelve flowers in the space between the front door and the spot where Mr. Quinn stood.

At his invitation she stepped over the threshold and into a fairy tale.

Miss Elizabeth Quinn sat on a small rose-patterned sofa next to the window, looking like some kind of an angel with the sun behind her, hair the color of roasted chestnuts, loose curls swept back from her face. And her eyes! She had the brightest blue eyes, almost violet, putting Jane in mind of a doll she and Emmaline had seen in Owen and Beckett's shop window last Christmas, all porcelain skin and shiny blue. Emmaline reckoned the doll's eyes opened and closed.

"My name is Elizabeth. Elizabeth Quinn. I'm Michael's sister." She patted the cushion next to her on the sofa. It was the palest of pinks, like the inside of a real rose.

"How d'you do, miss." She tried to do one of those curtsy things, but her stocking started to slither. Did Miss Quinn truly want Jane to sit next to her?

"Come and sit by me. We girls must stick together. Michael, you sit opposite us." She picked up a small bell from the table next to her and gave it a shake.

Two seconds later Lucy Smith returned, bobbing in the doorway like a foraging duck. "Yes, ma'am?" She shot Jane a disparaging look.

Not to be outdone, Jane stuck her nose in the air, crossed the room, and plonked herself down on the pink sofa, her hands neatly folded like Miss Quinn's. Lucy's eyes narrowed. That'd teach her.

"We'd like tea now, if you wouldn't mind, and some of Bessie's delicious macaroons."

Lucy dawdled for a moment, looking for all the world as though she'd like to stick her tongue out, then gave a huff and flounced from the room, banging the door behind her.

"Now, Jane." Miss Quinn turned sideways and smiled right into her eyes.

Jane caught Mr. Quinn smiling too. They were up to something, and she had no idea what.

"Michael's been telling me about your skill with figures. He thinks your acumen should be fostered."

Acumen? What was an acumen? Another *A* word. She hadn't had time to look up *aptitude* and *accountant* yet, and now she had to remember *acumen*.

"As I expect you know, we own the auction house in the main street."

The auction house! No, she didn't. Sister Mary Ann had given Jane a long lecture before she left, saying Mr. and Miss Quinn were important benefactors. Come to think of it, she wasn't too sure what a benefactor was either. Did they own the orphanage? No, that was the Benevolent Society.

"Many of the people we employ here at home and at the auction house started life at the orphanage."

Jane couldn't sit quiet any longer. "I'm almost old enough to go to work."

"We'd like to offer you the opportunity to extend your education."

Extend it? How could an education be extended? At twelve she'd have to find a job; everyone knew that. Out into the cottages and off to work. Only Sister Mary Ann's treasures escaped that fate.

"Come along, Elizabeth, stop picking your words. Tell Jane what she needs to know and let's see if she agrees."

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“I was simply trying to break the idea gently. It’s all well and good for you with your blunt, no-nonsense approach . . .”

“I like blunt, no nonsense.” Jane slapped her hand over her mouth, making Mr. Quinn’s big laugh echo around the room.

At the exact same moment the door swung open and there stood Lucy Smith. If she’d been gawking before, her eyes now looked as if they were about to bounce across the room.

“I’m sorry to disturb. I’ve brought tea.” She said it in such a hoity-toity voice it would have made Sister Mary Ann right proud.

“Thank you, put the tray down here.” Miss Quinn pointed to the table in front of the sofa. “That will be all.”

The cups rattled as the tray hit the table, and Lucy shot back out through the door as though she had a Chinese firecracker up her bum.

“Now, where were we?”

“Blunt. No nonsense.” Mr. Quinn gave another snort and pulled out a big red handkerchief from his pocket and wiped at his eyes.

“Ah yes.” Miss Quinn held the pot up high, and a stream of perfumed tea filled the cups, cups so thin you could see the light through them, and they were covered with roses the same color as the cushions underneath her. Jane smoothed the sofa with her fingers, then snatched her hand back.

“Michael and I would like to sponsor you to attend St. Joseph’s Girls School here in Maitland. We feel your aptitude . . .”

There was that word again. She must look it up.

“. . . for numbers is remarkable and should be fostered. After you’ve completed the education program, there are evening courses in accounting, bookkeeping, typing, and shorthand you could attend. Women need more in life than a husband.”

Well, Jane certainly didn’t want a husband. “Why me?”

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Miss Quinn reached out and laid her fingers on Jane's arm. "Neither Michael nor I have any children and we'd like to help you, become your benefactors, and when you have completed your education we'd like to offer you a position in our business."

"But I can't. I'm going to leave the orphanage and get meself a job, find somewhere to live. I can't be going to school and evening classes."

"Elizabeth has that covered, too, Jane. Be patient a little longer."

"Bessie, our cook, has decided not to live in anymore now that her daughter's had twins and needs some help. She'll come in daily. I'm proposing you take Bessie's room. It's on the attic floor, a little bigger than Lucy's, so there'd be room for a desk, which you'll need because you'll have plenty of studying to do."

"You'd do all this for nothing?"

"It wouldn't be for nothing. While you're at school you'd be able to help me in the afternoons and at weekends with the accounts, learn about the business. Now, how does that sound? Would you be interested?"

Interested, yes, maybe if she could get her head around it all. Not adopted like Emmaline and some of the other girls, and truth be told, she wasn't even sure she wanted to be. Bertha Brightman had come back with dreadful tales of whiskery old men and wandering hands. She shot a look at Mr. Quinn. He couldn't be described as whiskery or even very old, and he smelt nice, of some sort of hair oil, something sweet like caramel and a hint of tobacco.

"Are you all right, Jane?" Miss Quinn's cool hand covered hers. "I realize this is a lot to take in."

"Mmm. Yes. But I still don't get it. Why me?"

Mr. Quinn pushed to his feet and came and stood next to the sofa. Jane hadn't realized he was so tall.

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“I don’t think you understand, Jane. You have a gift. A gift that should be fostered.”

He’d gotten her a present? “What gift?”

“Your ability, your aptitude with numbers.”

“What is this aptitude thing I’ve got?” Perhaps they were telling her gently she had some dreadful disease. Like consumption or something. Betty Brown had consumption. She’d ended up in the infirmary and they’d never seen her again.

Mr. Quinn boomed out that laugh again. “I’m sorry. We’ve made an assumption. I’ve been following your progress for some time now. Your mathematic results indicate that you are gifted, have a talent for numbers. That gift should be fostered.”

“Not ignored because you’re a girl,” added Miss Quinn. “Why, there are girls attending Sydney University, studying mathematics. Have you heard of Fanny Hunt?”

Jane raked through her memory. She couldn’t place anyone called Fanny Hunt at the orphanage, but maybe she’d been there while Jane was in the nursery. Stuck in one of those dreadful cots day in and day out with nothing to do but make patterns with the bars and watch the slant of the sun through the high windows. No, Fanny Hunt didn’t sound familiar.

“She was the first woman to graduate from Sydney University. She gained a bachelor of science. I see no reason why you couldn’t do the same one day. So, would you like to come and live here, Jane?” Miss Quinn’s bright eyes stared into her own with such kindness.

Roses and sunshine or flapping robes and plaster saints. Not much of a decision.

## FOUR

SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA, 1863

There were days when Michael hardly remembered the past as he paced the deck of the ship, reveling in fresh air, freedom, and the promise of the future. As luck would have it, he and Elizabeth had the strongest of stomachs. When everyone else lay below decks heaving and moaning, they'd braved the swell around the Bay of Biscay and basked in the fierce ride.

As the weeks slipped into summer and the ship into warmer waters, the horror of Liverpool, Aunty Nuala's passing, and the workhouse faded.

"She's a bonnie lass." Mrs. Cameron kept Elizabeth close to her side, as she had ever since she'd snuck away from her that first day.

"Aye, she is that, me little darlin'." Michael passed his hand across the top of Elizabeth's soft hair. The fresh air and regular meals had filled out her cheeks and brought a glow to her pale skin. He'd make sure she'd never be wanting again.

"Not long now. Your mam will be happy to have her little one back, albeit not much of a bairn now. They grow quick. She'll be waiting on the dock, her arms wide. A son's a son 'til he takes a wife, but a daughter's a daughter for the rest of your life."

## THE GIRL IN THE PAINTING

And that was the one thing that worried him as the ship made its way between the two ominous cliff faces standing sentinel to the harbor. He hadn't heard from Mam and Da for nigh on twelve months.

From the water, Sydney didn't look like much. A small, ugly town, surrounded by barren sandy coves, the trees—short and stunted—clinging to the rocks. None of the green of Ireland. The blinding sun had leached the color from all but the sky and water. All about them smaller boats glided over the smooth, calm surface of the water—steamers, lighters plying their trade, and the bigger ships disgorging their cargo of immigrants and gold seekers.

The quay swarmed with life beneath the shadows of the tall warehouses; behind them a craggy, crowded ridge was packed with precariously perched buildings that threatened to topple into the busy harbor.

It took hours to dock, the wind and the waves taking them backward and forward. After close to five months aboard ship, Michael yearned for dry land under his feet and the chance to hand family decisions over to Da.

A pilot and an official-looking chap came on board, spoke with the captain and the surgeon, peered through mounds of paperwork, then muttered. There'd not been much illness aboard apart from bouts of seasickness and three cases of measles. Some of the hands reckoned they'd be up for a stint in quarantine, but there hadn't been any other outbreaks.

Michael patted the papers in his breast pocket. If all else failed he had the address the immigration bloke had given him.

"Not long now." Mrs. Cameron pressed a piece of paper into his hands.

He looked down at it and frowned.

"You can read, can't you?"

TEA COOPER

Of course he could read; he had the hedge school and his mam to thank for that.

CAMERON VICTUALLERS

“You be hanging on to that, and if something strange comes to pass, you come and see me. No hanging about. No ridiculous pride. I want to make sure this little angel is well cared for.” She lifted Elizabeth into her arms and planted a firm kiss on her cheek. “I’ll miss you, my little poppet.” Mrs. Cameron lowered Elizabeth to the deck and sailed down the gangplank, one of the first to leave the ship.

While Michael and Elizabeth waited their turn, his eyes scanned the dockside crowd, searching for Mam and Da, but the crush of bodies and upturned faces made it all a blur.

It wasn’t until the crew finished bringing the trunks and baggage up from the hold that they were finally given a nod, and with nothing but their one bag he and Elizabeth stepped ashore.

Some were grasped in long-awaited hugs and greetings; others wandered aimlessly, almost as lost as they’d looked in Liverpool. The crowds swirled and massed around them among the ropes, bollards, and bales and the stink of horse manure, sweat, and rotting vegetables, but there was no shriek of pleasure, no warm, enfolding arms.

“Michael Ó’Cuinn.”

He turned, heart in his mouth.

A tall, redheaded Scotsman with a drinker’s nose grinned at him. “I’m William Cameron, Bill to me mates. The wife’s brokenhearted, says if you want to leave the girl with us while you sort yourself out, she’d be more than happy to oblige.”

At the very moment he opened his mouth to decline, a passing

## THE GIRL IN THE PAINTING

cart overloaded with bales thumped his shoulder and Elizabeth's hand slipped from his. He grabbed at her coat and hauled her to safety seconds before she disappeared beneath the wheels.

"Mind Lizzie. She's scared." Elizabeth tucked her doll back under her chin.

"Aye, me darlin', we're all a bit scared. I'll be thanking you . . ." Before Michael finished, Mrs. Cameron bumbled up.

"You've found him, I see." She held out her arms to Elizabeth, who slid into her embrace, Lizzie clutched tight against her chest. "Let me take her, make it easier. You can sort yourself out, and you know where to find us."

"Aye, I do."

"Off you go, boy. You find your mam and da. Afterward come back and collect her."

A little piece of his heart flew to Elizabeth as she gave a jaunty wave over Mrs. Cameron's shoulder, then he pulled down his jacket and set off across the quay through the seething crowds.

Once the confusion and chaos settled to a tolerable level, he stopped at a barrow selling a range of fruit and vegetables that as good as made him weep.

"What'll it be, sir? Oranges, lemons? Straight off the ship, are you? These'll set you up a treat." He handed Michael a slice of juiciness that he thrust into his mouth, the taste and smell taking him back, back to that night in the chapel. His gorge rose and he spat the remains into the gutter.

"You'll learn to like them. Came out on the *Earl Canning*, did you?"

"Aye. I'm looking for the assisted immigration offices in Kent Street."

"Go along the street over there for a couple of hundred yards.

TEA COOPER

You'll find Windmill Street, turn right, and go up the hill. You'll see Kent Street. Lord Nelson's on the corner. Sure you wouldn't like an orange? Only a penny."

Michael shook his head. "Not right now." He needed every one of the pennies he'd tied in his handkerchief and tucked beneath his shirt until he knew what was what.

Ignoring all the other quayside vendors, he ploughed on until he found himself on Windmill Street. A mixture of stone and timber buildings lined the way—inns, shops, and offices, and every so often the entrance to a dark alleyway or courtyard.

Half an hour and one missed turn later, he stood in front of a window proclaiming itself to be the office of the assisted immigration scheme. He pushed open the door.

"How may I help you?"

Michael scooped off his cap and squinted at the voice, waiting for his eyes to adjust after the bright sunshine.

"Arrived on the *Earl Canning* this morning, did you?"

He must have had the fact painted across his forehead in large letters. "Aye."

"There'll be a talk for new arrivals tonight at six o'clock. Help you find your feet. Come to pay your dues, have you?"

"Dues?"

"The remainder of your passage. What's your name?"

"Michael, Michael Ó'Cuinn."

The clerk's head came up with a snap. "Ah! I have something here for you." He rummaged in the desk drawer and brought out a folded piece of paper and handed it to him. *M Quinn* was scrawled across the front.

"This ain't for me."

"It is, lad. Came hand delivered straight from your father."

## THE GIRL IN THE PAINTING

“Me name’s not Quinn. It’s Ó’Cuinn.”

The clerk winked. “One and the same. Ó’Cuinn’s too much of a mouthful for folks around here. Open your letter and be thankful your dues are paid.”

Michael’s hand shook as his heart soared. He unfolded the piece of paper.

## THE DIGGERS REST, HILL END

Nothing more. “Where’s Hill End?”

“Off in search of gold, are you? You and the rest of the world.”

“No, off to find me da. It says here Hill End, a place called the Diggers Rest.”

“Yep. Hill End district. That’s where you’ll find him. Hasn’t done the run of late.”

“The run?”

“Quarterly run via Bathurst to Sydney. Set himself up real well, employs a bloke now to drive the dray, since your mam passed.”

The world tipped and Michael reached for the desk. “Me mam passed?” How could that be?

“Sit yourself down, lad. I’m sorry. You didn’t know.” Hands settled on his shoulders, eased him down. “Take a moment.”

Michael knuckled a rogue tear from the corner of his eye. “What happened?”

“Not real sure. Heard it from one of your da’s drivers. I remember your mam, good-looker.” The clerk’s face turned ruddy. “Beggin’ your pardon. They took off for Hill End soon after they arrived. Your da made a go of it. Didn’t waste time chasing gold, just had that first lucky strike within a couple of months of arriving. Then bought the bullock dray and set himself up carting goods back and forth to

Sydney. Deposited the money in, regular as clockwork every quarter for your ticket.”

Michael slammed his fist on the desk, anger easier to show than the sorrow swelling in his chest. “Is me da all right?”

“Last I heard. Note came last quarter.”

Maybe the note wasn’t for him. Maybe it was a mistake. His mam wouldn’t leave without saying goodbye, dropping a kiss on his brow, cupping his cheek, same as she had before she’d climbed aboard the ship.

“How far’s this Hill End place?”

“Couple of hundred miles, west.” He waved his hand behind him in a generous arc. “I’ll give you a chit to draw rations for the long haul over the mountains; another three days’ll see you to Bathurst. You’ll pick up a ride from there. Come by tomorrow early. Once the drivers know you’re Quinn’s lad, they’ll be happy to take you on, big strappin’ lad like you, give them a hand over the mountain passes.”

Michael staggered to his feet, his head swirling. He’d clung to the vision of Mam and Da standing on the dock welcoming him with open arms for so long, and now this. “How well do you know me da?”

“A bit. Nice little cartage business he’s got going for himself, though, as I said, haven’t seen him for a while.”

“But he left the note last quarter?” Mary and Joseph, he couldn’t get his head around it.

“Nah, it wasn’t your da, ’twas one of the Celestials.”

“Celestials?”

“Chinese. Lots of them out that way.”

He didn’t need to know about Chinamen; he needed to get a move on. “I’ve got to go and see about Elizabeth, me little sister.”

“Your sister?” The clerk ran a grubby finger across the papers. “I’d forgotten about her.” He threw a sheepish look, cleared his throat, and

## THE GIRL IN THE PAINTING

opened the desk drawer. "I'm to give you this." He handed over a pouch. "Something to tide you over. Your da sent it. But Hill End's no place to be taking a child, specially not a girl. It's tough out there. A man's world." He shrugged his shoulders.

Aye, it was. And Michael wasn't yet a man, though he'd been making the decisions for far too long, since Mam and Da left. Wasn't sure if he wanted to do it anymore. Wasn't sure if he'd made the right call.

"I'll have the ride sorted tomorrow," the clerk promised.

Michael dragged the piece of paper Mrs. Cameron had given him. "Can you tell me where I'll find Cameron Victuallers?"

"Cameron Victuallers?" The clerk sat up a little straighter, eyed him with a tad more respect. "Not too hard. Thriving business. Out of here, turn right, take the next on the left down the hill, and you'll see the Metropolitan. Turn left and follow the road. Place you're looking for is on the left, couple of doors down from the Fortune of War."

"Ta." He held out his hand.

The clerk tipped his head and winked. "See you this evening. Meeting for new arrivals is at six sharp."

Once he was outside, Michael turned his face up to the sun, let out a long breath, and shrugged out of his jacket. A man could fry in the heat.

And nothing, nothing was as he'd expected. From here on in he'd never believe a word 'til he saw for himself.

Hoisting his bag onto his shoulder, he set off down the hill back through the chaos, the barking dogs, frolicking women, and drunken sailors.

It didn't take him long to find the warehouse with "Cameron Victuallers" emblazoned above the wide doors. Before he'd had a chance to look around, Bill Cameron, stripped to his singlet, brawny muscles bulging, appeared. "Ah! There you are. Everything sorted?"

Michael dropped his bag down inside the door and followed Mr. Cameron through a greasy-aired warehouse packed with mountains of canvas bales marked for London. They climbed up a flight of narrow stairs and stepped into a cozy room.

Mrs. Cameron smiled up at him from the chair beside the open window, a cup of tea in hand. "Sit yourself down and tell me how it went."

Michael drew in a deep breath and collapsed onto a chair. "It's not as simple as I thought." He pulled off his hat and scratched at his sweat-soaked hair. He'd no idea where he was going other than the name of the place. Hill End—it sounded like the road to Hades. "The immigration bloke seems to think me mam's dead." He swallowed the threatening sob. He'd not be believing it. "Me da's in some place called Hill End."

"Michael, Michael!" Elizabeth flew into the room, her doll tucked under one arm and an apple on a stick clutched in her other hand. "Toffee apple." She thrust the sticky mess into his face and grinned a gap-toothed smile.

"Come here, me little poppet." Mrs. Cameron stretched out her arms. Elizabeth hesitated for a moment, then nestled at her feet.

Mrs. Cameron caressed her halo of curls. "She cannae go out there. Not one this bonny." Her eyes narrowed. "Not without her mam."

He lifted his finger to his lips. No point in telling Elizabeth something she'd not understand.

"The good Lord's not seen fit to grant me children." She smoothed Elizabeth's hair back from her sticky cheeks. "Leave her here with me and go and find your da. She'll be safe and sound until you're ready. Goldfields are no place for a little girl. Since we sighted land I've been hearing nothing but terrible tales of dirt, heat, vicious animals, bushrangers, and sickness."

## THE GIRL IN THE PAINTING

The thought of leaving Elizabeth made his stomach sink. Perhaps it was the best solution. The immigration bloke had said the same, and Elizabeth had taken to Mrs. Cameron.

“Some say Sydney Town’s hard. Set foot outside and you’ve got dirt like you’ve never seen before, and heat that’d suck you dry.”

Bill Cameron threw in his five-pennyworth from the doorway. “Never mind the bloody animals, the bushrangers, and the Chinamen.”

Michael had to find out what happened to Mam, had to find Da. “I can’t ask you to look after her. I can’t pay for her board.” Maybe a bit, the pound Da sent. He’d not much else except a couple of pennies.

“Bill’s doing all right for himself. He’s got his own business, the boat, and the warehouse. Give us what you can and leave Elizabeth here. If you don’t like what you see out there, you come back. We’ll see you right.”



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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**T**ea Cooper is an established Australian author of historical fiction. In a past life she was a teacher, a journalist, and a farmer. These days she haunts museums and indulges her passion for storytelling. She is the bestselling author of several novels, including *The Horse Thief*, *The Cedar Cutter*, *The Currency Lass*, and *The Naturalist's Daughter*.

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