

Staircase to the Moon



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HARAN

BASTEI ENTERTAINMENT 

“I won’t be staying in town. I’ve taken a position as a seamstress on a station and I’m quite excited about it.”

“Really? Life on a station will be very different to life in a city like Perth,” Annie said, stirring her cocoa and tasting it. She noted that Emily did not touch hers.

“I suppose it will, but I’m looking forward to sewing women’s clothes instead of men’s suits.”

“Oh, you’ve been working for a tailor, then?”

Emily hesitated, but decided to mention her father’s business. “My father owns a shop. He’s been a tailor since he was very young so my brothers and I had no choice but to enter the business and help as dad built up a clientele.”

“What does your father think of you leaving the family business, or shouldn’t I ask?”

Emily turned away and stole another glance through the window. “He won’t be pleased,” she said quietly, knowing that was an understatement.

“So he doesn’t know and you’re worried he’s going to chase after you.”

Emily looked into Annie’s kindly blue eyes. “Is it that obvious?” Her heart sank again when it suddenly occurred to her that her father might have the police out looking for her.

“I’m afraid so. You look as skittish as a Catholic at a Jewish circumcision ceremony.”

Emily’s eyes widened in shock that her companion would say something like that. “Do you think my family might call the police?” she whispered. By now they still would be asleep, but what would happen when they woke up and found out that she was missing?

Annie gave her a reassuring glance. “I’m guessing you are older than you look.”

“I’m twenty-two,” Emily declared.

“I would’ve said nineteen, but as you’re older it’s unlikely the police would get involved.” Annie’s blue eyes twinkled mischievously, so Emily burst into laughter, attracting the attention of those closest to them.

“That’s better,” Annie said. “Now come with me.”

Annie struggled to her feet and put her gloves back on.

Emily felt quite relieved as she stood up and picked up her case and Annie’s. Presumably, Annie was right. Even if her father went to the police, it was not very likely that officials would start looking for her.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“Somewhere you can relax for the next two hours,” Annie said, taking her case from Emily and heading for the door. “You’re starting to make me feel nervous.”

Emily followed Annie outside, into the pale dawn light. They headed to a tiny cafe that was just opening for the day on the other side of the road from the station. It was tucked away in a little arcade between a hat shop and a shop selling every conceivable type of clock.

“I’ve gotten to know the owners over the years,” Annie said, waving to the husband and wife team working behind the counter. “They’re nice people and the food is very good.” She lowered her voice. “They’re foreigners, so people are slow to accept them. But that means the place is never overcrowded and that suits me just fine.”

Annie led Emily to a table away from the window but with just enough of a view of the street that she could see who was coming and going from the railway station across the road.

Emily was delighted and soon began to relax. "Thank you so much, Annie," she said feeling safe. "I don't think my nerves would've lasted until the departure in the railway cafeteria."

"You're welcome. Now let's have some breakfast, shall we?" She called the young waitress, a sixteen-year-old girl of Indian descent. Geeta greeted her warmly and took an order for bacon, scrambled eggs, mushrooms, toast, and a pot of tea for two.

Emily really enjoyed her breakfast, while Annie chatted about her fisherman husband, and her two sons, and their wives and children. She also told Emily all about her life before she married.

"I was a make-up artist for a Vaudeville show," she disclosed with pride. "Desmond was the show's producer. He was such a handsome devil. All the showgirls were in love with him. After a few months in Perth we took the show on the road, going as far as Kalgoorlie and other mining towns. I remember it was hard work, but I must've been blinded by love at the time because back then it seemed like quite an adventure travelling dusty roads on a wagon and setting up the performing tent." She laughed.

"It all sounds exciting and so romantic," Emily said in awe.

"I suppose it was, despite the flies and heat, but what I remember most wasn't the performances, or the excitement of a new town every few days, but how hard it was to keep make-up on faces that were constantly perspiring," Annie laughed again. "Anyway, Desmond and I returned to Perth, married, and had a family. He produced local theatre after that. I sometimes helped out with the make-up but we didn't go on the road because we had small children."

Emily had never met anyone like Annie. She'd obviously led an exciting life but she had a way of telling stories about her life that made 'everyday' sound so enthralling.

"To this day, when I look at a face, I still see a blank canvas," Annie said, studying Emily's features. "I'd really like to make-up your face. You have wonderful features; a pert nose, a perfect chin, high cheek bones, and beautiful green eyes."

"I most certainly do not," Emily protested quite seriously.

"You don't think your eyes are green?"

"Oh, yes, but they're a bland green. As for the rest of my features, they must be rather ordinary."

"How can you say that? You're a very pretty girl."

"I can't be. Why, just a few days ago my brother brought a very unattractive middle-aged man to the shop and told me he's to be my future husband because I could do no better. This man was horrible. He was a tailor, so he was dressed well, but he looked like a puffer fish, with bulging eyes and big lips and he had hands like an octopus. He took me to dinner yesterday evening and I had barely tasted my soup before the old lecherous sod was feeling my thigh."

"What did your father and brothers say about that?"

“I didn’t tell them because I knew I was leaving this morning. I’m not sure they would’ve believed me, though. They thought the guy was perfect because he had money.”

“Well then they should marry him.”

Emily laughed again and Annie smiled, delighted to see her relaxed.

“So that’s why you’re taking this job a long way from Perth,” Annie said. “You don’t want to marry old fish-face.”

“That’s part of the reason, Annie,” Emily said with a smile that faded. “My brothers and my father are so controlling. They never let me out of their sight. They criticize everything I do. I have no friends and no life outside work. I’m twenty-two years old and I’ve never had a boyfriend. It was the last straw when my brother brought fish-face to the shop and told me he’d make the perfect husband. I had to get away.”

“I don’t blame you.” Annie bristled. “The very idea of thinking it was okay to choose a husband for you. What’s the world coming to? I know that sort of thing goes on in some cultures, but this is Australia!”

Emily was almost overwhelmed with gratitude and relief. Finally, someone understood how she felt. “The friends I made at school stopped inviting me on outings because I worked long hours or my father and brothers found an excuse why I couldn’t go,” she said. “I did meet a nice young man at church, and we found a way to see a little of each other until my eldest brother found out. That was the end of that. I also liked a neighbour and he seemed interested in me, but another of my brothers scared him off, too.”

Annie looked perplexed.

Emily felt embarrassed. “My life sounds rather pathetic, doesn’t it?”

“That’s not your fault, but you do realise that life on a working sheep or cattle station, miles from a town, will be restrictive in regards to a social life,” Annie said, not sure Emily knew what she was getting into.

“Yes, my new employer has told me that.”

“And yet you accepted the position. Aren’t you swapping one cloistered life for another?”

“I don’t see it that way,” Emily said. “I need to put distance between myself and my family. That’s probably an awful thing to say, but it’s the truth.”

“Oh, I understand that,” Annie said. “But I can’t see you being better off socially.”

“It’s not so much a social life I’m seeking, as the company of women in completely different surroundings, without having my brothers constantly watching me. I just want to be able to feel free to think for myself. Mrs. McBride sounded lovely in her letter and she has a son and three daughters around my age who all want new wardrobes. I know how to make patterns and I have so many ideas for new gowns. The posting is just for six months, but I don’t want to think about the time afterwards.” She glanced at the clock on the wall and suffered a pang of guilt as she envisioned Uncle Freddy knocking on her bedroom door and getting no answer. He would then find the note she’d left beside her bed and become hysterical. She knew her father and brothers would be angry, but Freddy would be most upset that she’d left without saying goodbye.

The women chatted for another hour, mostly about the ideas that Emily had for gowns.

“What’s Broome like?” Emily asked, thinking about the journey ahead.

“It’s a pretty place, with the most beautiful long stretches of white sandy beaches, but the town is small, with not much to do for someone like me. There is a pearling industry, and it’s the perfect place for a man whose hobby is fishing, like my husband. It’s all he does since he retired, so I spend a lot of time on my own.”

“You must really stand out in a small country town because it’s quite obvious you are a city woman,” Emily said.

Annie was startled by the remark. “Why do you say that?”

“Your clothing is stylish and you know how to wear it. I know there are similar gowns to yours in Lady Jane Macy’s store in George Street. The brooch is a nice touch.”

Annie’s eyes widened. “That’s where I bought this gown a few weeks ago. You’re very observant,” she commented, glancing over the plain gown Emily was wearing.

“You can tell a lot by what people wear,” Emily said, feeling embarrassed that her gown wasn’t nearly so stylish. Annie must think that she hadn’t been able to afford anything better. But she only hadn’t been allowed to make her own clothes, not outer wear, anyway. When no one was at home, she’d slip down into the basement and sew herself beautiful petticoats, camisoles, and underwear on her old sewing machine. It had been her way of quietly rebelling.

“I couldn’t survive in a country town if I didn’t get back to the city every few months to shop and go to the theatre and coffee shops,” Annie said. “I’ve also been visiting friends and my sons and grandchildren.” She fished around in her handbag and produced a compact, rouge and a pale shade of pink lipstick. “I can’t wait any longer to do this,” she said. “May I?”

Emily was astonished that she wanted to apply the make-up to her face. “All right,” she said tentatively. She’d never been allowed to wear make-up, so she didn’t know what to expect.

Annie worked her magic, telling Emily to sit still. She then admired her handiwork when she was done. “You look so lovely,” she said. “Just as I’d imagined.”

Emily couldn’t believe the difference when she looked at her reflection in the mirror inside the compact. “I do look almost pretty,” she said.

“Not almost,” Annie said. “You look very beautiful,” she insisted. “You keep the rouge and lipstick,” she added. “I have plenty more at home.”

“I couldn’t,” Emily objected. “I wouldn’t know how to apply it.”

“I insist, and I’ll show you how to apply it once we board the ship, so don’t argue with an old woman.”

“Oh, thank you, Annie,” Emily said emotionally. “You’ve been so kind to me.”

“You are welcome,” Annie said, enjoying herself. “You’ve allowed an old woman to prattle on about her life, reliving memories, without flinching. But I’m curious about something. Why is it you’ve never experimented with make-up?”

“I…my father wouldn’t allow it, and neither would my brothers. My brothers have always disapproved of women who painted their faces. They refer to them as bad women.”

“What narrow-minded nonsense. Your brothers need to realise it’s the twentieth century and not the dark ages. Luckily they’re not here.” Annie’s blue eyes twinkled mischievously. “Most girls try their mother’s lipstick and rouge. Didn’t you ever do that?”

“My mother died when I was small,” Emily informed her. “I have vague memories because I was eight, but what sticks in my mind when I think of my mother is the smell of cinnamon. My father said I loved my mother’s teacake. It’s an odd thing to remember, isn’t it?”

“Not at all. Smells often evoke memories. Whenever I go past a fish market, I think of Desmond.”

Both women laughed.

“You’ve no idea how much I’ve enjoyed talking to you, Annie,” Emily said honestly. “I hope you have plenty more stories to tell me on our sea voyage.”

“Oh, I do. Let’s hope the weather is kind,” Annie said thoughtfully.

“Why?”

“I tend to suffer sea-sickness if it’s rough.” She noted Emily looked worried. “But it won’t be,” she added confidently. “Look at the time. Is it safe to board the train?” she added with a smile.

“The coast appears to be clear,” Emily said. “But I’ll be glad when the train leaves the platform.” She looked at Annie and something occurred to her. “This will be my first trip on a train,” she said excitedly. She then realised that her family probably wouldn’t consider the possibility that she’d be taking a train to Fremantle. She suddenly felt as if a weight had been lifted off her shoulders.