

Lindsay SIMPSON

From *The Curer of Souls*

CHAPTER ONE

London

March 1865

Lydia sometimes imagined her parents in heaven, floating at a large oblong dining table, looking formal but affectionate. Twin figureheads, their carved expressions would gaze confidently seaward. Now Jane, too, was dead buried in a country grave in a churchyard in Wiltshire, next to her forebears. In the end her stepmother couldn't face the thought of being buried next to her husband's empty coffin.

Lydia had dressed her stepmother's body in her hand-crocheted wedding dress. The fine stitching hung around her wasted flesh. Jane's skin was sallow and sunken, stretched across prominent cheekbones; her mouth loose, not how she would have liked. The white cotton bonnet around her head made her features look uncharacteristically witch-like and her eyelids had the translucency of the leaves that rustled in autumn outside Lydia's bedroom window. Lydia could feel no connection between the body lying in the coffin and the woman with whom she had spent most of her life.

Jane had always cared about her appearance, and although they had never discussed it, Lydia felt Jane's wedding dress was appropriate apparel for her final resting place. The bonnet jarred with the dress but now it was in place, it seemed too much effort to remove it. Besides, Jane had always told her it was where the soul went *after* death that was important and Jane's soul had long departed.

The funeral was not especially sad for Lydia. Each scrape of the shovel resonated, as though ending a chapter. Clods of earth fell on the coffin, a muffled sound pierced by the cry of gulls under the leaden sky. There were only a handful of people there. Charles Darwin, the grey-haired evolutionary came in a wheelchair along with other elderly gentlemen Lydia recognised - lords of some sort – and Jane's sister, Fanny, the only other family member. They stayed for the requisite time, then escaped in small clutches. The clipped shoes of their horses and the rumble of wooden wheels echoed off the low stone walls that surrounded the country cemetery as they disappeared out of Lydia's life forever. At forty-one years of age, she was alone.

After the funeral Lydia had returned to London, to the family's house in Bedford Place, Russell Square. One morning she awoke to sunshine, the first for many days. She had been half listening to the familiar noises that denoted the beginning of the day: the grate being dragged away from the fireplace as the maid prepared to lay the coal, doors being banged, the heavy curtains being closed, the great clock in the hallway striking the hour. She'd been waiting for the tinkle of the bell summoning her for service; Jane's voice commanding her to read, to adjust her pillows, to have a game of draughts, to administer her medicine, or to simply sit in the chair and listen to her talk.

Lydia felt separate from the cloistered world below. No one disturbed her. She did not go down to breakfast, nor did she ring to explain her absence. Instead, as the ordinary morning street sounds clattered outside, she sat in the study and wrote a letter to her father's relatives.

Each day since the funeral she had been delaying the inevitable. Jane's death had not

Simpson 1

been unexpected, but now it had happened she felt paralysed by indecision. Taking control was anathema to her. Besides, her future was decided. She imagined her relatives' sympathy clinging unspoken between them as they discussed her letter. How would she cope without Jane? They had been erstwhile companions, inseparable until death. Lydia was a woman in her forties, a spinster who was now alone with no direction and no real purpose in life. Nobody wanted the house in Russell Square, but it was expected that it would be sold and Lydia would begin emptying the furniture of generations of Griffins, Jane's family. Once the house was sold, Lydia was supposed to begin her new life in the family's small country cottage in Wiltshire, near Jane's grave.

21 Bedford Place was a five-storeyed Georgian house in Russell Square within walking distance of the British Museum and Covent Gardens where the gaslights bore the name of the Duke of Bedford from whose estate the suburb was born. The house had been Lydia's home since they returned from Van Diemen's Land in 1843. As a child, Jane told her there were so many windows in the house, she memorised how many windows there were on each floor to help her to learn how to count.

After summoning the footman to take the letter, Lydia moved into the morning room and sat staring at the large green ledger book on the desk. Even having delayed the move, she still had to dispense with nine servants - at one guinea per servant she could not afford any of them: the footman, the hall porter or the steward's room boy. In the past few years of Jane's illness they had rarely entertained. The servants had been an unnecessary luxury. The cost of their livery alone amounted to a princely sum and they expected new suits once a year, not to mention their board.

Lydia had already decided she would sell the silver and send her stepmother's exotica up for auction. The house was also full of memorabilia from her father's two trips to the Arctic. Jane had wanted her husband's study left the way it was when he had sailed for the last time all those years ago. In it there were the reindeer tongues he had given Jane on their wedding day and three pairs of shoes from the snow people, which he had brought back for Lydia. Then there were his dusty paintings, large Arctic horizons with the sun a watery smudge and the Inuits' faces yellowed, harsh and uncompromising. When she was a young child the large canvases had given her nightmares: a ghost of a ship trapped in the ice, its mast like a dead branch from a tree rising from whiteness, the ship a foreign object in the natural surroundings. Later, they reminded her of her father's death. She imagined him in a soundless land carpeted in snow.

Eleanor, Lydia's mother, had only been dead for three years when her father married Jane. Jane had been Eleanor's friend, but instead of gaining comfort from this, Lydia resented it. Jane had known her mother whereas *she* could not remember her. Her father had one portrait of Eleanor. The girl in the painting was in her teens, her hands clasped in front of her lavender dress - not like a mother at all. Lydia came to think of her as an older playmate, a mother who never grew old, her eyes solemn and oval spaced far apart, her hair dark like Lydia's.

It was Jane who had told Lydia that father was on one of his trips to the Arctic when Eleanor had died. She had been left with their baby daughter and, although she was sick, Jane said, Eleanor had told him to go. Lydia did not want to ask her father whether this was true. Her father did not like to speak of Eleanor. She resented Jane for knowing more about her mother than she could remember, nor did she want Jane reminding her that as a toddler *she* too had lost her mother. That did not make them the same. Nothing made them the same. It was not Jane's place to be revealing things her father had chosen not to tell her.

Her father had first brought her stepmother home from a trip to the Continent when

Simpson 1

Lydia was about four years old. Jane had brought her two porcelain dolls that were cool to touch and had fixed glassy smiles. She remembered waking to their shadowy stares and her stepmother's cold anger when she perceived her gift had been rejected. Her father, hovering, had tried to bind them together - the two girls he loved.

At the time of his wedding to Jane Sir John was already knighted, a hero after two trips which involved successfully charting much of the mythical north-west passage. His book about his adventures in the Arctic had been a bestseller. Jane listened to the same stories Lydia had listened to: the blistering winters he had endured, eating a man's leather boots to survive, the stabbing pain of frostbite. To Lydia Jane seemed to be incapable of real affection for anyone. She watched her stepmother from afar and it appeared to Lydia she was a consummate manipulator, supporting her father only for her own ends. Nevertheless, she had thought them happy. Her relationship with Jane, however, was upheld not through choice, but necessity. Jane had continually told her she knew little, or perhaps had no desire to know, about young people. Lydia had never confided in her stepmother nor had the sort of conversations she imagined having with her real mother. Her transition to womanhood was a painful, solitary journey.

When they had bid Sir John farewell at Southampton on the voyage that was to be his last, Lydia had been a young woman in her twenties. Jane had grasped her hand in a rare show of affection, which united them in their love for this man. They were alone, so Lydia knew this was not for anyone's benefit and the gesture touched her because of this. A dove had settled on the mast of his ship. It was a sign, Jane had said. He would return to them soon. But he never had. They had delayed his funeral for so many years and they still did not know the truth. Jane had been wrong, but Lydia had believed her. She tried to gain comfort by imagining that her father was preserved under so much ice, frozen for posterity, but instead, she would see his corpse frostbitten, his mouth hollow from lack of food and love. Jane never gave up hope, except, curiously, with her request to be buried in Wiltshire, as though she finally conceded in her dying moments, that his coffin would never be filled and she would be apart from him in death as she had been in life.

So now Lydia was left to journey on alone. She imagined her father's relatives discussing her as a nuisance. She tried to enjoy the unfolding of each new, uneventful day until one morning, about a week after the funeral she arose early, having decided she could procrastinate no longer. She pulled back the heavy maroon curtains in Jane's study which adjoined her bedroom to let in some of the foggy city sunshine. Jane had spent her last two years bedridden. The room had the feeling of being unoccupied for some time. Dust had settled, in spite of the parlourmaid's efforts.

Lydia surveyed the scene in front of her, unsure where to begin. Her stepmother had charged her with cataloguing her belongings. On a table in the corner of the room she noticed some large bulky shapes under a heavy canvas. Her curiosity aroused, she picked up the canvas and struggling with the weight of the cloth, pulling it back along the table. Particles of dust floated in the sunshine, a shower of diamonds. She peered into the blackness. As her eyes adjusted, she saw the yawning mouth of a Tasmanian devil. Teeth yellowing with age, the creature snarled at her as if protesting at being awoken so suddenly. It looked ferocious and real. The taxidermist's handiwork had survived for more than thirty years. Lydia closed her eyes. She was smelling the whale oil at the wharves on an island at the end of the earth, the fresh chilled breeze as it came off the Derwent River; the soft blowing sound of whales at night off Battery Point; the musty smell of the shops that sold kangaroo and possum skins. The devil was a relic from Van Diemen's Land. Lydia had almost forgotten about her stepmother's collection from that wild colonial outpost where she had

Simpson 1

spent much of her childhood. During the winters in Van Diemen's Land the clouds would circle Mount Wellington threatening a storm and only its jagged dolerite peaks would be visible. She would bury her head in her father's greatcoat as they strolled in the Government House gardens and he told her more of his Arctic adventures.

Come and see the Tasmanian emu, he would say. "My little Lydia, what a place we live in. Giant birds and convicts - we are in an island jail and I am the jailer."

And he would laugh his loud, comfortable laugh.

Twelve thousand convicts were imprisoned in Van Diemen's Land when her father arrived to govern the colony. That was more than half of its population. She saw his black frock coat buttoned to his neck, a white bob rising above the crown of his black beaver hat, a black belt and a sword in a glittering scabbard around his ample waist, a red seam down the outside of his trousers. He had always seemed to her the epitome of orderliness. Her protector. Her fondest memories of her time on the island were strolling with her father around the grounds of their home at Government House where the lawns ran down to the river. Since his marriage to Jane, her stepmother had taken up the space she had once inhabited. During those early morning or evening walks, she had the opportunity to speak with him alone. There was much that he missed in conversation due to his deafness but he would take her hand in his and watch her lips sounding the words. He had told her his deafness was the legacy of an old battle wound from Trafalgar, when he had stood too close to a canon firing. He wanted to know if he spoke too loudly and he was always happier away from a crowd.

When they first arrived in the colony the crowds had lined the streets waving their hats and trumpeters blazoned a welcome. Sir John's cheeks, usually pink, had shone even more than usual that first night at dinner in Government House with the glory of it all. She imagined him in the hubbub on the deck of the ship in full battle. Her father, the Arctic hero who ate men's boots, who'd defended the old country at sea, who'd chartered the coast of Australia, would now show he was capable of leading a colony, of deciding the fate of criminals, of succeeding as a leader of men. She watched Jane bask in the reflected glory. As he settled into the role of governor, Lydia suppressed her need to see him as more and more often his position took him on journeys around the colony. She and Jane were left to their own devices.

Jane had taken up collecting as a hobby in Van Diemen's Land. No doubt the Royal Society would be interested in the Tasmanian Devil. With some excitement she lifted the canvas off the other boxes, coughing into the dust. Finally, the creatures stood on the table, imprisoned in their glass cages, a silent zoo awaiting her direction. Her favourite had been the platypus, a creature that laid eggs, had furred skin like an otter and a beak like a duck. On impulse, Lydia pushed her fingers against the glass lid of the cage, a child again, tempted by forbidden fruit. Her stepmother had always been protective of her boudoir of stuffed animals. Was the platypus's fur coarse or soft? It looked so sleek. She pulled across a small footstool from underneath the piano and stepped gingerly onto it. It seemed to bear her weight. Now she could reach inside the cage. The fur was dry but smooth. The animal's webbed feet seemed incongruous with its furred body and she hesitated before touching the feet, wondering if they would crumble with the stress of time. Wedged between the wooden stand on which the creature was mounted, was what looked like a crease of butter. Forgetting her original intention, Lydia began to prise at the object with her fingernails. It was a document of some sort. She found an old ivory letter opener, but it was not strong enough. Impatiently, she pulled at the folded pages with the nails of her thumb and forefinger. She heard a rip and drew breath, but the pages were intact - four pages in all,

Simpson 1

yellowed with age. How long had they been there? She moved through into Jane's boudoir to her walnut writing desk where the light was better and opened them. The letter was addressed 'My dearest Thomas' and the handwriting belonged to her stepmother.

Blinking, she thought the light was playing a trick. Thomas? An early suitor perhaps? She hesitated, confronted by the idea she was prying. There had been so many men in Jane's life: geologists from Poland with unpronounceable names, botanists who specialised in grasses from the Falkland Islands, transported convicts with tickets-of-leave, amateur natural historians, with an insatiable appetite for the new and unclassified.

On the edge of her memory, a face appeared. Thomas - a keen natural historian from Port Arthur, an amateur painter. Jane had introduced her to him during one of her Tasmanian Society dinners. Lydia recalled he had his own museum at the penal settlement, but she could remember little else about him. Jane had kept some of his paintings, she thought.

*Marlborough
March 1842*

My dearest Thomas,

I leave this arid township to venture into a wild land with quartz peaks and streams of ice.

You are already spoken, for as am I yet, from the day you showed me the southern boobook and spoke of Cuvier, of Lyell and I saw your passion and curiosity for life, you seemed at once familiar and shocking to me. Love is the domain of Coleridge and Keats. I have studied their verse yet I have never understood it. Everything I read now speaks the same as my heart.

I may never return from this journey and never speak of what is between us. The Deputy Surveyor-General, Calder, has prepared the first fifty miles of our route as far as Frenchman's Cap. He tells me it is frightening terrain like that of Milton's Paradise Lost, with horizontal trees that grow outward like fallen branches, which will hamper our path. All around there are craggy mountains clothed in mist. Beyond is Transylvania, where few white men have been and to my knowledge no woman.

Of course, my mind runs away with me. The trip has been meticulously planned and Calder seems an able man. But even as a seasoned traveler, I confess to being alarmed.

The canvas flaps so strongly in the gale outside. I wonder if I will have the courage to send this to you? Committing it to pen is so dangerous.

Oh, my love. There. I have written it. I imagine your hair falling across your brow, reading those words. What will your expression be?

It is time to write of secrets so long kept, the heresy we have talked of. I have battled with myself for thinking these things, but I am writing to you to say that as each day passes I know there is truth in Mr Darwin hypotheses though he may feel as if he's confessing to a murder.

In his last letter he told me that his young wife, Emma Wedgwood, has been counselling him not to shut out the truth of religion. Why, she asked him, did he want to constantly prove things?

Mr Darwin challenges all of us - and not without proof - to accept his theory that species are not immutable. Thomas, we have been placed in this savage outpost at the end of the earth, where we have examples of creatures adapting to their habitat. Those strange creatures: the platypus - part bird, part mammal - the Tasmanian tiger with a body and jaws like a hyena. Is it heresy to believe they adapt to where they live? I want to take this opportunity in case I have no other to tell you that I believe it is not heresy.

Darwin writes that he was in Regent Park Zoo when he came across a baby orangutan who had the same expressions he had seen in human babes. "Man from monkeys?" he asks.

I cannot yet make that leap, yet I am entranced by his logic. Are you still recording the tides on the Isle de Mort? I think of your quill scratching across the page as you sit in the storeroom writing your

Simpson 1

meteorological register. The Royal Society will accept your records - they must. Your curiosity matches mine. You are curious about so much. You will have a place among scientists as a hydrographer of world renown. You deserve this, no matter what happens.

I must ask. What happened to the boy? I still dream of him and spend many sleepless nights pondering his fate. I know of your compassion for him. I attempted to intervene with Sir John as you asked me to. Alas, an exception cannot be made for a boy who has already been transported across the seas, particularly as the crime is murder and one so brutal. I realise you may not agree. You a curer of souls. Do we have a right, I hear you ask, to take a young man's soul? I have done all that I am able.

Perhaps had I not been on this journey I may never have had the courage to tell you any of this. God be willing we shall meet when I return to Hobart Town. If you feel moved to finish my portait, I can only acquiesce to your request. Do not reply to me at Government House, I beg of you, for it is not safe.

*Yours,
Jane*

Lydia stared at the inlaid cockleshell that she had admired as a child on the face of the bureau. Jane had sat here almost every day for the past twenty years, except when she and Lydia had travelled on the Continent. The chink in the curtains revealed hansom cabs on the cobbled streets below. Her eyes alighted on a mail coach piled high with mailbags, the sheen of its black and mauve doors reflecting dappled leaves. She looked back at the desk. She could not believe what she had read. She briefly wondered whether the letter had been planted there as a bizarre hoax, but there were too many accurate references to the past. Transylvania - the west coast of Van Diemen's Land. Lydia had been eighteen when her parents had undertaken the journey there. She remembered anxiously waiting for letters each day, imagining herself an orphan after her parents perished in the wilderness. But after Marlborough, the township Jane had mentioned in the letter, none came. They had both underestimated the force of the remorseless weather in the west coast. It was reminiscent of the ice age, and the land that they crossed utterly devoid of humans.

Lydia looked up at the portrait of her father hanging opposite the desk: beatific, serene, the Arctic hero. He'd sat for the painting just before he set sail. His balding head and cheeks had been lightened with gouache so they had the smoothness of peaches. Lydia looked into those untroubled eyes that gazed across the room, past the bed and out of the window. She considered destroying the pages, destroying this person, Thomas, whoever he was. Had her father known that his wife had felt this way for another man? Jane's letter mocked from the grave. It showed an entirely different woman to the stepmother she knew. Jane, who attended church every Sabbath; who devoted so much of her time counselling female prisoners about God; who said her prayers each night and who had spent most of her fortune sending ships to search for her father in the Arctic. This letter challenged all that. Jane had a lover, or had desired a lover. She had deceived her husband. Worst of all - and this shocked Lydia most - she couldn't challenge her to explain any of it. It was as if somehow Jane had meant this letter to be found after her death to ensure her presence remained at the forefront of her stepdaughter's mind.

Lydia's thoughts scattered, a kaleidoscope of possibilities. Looking at her father's portrait again, she felt pain reopen in her heart. The finality of his death - she had never said goodbye properly. After all these years she wanted to be reassured that he had not died in pain. She walked over to the fireplace, avoiding the portrait's eyes.

And the boy? There were boys, she remembered, at the penal settlement in Port Arthur. There was the boy on the ship. A face appeared before her, then vanished like the image on the silver-coated plate of the new daguerreotypes she had seen in The Strand.

Simpson 1

Lydia stared out of the window. The afternoon had become chilly with darkness. Her breath was a cloud on the glassed windowpane. The under housemaid had already relit the coal fire in the grate, but the warmth hadn't entered the room. She had declined morning tea and lunch. The servants, presumably, thought her lack of appetite was brought on by her mourning.

She felt paralysed with indecision: to destroy the letter or undertake some course of action? As the gaslights gradually illuminated the square, she decided. She would begin a search this afternoon. If anyone was able to unravel Lady Jane Franklin's life, Lydia could. She would begin with the diaries.

Feeling better, she walked through from the boudoir to Jane's bedroom. Her eyes travelled to the four-poster bed, accustomed to seeing Jane's diminutive figure under the bedclothes, but the rose-patterned coverlet was smoothed flat. Lydia was in charge now. Outdated Regency furniture Jane had kept from the days of her marriage sat gathering dust. A china washbasin stood in the corner. Jane's books were against one wall. Lydia opened the wardrobe. Clothes, mostly unworn for years, were hanging amidst a musty smell of mothballs. She walked around the room, searching for...what?

In the dark corner near the wardrobe, about half an hour later, she found the portrait of a kangaroo rat. Lydia lit another oil lamp and carried it across to the canvas, lowering the light. In the flickering flame, the creature's fur was luminous. She held the candle closer until she could make out the signature on the bottom right-hand corner of the frame. Thomas Lempriere. She glanced behind her at the bed to where Jane's prone form had always lain, accusing, but there was no one there. She placed the canvas back to where she had found it and closed the wardrobe.

Lydia was sure now this was the same Thomas that she had met at Jane's Tasmanian Society dinners. Her father would have known him too. She thought of her stepmother hosting those dinners with a suitor in their midst in the large dining room at Government House. She wondered whether Jane had publicly humiliated her father. Had her stepmother openly flirted with this man? Distracted and entering adolescence, Lydia may not have noticed. This was the same woman who had been once received by the pope as the devoted widow of Sir John Franklin. Her stepmother's devotion now had a different complexion to Lydia.

Approaching her stepmother's bed, she saw the bedside table under the window. Jane might have hidden other documents here. Now she felt like a detective, the torpor from the beginning of the day replaced with a feverish desire to know more. She slid open the drawer. Here was the small maroon book her stepmother had been writing in the days before she died. The words crawled across the page.

3rd January 1865

Today, I am, a sulphur crested cockatoo, wings wide, sweeping the air white before me in the vast reassurance of the sky.

Far below is the church with its wooden spire, standing on the edge of the bay. Coal fires are crackling inside the whitewashed houses of the penal settlement and there are the comforting rituals of home: backgammon and afternoon tea. I can see people on the deck of a visiting ship, dancing a quadrille, whirling in tightly controlled circles, engaged in a parody of manner, a show from the British Empire. What an empire we thought it was.

The clanking sound of irons echoes on the afternoon breeze. The curtains protect us from their view, but we cannot mistake the unwashed smell and the stench of the putrid abscess where steel has rubbed against flesh. The convicts have the same fascination for me as a captive bear I once saw in a Chinese marketplace.

Simpson 1

Or maybe the slaves I saw in Ecuador. Linked by chains, they move as one and we call this gross living creature "the centipede". They have become as much part of the settlement as the quadrilles and the daffodils that sprout amongst the vegetables, and the young orange trees planted from seed from Sydney Town.

I can smell that odour as if it were yesterday, assisted by old age and the way it sharpens memories. I am standing in the pew smelling, too, old mildewed cloth, wet shoe leather and sweat, the wooden railing hard against my knees, listening to the sermon. But the man who addresses me is not a Minister. I can see hot and yellow lights, dancing. Are they candles or eyes? They have become giant felines waiting in the dark, prancing, watching for me to stumble. I am weighed down by velvet drapes and the sombre walls. The words I speak come from underneath their fabric.

Then the voice speaks. I am back before my inquisitor in the witness box.

Senile rantings. Her stepmother had been prone, like most of the dying, to reveries. Talk of the courtroom had become commonplace with her, particularly towards the end. She asked questions that led nowhere. Lydia had long ago given up trying to work out what witness box she was talking about, what trial. At other times, as Jane spoke, Lydia would catch entertaining glimpses of a life long ago: helping to make a blancmange in the shape of a ship for a dinner party in honour of Queen Victoria's ascent to the throne. Fancy dress balls and extravagant costumes. Sending a white kangaroo as a present to the new queen. Then darker times that Lydia didn't want to recall, when Jane's words were like a cold draught blowing through an open door. A fragmented mind in its dotage. Towards the end she had paid even less heed to the words of others. Her stepmother's words would become jumbled, unintelligible, or full of hate and venom. Lydia would watch the dried cracked lips of the old woman lying on the bed and wish her dead. Before opening the diary again, Lydia glanced back at the bed for reassurance. Her stepmother was definitely gone and her secrets had gone with her.

Discarding a half-eaten supper, she ordered the flustered chambermaid to find her a ladder. The trunks containing Jane's papers were in the attic. Lydia had never shown an interest in her stepmother's writing, but now she felt compelled to uncover some answers. She knew Jane would never have thrown anything out, as she was proud of the record of her life. Lydia braced herself. She would not shy away from the unorthodox perhaps Jane had taught her that. An image of Jane in her bloomers being lowered down a volcano in South America when she was in her sixties came into her head and she almost laughed out loud. These journeys were the highlight of Lydia's time with her stepmother. Jane was the most inspiring of travelling companions always seeking the most out of every experience, even when Lydia, twenty years her junior, was exhausted. Lydia was inured to the continual attention they received on their many trips to the Continent, America and their most recent trip in Spain on donkeys. At first she thought Jane was travelling to forget her husband, but as the years passed, she continued to journey away from home. Even as she aged, she shirked the idea of more popular destinations, choosing instead the most dangerous. Lydia had no choice but to accompany her. Fellow travellers took up the task of entertaining and listening to her stepmother as she relived her adventures, and told and retold the story of her widowhood. However, Jane's tiresome appeals for sympathy at her status as a widow never extended to sympathy for Lydia as a spinster. Lydia knew her spinsterhood was inevitable. She couldn't look at her reflection without seeing the faint jagged line across the left side of her face that had cursed her youth and for which she blamed her stepmother. The scar ran along the bridge of her nose before splintering off into her cheek. Jane had introduced her, in her teens, to flaky lead-based skin powder to hide the worst of it. Never once had she claimed responsibility for what had happened. Throughout her life Lydia had struggled with

Simpson 1

the failure of not being able to find a husband, of going to her grave without ever having experienced intimacy and after the accident, she felt doubly damned.

The gas they had laid throughout most of the house did not yet reach the attic, but two hours later, using the light of a candle and wearing her thickest tweed cloak, Lydia unearthed a dozen small hard-covered books from one of the large trunks up there. They did not appear in order of date. Some seemed quite old, others appeared to be government records, ledgers of some sort.

Jane had begun keeping diaries when she was seventeen. In her old age, she had rejected a Van Diemen's Land publisher's request to publish her account of the colony, although Lydia knew she was secretly flattered. Her journals, she would tell Lydia, were like the *hyponmenmata* used by in Ancient Greece as "a material support from memory" and were for herself and her family. Lydia remembered that conversation. She surely had every right to read them. The worst of her stepmother was there to read. The youthful pledges to "better herself", studying a new subject every week - three hours on Latin and a determination to come to grips with physics, "which I hate". In some of the diaries she found withered sprigs of forget-me-not blue Jane had picked, still preserved from her youth. In others, she found blotting paper once pressed on the now faded ink. Lydia had not expected to become so absorbed.

The later books were slightly larger in form and Jane's hand more assured. She was surprised to find little about their wedding. Finally, she reached 1836 - the year they all sailed to Van Diemen's Land. Lydia remembered the exhilaration of the adventure: sailing across the ocean to the other end of the earth. She had never been on a ship before. The first night after they left Southampton she could not sleep because of quacking ducks and other poultry on board, then the clanking of buckets in the early morning as the decks were washed. She remembered her first meal - boiled cabbage and some sort of meat - and her queasiness from the rocking of the ship. There were some days when the violence of the storms kept her from sleeping, as furniture was hurled about in the cabins and had to be lashed down. Schoolwork was largely abandoned as her governess, the ineffectual Miss Williamson, suffered from seasickness throughout the voyage. One of Lydia's favourite memories was the hours spent stretched out on cushions on the deck reading.

She had attended Sunday school with a group of other children while Jane organised soirees and held audiences on 'important' topics, often insisting Lydia attend to improve her education. Her father would appear proud of his indefatigable wife as she presided over the discussions. Lydia remembered listening wide-eyed to accounts of a man born with a tail in Sicily and lots of discussion about the age of the earth and the perils of Satan.

Each evening the family shared a meal in the dining room, their places reserved for the duration of the voyage. Once, during a violent storm, the Archdeacon slipped and banged his head against a buffet in the dining room where he lay for some time lifeless. Lydia had been convinced the devil himself had visited them, but the archdeacon had recovered.

Lydia saw more of her father on the ship than she had in her lifetime, although Jane was usually by his side. During the five-month voyage to the colonies, she and Jane had learnt to live with each other, both aware of their shared responsibility to Sir John. Were they ever friends? Lydia shivered, knowing that in spite of the decades they had spent together, she had never thought of her stepmother as someone who understood her. If there was a friendship, it was conditional. Did that count as friendship? Her eyes scanned the pages looking for further reminders of a life lived so long ago. The octopus they had caught with tentacles the size of a man's wrists which sprawled on the deck.

Simpson 1

The shark's dissection. Suddenly she was an eleven-year-old girl again gazing up at the spectacle of a creature from the deep dangling from a large iron hook in front of her, his tail thrashing before the sailor's knife. She remembered the taste the next morning at breakfast - rich and oily - not unlike the taste of eels - but most of all she remembered that its tail was dismembered while the creature was still alive. It was the first death she had encountered.

15 October 1836

The shark cursed me in death. Its blood leaked out over the poop deck and sprayed on my Balmoral petticoat. Dr Richardson, the ship's naturalist, was much taken with the sucking fish attached to its back. He thought it might be the same one the amateur historian Bennett spoke of during his wanderings in New South Wales, but he'd never seen it attach to a blue shark like this one. He didn't even know its biological name. The jaw was his trophy. The backbone was divided up among the forward passengers and the skin was stretched over a hoop and transformed into a tambourine. It was used for the rest of the voyage to summon passengers to meals, a hollow drumming uncannily like the beat of my pulse at times of which I cannot write.

Lydia kept reading. Jane's declared that she was now a collector as she began to record the creatures she and Dr Richardson plucked from the sea's depths. There was another sucking fish that had stayed alive for some time in spite of being kept in formaldehyde. There were several entries about the days they spent in Cape Town at the house of the astronomer, John Herschel, and Jane's journey to the top of Table Mountain. Lydia remembered sunshine and vineyards and the towering mountain that looked as though it was sheered across the top, it was so flat. Then her eye alighted on a particular passages further on.

October 28

I was taking my customary stroll on the foredeck and had strayed below, curious to find out more about our cargo. If I write the truth, I am committed to that, but I blush even now as I do so. The sight of intimacy. The sound of pleasure, discordant to my ears. And a boy? I examine my thoughts, like Dr Richardson would a specimen. Why did I keep watching? I was shocked. The boy was in danger and I stood there, transfixed, unable to accept what my eyes recorded. I have relived that scene many times. I did not see the boy's face immediately, just the side of his buttocks and the other man's trousers around his ankles, his hands gripping the boy's shoulders, his dark hair across his features as he half crouched against the railing. Most of all I remember the urgency of the way the older man thrust - his hair matted and stripes across his back - like an animal; like the two dogs I once saw copulating in an alleyway. I must have cried out. The eyes of Satan turned towards me. And the boy? His hair was dark and in curls, his eyes wide when they turned to face me. But by then the soldiers had come running.

The boy. The ship. Lydia felt unnerved and realised that she was unprepared for further surprises. This was not the voyage out to Van Diemen's Land as she remembered it. Several days passed with no entries.