

THE
LYREBIRD
BROOCH



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This is a work of historical fiction. While certain places may be identified, the resemblance to people and events is purely coincidental.

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Chapter 1

Mathilda listened. Still silence. Her mother had not yet risen. Mathilda swung the weight of her hair over her shoulder, teasing out the knot that interrupted the flow of her brush. The slanted beams of the morning sun shone on the burnished strands, washed in the outhouse the night before. Mathilda ran the brush again through the swathe of her hair before she rolled its length around her fingers. Her face framed by the oval mirror on the cherry-wood dresser, she pushed the curved hairpins through her hair and anchored the coil to the crown of her head. She had not plaited it first. With luck she would be out the door before Mutter had a chance to notice.

Mathilda glanced at a photograph on the opposite wall, showing her twelve-year old self, hair released from its plaits and springing in fair ripples to her waist over the white of her Sunday dress. It was the only photo there was of her as a child. The portrait was a piece of foolishness – her mother’s words – a visit to the photographer’s studio a gift from Mathilda’s Tante Eleanore. The photograph could not be displayed in the drawing room lest it be construed as vanity.

Today, Mathilda hoped that, by the time she had walked to her aunt’s home in the town, loose tendrils of her hair would escape and soften the angularity of her features.

Mathilda stepped into her dress and drew the tiny buttons through the loops down the tight bodice. It was her second-best dress, owned only because her oldest sister Else’s girth no longer enabled her to wear it. Mathilda hoped the garment, too, would escape her mother’s notice. Always there was this desire to do as she herself wished, but without the bitter arguments that flared at the slightest infringement of the austere conventions that Mutter held so dear. As Mathilda’s slender fingers finished their rapid run to the bottom of the bodice, she shook her head with the frustration of the constant subterfuge.

Her mind wandered briefly to consider Else’s increasing weight in a family where food was dealt out in adequate but measured quantities. Their other sister, Maria, had commented to Mathilda, ‘Caused by

disappointment, pure and simple.’ Ernst, the man of all work at the Lutheran parsonage, may not have been much of a catch but his departure was too precise and public a blow after he had walked Else home from church for five years. Since then, Else had refused to join her three younger sisters, Maria, Anna and Mathilda on walks into town during rare releases from their regime of chores. Only Father’s stern admonishments forced Else, eyes lowered, to shuffle into church on Sundays.

But Else was not even eating her share. Mathilda had noticed that Else left portions of her food, even at times surreptitiously ladling some of her goulash onto Johann’s plate when her parents’ attention was elsewhere.

Mathilda looked down at the mauve embroidery that edged the row of buttons from the neck to the waist on Else’s dress, then smoothed the fitted bodice over her breasts and the skirt over her hips. She hesitated before she used the mirror to guide her in pinning her only brooch to the high collar of her dress. She stepped back from the mirror to check her appearance. Her breasts and hips might be more – Mathilda hesitated in her mind for an appropriate word and settled on *fraulich* – more womanly – than she wished, but her neck was slender. The chased gold brooch against the deep mauve of her dress reflected the pale honey of her skin and highlighted the deep blue-grey of her eyes. Thoughts like these came from her aunt’s tuition; Tante Eleanore, whose simple home above the grocer’s shop was a sparkling jewel where even a spring posy of flowers was placed with an eye to enhance the crisp buttercup yellow of a cushion.

Mathilda smiled at herself in the mirror. It was the best she could do. Abruptly, she turned from her reflection to the two small parcels on the bed. She picked them up and laid them in the bottom of her woven willow basket, then stopped. She could hear light steps crossing backwards and forwards next door. Anna. And the heavy creak of the bedsprings in the room on the other side of her own. Else. Vater and Johann would already be out in the orchard. But, so far, she had not heard her mother’s determined tread. If she left quickly before her mother dressed, Mutti would not be downstairs to scrutinise the wearing of the non-workday dress, her golden hair coiled high on her head, the additional package in the basket.

Mathilda opened her bedroom door and tiptoed down the stairs and across

the hall to the front door. It was only as she held the door open that she called, 'I'm off, Mutter.'

Two clouds hovered in the amethyst morning sky. Mathilda stepped quickly outside and shut the door firmly. She was sure her mother would be calling downstairs at this very moment in her querulous voice, 'Who is setting off so early? Why haven't you come to wish me good morning?'

These were questions she would no doubt have to answer later. Now she would focus on the visit ahead. She hoped it was not too early to call on her aunt.

The Gunthers' dog barked as she passed their gate and set off an emulating cacophony along the lane. Mathilda grimaced. She had no choice but to brave the hounds if she wished to walk into town before the working day began. She crossed the lane, her shoes crunching on the dry gravel. She passed the Mullers' house. Their solid black dog wagged its tail and gave a welcoming bark as he recognised the early riser. Mathilda hurried along against the fence. She traversed the edge of the orchard that stretched beside the lane lined with native eucalypts until she passed the Lischkes' neat timber home. The brown hound there hurled itself against the sturdy gate.

All these dogs to guard homes in a community that knew so little crime that the loss of a pail or the theft of peaches growing over a fence was worthy of comment! Mathilda supposed things had been harder in the Fatherland, where most of the older generation had begun life. She passed the Weissers' and the small Lutheran church.

Pastor Schober was in the parsonage garden. Mathilda's father admired him as a man of rectitude and industry. Mathilda thought of him less kindly. He saw too much.

'Was machen Sie? Warum gehen Sie so früh aus, Fräulein Neumann?' What takes you out so early, Miss Neumann? Pastor Schober always spoke in German.

'The blue sky,' Mathilda answered in English. She bobbed her head but did not break her pace. Undoubtedly, her impertinence was noted.

In her school years, Mathilda had attended the new state school, its building purchased from the Lutheran Church when the Victorian Education Department decided to take responsibility for educating the colony's

growing population. Else, eight years older than Mathilda, had had no choice but to go to the German school, the only one that then existed in Waldau. So had Mathilda's three other siblings. Mathilda, the youngest, had been the only child in the Neumann family to be educated in English. However, she had not escaped scot-free from Pastor Schober's tuition; Vater had insisted she attend Saturday school to learn to write in German, as well as study the Lutheran catechism. A good student on weekdays, Mathilda had envied her school friends their freedom on Saturdays. She had often been the butt of the pastor's stern words of admonishment as her attention drifted with the "Aark, Aark, Aark" of the crow crying on the fence post outside the window.

If only, Mathilda thought, the pastor would focus his attention where his finicky interference would do some good. At eighteen, she was old enough to go for an early morning walk without answering to her old German teacher. But his current role as spiritual leader in the predominantly Lutheran township made Pastor Schober a powerful figure in the community. She would have to sit under his scrutiny and listen to his sermons this coming Sunday and every Sunday for as long as she lived in her parents' home.

Mathilda turned into Main Street. She was opposite the bank with its fine façade, its architraves and columns, the town's newest and finest building. Sensing movement behind the curtains in the residence above the bank, and, just in case it was William Knight who watched, Mathilda gave her hips a tiny swing and felt the accompanying swish of the muslin around her ankles. A pity, yes, a great pity that the handsome bank manager was married, and for him that he was married to Frau Purse Lips, as Else called Mrs. Knight. After three years in the town, her first name was still unknown. Of course, she and her husband attended the Church of England.

Then Mathilda saw Dieter Muller viewing her progress along the edge of the path. The grocer's son was unloading the dray. She hoped he didn't think the twitch of her skirt was intended for him to approve of her ankles.

'Morgen, Tilly.'

'Morning, Dieter.' Her voice was curt so that her lack of interest in him would be quite clear. She saw a slight puzzled frown on his face and

softened her tone. 'I'll be in later.'

Mathilda and Dieter had gone to school together and never made the transition to adult forms of address.

For the thousandth time this year, Mathilda wished that she were less aware of every man she met, torn between wanting each to desire her and fearing that no one ever would, or only those like Dieter whom she would never consider for a husband. No, marriage to the grocer's son would not be the escape from the dreary round of daily chores that governed life in the Neumann household, the life of continuous physical labour that bound her mother's existence, the pattern that Mathilda had no intention of following.

Dieter nodded as he hoisted another sack of flour onto his shoulder, favouring his good leg as he carried the load into the store. He had fallen from the cart as a child, and his broken leg had mended shorter than the other.

Mathilda's family bought scant supplies at the grocer's store. Apart from the apples, pears and peaches from the orchard, the Neumanns' own kitchen garden provided carrots, red and white cabbages, potatoes and beans, and the hen house their eggs and poultry. Johann's pigsty supplemented these staples with an occasional feast of roast pork as well as sausages, hocks and rib bones that were smoked and used sparingly when vegetable soup was the main fare. But perhaps, Mathilda considered, a few of Mutti's favourite lozenges purchased at the grocer's might quell her displeasure, and therefore be worth the penny.

Between the grocer and the land agent, a gleaming, black-painted door led to the dwelling above. There was no sign to suggest Tante Eleanore took in paying guests, but somehow new German immigrants found their way to her door. Mathilda ran her hand over her hair, winding a tendril in front of each ear before she knocked.

'Tilly, Liebchen. Come in.' Her aunt drew Mathilda inside the door before she hugged her. 'So early. Wunderbar!' She lowered her voice and leant like a conspirator to whisper in Mathilda's ear. 'They are still at Frühstück.' Then, in a voice that could be heard from the adjoining room, she said, 'Come and meet my guests.'

It was always the same. The warmth of Tante Eleanore's welcome. The

mixture of English and German. And added was the implicit understanding between them that Mathilda needed to find some way to move out of the rigid Lutheran home into which she had been born.

Mathilda followed Eleanore's tiny figure into the dining room, with its red and white checked cloth on the main table and the fruit-wood sideboard with its platters of cold cuts and soft cheeses. The cheerful room caught the early sun between the looped yellow curtains. Not a single mote of dust showed on the polished oak floor. The breakfast room and indeed her aunt's entire home fulfilled the rules of pristine domesticity to which German housewives aspired. But the cleanliness was less apparent than the friendly elegance of her furnishings. No doubt it was this atmosphere as well as Eleanore's ever cheerful demeanour that sent her address from one set of new arrivals to the next.

Mathilda was interested in the guests at the table, though, not the spread of food or the cleanliness of the floor.

Her aunt put an arm behind Mathilda's back and drew her forward. 'Now, Herr Brandt you have met. And now here is also Herr Lund.'

Herr Brandt stood briefly and dipped his head to Mathilda, his bald patch for a moment exposed to her gaze, before resuming his seat.

Mathilda looked to the new guest. He wiped his clipped dark moustache with his napkin and stretched out his hand.

'My niece, Fräulein Mathilda Neumann.'

'Guten Morgen, Herr Lund.' Mathilda used the cadences of formal German learnt in Pastor Schober's Saturday class rather than the guttural language spoken in her own home.

'Good morning, Miss Neumann.' His hand was smooth and firm within her proffered one.

Mathilda smiled. The boarder's English was clear, with the level tone of an English accent. The early start and possible recriminations to come were worthwhile. She would be the first young woman of their community to meet the new arrival.

The latest house guest was not smiling; his clear brown eyes under straight brows were appraising her. Single and handsome, according to Tante Eleanore's whispered aside to her after Kirche last Sunday. Herr, no,

Mr Lund was tall, taller than herself, with a high smooth brow and wavy hair the colour of chestnuts. His moustache was full, unlike the pencil-thin moustaches that were worn by the men she knew.

Now she had achieved her object of meeting her aunt's new boarder, Mathilda was at a loss for words. She felt a flush rise up her cheek as Mr Lund remained standing. Yes, but he was a real man; she could see that by the way his gaze left her face for the briefest moment and travelled down to her toes then up again.

'Please, continue with your breakfast,' Mathilda said. She looked around as her aunt left the room, perhaps to bring in some warm additions for the sideboard. 'Please,' she reiterated as the new house guest paused. 'I've already eaten.'

With a nod, Mr Lund reseated himself, spreading his napkin over his lap. Mathilda would have to find her aunt. She couldn't remain standing, scrutinising her aunt's guests as they ate. Suddenly, she changed her mind as her eye landed on the coffee pot on the sideboard.

'May I pour you a cup of coffee, Mr. Lund? And Herr Brandt?'

'Thank you,' the new guest said.

Herr Brandt also grunted his assent.

Mathilda poured coffee from the blue and white pot and placed a cup beside each of the seated men, then added the sugar bowl and little jug of milk at the side of the new guest. She returned the pot to its stand on the sideboard and could think of nothing else to delay her departure. Then, with a burst of temerity, she poured coffee into the spare cup.

She crossed to the chair opposite Mr. Lund and sat down. She did not miss the slight raise of his eyebrows, but he did not look displeased. Having taken the bold move of seating herself with the boarders at their breakfast, Mathilda felt impelled to speak. 'Do you intend to live in this area, Mr. Lund?'

'I don't think so. My work requires either a larger town or easier access to the city. But I had your aunt's accommodation recommended most highly. Frau Neumann *is* your aunt?'

It was a confirming aside to which Mathilda nodded.

He continued, 'Although I don't expect to settle here, it seemed an easy

beginning to spend some time in Waldau while I become acquainted with the way of life in a new country.’ Herr Lund looked directly at her.

These were sentences that Tilly herself, born in this English-speaking country, would be pushed to match in fluency. Eager that he would not think her ignorant, she leant forward and said, ‘But your excellent English would allow you to fit in easily in Melbourne.’

‘Thank you, Miss Neumann.’ He gave a polite nod, then continued. ‘Still, I trust the Lutheran community here to give me good advice. Honest advice.’

‘Ah! Certainly, the men are full of advice.’

At once, Mathilda regretted the slight note of disparagement with which she had spoken. It was the truth, though, the men’s certainty in all their utterances. To soften her words she continued more modestly, ‘They will be pleased to give you the benefit of their knowledge.’ Then she could not resist adding, ‘...but it will be all about peaches and pears.’

Wilhelm Lund laughed, and Mathilda’s grey eyes sparkled as they met his.

Chapter 2

Peaches and pears, peaches and pears. There was a rhythm to Mathilda's steps as she retraced her journey homewards, the words creating a jingle in her head. The working day was under way and the dogs were no longer growling at the end of their night-watch. But Mathilda's mind was focused back at the breakfast table. The moment of looking into Will Lund's eyes stayed with her, and she re-ran the remainder of their meeting in her head.

'Shall we speak in the language of our new land?' Mr. Lund suggested.

'Certainly,' Mathilda agreed, although she rarely spoke in English at any length.

Herr Brandt made a disapproving clearing of his throat and helped himself to another slice of ham, then took no part in their conversation.

Mathilda continued, 'But, for me, it is the only land I know. My parents were part of the group of Germans who were first to settle here.'

'When was that?' Mr. Lund asked.

'In...'

She paused, unsure of the exact year. 'It was soon after gold was discovered. I think it was 1854. My father says he desired gold until he saw the soil in this area. The soil won.'

His eyebrows arched in surprise. 'And you were born here, in Waldau, or Doncaster, as I have heard it will soon be called?'

Mathilda hoped his question was not because she spoke her English with a German accent, or that her speech lacked fluency. 'Yes, my sisters and brother were all born here. I'm the baby of the family.'

She realised how much he had elicited from her about her family as well as the district. There had been earnestness in his queries that Mathilda had deemed to be genuine curiosity, a sincere interest to understand the burgeoning colony and, she surmised hopefully, her tiny section of it.

Mathilda had told Will Lund that her parents had sailed here with a band of German settlers from the north-east of Germany, a group of staunch Lutherans. As she trod her way home along German Lane, as the locals called it, she realised how little interest, before today, the early history of

her parents' emigration to the colony of Victoria had held for her. She did remember – how typical – that Vati had wanted to keep to the proper Lutheran ways and had objected to some new book the Prussian king had wanted to impose on all Protestant churches. So, Vater had set out as a young man from Frankfurt am Oder travelling overland beside the Oder River, sometimes working his way by barge, to Hamburg.

For the first time, Mathilda thought about her parents meeting on the boat that sailed from Hamburg and gave her head a little shake. She could not imagine there being a romance! Her mother, Christiana, was the oldest child of a family called Fankhauser. While the remainder of the ship load of German passengers had been set ashore in the new colony of South Australia, August had decided to travel on with the Fankhausers to the port of Sandhurst. Could it have been that her father already had his eye on the buxom Christiana?

Mutti had said she was sixteen when she travelled by boat to this new land. The only time Mathilda had heard an explanation as to why her father had changed his mind about travelling to the diggings was that he had fallen in love with the soil! A little giggle escaped from Mathilda's mouth as she hurried towards home.

It was obvious, though, Mr. Lund had commented, that the quickly growing metropolis of Melbourne would have needed supplies of fruits and vegetables, and the gently hilled land that had been selected continued to prove well suited to this task. Mathilda agreed. For whatever reason, her father alongside the Fankhauser family had joined other German settlers and started clearing land in this area they called Waldau. At first, August supported himself with the sale of firewood from the trees he felled. This had enabled him to survive in a wattle and daub hut until the first crop of berries provided more than a frugal subsistence. 'That hut is still our scullery,' Mathilda had told her new acquaintance.

As she walked past the church, she thought of what else she knew of those early days before she was born. It had taken Vati ten years to build a substantial house of timber felled, dressed, then built with his own hands on his own land. Only then had he married Christiana, and the children began to arrive: five in all, at near yearly intervals. Mathilda was the last child,

and it was openly acknowledged that August had wished for a second son, not a fourth daughter. Mathilda was torn by this, resenting her father for not welcoming her but pleased to be a girl nonetheless when she compared her life with her brother, Johann.

Wilhelm Lund had surprised her by asking, ‘Your mother, has she been happy in a new country?’

Mathilda for the first time thought consciously about her mother’s constant state of discontent. Her father occasionally acknowledged his wife’s punctilious performance of her role as housekeeper and mother, but a happy demeanour was never one of his expectations. Mathilda, too, accepted that her mother was a grouch who scolded and reprimanded her children, even now they were young adults.

So, in response to Wilhelm, Mathilda had shrugged. ‘She has an upside-down mouth, my mother. But she is pleased that we have plenty of food. And four daughters! The worst jobs she leaves to us!’

Wilhelm had smiled at Mathilda’s memory of those hated tasks. ‘Yes, if you did not grow up on a farm you do not know the disgusting feel of scraping of bristles from the slaughtered pig. And the insides! Ugh! Vati loves his Blutwurst and so the blood must be saved, and the insides of the pig must be washed and chopped and pushed into the...’ Mathilda paused. The English word escaped her.

‘Intestines?’

Wilhelm saw her embarrassment. ‘Ah, but I did grow up on a farm. And you are right! There are many unpleasant tasks I was glad to leave behind.’

Mathilda drew breath. Wilhelm Lund’s comment reminded her that, in her excitement at meeting him, she had let her tongue run away with her. She did not want him to think of her as someone who spoke too freely about private family matters, nor that she was a kitchen drudge, and a grumpy one at that. So, she added, ‘But the tasks are shared, and Mutter has an easier life now we are all grown up. Of course, most of my time is spent on needlework.’

As Mathilda continued past the Zerbes’ home, with its window boxes of geraniums visible through an avenue of pines, she reconsidered her reply about her mother’s state of apparent unhappiness. There had been a day,

perhaps ten years ago, when she had found Mutti sobbing on the stairs, a letter in her hand. Grossmutter Fankhauser had died on her way back to the old country, on a journey to see her own dying mother. August had labelled his mother-in-law's trip as a piece of silly extravagance.

Pastor Schober had uttered a prayer of condolence and consolation in church the Sunday after Mutter had received the letter, but Mathilda had no memory that her father had acknowledged at any stage his wife's state of grief. Certainly, she had no time to grieve or rest from her duties. Nor had the children been asked to be kind. Mathilda thought how the family had followed her father's expectation that Christiana would continue to work seven days a week.

Almost home, Mathilda realised she had forgotten the lozenges for her mother. She wished she had bought a tiny something to make her mother's day a little sweeter, no longer just to avoid criticism for her escape from the early morning tasks.

Then she noticed the grey gelding tied in the shade of the tree at their front fence. It would be Mr. Donaldson taking a morning coffee in the drawing room, unless he was out in the orchard with her father. If it were the former, his presence would distract her parents from questioning Mathilda about her early absence. And Mutti would not comment on her wearing an embroidered dress with a brooch in front of the successful Mr. Donaldson.

As she stepped into the shade of the veranda Mathilda heard the low rumbling tones of her father, his hesitations as he spoke in English but with the German ordering of his words. 'Already the flowers give way to tiny fruits.'

Of course, this was his favourite topic. For August was most proud of his reputation as an orchardist. When the settlers' clearing of the forest had reduced the land's suitability for growing berries, August Neumann had been one of the first settlers to plant fruit trees; the district had now become the premier pear and peach growing area for the rapidly expanding town of Melbourne. And if August Neumann's peaches could be ready for market before those of his fellow orchardists, he could ask a price that was half as much again.

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