

The Conductor

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Chapter 1

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“Fancy a snog?”

Thomas didn’t wait for a reply as he kissed his wife once and then again before holding up their infant, Birdy, to place a soft peck on Beatrix’s cheek. The little one waved with both chubby arms, and her almond-shaped eyes always made Beatrix blink in astonishment, feeling wonder and joy, fear and gratitude, all balled together. It was nothing she’d ever experienced.

“Can’t you just say ‘kiss’ rather than snog, darling? It sounds scandalous,” Beatrix protested.

“My point exactly.” He kissed Beatrix again, then turned to the nearly year-old baby. “Amazing wave there, Birdy, and now, come on. You can do it. You can say ‘Daddy.’” Thomas had been coaching her to wave and say Daddy, consumed with it for weeks.

“You know, Thomas, that Birdy might not actually speak until after her first birthday. And ‘Ma’ is the easiest sound for her. The wave, however, is quite genius,” Beatrix said.

“Isn’t she just? Don’t wait up for us.” He laughed again.

They’d just finished breakfast, so this made Beatrix chuckle, her brown hair with the auburn highlights stuck back in a loose ponytail. She was dressed for the garden in green denim overalls and a blue, lightweight pullover. She was eager to get digging in the dirt. In another month, the flower beds would be exploding with a riot of reds, yellows, and orange nasturtiums, happy-faced Marguerite daisies, and yellow coreopsis with white cosmos accenting the design. Sweet alyssum in puffy clouds would round out the color scheme. She planned to jam the beds and pots with everything the local nursery offered.

As anxious as she was to plant the starters she’d bought at the nursery center the previous day, Beatrix never rushed their goodbyes. Not in the most secret places of her heart or her wildest dreams, in the darkest times of her life as an unwanted orphan, lost in a series of boarding schools as a teenager, and floundering to make a living during the horrors of the war,

did she ever think her life would be filled with the love of a devoted husband and the cutest baby on the planet.

Standing on the sidewalk in front of their ever-so-slowly-being-renovated Victorian mansion in the sleepy, little California beach town of Santa Barbara, Beatrix moved closer to Thomas, slipped her arm around his trim middle, and moved in for a hug. In the cheerless days of World War II, all the gratitude she felt in that moment had been impossible even to dream about. She trailed her fingers down her cheek, where soft baby lips had just been, and sighed.

“Think we’ll saunter over to Woolworths Five and Dime for an escapade, and certainly we’ll be back before elevenses, which I prefer to call it over your Americanized ‘snack time.’ That chocolate chip scone in the pantry is to share with our tea, my dearest Bea. Not my best baking, but it had better be there when I return.” He produced a frown, knowing she had a penchant for chocolate—the reason he’d baked them.

“Wave goodbye to Mummy, Birdy pet. We’re off for a jaunt,” he said, and Birdy did exactly as her daddy asked. Then the twosome was off for their quick spin in the neighborhood or even farther to Sterns Wharf or north to the mission. Down the sidewalk they went, and Beatrix waved to their backs. She loved his smile and knew how broad it would be, even as she watched them moving toward the shops.

Thomas had procured, somehow, an honest-to-goodness British pram in the traditional navy blue fabric. She often thought he got more British by the day, although they’d lived in this community since the end of the war. He insisted that sweaters were jumpers and knackered meant that he or the baby was tired.

Just like Thomas, Birdy seemed to mostly have an “on” switch where she was happily and thoroughly engaged with toys, cooing, and making sounds that would eventually become words, and the rare “off” one, where she, as Thomas did, slept like a bag of rocks. While they had fostered and then adopted Birdy as an infant, it was remarkable to friends, family, and strangers how much the baby looked like Thomas and Beatrix. She had striking, intelligent eyes that constantly watched where her parents were, wild hair just like Thomas’s, and smooth, creamy skin like Beatrix’s. Most likely, they’d discussed, they’d never find her birth parents—who had left her, hours after her birth, at Cottage Hospital—or know her heritage.

Thomas had researched the possibility of using blood samples or even the cutting-edge science of gene testing to determine her ethnicity, but without any way to find Birdy’s biological

parents, it hardly mattered. They had just the previous evening talked about adopting more children and knew as soon as was appropriate that they'd explain to all the Patterson-Ling kids that they had been chosen, just like Mummy and Daddy had chosen each other.

They'd decided to name the little girl after all of their mothers and call her Jay. She would be Jennie, for Beatrix's adoptive mother; Adelina, for her biological mother; and Ya, for Thomas's mother, which in Chinese meant refined, elegant, and graceful. About a month after the baby came into their lives, there was a flock of squawking and comical California scrub jays frolicking the bird bath in the garden, and the little girl's nickname morphed into Birdy.

Thomas moved with grace and a quiet confidence, which Beatrix knew came from his years of martial arts training. Thomas was lithe and just an inch taller than his wife at five foot eight. He never thought there was anything unmanly about strolling around the city with the little girl and was totally in love with the child, as he'd told Beatrix that morning and every morning since the little one had joined their lives.

Thomas felt burdened with guilt as he headed into downtown Santa Barbara. He knew it was not cricket to conceal the letter he'd placed in his jacket's pocket when he picked up the morning mail. Yet, as with everything in his well-organized life, he dreamed it would be better to wait until evening to discuss what had been written. Was this an opportunity or madness? He liked to think he made wise decisions, calculated and smart. Yet the contents of the letter could change everything about their future and their family life in the tranquil beach city.

Was it a lie not to tell Beatrix at once? He thought not, except one could say it was a lie of omission. He mentally calculated what the effect caused by the letter would be on his family and sighed deeply. Beatrix had just established her practice as a psychologist focusing on returning veterans who suffered from mental damage as well as physical issues during and after the war. The effects of trauma on soldiers during the Great War was a field she'd studied at length, and now she was compiling data on the current mass of returning veterans, wounded inside and out from the Second World War.

Then there was the house. It still needed a multitude of improvements. Thomas thought, *What houses built in the late 1800s didn't?* However, it was livable, warm in the winter, and cool in summertime, thanks to the oversized windows letting in the playful ocean breezes.

Then there were the friends, closer than family, they'd made in the city. Sam and Jo Conrad lived just blocks away. The couples and their kids dined together once and sometimes twice a

week. They were already planning summer picnics on Arroyo Burro Beach, also known as Hendry's Beach by locals, with its wide sandy shore and cliffs perfect for boys like the Conrads' eldest, Sammy, to scurry up. Thomas imagined Birdy following the Conrad twins and Sammy, running through the waves, unaware of how idyllic their childhoods would be away from the recent nightmares of war, with loving parents and a safe community in which to grow, learn, and follow their dreams.

After the war, when he could safely cross the Atlantic and travel from England to Santa Barbara to see his lover, he vowed never to forget how fortunate he was. This letter? The knowledge of it felt like a fire in his pocket, as its contents would change every aspect of their lives.

Can I do that? Am I dedicated enough? Why am I even considering it? It's utter madness, he thought.

Earlier that morning, he shook his head in dismay at the sheer contentment on his wife's face as she stroked Birdy's pitch-black hair. They'd been through so much together, individually and now as a family, after adopting Birdy. They were on a journey that made them both feel at peace. Once Beatrix read the letter and acknowledged its content, the future would flip, a dangerous somersault to their tranquil life. There would be no going back.

Whatever the result, we'll never be the same. That frightened Thomas, and he thought, *For now, I best wait. A few more hours of bliss before . . .* He couldn't even *think* the words—didn't want to face what would be the outcome when he did.

Beatrix continued to watch the pair and imagined Thomas chatting with the baby in Cantonese as they ambled down serene Anapamu Street in the heart of the city and onward to State Street, the main shopping street. Truth be told, she'd had doubts about becoming a mother to the fostered little one and then again when they applied to adopt the infant. At thirty, she didn't know if she'd have the patience of younger moms, but the moment Birdy arrived in their arms, Beatrix never looked back. Thomas, on the other hand, never doubted the decision. He jumped in, taking over the hourly feedings when Birdy was tiny, changing the nappies, walking the floor, sterilizing glass baby bottles, and suddenly becoming an expert on burping the baby. Because of Beatrix's incredible memory, she'd cataloged and compiled every event in their lives since the child had come to them. Often, when she was alone or taking a quiet walk on the beach, she'd think of how they'd come together and what their future could possibly hold.

At least once a day, Thomas would remark, “I was born to be a father.” Thomas told this to anyone and everyone who would listen. He’d even taken a year’s leave of absence from the University of California researching clean energy and teaching so he could be there for Beatrix and Birdy. “I do not want to forgo a second of our daughter’s first year.” The year was closing in, which made him blink back tears more often than not when he talked about returning to the university.

Beatrix thought of how, since the day Birdy was placed in his arms, Thomas sang the same Chinese lullabies his grandmother crooned to him. After all this time, Beatrix could finally join him, still fuzzy on the translated words. Thomas assured her one song was Birdy’s favorite and performed it regularly at bedtime. “It’s all about how the moon protects little ones,” he’d told her. Then he winked and looked like a mischievous boy—a look she loved.

Beatrix remembered pointing out that the song sounded like a rude sea shanty that his grandmother also sang. She had learned that possibility from one of Thomas’ sisters when the entire Ling clan had visited for December and January to get away from the chill of London. More so, to admire and love Birdy Patterson-Ling. And they did.

Beatrix knew that Thomas regularly held deep scientific conversations, talking to the infant as if she were a colleague. Other times, Beatrix had seen him get teary-eyed watching their exquisite little girl just sleeping. He’d whisper to Beatrix, “She’s dreaming. Look at her fingers move. Look at that heart-shaped mouth. Bea, whatever do babies dream about?”

Truth be told, Beatrix did the same, humming French songs and reciting poems that her Parisian biological mother had taught her, also wondering what babies dreamed of.

Beatrix often found Thomas sitting near Birdy’s bassinet, holding her plump little foot or stroking it while the baby napped. He balanced a book of advanced physics or some scientific theory Beatrix barely grasped and stayed close to the tot, sheer bliss etched on his face.

Birdy’s arrival was unexpected and awe-inspiring. Thomas and Beatrix were the only couple on the county’s foster parent list who asked for a child of mixed race, so the county of Santa Barbara quickly granted them the opportunity to adopt Birdy. Hence, the plans to visit London and Thomas’s family were postponed, mandating immediately that the entire Ling clan came to Santa Barbara. Thomas and Beatrix put off visiting Paris to reunite with Beatrix’s biological father, General Charles de Gaulle. After discovering Beatrix was de Gaulle’s daughter, his family refused to speak with her, respond to her letters, or any attempts at reconciliation.

Growing up, Beatrix had always thought that de Gaulle was an unofficial uncle, a kindly and generous man. Now, they were all, including her father, estranged from Beatrix.

Beatrix felt content, more than she'd ever experienced. That surprised and pleased her. She was just climbing the last of the front steps when the buzzing of the big, black Bakelite telephone in the front room of the Victorian home demanded her full attention. She swung open the screen door and dashed for the phone.

"Hello, Dr. Beatrix Patterson speaking," she said.

Beatrix felt fear shoot through her, and her forehead wrinkled when she heard the caller sob. "What is it? Who is this?"

It certainly could not be the person she'd expected to call. She glanced at her watch. No, it was too early.

That cry was completely out of character for her first counseling client of the day, as the woman always called to confirm before an appointment. Gloria Rayne had been in the South Pacific as a surgeon throughout the war, bobbing around on a naval hospital ship, often being harassed and bombed by the enemy as she performed surgeries with limited resources. Beatrix met her by chance during a previous investigation of a local religious leader who died under suspicious circumstances and the murder of a federal agent connected with the local Indigenous people, the Chumash Indians. Gloria had enough courage to do her job with the utmost confidence and then the wherewithal to seek counseling when she returned to the home front.

To the city's population, Santa Barbara's esteemed coroner, Dr. Rayne, seemed like the poster model for a competent, modern woman. "I can hide my pain well," she'd told Beatrix at their first counseling session, although the scars from Japanese bullets hitting her neck were visible still. Explaining the injury, she shook her head. "I was stupid, Beatrix. Went on deck. It had been a horrible night, filled with death, and unless I saw the sun that fateful morning, I knew I wouldn't be fit for the next surgery. I was sun-deprived and naïve. I walked to the edge of the ship and turned to see—truly, I could see the pilot's eyes on me—I saw the plane swoop down. He aimed at me, a woman." Her palm covered the scream that was in her throat. "I was the only one injured that day as our boys shot that killer out of the sky. I found myself in surgery, but not as the doctor."

While her external wartime wounds had left a mark, the psychological ones were deeper. Loud noises, barking dogs, and screaming children all sent her into a well-concealed panic.

She'd come to Beatrix knowing that therapy could help with "combat fatigue." Over the past five months, they had been working to desensitize her crippling fears. Fortunately, Gloria could now enter a shop or restaurant where there was chaos and deafening noises without breaking out in a drenching sweat.

The caller was not the coroner. The sob Beatrix heard sent a chill to the hair on the back of her neck.

"Beatrix, it's Jo." Jo's voice quivered, and that never happened. "I'm sick with fear."