

HOUSE *of* LONGING

*Broken by grief
Bound by love*



TARA CALABY



CHAPTER 9

It seemed unthinkable at first, but the daily pattern of asylum life quickly became routine. Every morning Charlotte and the other women rose, washed and dressed themselves, then filed into the dining room for breakfast. Most days, they were given the same revolting porridge Charlotte knew from her first days at Kew; on occasion there were eggs from the asylum's hens or a bubble and squeak made with the previous day's leftovers.

After breakfast, the patients were sent to their separate occupations. The least able remained in the ward, making the beds and scrubbing the floors, while the others were divided among the kitchens, the laundry and the sewing rooms. Charlotte was assigned to a sewing room, as she had been led to expect, and her days were consumed in turning up hems and attempting clumsy embroidery on cloths and runners that the asylum would later sell.

The doctors would usually make their rounds in the

mornings. Sometimes they visited the wards, but they might also appear in the work rooms, or speak to the women when they were exercising in the yards. Charlotte respected Dr McKay the most. His dual roles meant that he was rarely present, but when he was he seemed genuinely interested in his patients and their progress. When he asked Charlotte questions, he listened to the answers, which was not always the case with his colleagues. She didn't delude herself that the superintendent understood her loneliness—for a start, he was married with a brood of children, according to Kate Riley. More importantly, he had his occupation. You could never feel cast adrift as she did, Charlotte thought, when you had a career to anchor you. She had seen her father after the death of her mother: how he had buried his grief in invoices and orders, and nearly doubled the stationery shop's profits before the end of the first year.

The shop had been Charlotte's refuge, too, in the past. But now it was so deeply imbued with memories of her father that, even if the threat of losing it wasn't always in her mind, it could have provided no refuge from her grief. Her dream of inheriting the business had hinged on her father's old age and retirement, not his death. And in her more recent fantasies, of course, there had been Flora. If not a partner in the bookkeeping and selling, then at least in smiles and reassurance and...and *being* there. Her presence would have been help enough. That was the thing neither Dr McKay nor any other man would ever be able to comprehend: the utter hopelessness of being a woman alone. How should she desire to stay alive when all that stretched in front of her was the

same solitary existence? She couldn't bear the thought of it, far less the reality.

The other doctors were both educated men, that was clear, but they didn't have the same devotion to their patients' improvement that Charlotte sensed in Dr McKay. The senior medical officer, Dr Runcorn, was a relatively young man, in his mid-thirties perhaps, and preoccupied with the latest innovations in psychiatric drugs. Charlotte escaped the worst of his experimentation—melancholics were rarely given medication beyond an occasional purgative or sleeping draught—but those women diagnosed with mania were not so fortunate. They were dosed with draughts to calm them and tabloids to keep them agreeable which, as Mary remarked to Charlotte, was 'a right bloody joke'. The drugs gave her throbbing headaches, she said, that made her more short-tempered, not less, and the draughts did not calm her, unless you considered it calming to apprehend the world through a thick, dizzying haze. When Dr McKay was away from the asylum, Dr Runcorn was left in charge. On those days, Mary became a model patient, at pains to escape the doctor's notice.

For Charlotte, it was Dr Lalor who was to be avoided. Whenever she saw him, she felt again the humiliation, the desperation, of being held down while her body was invaded. She remembered the burning, choking sensation of the tube being threaded through her body as vividly as if it was still caught inside her: the primal fear at being trapped and powerless with no avenue or escape from the pain. Although he had no cause to administer the tube again, she worried that there were other terrible procedures he might employ. She shrank

back against the walls whenever he visited the wards, praying that she might disappear entirely, and her terror of him must have been evident. Mary would squeeze Charlotte's hand once he had gone, and distract her with a joke or silly tale.

When the doctors were not present, the matron was in charge. She was a tall, imposing woman by the name of Blythe, married to the asylum's head gardener. If she enjoyed her occupation, she gave no sign of it, carrying out her duties with grim-faced efficiency and rarely smiling. She was not warm, but Charlotte believed her to be kind. She had watched the matron ministering to the more feeble patients, and they were always afforded a brisk kind of respect. The same could not be said for all of the attendants. Miss Simmons, in particular, was universally disliked for her scornful treatment of the patients who couldn't speak.

Regardless of weather or the day's activities, the main meal was at noon, and the food, although plain, was always fresh and plentiful. Charlotte had eaten quite simply when at home with her father and she didn't miss more elaborate fare as much as some of the other patients did. Her favourite days were those when a harvest came in from the kitchen garden and her plate would be piled high with vegetables: not just the usual peas and potatoes, but cabbage and pumpkin and parsnip; sometimes even cauliflower.

What she did miss was sweet things. Some of the women had family who brought in cakes and biscuits, but Charlotte's only visit had been from Mr Harrison, calling in briefly to discuss the difficulties with her father's probate, not to enhance her diet. On the outside, Charlotte had taken choice

for granted. In Kew, she quickly learned that the bulk of her decisions would be made for her—from accommodation and employment down to what she ate for dinner.

The afternoons were split between work and exercise. When the weather was good, the women were sent out into the yard, where some would walk circuits of the small space while others lounged beneath the trees. Charlotte often thought at these times of the evenings she'd spent with her father observing the Collins Street promenade—as much a public performance as it was a constitutional. Women showed off the latest Parisian fashions; men showed off their women. Charlotte had several times witnessed icy encounters between women in identical bonnets, and pitied the unfortunate milliner who would face their fury the following day. When Flora did the promenade she drew the attention of all around her while Charlotte, beside her, was all but invisible. She hadn't minded that; it was the way men looked at Flora that Charlotte didn't like. They would lift their hats and bow, but their eyes spoke of other things than gallantry.

'They look at you as if they want to eat you,' she had said once, and Flora had laughed. 'They're just jealous that I'm on your arm, not theirs. Their manly pride cannot sustain the slight.'

Now, Charlotte particularly enjoyed the times when Mary was able to circle the yard with her, talking and laughing. She had thought, not so long ago, that she would never be able to laugh again, but Mary had persuaded her that she was not betraying her father's memory if she smiled. 'He'd not want you to be miserable,' she said. 'Laughing at that old

cow Simmons slipping about on a sudsy floor doesn't mean you mourn your dad any the less.'

The two of them were separated, of course, when obliged to work. Mary was assigned to the laundry with Kate and Millicent, where she would occasionally iron linen if she could find nothing else to occupy her.

'Work's what you do when you want to get out of here,' she once told Charlotte, 'to make yourself look biddable. If you're staying in here anyway, you're just doing them a favour.'

'But won't they punish you?'

Mary laughed. 'What, for doing nowt? Reckon they're glad I'm not smashing windows. They're not fool enough to make a fuss 'cause I'm sitting on my arse.'

Charlotte missed Mary's camaraderie in the sewing room, which was well stocked with quiet women who made competent small talk but seemed to do little else.

For the first few weeks, Charlotte sewed in silence and viewed the roomful of women as an indistinguishable mass, but slowly she became aware of her fellow patients as individual personalities. Several of the elderly women were demented, with little idea of place or time. Without exception, their skill with the needle was impressive, but they mistook the attendants for their children or believed themselves to be young girls again, no longer bent and wrinkled. Two women knew no English, and conversed entirely in Gaelic, much to the doctors' disapproval. There was a Danish woman, too, Inge Jørgensen. She spoke English fluently, albeit with a heavy accent, and Charlotte came to appreciate her dry sense of humour and pragmatic outlook.

Inge had been sent to Kew after she accused her husband of poisoning her. The doctors pronounced her delusional, but Inge had not backed down. She had been covered in bruises when she was admitted, with the marks of lashes on her back. Her husband told the medical officer he'd been obliged to discipline her, and according to Inge, the doctor hadn't even blinked.

Not long after Charlotte's arrival at Kew, Eliza Walker was admitted: a timid, underfed woman, who hid herself in corners and rarely spoke. She scuttled from place to place with her shoulders bent forward, haunted eyes fixed to the ground. She was soon the subject of boiling rumour.

'She's the one what killed her baby,' Millicent said. 'Chopped it into pieces!' she added gleefully. 'Well, that or drowned it in its bath.'

Eliza didn't look robust enough to have done either, but it was clear that something tormented the frail little woman. Sometimes she would weep as she sewed, the tears wetting her fingers so that the needle would slip, and often drew blood. Charlotte knew the look of unquenchable misery well enough; she had seen it reflected in a looking glass. She found her own pain to be so much more bearable when there were people about to distract her that it seemed cruel to let Eliza remain so withdrawn. She enlisted Inge's assistance, and they would make a point of sitting on either side of the defeated woman, talking about their lives outside and asking questions, until finally one day Eliza began to respond.

Charlotte and Inge were trading memories of the foods they missed most from outside. Eliza hadn't appeared to be

listening until she mumbled 'rice pudding' into her chest.

'Oh, it's so flavourless here, though,' Inge responded, as though there was nothing unexpected about Eliza's contribution. 'In my country, we call it *risalamande* and we make it with whipped cream as well as milk. None of your dried-up raisins, either: we serve it with sour cherries in syrup.' She closed her eyes, smiling slightly as though she could taste it in her mind.

Charlotte followed Inge's lead, acting as though Eliza had always been part of their conversations. 'I've always preferred bread pudding.'

'That's because you've never had *risalamande*.'

'It sounds delicious,' Eliza said, finally looking up from her sewing and meeting Inge's eyes with a timid smile.

'Just wait until I tell you about *wienerbrød*.'

From that point, the three of them always sat together as they did their needlework. Eliza was warm-hearted and a good listener, but she was filled with self-loathing and shame. She never spoke of her son, but her husband visited regularly and she held him in high esteem, amounting almost to reverence.

'It's a great man who'll see the worst of you and forgive it,' she said once, when Charlotte made a joke of her devotion. 'It's easy loving the good parts, but he loves me despite my faults. I hope, one day, to be worthy of him.'

Charlotte, regretting her levity, squeezed Eliza's hand. 'You're already worthy, Liza.'

'You are kind to say so, but I'm afraid you're very wrong.'

Charlotte felt sure that Eliza would come on more quickly

if she were allocated anywhere but Miss Simmons' ward. The attendant had formed a great dislike of Eliza and often made her the target of her hated derision. If she walked too slowly or spoke too quietly—or sometimes for no reason at all—she would be punished. A harsh word if another staff member was present; a slap if there were only other patients to see it.

Eliza would probably have endured this treatment without ever speaking of it, had Charlotte not witnessed it firsthand. They were on their way to dinner when the hem of Eliza's dress caught on a splinter extending from a doorframe and they paused in the hall so that she could free her dress without tearing it. The other patients continued past unhindered, so Charlotte was not expecting the sharp cry of 'Stop blocking the hallway!' from Miss Simmons.

'I'm sorry, Miss Simmons,' Eliza said, before Charlotte could explain the problem. Her fingers trembled as she tried desperately to free her skirts from the splinter, her movements clumsy with fear. 'My dress is caught.'

'Stupid girl,' the attendant snapped, then lashed out with open palm, hitting Eliza full upon the cheek. Even in the bustle of the hallway the sound was startling, and Charlotte flinched as though the pain was her own.

'Sorry,' Eliza said again, the red mark of the slap already blooming upon her face.

Miss Simmons reached down and yanked the dress free with one movement, leaving a jagged tear where it had been caught. 'I expect this to be mended by the time I next see you,' she said.

'There was no need for violence,' Charlotte said, filled

with a dull anger, caused as much by her inability to protect Eliza as by the act itself.

‘Violence? I have no idea what you’re talking about, Miss Ross.’ A smug little smile compounded the audacity of the lie. ‘If you persist in voicing such delusions, I’ll be forced to express my concern to the doctors.’

Charlotte wanted to argue, but Eliza laid a gentle hand on her elbow and shook her head. ‘I’ll mend the dress immediately, Miss Simmons.’

The attendant didn’t even look at her. ‘See that you do.’

After that, Eliza began to tell her friends when Miss Simmons was more hateful than usual, whether with a particularly cutting comment or a surreptitious pinch. A woman more reactive than Eliza might have made a formal complaint, but she accepted the ill treatment without question, no matter how many times Charlotte and Inge urged her to speak to Dr McKay. It was not stoicism or cowardice that stayed Eliza’s hand; she simply believed that any punishment dealt her was deserved.

As much as Charlotte came to enjoy the company of Inge and Eliza, her favourite time of the day was evening, when the patients were allowed time for amusements. Local newspapers were not provided, in case a patient became agitated upon reading of a death in the family or other bad news. The English papers were allowed, though, along with novels and pamphlets, as long as they were deemed appropriate, and there were the inescapable games of cards or chess. There was also a battered piano, more or less in tune, and those women who knew how to play were encouraged to do so. The doctors

considered it a sign of convalescence, provided that a patient played melodiously and only sang when it was appropriate.

Charlotte had never learnt any instrument, a lapse that the doctors found shocking. Purely from her financial position, they imagined a life for her that she hadn't lived. Their Charlotte had arranged dinner parties and dances, holding court at the piano in the latest fashions from the continent. She had socialised with all the best people in Melbourne, rather than merely selling ink to them, and had been instructed in needlework and painting, instead of the various weights of paper and lines of perfect calculations. She would have found this amusing, if not for the fact that the doctors wished to restore her to this fictional self, rather than to the Charlotte that she had always been.

Their expectations were particularly high when it came to the asylum balls that were held regularly, and were among the few occasions where male and female patients were allowed to mix. This made them popular with those women who struggled with the usual segregation and did whatever they could to come into contact with any men who had cause to be on the female side.

Charlotte had no interest in men or dancing. She knew better than to express the former in the doctors' presence, but the latter she excused due to her state of mourning. Accordingly, although she was expected to attend the balls, she was excused from active participation and was allowed to stay with the long line of female patients who sat on one side of the room, looking at the male patients who sat facing them. Often it was the attendants who drew patients into the

centre of the room to dance, and from their stony-faced lack of interest, Charlotte guessed it was a requirement of the job. Well-behaved patients were permitted to dance with each other, provided that they maintained a genteel distance. Kate Riley was always in demand as a dance partner, both for her ability and for her tendency to flirt.

The first time she was ushered into the crowded ballroom, Charlotte felt quite overwhelmed by the bustle and the ubiquitous masculine presence. She had grown used to seeing only women, apart from the doctors; it was a shock to be faced by that line of beards and trousers and to feel the shift in the atmosphere when the sexes were mingled. Only the patients currently thought to be stable were permitted to attend the balls, so there was little threat of violence or scandal, but the room held an undeniable tension.

Charlotte's unease must have showed on her face, because Mary moved quickly to stand beside her, looping her arm through Charlotte's in a way that made her feel somehow protected from the throng.

Charlotte had read about asylum balls in the papers—always described with an air of morbid fascination—and had imagined a grotesque gathering of madmen more bestial than they were human. These men did not appear so. They were just men: lost, broken or miserable, much as the women were. The dangerous and the indecent remained hidden from public sight. But when the first male patient approached Charlotte for a dance—a gangly, long-faced man of about thirty—she found herself quite unable to refuse his request. In her time since arriving at Kew, she had seen the most gentle of women

become furies without warning. How might this man—or any of the others—react to a denial?

She was relieved when Mary stepped slightly in front of her, giving the man her most challenging glare. ‘Can’t you see the lady’s in mourning?’

He muttered an apology before moving on to the next woman in the line.

Mary rebuffed the next two men in a similar manner and after that Charlotte was left alone. She had realised early in the evening that Mary was not being approached at all, although she was clearly one of the prettier women in attendance. After seeing her passed over several times in favour of older and plainer women around her, Charlotte couldn’t help but remark upon the men’s odd behaviour.

‘Oh, they know me, you see,’ Mary said, eyes glinting with amusement. ‘They used to try it on when I was first here. “Come join me in a waltz,” and I’d just laugh in their face. “Not much call for waltzes where I’m from!” and if they kept on at me I’d tell ’em that even if I could dance all fancy-like, I still wouldn’t dance with *them*.’

‘Weren’t you afraid you’d make them angry?’

Mary laughed. ‘Reckon it was them who was afraid of me!’

They were alone at that point—as alone as they could be in a room full of people—the stretch of bench on each side emptied of patients by a popular tune. ‘But what if the man was remarkably handsome?’ Charlotte asked her, voice as low as it could be with the noise of the band.

‘They’re all as bad as each other,’ she told Charlotte. ‘If

owt, the good-looking ones are worse. Oh, they'll charm you and tell you they love you, but all they really love is what's inside your drawers.'

Charlotte could feel her cheeks flaming. Mary said things plainly that her friends outside wouldn't even have whispered. 'I've never been courted by a man,' she said. 'Not really. There were some who would come to the shop. Father said they'd be willing, if I encouraged them, but *I* think they were just there to do business.'

'Did you mind? Not being courted, I mean.'

'No. I was never a girl who dreamed of marriage. I always envisioned myself in charge of my father's shop.'

'I used to want to be married,' Mary said, surprising Charlotte. She scooted a little closer to Charlotte on the wooden form so she could speak without raising her voice. 'Before Paddy. When my mam was still alive. There was a boy, worked at the butcher's. He were a pretty thing, with the queerest eyes. So dark a blue they was almost purple. I've not seen the like of them since. He'd say sweet things to me when I'd go past and I'd picture us married with a dozen bairns.'

'What happened?'

'My mam died. My sister was hungry—three years younger than me, she was—and the boy from the butcher took me in an alleyway and gave me enough to buy food for a week. I didn't much fancy him after that.'

'How old were you?' Charlotte asked, trying to keep her voice even.

'Thirteen.'

Charlotte tried to blink away the tears that stung her eyes.

It was not her pain to cry about, but it hurt all the same. She ached for Mary and what had been done to her; ached for the girl she might have been if her mother hadn't died. How easily it could have been Charlotte, if she'd not had her father to protect her. She'd always thought herself superior to the fallen women people spoke of, but she had been lucky: nothing more.

Later, it seemed odd to Charlotte that Mary held her while she cried.

With male company of no interest to either friend, they used the time on the ballroom benches to talk, and Charlotte found it far more invigorating than dancing could ever have been. Mary's robust sense of humour was capable of rousing Charlotte from even her most morbid inclinations.

But she couldn't be with Mary all night and day. Although the routine of the asylum allowed Charlotte little occasion for solitude, there were still times when neither work nor companions could overcome the clamour of her thoughts. Then the darkness would wrap around her, and she would succumb to reminiscence and despair. It did not matter if she had laughed only recently; such periods of lightness were merely digressions from her normal state. She did not know real happiness, so much as moments of distraction—at best, something approaching contentment, and that was a fragile state easily shattered by a doctor's questioning or a sarcastic comment from Miss Simmons.

Sometimes the doctors asked Charlotte whether she wished to return home. She had been told by the other patients that the answer they were hoping for was a moderate yes; one

that wasn't excessively anxious. Eagerness to leave the asylum was viewed as resistance to treatment; willingness to remain was equated with acquiescence to illness. Those women who wished to obtain their discharge were obliged to master the correct balance. But even if they managed this, they might find themselves held indefinitely for other reasons. Kate Riley was not the only patient with a husband who didn't want her back, and many of the single women were retained for the lack of a situation outside.

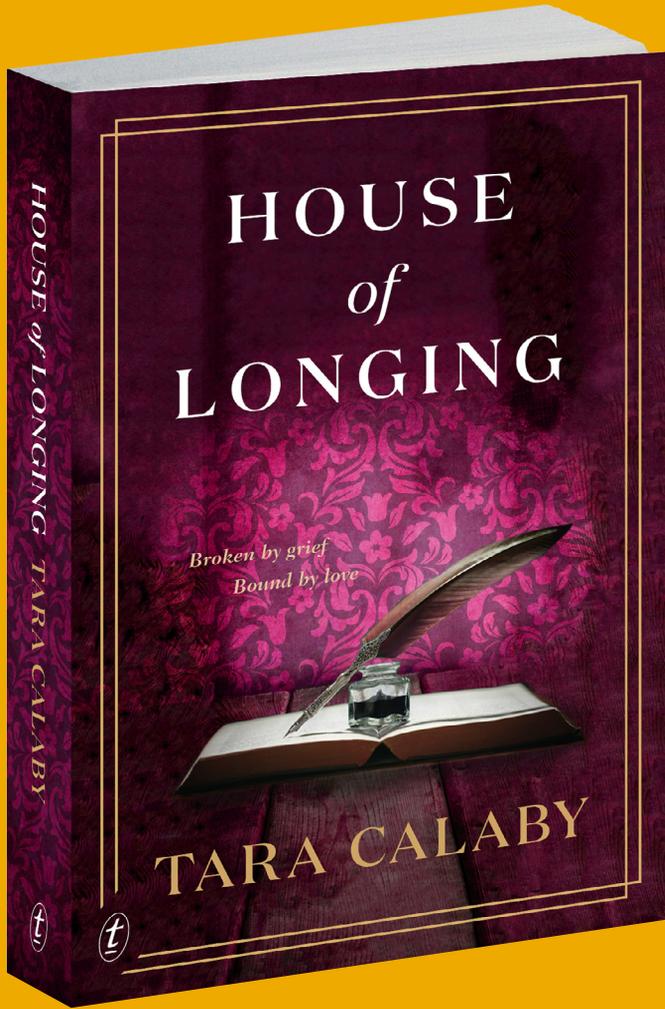
Charlotte found life in the asylum tiresome. But she knew that if she returned home, it would be to solitude. At her lowest moments, she thought nothing of that, since at least she would have the means to destroy herself. At other times, she thought it best to avoid the temptation. The doctors reassured her that she would come to value life again, and Charlotte wanted to believe that they were right. She looked at Mary, who had so many reasons to despair of the world, but who met each day with amusement, and she felt like a humbug for wanting to die. Were her trials so very terrible when compared with those of the women around her? Most had lost people they'd loved; what gave them the fortitude that Charlotte seemed to lack?

She was abnormal, she knew. Only that would explain her unreasonable emotions; only that would account for her immoderate love for Flora and her lack of interest in any man. Even Mary had cared for men once, before their behaviour had stripped away all her goodwill. Kate despised her husband, but wished she could replace him with a better man; even Flora had chosen marriage in the end. Charlotte was

unnatural, and so how could she ever be cured? If she told the doctors about Flora, would they still speak of recovery, or would they look at her with revulsion and leave her to her grief? Could they even understand the sharp edge of it: the cut of every day she remained alone and unvisited. If Flora loved her, if Flora had *ever* loved her, she would have come.

Charlotte thought about it late at night, and imagined herself stripped of her eccentricities. No longer yearning for Flora, and for the life of a shopkeeper. Instead, she saw herself married to a reliable man and bearing him battalions of sons. She would learn to dance and to play the piano; she would dress in pink and curl her hair. No one would doubt her femininity if they passed her in the street. She would be unremarkable. Not happy. But perhaps that would be enough.

Even the thought made her ache. She could recognise nothing in that imaginary woman, as sensible as she might be. Better to be herself and despised by others than to be normal and despise herself. If there was a cure, she didn't want it. And if that meant that she would remain in Kew forever, then she would accept that as her fate.



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