



A Mosaic  
of Wings

*a novel*

KIMBERLY DUFFY

The title is surrounded by several light gray decorative elements: a large four-petaled flower in the upper left, a smaller two-petaled flower in the upper right, a large four-petaled flower in the middle right, a two-petaled flower in the lower left, and a two-petaled flower in the lower right.

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This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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To the Creator of all things.  
You heard a little girl's dream  
and wove a story greater than anything she imagined.

And to Grainne, my aspiring entomologist.  
I love how much you love creation.  
You make me see the world in a different way.





# Part One



ITHACA, NEW YORK

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*May 1885*



# Chapter One

Nora Shipley's ears buzzed as though a thousand bees were trapped inside her head. Her back stiffened against the dining chair. She forced her grip on the May issue of *The Journal of Eastern Flora and Fauna* to relax, smoothing the creases at the corner of the page with her thumb.

Nora placed the journal on the table and gazed at her stepfather, Lucius Ward. Society deemed the house Nora grew up in his. But it wasn't really. Her father, Alexander Shipley, had bought this house when he secured his teaching job at Cornell University. It would always be her father's house, yet Lucius sat in her father's chair across the dining table from her, calmly eating his eggs, not realizing she barely contained an angry swarm behind her pinched lips.

Lucius wiped his mouth with a napkin. "Well, Nora, what do you think of our latest printing?"

Nora took a bite of toast to avoid answering. She flipped the periodical open to the most offensive spot, page sixteen. The advertisement, titled in a ridiculous and fanciful font, called

for submissions from those willing to pay to have their articles published. As she chewed her toast into nonexistence, she silently read the destruction of her father's well-respected nature journal.

Finally, she swallowed and looked up. "Have you turned the journal into a commission publisher?"

Lucius's eyes darted to Nora's mother, who sat at the end of the table. Lydia Ward made a small sound in her throat, then placed her attention firmly on her teacup.

Putting his fork down, Lucius coughed. "I had no choice. It was no longer self-supporting."

Nora raised a brow. "Really? It did fine under my father's control."

Red infused Lucius's face. Nora couldn't tell if it was from embarrassment or anger—he looked the same with both emotions. "You forget I was his partner. We started the journal together."

Nora remained silent. She glanced at her mother, who motioned for their housemaid, Alice, to refill her cup. Mother always drank tea when she was upset.

Nora turned her attention back to the periodical and flipped through, slapping it down on the table when she found the offending article. Jabbing at the title, she lifted her eyes from the page. "Is this what you will be publishing from now on? Articles from hobbyists, rife with inaccuracies?" Nora could hardly hear her words, muffled as they were by the furious sound of the bees trapped inside her head. "As a biologist, why would you be willing to promote bad science? It's misleading. And more than that, it mocks the exceptional reputation this magazine has earned."

Lucius sighed and scrubbed his thick fingers over his jowls. "I can't pour more of my own money into it. If it doesn't generate income, it will become defunct. I know you don't want that. Neither of us do."

Nora reached for the napkin beside her plate and twisted it between her fingers. She shook her head. "But you knew the

author was wrong. Why didn't you edit the article? This isn't the same academic journal you ran with Father."

Lucius had taught biology at Cornell University for twenty years, until he was abruptly released the winter before. A bright man, he dabbled in all facets of natural science—entomology, botany, chemistry—and knew the difference between solid research and vain posturing. What would their subscribers think when they read this month's issue? They couldn't possibly take it seriously.

Lucius waved his hand at the journal beside her plate. "These writers, they're so fragile. Correct them, and they pull their work and commission."

Nora shot to her feet, and the bees forced themselves out. "You'll turn my father's legacy into a laughingstock. I do not want to publish a journal that compromises his intent."

Lucius clambered from his chair and placed his knuckles on the table. He leaned forward, and Nora saw the flecks of mahogany flame against his brown eyes. Even though he spoke in a low tone, she didn't miss the warning in his voice. "It's a good thing, then, that this isn't your periodical. Nor is it, any longer, your father's."

His words stung, and Nora pressed the napkin to her middle.

"Alice," Mother called, her voice trembling, "please help me to my room. I believe I'm tired."

"You've upset your mother." Lucius placed a beefy hand beneath Lydia's arm. "Let me help you, my dear."

Mother stood, then swayed.

Nora's anger fled at the sight of her mother's white face and quivering lips. "I'm sorry, Mother."

Mother gave her a little smile, took Alice's arm, and left the room on silent steps.

Lucius sat and picked up his fork. "You're always sorry, Nora, but you speak without thought. It's not entirely your fault. Your father did you no favors in leaving you that inheritance without stipulation. A young woman would do better to marry than pursue a degree she will never be able to use."

Nora listened to Lucius prattle. She'd heard it before. Four years earlier, when he'd married her mother, Lucius had tried to convince Nora it would be wasteful for her to pursue a college degree. It galled him that Nora had ignored his advice and spent the inheritance her father left her on attending Cornell. In two weeks she'd have her bachelor of entomology. With determined application, Nora had been able to complete her degree in three years. Her money was gone, but what she had used it for would always be accessible in the form of an education.

"Your father should have known better, letting you believe you could—"

Nora blinked. "My father was a man of integrity and intellect."

Lucius slurped at his cup. When he set it down, tea sloshed over the rim and spread in a circle on the snowy white tablecloth. "Yes. He was also idealistic. Too idealistic, if you ask me. You need to marry, Nora. There's nothing admirable about becoming a spinster, especially when you're an only child. Your mother wants grandchildren." His voice turned almost plaintive, and he leaned toward her. "Let me introduce you to my friend. Mr. Primrose is successful and intelligent."

Nora groaned. "I've already told you I'm not interested in marrying right now. If you'll excuse me, I have a meeting with Professor Comstock in an hour, and I must prepare."

She swept from the room, her skirts swishing around her ankles. She couldn't listen to another word. Lucius was unbearable, and she was glad there were men in the world like her father and John Comstock. Men who viewed a woman's intellect on par with a man's. Men who believed God had made women in His image, not as a pale imitation of Adam.

Nora climbed the steps to the second floor and stopped to peer into her mother's bedroom. Through the dotted Swiss curtains of the canopied bed, she saw Mother reclining atop a pile of pillows, her hand against her head.

"Are you well, Mother?"

“Yes, quite, darling. I’m just going to rest awhile.” By the time her words made it to Nora, they were a whisper.

Nora blew her mother a kiss and followed the hallway to her own room, where she gathered her hat, cloak, and the box containing the *Scutelleridae*—commonly known as the jewel bug—she’d received yesterday. It did look like a little jewel. It was almost as pretty as the Lalique cicada brooch her father had given her on her thirteenth birthday. The insect would send her mother into a swoon, but Professor Comstock was sure to admire it.



Just before Nora reached Cornell’s White Hall, it began to rain. A sudden, heavy spring shower that drenched her head in moments. She groaned and ran the rest of the way, ducking beneath the door and into the corridor. She pulled off the tiny hat that had done nothing to protect her from the rain, and smoothed the curls twisting from their pins and beginning their corkscrewed ascent from her head. Of all the ridiculous things God could have given her, her wild hair topped them. Why she couldn’t have shiny, well-behaved locks, she didn’t know.

There was nothing for it. She’d just look like a sheep the rest of the day.

The entomology laboratory occupied the north end of the second floor, and Nora did her best to tuck as many frizzy curls back into their pins as she could while she climbed the stairs. The moment she stepped through the door of the lab, though, her irritation over her hair and the morning’s stress slipped from her shoulders like a butterfly shaking free from its cocoon. Nora never brought her burdens into the lab. Crowded with long wooden tables, shelves of books, and stacks of nets, the room seemed almost sacrosanct, and she didn’t want to disturb its peace. It was home. Even more so than the house she’d lived in all her life. That hadn’t been home since her mother had married Lucius.

Professor Comstock sat on the edge of his chair, peering into the eyepiece of a brass microscope. Nora set her box on the table and settled onto the stool beside him. He either didn't hear her or chose not to acknowledge her, because he continued to study his slide, making clicking noises with his tongue and murmuring.

"Professor," Nora said.

He held up a finger.

Nora grinned. She well understood the excitement of discovery. When Cornell first received the microscopes, Nora had spent hours studying the world she'd previously been unable to see. Pulling away to attend to the mundane was always difficult.

Professor Comstock sat up straight and shook his head. "Look and tell me what you see."

She pulled the microscope toward her and bent over it. Expecting the brilliant scales of a butterfly's wing or the spiky hairs of an ant's mandible, she was perplexed by the translucent orbs clinging to what looked like a tortoise shell comb. "Pollen? Are you studying botany now?"

"Only as it relates to apiculture. The pollen is clinging to the legs of a honeybee. It's fascinating. I'm beginning a new class next year. If you pursue your master's, you will take it."

"I've used my entire inheritance to obtain my bachelor's degree, but I'll attend your lectures." Nora thought she'd spoken well, with no trace of tremor in her voice.

He patted her hand. "Perhaps Lucius will . . ." He grimaced.

She laughed without humor. "We both know that's unlikely. Especially after Cornell released him from his job the way they did."

The professor sighed. "That's the second time the university has done that—let someone go by announcing it in the paper. And at Christmas! So unprofessional." He shook his head for a moment, then rapped the table with his knuckles, as though trying to wake himself up. "Tell me what you've brought today."

Nora pushed the cardboard box toward him and leaned

forward, the anticipation delicious. When her father died, she thought she'd have no one to share her love of insects with. She'd have to suppress her joy when she discovered an orb-weaver's web or a centipede crawled into her upturned palm. But Professor Comstock and his wife, Anna, filled that empty place. They hadn't yet had children, and they'd watched Nora grow up. She'd joined them and her father when they tromped through the gorges. Her little hands could reach into the crevices behind wet rocks to pull out the insects hiding within. Nora wasn't sure how she could have managed the last six years without them.

Professor Comstock flipped open the box, and a delighted grin pushed his thick mustache northward.

She craned her neck to see into the box and recapture the moment she first saw the mounted insect. "What do you think?"

With gentle movements, he pulled it out and set it on the table. "He's beautiful. Where did he come from?"

Nora scooted her stool nearer and stared at the bug secured by brass pins. She liked the romantic-sounding name of jewel bug, but it was also known as a metallic shield bug, and that was more appropriate. An iridescent green and red scutellum shielded its abdomen and wings, and it looked like it wore armor—a miniature soldier waiting for battle orders.

"My father's old friend, Mrs. Martín, lives in the Philippines with her husband, who is a Spanish diplomat. She's an amateur entomologist and often sent insects to my father, but she stopped after his death. I wrote to her months ago and told her I'd still love any she thought might add to my collection, and this is the first I've received. Isn't it incredible?"

Professor Comstock nodded. He lifted the insect and peered between it and the card. Satisfied, he set it back down. "It will make a nice addition. I do wish we could get a look beneath its wings. . . ." He glanced around as though searching for his scalpel.

Nora slipped the bug back into the box, imagining him slicing

into it, bug parts flying as he figured out all he could about the internal workings of her magnificent little soldier.

He caught her surreptitious movement and smiled. “I promise to leave him in one piece.” As he gazed at the bug, a faraway look clouded his eyes. “Wouldn’t it be something, studying insects like this in Asia?” He turned to her, one brow raised in question. “Nora, I’ve just had a wonderful thought. A British colleague is in India, collecting butterflies for a book commissioned by the Crown. He’s had the worst luck with illness—his assistants are dropping like flies.” He gave her a wry smile. “He’s asked if I can recommend anyone to join him. What about you?”

A short laugh escaped her throat as Nora imagined herself clad in linen and traipsing through the jungle with an umbrella net, capturing golden butterflies the size of her hand. She blinked away the unlikely dream. “I couldn’t possibly.” She was content to live and study in Ithaca. And to save the journal from Lucius’s terrible management. “Did you know Lucius turned my father’s journal into a commission publication?”

The professor’s expression turned thoughtful. “I’d heard. It’s a shame. It was such a beautiful publication.”

“Now line space will be sold to the most willing buyer—anyone with a smattering of knowledge and a desire to be published.” She couldn’t keep the disgust from her voice. It dripped from her lips like honey, thick and cloying.

He tapped his finger against his chin. “Maybe Lucius needed the money after his dismissal. Commission publications can generate a decent income.”

Nora shook her head. “That’s what he said, but why? Mother’s inheritance will last years.”

Professor Comstock ducked, but not before Nora saw dismay in his narrowed eyes.

“What is it?”

“It’s nothing. Just speculation and rumors.” He patted her hand. “Even if Lucius does ruin the journal, you have other

talents. You'd be a wonderful researcher. And India beckons. Imagine the insects you could collect there."

"If Lucius insists I meet this Mr. Primrose he's always going on about, I might have to go to India just to escape." She swiveled toward the table and rested her chin in her hand. "No, I mostly want the journal. It's all I have left of my father. I'm not ready to let it go, and I think he'd be proud of me if I saved it. Helped keep it alive."

"You made him proud the first time you caught a *Lampyridae*. He was thrilled when you mounted your first *coccinellid*. You inherited his passion for nature and insects, and he loved that."

Nora heard his words and recognized the truth in them. But a child's interest in lightning bugs and ladybird beetles wasn't going to save her father's legacy. His journal could be around for decades, and people would know her father's name and work. Even in death, he could claim recognition. And she would do anything to make that happen.

A light rap sounded at the door, and the tapping of heels against the wood floor followed. Anna Comstock entered the room, her stride efficient and her expression serene. Nora stood and smiled at her mentor, glad to put her attention on something other than the web of thoughts spinning in her mind. "Anna! I didn't think I'd see you until our session on Thursday."

Anna smiled, full of warmth and quiet joy. "I'm glad you refuse to admit you've surpassed your teacher's skill and still want art lessons."

Nora laughed. "That will never be true. And I wouldn't admit it anyway."

"Excellent. After my wood-engraving class, I'll have something new to share with you. The teacher need only be one step ahead of the student." Anna turned to her husband. "President White wants to see you in his office."

"Of course," he said. "Nora, if you have some time, would you mind mounting a few of my *Apis mellifera*? They're already prepared." He motioned toward the long table in the middle of

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the room, and Nora saw a trio of kill jars, a fuzzy yellow-and-black honeybee in each one.

She nodded, and when they left, she closed her eyes, inhaling the musty scent of books, solvents, and memories. The sun spilling through the bank of windows warmed her face, and for a moment, here in this place she loved, things didn't seem as awful as they had that morning.

If only she could spend the rest of her life in the laboratory.