Prologue

The first time I saw her again, I felt as if I'd been hit.

I have heard that said a thousand times, but I had never until then understood its true meaning: there was a delay, in which my memory took time to connect with what my eyes were seeing, and then a physical shock that went straight through me, as if I had taken some great blow. I am not a fanciful person. I don't dress up my words. But I can say truthfully that it left me winded.

I hadn't expected ever to see her again. Not in a place like that. I had long since buried her in some mental bottom drawer. Not just her physically, but everything she had meant to me. Everything she had forced me to go through. Because I hadn't understood what she had done until time—eons—had passed. That, in myriad ways, she had been both the best and the worst thing that had ever happened to me.

But it wasn't just the shock of her physical presence. There was grief too. I suppose in my memory she existed only as she had then, all those years ago. Seeing her as she was now, surrounded by all those people, looking somehow so aged, so diminished . . . all I could think was that it was the wrong place for her. I grieved for what had once been so beautiful, magnificent, even, reduced to . . .

I don't know. Perhaps that's not quite fair. None of us lasts forever, do we? If I'm honest, seeing her like that was an unwelcome reminder of my own mortality. Of what I had been. Of what we all must become.

Whatever it was, there, in a place I had never been before, in a place I had no reason to be, I had found her again. Or perhaps she had found me.

I suppose I hadn't believed in Fate until that point. But it's hard not to, when you think how far we had both come.

Hard not to when you think that there was no way, across miles, continents, vast oceans, we were meant to see each other again.

INDIA, 2002

She had woken to the sound of bickering. Yapping, irregular, explosive, like the sound a small dog makes when it is yet to discover where the trouble is. The old woman lifted her head away from the window, rubbing the back of her neck where the air-conditioning had cast the chill deep into her bones, and tried to straighten up. In those first few blurred moments of wakefulness she was not sure where, or even who, she was. She made out a lilting harmony of voices, then gradually the words became distinct, hauling her in stages from dreamless sleep to the present.

"I'm not saying I didn't like the palaces. Or the temples. I'm just saying I've spent two weeks here and I don't feel I got close to the real India."

"What do you think I am? Virtual Sanjay?" From the front seat, his voice was gently mocking.

"You know what I mean."

"I am Indian. Ram here is Indian. Just because I spend half my life in England does not make me less Indian."

"Oh, come on, Jay, you're hardly typical."

“Typical of what?”

“I don’t know. Of most of the people who live here.”

The young man shook his head dismissively. “You want to be a poverty tourist.”

“That’s not it.”

“You want to be able to go home and tell your friends about the terrible things you’ve seen. How they have no idea of the suffering. And all we have given you is Coca-Cola and air-conditioning.”

There was laughter. The old woman squinted at her watch. It was almost half past eleven: she had been asleep almost an hour.

Her granddaughter, beside her, was leaning forward between the two front seats. “Look, I just want to see something that tells me how people really live. I mean, all the tour guides want to show you are princely abodes or shopping malls.”

“So you want slums.”

From the driver’s seat Mr. Vaghela’s voice: “I can take you to my home, Miss Jennifer. Now this is slum conditions.”

When the two young people ignored him, he raised his voice: “Look closely at Mr. Ram B. Vaghela here and you will also find the poor, the downtrodden and the dispossessed.” He shrugged. “You know, it is a wonder to me how I have survived this many years.”

“We, too, wonder almost daily,” Sanjay said.

The old woman pushed herself fully upright, catching sight of herself in the rear-view mirror. Her hair had flattened on one side of her head, and her collar had left a deep red indent in her pale skin.

Jennifer glanced behind her. “You all right, Gran?” Her jeans had ridden a little down her hip, revealing a small tattoo.

“Fine, dear.” Had Jennifer told her she’d got a tattoo? She smoothed her hair, unable to remember. “I’m terribly sorry. I must have nodded off.”

“Nothing to apologize for,” said Mr. Vaghela. “We mature citizens should be allowed to rest when we need to.”

“Are you saying you want me to drive, Ram?” Sanjay asked.

“No, no, Mr. Sanjay, sir. I would be reluctant to interrupt your scintillating discourse.”

The old man’s eyes met hers in the rear-view mirror. Still fogged and vulnerable from sleep, the old woman forced herself to smile in response to what she assumed was a deliberate wink.

They had, she calculated, been on the road for nearly three hours. Their trip to Gujarat, her and Jennifer’s last-minute incursion into the otherwise hermetically scheduled touring holiday, had started as an adventure (“My friend from college—Sanjay—his parents have offered to put us up for a couple of nights, Gran! They’ve got the most amazing place, like a palace. It’s only a few

hours away") and ended in near disaster when the failure of their plane to meet its scheduled slot left them only a day in which to return to Bombay to catch their connecting flight home.

Already exhausted by the trip, she had despaired privately. She had found India a trial, an overwhelming bombardment of her senses even with the filters of air-conditioned buses and four-star hotels, and the thought of being stranded in Gujarat, even in the palatial confines of the Singhs' home, filled her with horror. But then Mrs. Singh had volunteered the use of their car and driver to ensure "the ladies" made their flight home. Even though it was due to take off from an airport some four hundred miles away. "You don't want to be hanging around at railway stations," she said, with a delicate gesture toward Jennifer's bright blonde hair. "Not unaccompanied."

"I can drive them," Sanjay had protested. But his mother had murmured something about an insurance claim and a driving ban, and her son had agreed instead to accompany Mr. Vaghela, to make sure they were not bothered when they stopped. That kind of thing. Once it had irritated her, the assumption that women traveling together could not be trusted to take care of themselves. Now she was grateful for such old-fashioned courtesy. She did not feel capable of negotiating her way alone through these alien landscapes, found herself anxious with her risk-taking granddaughter, for whom nothing seemed to hold any fear. She had wanted to caution her several times, but stopped herself, conscious that she sounded feeble and tremulous. The young are right to be fearless, she reminded herself. Remember yourself at that age.

"Are you okay back there, madam?"

"I'm fine thank you, Sanjay."

"Still a fair way to go, I'm afraid. It's not an easy trip."

"It must be very arduous for those just sitting," muttered Mr. Vaghela.

"It's very kind of you to take us."

"Jay! Look at that!"

She saw they had come off the fast road now and were traveling through a shanty town, studded with warehouses full of steel girders and timber. The road, flanked by a long wall created from sheets of metal haphazardly patchworked together, had become increasingly pockmarked and rutted so that scooters traced Sanskrit trails in the dust and even a vehicle built for breakneck speed could travel at no more than fifteen miles an hour. The black Lexus now crept onward, its engine emitting a faint growl of impatience as it swerved periodically to avoid the potholes or the odd cow, ambling with apparent direction, as if answering some siren call.

The prompt for Jennifer's exclamation had not been the cow (they had seen plenty of those) but a mountain of white ceramic sinks, their wastepipes emerging from them like severed umbilical cords. A short distance away sat a pile of mattresses and another of what looked like surgical tables.

"From the ships," said Mr. Vaghela, apropos apparently nothing.

"Do you think we could stop soon?" she asked. "Where are we?"

The driver placed a gnarled finger on the map beside him. "Alang."

"Not here." Sanjay frowned. "I don't think this is a good place to stop."

“Let me see the map.” Jennifer thrust herself forward between the two men. “There might be somewhere off the beaten track. Somewhere a bit more . . . exciting.”

“Surely we are off the beaten track,” said her grandmother, viewing the dusty street, the men squatting by the roadside. But no one seemed to hear her.

“No . . .” Sanjay was gazing around him. “I don’t think this is the kind of place . . .”

The old woman shifted in her seat. She was now desperate for a drink, and the chance to stretch her legs. She would also have appreciated a visit to the lavatory, but the short time they had spent in India had taught her that outside the bigger hotels this was often as much of an ordeal as a relief.

“I tell you what,” said Sanjay, “we’ll get a couple of bottles of cola and stop out of town somewhere to stretch our legs.”

“Is this, like, a junkyard town?” Jennifer squinted at a heap of refrigerators.

Sanjay waved at the driver to stop. “Stop there, Ram, at that shop. The one next to the temple. I’ll get some cold drinks.”

“*We*’ll get some cold drinks,” said Jennifer. The car pulled up. “You all right in the car, Gran?” She didn’t wait for an answer. The two of them sprang out of the doors, a blast of hot air invading the artificial chill of the car, and went, laughing, into the sunbaked shop.

A short way along the road another group of men squatted on their haunches, drinking from tin mugs, occasionally clearing their throats with nonchalant relish. They eyed the car incuriously. She sat in the car, feeling suddenly conspicuous, listening to the tick of the engine as it idled. Outside, the heat shimmered off the earth.

Mr. Vaghela turned in his seat. “Madam, may I inquire—what do you pay your driver?” It was the third such question he’d asked her, every time Sanjay was absent from the car.

“I don’t have one.”

“What? No help?”

“Well, I have a girl who does,” she faltered. “Annette.”

“Does she have her own quarters?”

She thought of Annette’s neat railwayman’s cottage, the geraniums on the windowsill. “Yes, in a manner of speaking.”

“Paid holiday?”

“I’m afraid I’m not sure.” She was about to attempt to elaborate on her and Annette’s working relationship, but Mr. Vaghela interrupted.

“Forty years I work for this family and only one week’s paid holiday a year. I am thinking of starting a trade union, *yaar*. My cousin has the Internet at his house. We have been looking at how it works. Denmark. Now, there’s a good country for workers’ rights.” He turned back to the front and nodded. “Pensions, hospitals . . . education . . . we should all be working in Denmark.”

She was silent for a few moments. “I’ve never been,” she said eventually.

She watched the two young people, the blonde head and the black, as they moved within the roadside store. Jennifer had said they were just friends, yet two nights previously she had heard her granddaughter sneak along the tiled corridor into what she assumed was Sanjay’s room. The following day they had been as easy with each other as children. “In love with him?” Jennifer had looked appalled at her tentative question. “God, no, Gran. Me and Jay . . . oh, no . . . I don’t want a relationship. He knows that.”

Again, she remembered herself at that age, her stammering horror at being left alone in male company, her determination to stay single, for quite different reasons. And then she looked at Sanjay, who, she suspected, might not be as understanding of the situation as her granddaughter believed.

“You know this place?” Mr. Vaghela had started to chew another piece of betel. His teeth were stained red.

She shook her head. With the air-conditioning turned off, she could already feel the elevating temperatures. Her mouth was dry, and she swallowed awkwardly. She had told Jennifer several times that she didn’t like cola.

“Alang. Biggest shipbreaker’s yard in the world.”

“Oh.” She tried to look interested, but felt increasingly weary and keen to move on. The Bombay hotel, some unknown distance ahead, seemed like an oasis. She looked at her watch: how could anyone spend nearly twenty minutes purchasing two bottles of drink?

“Four hundred shipyards here. And men who can strip a tanker down to nuts and bolts in a matter of months.”

“Oh.”

“No workers’ rights here, you know. One dollar a day, they are paid, to risk life and limb.”

“Really?”

“Some of the biggest ships in the world have ended up here. You would not believe the things that the owners leave on cruise ships—dinner services, Irish linen, whole orchestras of musical instruments.” He sighed. “Sometimes it makes you feel quite sad, *yaar*. Such beautiful ships, to become so much scrap metal.”

The old woman tore her gaze from the shop doorway, trying to maintain a semblance of interest. The young could be so inconsiderate. She closed her eyes, conscious that exhaustion and thirst were poisoning her normally equable mood.

“They say on the road to Bhavnagar one can buy anything—chairs, telephones, musical instruments. Anything that can come out of the ship they sell. My brother-in-law works for one of the big shipbreakers in Bhavnagar, *yaar*. He has furnished his entire house with ship’s goods. It looks like a palace, you know?” He picked at his teeth. “Anything they can remove. Hmph. It would not surprise me if they sold the crew too.”

“Mr. Vaghela.”

“Yes, madam?”

“Is that a tea-house?”

Mr. Vaghela, diverted from his monologue, followed her pointing finger to a quiet shopfront, where several chairs and tables stood haphazardly on the dusty roadside. “It is.”

“Then would you be so kind as to take me and order me a cup of tea? I really do not think I can spend another moment waiting for my granddaughter.”

“I would be delighted, madam.” He climbed out of the car, and held open the door for her. “These young people, *yaar*, no sense of respect.” He offered his arm, and she leaned on it as she emerged, blinking, into the midday sun. “I have heard it is very different in Denmark.”

The young people came out as she was drinking her cup of what Mr. Vaghela called “service tea.” The cup was scratched, as if from years of use, but it looked clean, and the man who had looked after them had made a prodigious show of serving it. She had answered the obligatory questions about her travels, through Mr. Vaghela, confirmed that she was not acquainted with the owner’s cousin in Milton Keynes, and then, having paid for Mr. Vaghela’s glass of *chai* (and a sticky pistachio sweetmeat, to keep his strength up, you understand), she had sat under the canopy and gazed out at what she now knew, from her slightly elevated vantage-point, to lie behind the steel wall: the endless, shimmering blue sea.

A short distance away, a small Hindu temple was shaded by a neem tree. It was flanked by a series of shacks that had apparently evolved to meet the workers’ needs: a barber’s stall, a cigarette vendor, a man selling fruit and eggs, and another with bicycle parts. It was some minutes before she grasped that she was the only woman in sight.

“We wondered where you’d gone.”

“Not for long, I assume. Mr. Vaghela and I were only a few yards away.” Her tone was sharper than she’d intended.

“I said I didn’t think we should stop here,” said Sanjay, eyeing first the group of men nearby, then the car with barely hidden irritation.

“I had to get out,” she said firmly. “Mr. Vaghela was kind enough to accommodate me.” She sipped her tea, which was surprisingly good. “I needed a break.”

“Of course. I just meant—I would have liked to find somewhere more picturesque for you, it being the last day of your holiday.”

“This will do me fine.” She felt a little better now: the heat was tempered by the faintest of sea breezes. The sight of the azure water was soothing after the blurred and endless miles of road. In the distance, she could hear the muffled clang of metal against metal, the whine of a cutting instrument.

“Wow! Look at all those ships!”

Jennifer was gesticulating at the beach, where her grandmother could just make out the hulls of huge vessels, beached like whales upon the sand. She half closed her eyes, wishing she had brought her glasses out of the car. “Is that the shipbreaking yard you mentioned?” she said to Mr. Vaghela.

“Four hundred of them, madam. All the way along ten kilometers of beach.”

“Looks like an elephant’s graveyard,” said Jennifer, and added portentously, “where ships come to die. Shall I fetch your glasses, Gran?” She was helpful, conciliatory, as if to make amends for her prolonged stay in the shop.

“That would be very kind.”

In other circumstances, she thought afterward, the endless sandy beach might have graced a travel brochure, its blue skies meeting the horizon in a silvered arc, behind her a row of distant blue mountains. But with the benefit of her glasses, she could see that the sand was gray with years of rust and oil, and the acres of beachfront punctuated by the vast ships that sat at quarter-mile intervals and huge unidentifiable pieces of metal, the dismantled innards of the defunct vessels.

At the water’s edge, a few hundred yards away, a group of men squatted in a row on their haunches, dressed in faded robes of blue, gray and white, watching as a ship’s deckhouse swung out from a still-white hull anchored several hundred feet from the shore and crashed heavily into the sea.

“Not your usual tourist attraction,” said Sanjay.

Jennifer was staring at something, her hand lifted to shield her eyes against the sun. Her grandmother gazed at her bare shoulders and wondered if she should suggest the girl cover up.

“This is the kind of thing I was talking about. Come on, Jay, let’s go and have a look.”

“No, no, miss. I don’t think this is a good idea.” Mr. Vaghela finished his *chai*. “The shipyard is no place for a lady. And you would be required to seek permission from the port office.”

“I only want a look, Ram. I’m not going to start wielding a welder’s torch.”

“I think you should listen to Mr. Vaghela, dear.” She lowered her cup, conscious that even their presence at the tea-house was attracting attention. “It’s a working area.”

“And it’s the weekend. There’s hardly anything going on. Come on, Jay. No one’s going to mind if we go in for five minutes.”

“There’s a guard on the gate,” said Sanjay.

She could tell that Sanjay’s natural disinclination to venture further was tempered by his need to be seen as a fellow-adventurer, a protector, even. “Jennifer dear—” she said, wanting to spare his embarrassment.

“Five minutes.” Jennifer jumped up, almost bouncing with impatience. Then she was half-way across the road.

“I’d better go with her,” said Sanjay, a hint of resignation in his voice. “I’ll get her to stay where you can see her.”

“Young people,” said Mr. Vaghela, chewing meditatively. “There is no telling them.”

A huge truck trundled past, the back filled with twisted pieces of metal to which six or seven men clung precariously.

After it had passed, she could just make out Jennifer in conversation with the man on the gate. The girl smiled, ran her hand through her blonde hair. Then she reached into her bag and handed him a

bottle of cola. As Sanjay caught up with her, the gate opened. And then they were gone, reappearing several seconds later as tiny figures on the beach.

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It was almost twenty minutes before either she or Mr. Vaghela could bear to say what they both thought: that the young people were now not just out of sight but way over time. And that they would have to go and look for them.

Revived by her tea, she struggled to suppress her irritation that her granddaughter had again behaved in such a selfish, reckless manner. Yet she knew that her response was due partly to fear that something would happen to the girl while she was in her charge. That she, helpless and old, in this strange, otherworldly place, would be responsible in circumstances she could not hope to control.

"She won't wear a watch, you know."

"I think we should go and bring them back," said Mr. Vaghela. "They have obviously forgotten the time."

She let him pull back her chair and took his arm gratefully. His shirt had the soft papery feel of linen washed many, many times.

He pulled out the black umbrella that he had used on several occasions and opened it, holding it so that she could walk in the shade. She stayed close to him, conscious of the stares of the thin men behind, of those who passed by on whining buses.

They halted at the gate, and Mr. Vaghela said something to the security guard, pointing through at the shipyard beyond. His tone was aggressive, belligerent, as if the man had committed some crime in allowing the young people to go through.

The guard said something apparently conciliatory in reply, then shepherded them in.

The ships were not intact, as she had first believed, but prehistoric, rusting hulks. Tiny men swarmed over them like ants, apparently oblivious to the shriek of rent metal, the high-pitched squeal of steel cutters. They held welding torches, hammers, spanners, the beating chimes of their destruction echoing disconsolately in the open space.

Those hulls still in deeper water were strung with ropes from which dangled impossibly frail platforms on which metal moved to the shore. Closer to the water, she lifted her hand to her face, conscious of the pervasive stench of raw sewage, and something chemical she could not identify. Several yards away a series of bonfires sent toxic plumes of thick smoke into the clear air.

"Please be careful where you walk," said Mr. Vaghela, gesturing toward the discolored sand. "I do not think this is a good place." He glanced back, apparently wondering whether the old woman should remain at the tea-house.

But she did not want to sit and face those young men alone. "I shall hold on to you, Mr. Vaghela, if you don't mind."

"I think this would be recommended," he said, squinting into the distance.

Around them, on the sand, stood chaotic piles of rusting girders, what looked like oversized turbines, and crumpled steel sheets. Huge barnacle-encrusted chains snaked around everything or were piled in seaweedy coils, like giant sleeping serpents, dwarfing the workers around them.

Jennifer was nowhere to be seen.

A small group of people had gathered on the sand, some clutching binoculars, others resting against bicycles, all looking out to sea. She took a firmer hold of Mr. Vaghela's arm and paused for a second, adjusting to the heat. Then they moved forward slowly down to the shore, to where men with walkie-talkies and dusty robes moved backward and forward, talking excitedly to each other, and children played unconcernedly at their parents' feet.

"Another ship is coming in," said Mr. Vaghela, pointing.

They watched what might have been an old tanker, towed by several tugs, becoming gradually distinct as it drew toward the shore. A Japanese four-wheel drive roared past, screeching to a halt a few hundred yards ahead. And it was then that they became aware of voices raised in anger and, as they turned past a huge pile of gas cylinders, of a small crowd further along, standing in the shadow of a huge metallic hull. In their midst, there was some kind of commotion.

"Madam, we should probably head this way," said Mr. Vaghela.

She nodded. She had begun to feel anxious.

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The man, whose generous pot-belly would have marked him out from the others even without the aid of his smart car, was gesturing at the ship, his indignant speech accompanied by sprays of spittle. Sanjay stood before him in the circle of men, his hands palms down in a conciliatory gesture, trying to interrupt. The object of the man's ire, Jennifer, was standing in a pose her grandmother remembered from her adolescence, hips jutted, arms folded defensively across her chest, head cocked in an insolent manner.

"You can tell him," she interjected periodically, "that I wasn't trying to do anything to his bloody ship. And that there's no law against looking."

Sanjay turned to her. "That's the problem, Jen. There *is* a law against looking. When you're trespassing on someone else's property."

"It's a beach," she yelled at the man. "It's ten kilometers long. With thousands of bloody people. How is me looking at a few rusting ships going to make the slightest difference to anything?"

"Jen, please . . ."

Around Sanjay, the men stood watching with unconcealed interest, nudging each other at Jennifer's jeans and vest-top, some bowed under the weight of the oxygen cylinders they carried on their shoulders. As the old woman approached, several moved back, and she caught the smell of stale sweat, overlaid with incense and something sulfurous. She fought the urge to put a hand over her mouth.

"He thinks Jennifer is from some environmental group, that she's here to gather evidence against him," Sanjay told her.

"It's obvious I'm only looking," said Jennifer. "I haven't even got a camera on me," she enunciated at the man, who scowled at her.

"You're really not helping," Sanjay remonstrated.

The old woman tried to assess how much of a threat the man might be. His gestures had become increasingly abrupt and dramatic, his expression florid with rage. She looked at Mr. Vaghela, almost as if he were the only adult present.

Perhaps mindful of this, he detached himself from her and moved through the men, his carriage suddenly erect. He went to the shipbreaker and thrust out his hand, so that the man was forced to take it. “Sir. I am Mr. Ram B. Vaghela,” he announced.

The two men began to talk rapidly, in Urdu, Mr. Vaghela’s voice wheedling and conciliatory one minute, determined and assertive the next.

The conversation was evidently going to take some time. Without Mr. Vaghela’s arm, the old woman found she felt wobbly. She glanced to each side of her, searching for somewhere to sit down, then backed a little way from the group, trying not to feel self-conscious—or fearful—of the blatant curiosity of some of the men. She spied a steel drum and walked slowly toward it.

She sat on it for several minutes, watching as Mr. Vaghela and Sanjay tried to placate the shipowner, to convince him of the naïveté and commercial innocence of his visitors. Occasionally they waved toward her and she fanned herself under the umbrella, conscious that her presence, an apparently frail old lady, would probably aid their cause. Despite her benign appearance, she was furious. Jennifer had willfully ignored everyone else’s wishes and, in the process, set back their journey at least an hour. Shipyards were dangerous places, Mr. Vaghela had muttered as they crossed the sand, not just for the workers, but for those who were thought to be “interfering.” Property had been known to be confiscated, he had said, looking back nervously at the car.

Now she mulled over the fact that she was going to have to walk the same distance back across the hot sand, and that it was entirely possible they would have to pay these people before they could leave, which would eat further into her already depleted budget. “Foolish, inconsiderate girl,” she muttered.

In an attempt at nonchalance, she stood up and began to walk toward the bow of the ship, keen to be away from her irresponsible granddaughter and the blank-eyed men. She raised the umbrella and held it low over her head, kicking up dustclouds of sand as she went toward a shaded area. The ship was half dismantled and ended abruptly, as if some giant hand had cut it in two and removed the back half. She lifted the umbrella high to get a better view. It was hard to see much from so far underneath, but she could just make out a couple of gun turrets that had yet to be removed. She studied them, frowning at their familiarity, at the peeling pale gray paintwork, a soft color you saw nowhere but on British naval ships. After a minute, she lowered the umbrella, stepped back, and stared up at the broken hull looming above her, stiff neck temporarily forgotten.

She lifted her hand to shield her eyes from the fierce sun until she could see what remained of the name on the side.

And then, as the last of the letters became distinct, the arguing voices receded, and even in the oppressive heat of an Indian afternoon, the old woman beneath the ship felt herself possessed of a sudden and icy cold.

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The shipbreaker, Mr. Bhattacharya, was unconvinced, yet even in the face of his mounting hostility, the growing restlessness of the crowd and even that they were now a good hour behind schedule, the young people were still bickering. Mr. Vaghela wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. Miss Jennifer was kicking sand angrily behind her, her expression one of sulky acquiescence. Mr. Sanjay wore the uncomfortably flushed countenance of someone who feels himself to be defending an unwinnable argument. Periodically he would look at Miss Jennifer, then away, as if he, too, were annoyed with her.

“I don’t need you to have my arguments for me, okay?”

Mr. Vaghela tapped her arm. “If you will forgive me for saying so, Miss Jennifer, I do not believe your grasp of Urdu leaves you up to the task.”

“He understands English. I heard him.”

“What is the girl saying now?” Mr. Bhattacharya, he could tell, was offended by her barely decent mode of dress. Mr. Vaghela suspected that while he secretly knew the young people were innocent of his charges, he had worked himself into such a rage that he was determined to continue the argument. Mr. Vaghela had met many such men in his life.

“I don’t like the way he’s talking to me.”

Mr. Sanjay moved toward the girl. “You don’t even know what he’s saying! You’re making things worse, Jen. Go back to the car and take your gran with you. We’ll sort this out.”

“Don’t tell me what to do, Jay.”

“Where is he going? Where are they going?” Mr. Bhattacharya was watching Mr. Sanjay with increasing fury.

“I think it would be better if the girl left your yard, sir. My friend is just persuading her of that.”

“I don’t need you to—” Miss Jennifer stopped abruptly.

There was a sudden silence, and Mr. Vaghela, who was uncomfortably warm, followed the eyes of the crowd to the shaded area under the hull of the next ship.

“What is wrong with the old lady?” said Mr. Bhattacharya.

She was sitting slumped forward, her head supported in her hands. Her gray hair looked silver white.

“Gran?” The girl sprinted over to her.

As the old woman raised her head, Mr. Vaghela exhaled. He was forced to admit he had been alarmed by her stance.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes. Yes, dear.” The words seemed to come out automatically, Mr. Vaghela thought. It was as if will hadn’t had anything to do with them.

Forgetting Mr. Bhattacharya, he and Mr. Sanjay walked over and squatted in front of her.

“You look rather pale, Mammaji, if I may say so.” She had one hand on the ship, he noticed, a curious gesture, which she had to bend awkwardly to make.

The shipbreaker was beside them, cleaning his expensive crocodile shoes on the back of his trousers. He muttered to Mr. Vaghela. “He wants to know if you’d like a drink,” he told her. “He says he has some iced water in his office.”

“I don’t want her to have a heart-attack in my yard,” Mr. Bhattacharya was saying. “Get her some water and then please take her away.”

“Would you like some iced water?”

She looked as if she was going to sit upright, but instead lifted a hand feebly. “That’s very kind, but I’ll just sit for a minute.”

“Gran? What’s the matter?” Jennifer had knelt down, hands pressed on her grandmother’s knee. Her eyes were wide with anxiety. The posturing arrogance had evaporated in the heat. Behind them, the younger men were murmuring and jostling, conscious that some unknown drama was being played out before them.

“Please ask them to go away, Jen,” the old woman whispered. “Really. I’ll be fine if everyone just leaves me alone.”

“Is it me? I’m really sorry, Gran. I know I’ve been a pain. I just didn’t like the way he was talking to me. It’s because I’m a girl, you know? It gets up my nose.”

“It’s not you—”

“I’m sorry. I should have been more thoughtful. Look, we’ll get you back to the car.”

Mr. Vaghela was gratified to hear the apology. It was good to know that young people could acknowledge their irresponsible behavior. She should not have caused the old lady to walk such a distance in this heat, not in a place like this. It indicated a lack of respect.

“It’s not you, Jennifer.” The old woman’s voice was strained. “It’s the ship,” she whispered.

Uncomprehending, they followed her gaze, taking in the vast pale gray expanse of metal, the huge, rusting rivets that dotted their way up the side.

The young people stared at each other, then down at the old lady, who seemed, suddenly, impossibly frail.

“It’s just a ship, Gran,” said Jennifer.

“No,” she said, and Mr. Vaghela noted that her face was as bleached as the metal behind it. “That’s where you’re quite wrong.”

———

It was not often, Mr. Ram B. Vaghela observed to his wife on his return, that one saw an old lady weeping. Evidently they were much more free with their emotions than he had imagined, these British, not at all the reserved stiff-upper-lips he had anticipated. His wife, rather irritatingly, raised an eyebrow, as if she could no longer be bothered to make an adequate response to his observations. He remembered the old woman’s grief, the way she had had to be helped back to the car, the way she had sat in silence all the way to Mumbai. She was like someone who had witnessed a death.

Yes, he had been rather surprised by the English madam. Not the kind of woman he’d had her down as at all.

He was pretty sure they were not like that in Denmark.

Part One

1

Money in rabbits! At recent sales in Sydney best furred full-grown bucks made 19s 11d per pound, the highest price I ever heard of in Australia. The percentage of top pelts would be small, but at about five to the pound just on 4s each is a remarkable return.

"THE MAN ON THE LAND," BULLETIN, AUSTRALIA, 10 JULY 1946

AUSTRALIA, 1946
FOUR WEEKS TO EMBARKATION

Letty McHugh halted the pick-up truck, wiped non-existent soot from under her eyes, and noted that on a woman with "handsome features," as the saleswoman had tactfully defined hers, Cherry Blossom lipstick was never going to alter much. She rubbed briskly at her lips, feeling stupid for having bought it at all. Then, less than a minute later, she reached into her bag and carefully reapplied it, grimacing at her reflection in the rear-view mirror.

She straightened her blouse, picked up the letters she had collected on her weekly visit to the post office and peered out at the blurred landscape through the windscreen. The rain probably wouldn't let up no matter how long she waited. She pulled a piece of tarpaulin over her head and shoulders and, with a gasp, leapt out of the truck and ran for the house.

"Margaret? Maggie?"

The screen door slammed behind her, muffling the insistent timpani of the deluge outside, but only her own voice and the sound of her good shoes on the floorboards echoed back at her. Letty checked her handbag, then wiped her feet and walked into the kitchen, calling a couple more times, even though she suspected that no one was in. "Maggie? You there?"

The kitchen, as was usual since Noreen had gone, was empty. Letty put her handbag and the letters on the scrubbed wooden table and went to the stove, where a stew was simmering. She lifted the lid and sniffed. Then, guiltily, she reached into the cupboard and added a pinch of salt, some cumin and cornflour, stirred, then replaced the lid.

She went to the little liver-spotted mirror by the medicine cupboard and tried to smooth her hair, which had already begun to frizz in the moisture-filled air. She could barely see all of her face at once; the Donleavy family could never be accused of vanity, that was for sure.

She rubbed again at her lips, then turned back to the kitchen, her solitude allowing her to see it with a dispassionate eye. She surveyed the linoleum, cracked and ingrained with years of agricultural dirt that wouldn't lift, no matter how many times it was mopped and swept. Her sister had planned to replace it, had even shown Letty the design she fancied, in a book sent all the way from Perth. She took in the faded paintwork, the calendar that marked only this or that agricultural show, the arrival of vets, buyers or grain salesmen, the dogs' baskets with their filthy old blankets lined up round the range, and the packet of Bluo for the men's shirts, spilling its grains on to the bleached work surface. The only sign of any female influence was a copy of *Glamor* magazine, its straplines advertising a new story by Daphne du Maurier, and an article entitled "Would You Marry A Foreigner?" The pages, she noted, had been heavily thumbed.

"Margaret?"

She glanced at the clock: the men would be in shortly for lunch. She walked to the coathooks by the back door and pulled off an old stockman's jacket, wincing at the smell of tar and wet dog that, she knew, would linger on her clothes.

The rain was now so heavy that in places around the yard it ran in rivers; the drains gurgled a protest, and the chickens huddled in ruffled groups under the shrubs. Letty cursed herself for not having brought her gumboots but ran from the back door of the house to the yard and round to the back of the barn. There, as she had half expected, she made out what looked like a brown oil-proofed lump on a horse, circling the paddock, no face visible under the wide-brimmed hat that fell down to the collar, almost mirrored with slick channels of rainwater.

"Margaret!" Letty stood under the eaves of the barn and shouted to be heard over the rain, waving half-heartedly.

The horse was plainly fed up: its tail clamped to its soaking hindquarters, it was tiptoeing sideways round the fence, occasionally cowkicking in frustration while its rider patiently turned it to begin each painstaking maneuver again.

"Maggie!"

At one point it bucked. Letty's heart lurched and her hand flew to her mouth. But the rider was neither unseated nor concerned, and merely booted the animal forward, muttering something that might or might not have been an admonishment.

"For God's sake, Maggie, will you get over here!"

The brim of the hat lifted and a hand was raised in greeting. The horse was steered round and walked toward the gate, its head low. "Been there long, Letty?" she called.

"Are you insane, girl? What on earth do you think you're doing?" She could see her niece's broad grin under the brim of the hat.

"Just a bit of schooling. Dad's too big to ride her and the boys are useless with her, so there's only me. Moody old girl, isn't she?"

Letty shook her head, exasperated, and motioned for Margaret to dismount. "For goodness' sake, child. Do you want a hand getting off?"

"Hah! No, I'm fine. Is it lunchtime yet? I put some stew on earlier, but I don't know what time they'll be in. They're moving the calves down to Yarrawa Creek, and they can be all day down there."

"They'll not be all day in this weather," Letty responded, as Margaret clambered down inelegantly from the horse and landed heavily on her feet. "Unless they're as insane as you are."

"Ah, don't fuss. She looks worse than she is."

"You're soaked. Look at you! I can't believe you'd even consider riding out in this weather. Good gracious, Maggie, I don't know what you think you're doing . . . What your dear mother would say, God only knows."

There was a brief pause.

"I know . . ." Margaret wrinkled her nose as she reached up to undo the girth.

Letty wondered if she had said too much. She hesitated, then bit back the awkward apology that had sprung to her lips. “I didn’t mean—”

“Forget it. You’re right, Letty,” said the girl, as she swung the saddle easily under her arm. “She wouldn’t have had this mare doing circles to balance her up. She’d have put her in a pair of side reins and be done with it.”

———

The men returned shortly before one o’clock, arriving in a thunderous cluster of wet overshoes and dripping hats, shedding their coats at the door. Margaret had set the table and was dishing up steaming bowls of beef stew.

“Colm, you’ve still got mud all the way up the back of your heels,” said Letty, and the young man obligingly kicked off his boots on the mat rather than waste time trying to clean them.

“Got any bread with that?”

“Give us a chance, boys. I’m going as fast as I can.”

“Maggie, your dog’s asleep in Dad’s old hat,” said Daniel, grinning. “Dad says if he gets fleas off it he’ll shoot her.”

“I said no such thing, eejit child. How are you, Letty? Did you get up to town yesterday?” Murray Donleavy, a towering, angular man whose freckles and pale eyes signaled his Celtic origins, sat down at the head of the table and, without comment, began to work his way through a hunk of bread that his sister-in-law had sliced for him.

“I did, Murray.”

“Any post for us?”

“I’ll bring it out after you’ve eaten.” Otherwise, the way these men sat at a table, the letters would be splashed with gravy and fingered with grease marks. Noreen had never seemed to mind.

Margaret had had her lunch already, and was sitting on the easy chair by the larder, her socked feet on a footstool. Letty watched the men settle, with private satisfaction, as they lowered their heads to eat. Not many families, these days, could boast five men round a table with three of them having been in the services. As Murray muttered to Daniel, his youngest, to pass more bread, Letty could still detect a hint of the Irish accent with which he had arrived in the country. Her sister had occasionally mocked it good-humoredly. “That one!” she’d say, her accent curled round a poor approximation of his own. “He’s got more fight in him than a Dundalk wedding.”

No, this table lacked someone else entirely. She sighed, pushing Noreen from her thoughts, as she did countless times every day. Then she said brightly, “Alf Pettit’s wife has bought one of those new Defender refrigerators. It’s got four drawers and an icemaker, and doesn’t make a sound.”

“Unlike Alf Pettit’s wife,” said Murray. He had pulled over the latest copy of the *Bulletin*, and was deep in “The Man on the Land,” its farming column. “Hmph. Says here that dairy yards are getting dirtier because all the women are quitting.”

“They’ve obviously never seen the state of Maggie’s room.”

“You make this?” Murray lifted his head from his newspaper and jerked a thumb at his bowl, which was nearly empty.

“Maggie did,” said Letty.

“Nice. Better than the last one.”

“I don’t know why,” said Margaret, her hand held out in front of her the better to examine a splinter. “I didn’t do anything any different.”

“There’s a new picture starting at the Odeon,” Letty said, changing the subject. That got their attention. She knew the men pretended not to be interested in the snippets of gossip she brought to the farm twice a week, gossip being the stuff of women, but every now and then the mask of indifference slipped. She rested against the sink, arms crossed over her chest.

“Well?”

“It’s a war film. Greer Garson and Tyrone Power. I forget the name. Something with *Forever* in it?”

“I hope it’s got lots of fighter planes. American ones.” Daniel glanced at his brothers, apparently searching for agreement, but their heads were down as they shoveled food into their mouths.

“How are you going to get to Woodside, short-arse? Your bike’s broke, if you remember.” Liam shoved him.

“He’s not cycling all that way by himself, whatever,” said Murray.

“One of youse can take me in the truck. Ah, go on. I’ll pay for your ices.”

“How many rabbits you sell this week?”

Daniel had been raising extra cash by skinning rabbits and selling the pelts. The price of good ones had risen inexplicably from a penny each to several shillings, which had left his brothers mildly envious of his sudden wealth.

“Only four.”

“Well, that’s my best price.”

“Oh, Murray, Betty says to tell you their good mare is in foal finally, if you’re still interested.”

“The one they put to the Magician?”

“I think so.”

Murray exchanged a glance with his eldest son. “Might swing by there later in the week, Colm. Be good to have a decent horse around the place.”

“Which reminds me.” Letty took a deep breath. “I found Margaret riding that mean young filly of yours. I don’t think she should be riding. It’s not . . . safe.”

Murray didn’t look up from his stew. “She’s a grown woman, Letty. We’ll have little or no say over her life soon enough.”

“You’ve no need to fuss, Letty. I know what I’m doing.”

“She’s a mean-looking horse.” Letty began to wash up, feeling vaguely undermined. “I’m just saying I don’t think Noreen would have liked it. Not with things . . . the way they are . . .”

The mention of her sister’s name brought with it a brief, melancholy silence.

Murray pushed his empty bowl to the center of the table. “It’s good of you to concern yourself about us, Letty. Don’t think we’re not grateful.”

If the boys noted the look that passed between the two “olds,” as they were known, or that their aunt Letty’s was followed by the faintest pinking of her cheeks, they said nothing. Just as they had said nothing when, several months previously, she had started to wear her good skirt to visit them. Or that, in her mid-forties, she was suddenly setting her hair.

Margaret, meanwhile, had risen from her chair and was flicking through the letters that lay on the sideboard beside Letty’s bag. “Bloody hell!” she exclaimed.

“Margaret!”

“Sorry, Letty. Look! Look, Dad, it’s for me! From the Navy!”

Her father motioned for her to bring it over. He turned the envelope in his broad hands, noting the official stamp, the return address. “Want me to open it?”

“He’s not dead, is he?” Daniel yelped as Colm’s hand caught him a sharp blow to the back of the head.

“Don’t be even more of a mongrel than you already are.”

“You don’t think he’s dead, do you?” Margaret reached out to steady herself, her normally high color draining away.

“Course he’s not dead,” her father said. “They send you a wire for that.”

“They might have wanted to save on postage but—” Daniel shot backward on his chair to avoid an energetic kick from his elder brother.

“I was going to wait until you’d all finished eating,” Letty said, and was ignored.

“Go on, then, Mags. What are you waiting for?”

“I don’t know,” said the girl, apparently now in an agony of indecision.

“Go on, we’re all here.” Her father reached out a comforting hand and laid it on her back.

She looked at him, then down at the letter, which she now held. Her brothers were on their feet, standing tightly around her. Letty, watching from the sink, felt superfluous, as if she were an outsider. To hide her own discomfort she busied herself scrubbing a pan, her broad fingers reddening in the scalding water.

Margaret ripped open the letter, and began to read it, murmuring the words under her breath, a habit she had held since childhood. Then she gave a little moan, and Letty whirled round to see her sit down heavily on a chair that one of her brothers had pushed out for her. She looked at her father, apparently grief-stricken.

“You all right, girl?” His face was creased with anxiety.

“I’m going, Dad,” she croaked.

“What? To Ireland?” said Daniel, snatching the letter.

“No. To England. They’ve got me aboard a ship. Oh, my God, Dad.”

“Margaret!” Letty admonished her, but no one heard.

“Mags is going to England!” Her older brother read the letter. “She’s really going! They’ve actually managed to squeeze her on!”

“Less of your cheek,” said Margaret, but her heart wasn’t in it.

“‘Due to the change in status of another war bride, we can offer you a passage on the—’ What does that spell? ‘Will leave from Sydney’ blah-blah-blah.”

“Change in status? What do you suppose happened to that poor soul, then?” Niall scoffed.

“It’s possible the husband might have been married already. It happens, you know.”

“Letty!” Murray protested.

“Well, it’s true, Murray. All sorts has happened. You only have to read the papers. I’ve heard of girls who’ve gone all the way to America to be told they’re not wanted. Some with . . .” She tailed off.

“Joe’s not like that,” said Murray. “We all know he’s not like that.”

“Besides,” said Colm cheerfully, “when he married Mags I told him if he ever let her down I’d hunt him down and kill him.”

“You did that too?” said Niall, surprised.

“God,” said Margaret, ignoring her aunt but crossing herself in mute apology. “With you lot looking after me it’s a wonder he stuck around at all.”

A hush descended as the import of the letter settled on the occupants of the room. Margaret took her father’s hand and held it tightly, while the others affected not to notice.

“Does anyone want tea?” said Letty. A lump had risen in her throat: she had been picturing the kitchen without Margaret in it. There were several subdued murmurs of assent.

“There’s no guarantee you’re getting a cabin, mind,” said Niall, still reading.

“They could store her with the luggage,” said Liam. “She’s tough as old hide.”

“Is that it?” said Daniel, who, Letty saw, looked profoundly shocked. “I mean, do you go to England and that’s it?”

“That’s it,” said Margaret, quietly.

“But what about us?” said Daniel, his voice breaking, as if he had not yet taken seriously his sister’s marriage or its possible ramifications. “We can’t lose Mum*and* Mags. I mean, what are we supposed to do?”

Letty made to speak and found she had no words.

Across the table, Murray had been sitting in silence, his hand entwined with his daughter’s. “We, son, are to be glad.”

“What?”

Murray smiled reassuringly at his daughter—a smile that Letty could not believe he truly felt. “We are going to be glad, because Margaret is going to be with a good man. A man who’s fought for his country and ours. A man who deserves to be with our Margaret just as much as she deserves him.”

“Oh, Dad.” Margaret dabbed at her eyes.

“And more importantly,” here his voice rose, as if to stave off interruption, “we should be glad as anything because Joe’s grandfather was an Irishman. And that means . . .” he laid a roughened hand gently on his daughter’s expanded belly “. . . this little fellow here is going to set foot, God willing, in God’s own country.”

“Oh, Murray,” whispered Letty, her hand pressed to her mouth.

“Brace yourself, lads,” muttered Colm to his brothers, and began to pull on his boots, “we’re in for an evening of ‘Oh Danny Boy.’ ”

———

They had run out of places to put wet washing. The indoor dryer was loaded to the point where it threatened to pull down the ceiling; damp linen hung from every indoor hook and cable, pegged to hangers hooked over the tops of doors or laid flat on towels on work surfaces. Margaret hauled another wet undershirt from the bucket and handed it to her aunt, who fed the hem into the mangle and began to turn the handle.

“It’s because nothing dried yesterday,” Margaret said. “I didn’t get the stuff off the line in time so it was soaked again, and I still had lots more to do.”

“Why don’t you sit down, Maggie?” Letty said, eyeing her legs. “Take the weight off your feet for a minute or two.”

Margaret sank gratefully into the chair in the laundry room, and reached down to stroke the terrier that sat by her side. “I could put some in the bathroom, but Dad hates that.”

“You know you should rest. Most women have their feet up by now.”

“Ah, there’s ages yet,” Margaret said.

“Less than twelve weeks, by my reckoning.”

“African women just drop them behind a bush and carry on working.”

“You’re not African. And I doubt anyone ‘drops’ a baby like they’re . . .” Letty was conscious of her inability to talk of childbirth with any authority. She continued wringing in silence, the rain drumming noisily on the tin roof of the outhouse, the sweet smell of newly drenched earth rising up through the open windows. The mangle squeaked, a geriatric creature forced unwillingly into effort.

“Daniel’s taken it worse than I thought,” Margaret said eventually.

Letty continued to work the handle, grunting as she hauled it toward her. “He’s still young. He’s had a lot to deal with this past couple of years.”

“But he’s really angry. I didn’t expect him to be angry.”

Letty paused. “He feels let down, I suppose. What with losing his mum and you . . .”

“It’s not like I did it on purpose.” Margaret thought of her brother’s outburst, of the words “selfish” and “hateful” hurled at her in temper until the flat of her father’s hand brought the diatribe to an abrupt halt.

“I know,” said Letty, stopping and straightening. “They know it too. Even Daniel.”

“But when Joe and I got married, you know, I didn’t think about leaving Dad and the boys. I didn’t think anyone would mind too much.”

“Of course they mind. They love you.”

“I didn’t mind when Niall went.”

“That was war. You knew he had to go.”

“But who’s going to look after them all? Dad can just about press a shirt or wash the dishes, if he has to, but there’s not one of them can put together a meal. And they’d leave the sheets on their beds until they walked themselves to the linen basket.”

As she spoke, Margaret began almost to believe in this picture of herself as a domestic lynchpin, which position she had held with quiet resentment for the past two years. She had never anticipated having to cook and clean for anyone. Even Joe had understood when she told him she was hopeless at it and, more importantly, had no intention of remedying the situation. Now, forced to spend hours of every day tending the brothers she had once treated as equals, grief, guilt and mute fury fought within her. “It’s a huge worry, Letty. I really think they won’t be able to cope without . . . well, a woman around the place.”

There was a lengthy silence. The dog whined in her sleep, her legs paddling in some unseen chase.

“I suppose they could get someone in, like a housekeeper,” said Letty eventually, her voice deceptively light.

“Dad wouldn’t want to pay for that. You know how he goes on about saving money. And, besides, I don’t think any of them would like a stranger in the kitchen. You know what they’re like.” She sneaked a glance at her aunt. “Niall hasn’t liked anyone new being around since he came back from the camps. Oh, I don’t know . . .”

Outside, the rain was easing off. The drumming on the roof had lightened, and small patches of blue could be seen amid the gray clouds toward the east. The two women were silent for a few minutes, each apparently absorbed in the view from the screened window.

When no answer was forthcoming, Margaret spoke again: “Actually, I’m wondering whether I should leave at all. I mean, there’s no point in going if I’m going to spend my whole time worrying about the family, is there?”

She waited for her aunt to speak. When nothing came, she continued, “Because I—”

“I suppose,” Letty ventured, “that I could help out.”

“What?”

“Don’t say ‘what,’ dear. If you’re that worried about them all,” Letty’s voice was measured, “I might be able to come most days. Just to help out a bit.”

“Oh, Letty, would you?” Margaret had ensured that her voice held just the right amount of surprise, just the right level of gratitude.

“I wouldn’t want to be treading on anyone’s toes.”

“No . . . no . . . of course not.”

“I wouldn’t want you or the boys thinking . . . that I was trying to take your mother’s place.”

“Oh, I don’t think anyone would think that.”

Both women digested what had finally been said aloud.

“There might be people who will . . . interpret things the wrong way. People in town and suchlike.” Letty smoothed her hair unconsciously.

“Yes, there might,” said Margaret, still looking deadly serious.

“But, then, it’s not like I’ve got a job or anything. Not now they’ve shut the munitions factory. And family should come first.”

“It certainly should.”

“I mean, those boys need a feminine influence. Daniel especially. He’s at that age . . . And it’s not like I’m doing anything wrong. Anything . . . you know . . .”

If Margaret noticed the faint blush of pleasure creeping across her aunt’s face she said nothing. If there was something else in her aunt’s face, in the new lipstick, that made Margaret feel a little more complicated about the arrangement, she made a game attempt to push it away. If the price of her own guiltless freedom was for her mother’s place to be usurped, she would be careful only to see the benefits.

Letty’s angular face was lit now by a smile. “In that case, dear, if it will help you, I’ll take good care of them all,” she said. “And Maudie there. I’ll take good care of her. You won’t need to worry.”

“Oh, I’m not worried about her.” Margaret raised herself with an effort. “I’m going to—”

“Yes, I’ll make sure they’re all all right,” Letty continued. Anticipation had apparently made her garrulous. “If it will really make you feel a little easier in yourself, Maggie dear, I’ll do what I can.

Yes, you won't need to worry about a thing." Suddenly galvanized, she wrung out the last shirt by hand and dumped it in the washing basket, ready for the next drying session.

She wiped her large, bony hands on her apron. "Right. Now. Why don't I go and make us both a cup of tea? You write your letter to the Navy, telling them you'll accept, and then we'll know you're all set. You don't want to miss your place, do you? Not like that other poor soul."

Margaret made her smile seem readier than it felt. The *Glamour* article had said she might never see any of them again. You had to be ready for that.

"Tell you what, Maggie, I'll go through your drawers upstairs. See if there's anything I can darn for you. I know you're not the best with a needle, and we'll want you to look as nice as pie when you see Joe again."

You were not to resent them, the magazine had said. You had to make sure you never blamed your husband for separating you from your family. Her aunt was now hauling the basket across the room with the same proprietorial familiarity as her mother once had.

Margaret shut her eyes and breathed deeply as Letty's voice echoed across the laundry room: "I might fix up a few of your father's shirts, while I'm at it. I couldn't help noticing, dear, that they're looking a bit tired, and I wouldn't want anyone saying I don't . . ." She shot a sideways look at Margaret. "I'll make sure everything's shipshape here. Oh, yes. You won't need to worry about a thing."

Margaret didn't want to think of them on their own. Better this way than with someone she didn't know.

"Maggie?"

"Mm?"

"Do you think . . . do you think your father will mind about it? I mean, about me?" Letty's face was suddenly anxious, her forty-five-year-old features as open as those of a young bride.

Afterward, on the many nights when she thought back, Margaret wasn't sure what had made her say it. She wasn't a mean person. She didn't want either Letty or her father to be lonely, after all.

"I think he'll be delighted," she said, reaching down to her little dog. "He's very fond of you, Letty, as are the boys." She looked down and coughed, examining the splinter on her hand. "He's often said he looks on you like . . . a kind of sister. Someone who can talk to him about Mum, who remembers what she was like . . . And, of course, if you're washing their shirts for them you'll have their undying gratitude." For some reason it was impossible to look up but she was aware of the acute stillness of Letty's skirts, of her thin, strong legs, as she stood a few feet away. Her hands, habitually active, hung motionless against her apron.

"Yes," Letty said at last. "Of course." There was a slight choke in her voice. "Well. As I said. I'll—I'll go and make us that tea."

2

The two male kangaroos—both only 12 months out of the pouch—which will fly to London shortly . . . will eat 12 lb of hay en route. Qantas Empire Airways said yesterday the kangaroos would spend only 63 hours in the air.

SYDNEY MORNING HERALD, *4 JULY 1946*

THREE WEEKS TO EMBARKATION

Ian darling,

You'll never guess what—I'm on! I know you won't believe it, as I hardly can myself, but it's true. Daddy had a word with one of his old friends at the Red Cross, who has some friends high up in the RN, and the next thing I had orders saying I've got a place on the next boat out, even though, strictly speaking, I should be low priority.

I had to tell the other brides back at home that I was going to Perth to see my grandmother, to prevent a riot, but now I'm here, holed up at the Wentworth Hotel in Sydney, waiting to nip on board before them.

Darling, I can't wait to see you. I've missed you so terribly. Mummy says that when we've got our new home sorted she and Daddy will be over ASAP. They are planning to travel on the new Qantas "Kangaroo" service—did you know you can get to London in only 63 hours flying on a Lancastrian? She has asked me to ask you for your mother's address so she can send on the rest of my things once I'm in England. I'm sure they'll be better about everything once they've met your parents. They seem to have visions of me ending up in some mud hut in the middle of an English field somewhere.

So, anyway, darling, here I am practicing my signature, and remembering to answer to "Mrs.," and still getting used to the sight of a wedding band on my finger. It was so disappointing us not having a proper honeymoon, but I really don't mind where it happens, as long as I'll be with you. I'll end now, as I'm spending the afternoon at the American Wives' Club at Woolloomooloo, finding out what I'll need for the trip. The American Wives get all sorts, unlike us poor British wives. (Isn't it a gas, my saying that?) Mind you, if I have to listen to one more rendition of "When The Boy From Alabama Meets A Girl From Gundagi" I think I shall sprout wings and fly to you myself. Take care my love, and write as soon as you have a moment.

Your Avice

In the four years since its inception the American Wives' Club had met every two weeks at the elegant white stucco house on the edge of the Royal Botanic Gardens, initially to help girls who had traveled from Perth or Canberra to while away the endless weeks before they were allowed a passage to meet their American husbands. It taught them how to make American patchwork quilts, sing "The Star Spangled Banner," and offered a little matronly support to those who were pregnant or nursing, and those who could not decide whether they were paralyzed with fear at the thought of the journey or at the idea that they would never make it.

Latterly the club had ceased to be American in character: the previous year's U.S. War Brides Act had hastened the departure of its twelve thousand newly claimed Australian wives, so the quilts had been replaced by bridge afternoons and advice on how to cope with British food and rationing.

Many of the young brides who now attended were lodged with families in Leichhardt, Darlinghurst or the suburbs. They were in a strange hinterland, their lives in Australia not yet over and those elsewhere not begun, their focus on the minutiae of a future they knew little about and could not control. It was perhaps unsurprising that on the biweekly occasions that they met, there was only one topic of conversation.

"A girl I know from Melbourne got to travel over on the *Queen Mary* in a first-class cabin," a bespectacled girl was saying. The liner had been held up as the holy grail of transport. Letters were still arriving in Australia with tales of her glory. "She said she spent almost all her time toasting herself by the pool. She said there were dinner-dances, party games, everything. And they got the most heavenly dresses made in Ceylon. The only thing was she had to share with some

woman and her children. Ugh. Sticky fingers all over her clothes, and up at five thirty in the morning when the baby started to wail."

"Children are a blessing," said Mrs. Proffit, benignly, as she checked the stitching of a green hat on a brown woolen monkey. Today they were Gift-making for the Bombed-out Children of London. One of the girls had been sent a book called *Useful Hints from Odds and Ends* by her English mother-in-law, and Mrs. Proffit had written out instructions on how to make a necklace from the metal rings for chickens' legs, and a bed-jacket from old cami-knickers for next week's meeting. "Yes," she said, glancing fondly at them all. "You'll understand one day. Children are a blessing."

"No children is more of one," muttered the dark-eyed girl next to Avice, accompanying the remark with a rather vulgar nudge.

In other times, Avice would not have spent five minutes with this peculiar mixture of girls—some of whom seemed to have landed straight off some outback station with red dust on their shoes—or, indeed, have wasted so many hours enduring interminable lectures from middle-aged spinsters who had seized upon the war as a way to enliven what had probably been dismal lives. But she had been in Sydney for almost ten days now, with her father's friend, Mr. Burton, the only person she knew there, and the Wives' Club had become her only point of social contact. (She still wasn't sure how to explain Mr. Burton's behavior to her father. She had had to tell the man no less than four times that she was a married woman, and she wasn't entirely sure that as far as he was concerned that made any difference.)

There were twelve other young women at today's gathering; few had spent more than a week at a time with their husbands, and more than half had not seen them for the best part of a year. The shipment home of troops was a priority; the "wallflower wives," as they had become known, were not. Some had filed their papers over a year previously and heard little since. At least one, tiring of her dreary lodgings, had given up and gone home. The rest stayed on, fueled by blind hope, desperation, love or, in most cases, a varying mix of all three.

Avice was the newest member. Listening to their tales of the families with whom they were billeted, she had silently thanked her parents for the opulence of her hotel accommodation. It would all have been so much less exciting if she had been forced to stay with some grumpy old couple. As it was, it became rather less exciting by the day.

"If that Mrs. Tidworth says to me one more time, 'Oh dear, hasn't he sent for you yet?' I swear I'll swing for her."

"She loves it, the old bitch. She did the same to Mary Knight when she stayed there. I reckon she actually wants you to get the telegram saying, 'Don't come.' "

"It's the you'll-be-sorrys I can't stand."

"Not much longer, eh?"

"When's the next one due in?"

"Around three weeks, according to my orders," said the dark-eyed girl. Avice thought she might have said her name was Jean, but she was hopeless with names and had forgotten them all immediately she'd been introduced. "She'd better be as nice as the *Queen Mary*. She even had a hair salon with heated dryers. I'm desperate to get my hair done properly before I see Stan again."

"She was a wonderful woman, Queen Mary," said Mrs. Proffit, from the end of the table. "Such a lady."

“You’ve got your orders?” A freckled girl on the other side of the table was frowning at Jean.

“Last week.”

“But you’re low priority. You said you didn’t even put in your papers until a month ago.”

There was a brief silence. Around the table, several girls exchanged glances, then fixed their eyes on their embroidery. Mrs. Proffit looked up; she had apparently picked up on the subtle cooling in the atmosphere. “Anyone need more thread?” she asked, peering over her spectacles.

“Yes, well, sometimes you just get lucky,” said Jean, and excused herself from the table.

“How come she gets on?” said the freckled girl, turning to the women on each side of her. “I’ve been waiting nearly fifteen months, and she’s getting on the next boat out. How can that be right?” Her voice had sharpened with the injustice of it. Avice made a mental note not to mention her own orders.

“She’s carrying, isn’t she?” muttered another girl.

“What?”

“Jean. She’s in the family way. You know what? The Americans won’t let you over once you’re past four months.”

“Who’s doing the penguin?” said Mrs. Proffit. “You’ll need to keep that black thread for whoever’s doing the penguin.”

“Hang on,” said a redhead threading a needle. “Her Stan left in November. She said he was on the same ship as my Ernie.”

“So she can’t be in the family way.”

“Or she is . . . and . . .”

Eyes widened and met, accompanied by the odd smirk.

“Are you up for a little roo, Sarah dear?” Mrs. Proffit beamed at the girls and pulled some pieces of fawn felt out of her cloth bag. “I do think the little roos are rather sweet, don’t you?”

Several minutes later Jean returned to her chair, and folded her arms rather combatively. She seemed to realize that she was no longer the topic of conversation and visibly relaxed—although she might have wondered at the sudden industriousness of the toy-making around her.

“I met Ian, my husband, at a tea-dance,” said Avice, in an attempt to break the silence. “I was part of a young ladies’ reception committee, and he was the second man I offered a cup of tea to.”

“Was that all you offered him?”

That was Jean. She might have known. “From what I’ve heard I don’t suppose everyone’s idea of hospitality is quite the same as yours,” she retorted. She remembered how she had blushed as she poured; he had been staring conspicuously at her ankles—of which she was rather proud.

Petty Officer Ian Stewart Radley. At twenty-six, a whole five years older than her, which Avice considered just right, tall and straight-backed with eyes the color of the sea, a gentlemanly British

accent and broad, soft hands that had made her tremble the first time they ever brushed hers—even holding a shortbread finger. He had asked her to dance—even though no one else was on the floor—and with him being a serviceman, she had thought it mean-spirited to refuse. What was a quickstep or a Gay Gordons when he was looking death in the face?

Less than four months later they were married, a tasteful ceremony in the Collins Street register office. Her father had been suspicious, had made her mother quiz her—in a discreet woman-to-woman way, of course—as to whether there was any reason for such a hasty marriage other than Ian's imminent departure. Ian had told her father, rather honorably, she thought, that he was happy to wait, if that was what Avice's parents wanted, that he would do nothing to upset them, but she had been determined to become Mrs. Radley. The war had hastened everything, foreshortened the natural timescale of such things. And she had known, from that first cup of tea, there was no one else in the world she could envisage marrying; no one else upon whom she could consider bestowing her many gifts.

"But we know nothing about him, dear," her mother had said, wringing her hands.

"He's perfect."

"You know that's not what I mean."

"What do you need to know? He's been out there holding the Brisbane line, hasn't he? Doesn't protecting our country, putting his own life at risk twelve thousand miles from his home to save us from the Japs, make him worthy of my hand?"

"No need to be melodramatic, sweetheart," her father had said.

They had given in, of course. They always did. Her sister Deanna had been furious.

"My Johnnie was billeted with my aunt Vi," said another girl. "I thought he was gorgeous. I sneaked into his room the second night he was there and that was that."

"Best to get in early," said another, to raucous laughter. "Stake your claim."

"Especially if Jean's around."

Even Jean found that funny.

"Now, who wants to practice making one of these lovely necklaces?" Mrs. Proffit held up an uneven-looking chain of aluminum coils. "I'm sure it's what the best-dressed ladies are wearing in Europe."

"Next week it'll be how to make couture evening cloaks from horse blankets."

"I heard that, Edwina." Mrs. Proffit placed the necklace carefully on the table.

"Sorry, Mrs. P, but if my Johnnie saw me wearing one of those he wouldn't know whether to kiss me or check my rear to see if I'd laid an egg."

There was an explosion of laughter, an outburst of barely suppressed hysteria.

Mrs. Proffit sighed and laid down her craftwork. Really! It was only to be expected, as embarkation drew closer—but really! These girls could be so wearying.

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"So, when are you out?"

Jean's host family were two streets away from the Wentworth, and the girls had ended up walking back together, dawdling. Despite the air of mutual dislike between them, they were reluctant to sit alone in their rooms for yet another evening.

"Avice? When are your orders for?"

Avice wondered whether to answer truthfully. She was pretty sure that Jean—immature and coarse as she was—was not the kind of girl she would normally want to associate with, especially if what had been said about her condition was true. But neither was Avice a girl used to self-restraint, and the effort involved in keeping quiet for an entire afternoon about her own plans had been a strain. "Same as you. Three weeks. What's she called? The *Victoria*?"

"It's a bugger, isn't it?" Jean lit a cigarette, cupping her hands against the sea breeze. As an afterthought, she offered one to Avice.

Avice wrinkled her nose and declined. "What did you say?"

"It's a bugger. They get the bloody *Queen Mary* and we get the old tin can."

A car drove past slowly, and two servicemen hung out of the windows, shouting something crude. Jean grinned at them, waving her cigarette, as the car disappeared round the corner.

Avice stood in front of her. "I'm sorry, I don't understand what you mean."

"Didn't you hear Mrs. Proffit? The one who's married to the commander?"

Avice shook her head.

Jean laughed humorlessly. "I don't think it's quite hair salons and first-class cabins for you and me, girl. Our *Victoria* is a bloody aircraft-carrier."

Avice stared at the girl for a minute, then smiled. It was the kind of smile she reserved at home for the staff when they did something particularly stupid. "I think you must be mistaken, Jean. Ladies don't travel on aircraft-carriers." She pursed her lips, as smoke trickled her way. "Besides, there'd be nowhere to put us all."

"You really don't know anything, do you?"

Avice fought back irritation at being addressed in this manner by someone who had to be at least five years younger than herself.

"They've run out of decent transport. They're going to stick us on anything to get us over there. I reckon they figure whoever really wants to go will put up with whatever they throw our way."

"Are you sure?"

"Even old Mrs. P seemed a bit concerned. Think she's worried about her young ladies arriving in England wearing overalls and covered with fuel. Not quite the impression she wants for Australia's finest."

“An aircraft-carrier?” Avice felt a little wobbly. She reached for a nearby wall and sat down.

Jean seated herself comfortably beside her. “That’s what she is. I never bothered to check the name of it. I just assumed . . . Oh, well, they’ll have modified it a bit, I should think.”