

# HARBOUR *of* SECRETS

Secrets are  
easy to keep.  
At first.

**KATE LANCE**  
*Tempo Book 3*

# Harbour of Secrets

Kate Lance

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

## **Fiction**

*Embers at Midnight*

*Testing the Limits*

*Silver Highways*

*Atomic Sea* (As CM Lance)

*The Turning Tide* (As CM Lance)

## **Non-Fiction**

*Alan Villiers: Voyager of the Winds*

*Redbill: From Pearls to Peace*

*To Margaret Mary Lance*  
*8 October 1928 - 26 May 2021*

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## 1. Tina: Me Too

Look, I love a party—and it's not as if this one's going to be a big deal, just a get-together for my brother and his wife—but I feel oddly on edge. Perhaps it's the people coming tonight?

Probably not. Just the usual crowd, a few of the girls from my old signals section plus assorted husbands, and a handful of Nikos's workmates, dull as ditchwater and always talking about seaplanes and flying boats and flarepaths and pontoons. Yawn.

I may have been an airwoman myself, but most of us mustered in the WAAAF as clerks, cooks, drivers or mechanics: we certainly didn't *fly* anything—and planes themselves bore me to tears.

All the same I loved my work in signals. But when peace came I simply wanted out of that regimented world, to return to freedom. I thought marriage to Nikos and a new start would mean ... what? Now, three years later, not *this*.

Perhaps I'm just annoyed at Nikos. With his usual efficiency we got to Sydney Central on time to meet the Newcastle train, but it's late. Naturally. The wind is rushing cold and gritty along the vast concourse and, despite a cardigan over my dress, I'm freezing.

There's a whoosh of steam as a train stops at the railheads and smoke drifts across the skylight in the great barrel roof above. Unfortunately it's not the Newcastle train. People are streaming through the exit now, passing us where we're waiting beneath the clock at the timetable board. Is it them, perhaps?

It's late 1948 for heaven's sake, yet quite a few blokes ambling past are still wearing items of khaki uniform. Some are arm-in-arm with women whose dated hairstyles and hard scarlet mouths suggest their best days are behind them as well.

Are mine?

I sigh, and a young woman in a suit gives me a friendly glance as she passes, her bag slung stylishly over her shoulder.

I gaze at her with envy. She looks like someone on her way to a job, a *real* job. Something that tests her and engages her and makes her glad to be alive. Like the job I used to have.

A pair of thugs swagger by in double-breasted jackets and pegged trousers. They look me up and down, then notice Nikos and take an interest in the timetable board instead. Imperturbable Nikos glances at them. Tall and strong, his brows as dark as his neat beard, if I were a thug I wouldn't ogle his wife either.

Perhaps it's the reminder that spivs like that are everywhere now? The newspapers seem to be full of the doings of racketeers who received a fine weapons training in the war. I suppose Sydney's always been notorious for its gangsters, prostitutes and drug dealers, especially around Kings Cross, but in these drab post-war days, crime seem more *blatant*.

Like all those illegal gambling rings patronised by social butterflies rich enough to risk a thousand pounds—three times a workingman's annual pay!—on a single flutter.

Keeping a sly eye on the libel laws, the papers hint that the baccarat rings flourish because they're patronised by the highest ranks of government. Given our squalid politicians and the corruption I saw during the war, it's not hard to believe.

But I don't think that's what's weighing on me, either.

Nikos checks his watch for what must be the twentieth time and, thankfully, the Newcastle train finally chuffs to a halt a few platforms down. Carriage doors open and another crowd of people emerge chatting, and Nikos says calmly, 'There they are.'

He says everything calmly. Our women friends who fancy him imagine that means he's manly and dependable: they have no idea how dull such calmness can be. And irritating.

But soon my older brother Harry and his wife Eliza are approaching us, laughing, and suddenly I forget my bad mood. I reach up to hug Harry, nearly as tall as Nikos, and kiss Eliza, small and bright-eyed as a sparrow.



## 1. Tina: Me Too

I admire her little red hat and she compliments my dress, then we walk out to the car park, to Nikos's beloved Chevrolet, all long plump curves and soft leather.

Harry and Eliza are staying the weekend with us. They plan to catch up with an old mate of theirs who's arriving this evening from Perth—Billie Quinn, one of those determined lady aviators who flew with a women's transport unit in the war. She sounds daunting, although Eliza says she's witty and elegant.

We set off along George Street and I turn to her in the back seat and say, 'Everything's just about ready for your friend tonight. Can't remember—did I meet her in 1936, when Mum and I visited you in Southampton—a tall woman with short red hair?'

'With a fairly *brisk* way of expressing herself,' Harry says dryly.

'And she sent you a telegram out of the blue, asking to meet?'

'We used to write all the time, she was my closest friend,' says Eliza, a little wistfully. 'Then the letters trailed off to nothing, and suddenly this mysterious telegram arrived.'

At the wheel, Nikos says, 'The name's familiar. Didn't she set a flying record in the late twenties?'

'Yes, that's Billie,' says Eliza. 'After the war she came back to Perth and opened a training school for pilots. The papers made a great to-do about the homecoming of the 'glamorous girl aviator,' which annoyed her terribly.'

'And in the war she flew with the—what was it? Air Transport something?' says Nikos, as we drive through shabby Glebe.

'Air Transport Auxiliary,' says Harry. 'Surprised you know of it.'

'I'd see articles in Picture Post,' says Nikos. 'Women in Spitfires were always newsworthy.'

'The ATA had male pilots as well, but they weren't quite as photogenic,' says Eliza wryly. 'Still, they all did the job of flying new planes to the fit-out airfields.'

'Did they *really* do that without weapons or radios?' Nikos shakes his head as he turns the car. 'Hard to believe.'

'It's true,' says Eliza. 'Another friend of ours in London, Yvonne, was an ATA pilot too. You can ask Billie about it when you meet.'

Nikos laughs. ‘Ask about planes? Now if she’d sailed on ships like you two, or even the odd boat, we’d have something to *talk* about.’

With another twinge of irritation I watch the sooty houses passing by on Victoria Road. Beyond even the Chevrolet, my husband’s deepest passion is his yacht, *Wind Rose*. Of course I used to go sailing with him, but the novelty soon wore off.

We turn into Darling Street, then drive down a cul-de-sac to our modern two-storied house. It’s incongruous among the old semi-detached terraces, but Nikos’s parents live nearby and this house was their wedding present to us. It’s too large as well—we only needed space for Nikos’s grumpy son Stavros—but at least the extra bedrooms make it useful for guests.

Eliza and Harry look tired after the long trip, so I serve them sandwiches and tea, then send them off to rest for the afternoon while we prepare for the party tonight.

Nikos makes himself busy in the kitchen (my husband’s saving grace is his love of cooking), while I tidy the living room’s low-slung sofas and occasional tables, and vacuum the rug. Then I go upstairs, have a bath, and put on my new gold taffeta gown.

After a few people have arrived, Harry and Eliza come downstairs. Eliza is in a darling blue dress that shows her shoulders, and thankfully Harry is looking brighter than before. My poor brother spent much of the war in a prison camp in Singapore and, even now, I’m not sure he’s completely recovered.

Nor Eliza, for that matter. She had a dreadful time escaping from Singapore, and then worked in some stressful hush-hush job in London that left a streak of silver in her dark hair.

At least when Harry came home from Changi she finally became pregnant with the child they’d wanted for years, my adorable nephew Leo. Grandmother Jessie (my mum) is minding him at home in Newcastle this weekend. I think it must be his parent’s first time alone since they had him, poor sods.

‘Meet our friends,’ says Nikos, waving them into the room.

## 1. Tina: Me Too

‘Everyone, this is Dr Harry Bell, Tina’s big brother, and his wife, Eliza. They’re from Newcastle—but of course if they had any sense at all they’d live near us in Sydney.’

‘But we love it there, Nikos,’ says Eliza, laughing. ‘Perfect for Leo. So where’s your young Stavros tonight?’

‘With my parents.’ Nikos shrugs. ‘Doesn’t want to bother with boring grown-ups. Now what are you drinking? We’ve got potent cocktails, champagne or red wine from my cousin’s vineyard.’

I offer around a tray with drinks. ‘Ooh, *cocktails*,’ says a woman, wife of one of Nikos’s workmates, all red lipstick and come-hither looks at my husband. Silly cow. If nothing else, he’s a faithful man.

Harry takes a glass of wine and Mrs Lipstick turns her gaze on him. ‘And you’re Tina’s brother, Harry? Goodness. Tina must be a bit older than she’d like us to believe.’

‘Not at all, there’s—what, Tina?’ he says. ‘Sixteen years between us? She was just a shy little thing when I left to study in London.’

‘I think I grew up fairly quickly once the war came,’ I say.

Harry smiles. ‘When you dashed off to study wireless telegraphy?’

‘Best thing I ever did. I’ll always be grateful you and Eliza got me into that training course.’

He nudges me gently. ‘Ah, you only wanted to escape Newcastle and spread your wings.’

I laugh. ‘That’s true. And I certainly did.’

Mrs Lipstick interrupts with a smirk. ‘Oh, *do* tell us more about tonight’s visitor, Harry. An old friend of yours, I hear.’

‘Well, yes,’ he says. ‘We first met Billie in the early thirties when we were living in England. She and Eliza’s brother Pete came over to do some advanced aviation courses.’

‘Have more wine, Harry,’ says Nikos, re-filling his glass.

‘Goodness, an *aviatrix*?’ says Mrs Lipstick. ‘How *dramatic*. And this—Billie is married to Eliza’s brother?’

Harry takes another mouthful of wine. ‘Oh no, they went their different ways. Billie came home and Pete stayed on his Hampshire farm.’ He chuckles. ‘*He* ended up marrying—and divorcing—my flighty first wife, and certainly came to regret it.’

I'm a little surprised. Harry is rarely so personal, but the drink must have gone to his head.

'Such drama, mate,' says Nikos. 'We're pretty dull in comparison.' You can say that again, I think.

I take the last glass of champagne and hand the tray to Mrs Lipstick, saying, 'Mind bringing us some appetisers from the kitchen, dear?' She flounces away.

'This wine is bloody good, Nikos,' says Harry, 'but you're going to have to stop topping me up.'

'What nonsense, Harry, it's a party.'

The doorbell rings, and Nikos says, 'Ah—our visitor at last,' and goes out to the hall.

Eliza comes over and takes Harry's hand. 'I'm so excited, love. I've missed her terribly.'

I hear Nikos's deep welcoming voice outside the door, then he ushers a woman into the room.

Harry stares and murmurs, 'Eliza—?'

Eliza whispers in shock, 'What on earth's *happened?*'

I try not to stare myself, and say brightly, 'Welcome to Sydney, Billie!' I'm good at being bright.

'Reckon the taxi brought me here via Brisbane,' she says. 'Um, can I put my bag—?'

Eliza cries, 'Oh, *Billie!*' and hugs her as the now fairly well-oiled guests cluster happily around.

'Let me—' Billie says. 'I just want to—'

'*Right,*' I say in the voice that kept the girls in Hut 12 in line. 'Give the poor thing a bit of space.'

Billie glances at me gratefully, then says to Eliza, 'In a few minutes, Lizzie—'

'I'll show Billie her room, then you can all catch up.' I take her bag and usher her upstairs. 'The bathroom's along there, first left. Fresh towels too. Can I get you anything? A drink?'

'No, let me tidy up, then I'll join you.'

## *1. Tina: Me Too*

I leave her. She's going to need more than a tidy up. Her face is grey with—what? Fatigue, dust, illness? Her greasy hair is pulled back with a rubber band. She's in a stained shirt and jeans, which hardly disguise the fact she's so thin she's practically a skeleton.

Where's the elegant redhead I've heard so much about?

I resume my hostess duties. Time passes. A few guests leave, then a few more, until only me, Nikos, Eliza and Harry are left. Finally Billie comes downstairs. She's washed her face and changed her clothes, though they'd still suit a mechanic.

I hand her a glass of champagne, which she quickly downs, then give her another and say, 'Let's have something to eat.'

I play my wifely role and produce something tasty Nikos made earlier. Fortunately the conversation ambles along, and we hear about Billie's delayed flight and Harry and Eliza's train trip and young Leo's well-being. Tomorrow we can find out what's going on, but for now let's be diplomatic.

After the food, Nikos switches on the gramophone. Eliza and Harry dance quietly together and I feel envy at the way they seem so lost in each other. The music is the sort Nikos likes, the dance tunes of wartime.

I prefer jazz myself—the sparse, drifting lines of saxophone I'd listen to late at night, when my mind yearned for emptiness but was still echoing with the ghostly dit-dahs of Japanese signals.

Life and death signals.

The record ends and Harry and Eliza sit down. Nikos loves to dance but knows perfectly well I don't, so he asks Eliza.

She says, laughing, 'Try Billie, she's so much better than me—you always says dancing and flying go together, don't you, Bill?'

Billie doesn't respond but simply sips her drink.

Nikos changes the record and turns. 'Then I must insist, Billie. Let's see what you're made of.' He takes her free hand and pulls her from the lounge towards him.

She stares and throws her drink in his face.

Next morning I'm awake early—old wartime habit—and go downstairs to the lounge-room. I gather glasses and plates and start washing up in the kitchen. Still, it wasn't a bad party. People seemed to enjoy themselves, apart from the bizarre Billie.

Her face blank with shock she simply stood staring at Nikos, champagne dripping on his shirt, his face as astonished as hers. She put down her glass (a very nice crystal—I feared she'd throw it as well), then murmured 'Good-night,' and went upstairs.

The door slams. Stavros must be home.

He slouches into the kitchen, glances at me with dislike and opens the refrigerator. He pulls out some titbit from last night and I say automatically, 'Have you had breakfast yet, Stavros?'

He mutters, 'Call me *Steve*,' and leaves.

The fridge is still ajar so I grit my teeth and close it, and go back to the washing-up. Stavros is fourteen and not my son.

Nikos's first wife died some months after she had him, so he never knew her, and I don't understand why he dislikes me so much.

Nikos and I met during the war and married as soon as it was over. He was in the Naval Reserve then, skipper of a small ship—when the war began the Navy requisitioned almost everything that floated, from luggers to ferries.

Nikos used to joke they sent anyone who knew port from starboard off to sail them, but as he'd grown up playing on boats, then crewed as a teenager on a relative's fishing vessel, he was probably more than good enough for the job.

He was on sick leave in Brisbane then—a broken arm from a fall during a storm, not a war wound—and I was out with one of my Hut 12 girls who vaguely knew him.

We stopped to chat, then went for a few drinks and a meal, but I wasn't in the mood to flirt. I'd been badly hurt a few months before by a pilot who'd taken my heart and virginity both, then disappeared on me.

A few days later Nikos and I met again by chance, walking in the Botanic Gardens. He had maturity and gentleness and intense dark

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eyes, and by the end of the afternoon I was more than in the mood. He kissed me politely on the cheek as we were parting, a kiss that turned suddenly passionate, anguished, heart-thudding.

He had a room not far away, a blessedly private room, and that night I shed another kind of virginity, an innocence about myself and what I was capable of desiring.

After a few wonderful weeks Nikos had to go hundreds of miles north, back to Townsville where his fleet was berthed, but soon afterwards my radio section was relocated to Townsville as well.

We got to see each other more than most wartime couples, although it was never enough. We were always hungry, always desperate for each other.

But now? The joy has ebbed from our life. We love each other—I think we do—but Nikos is almost never around, and when he is he drives me to the point of fury.

I've just put the kettle on when I hear footsteps. Billie comes into the kitchen, then hesitates at the sight of me.

I say, 'Cup of tea?' and of course she says yes, simple politeness.

I make the tea and we go to sit in the sunroom. She's washed her hair, thank heavens. It's a nice auburn, richer than my own strawberry blonde, and she's got those dark lashes and brows some redheads have that don't need makeup. Lucky girl.

'Wouldn't have a rubber band?' Billie says. 'Mine broke.'

'No,' I say. 'And you shouldn't use rubber bands, it's bad for the hair and looks dreadful. I thought you were famous for your stylishness. What happened?'

She shrugs. 'Too much effort. Easier to pull it back when I was working on engines.'

'Well you're hardly working on engines now.'

We sip our tea. Billie says, 'Did it stain the rug?'

'The expensive French champagne, you mean? No, the rug's made of that new nylon fibre. Could cope with an atom bomb.'

'Oh. Good.'

After a silence I say, 'What was too much effort?'

'Ah, just—I don't know, things.'

'No, that's not it.'

Billie looks at me, surprised. 'Pretty sure of yourself, aren't you?'

'Got to be if you're short and everyone calls you love. Or blonde.'

Or *you stupid bitch.*

'Army?'

'Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force,' I say. 'Signals.'

'Oh, intelligence stuff like Eliza.'

'Since we're sworn to eternal secrecy we'll never know. But yes.'

'Accounts for the bossiness,' Billie says. 'Or air of command, take your pick.'

'Bossiness—I was a sergeant. You?'

'Nah, civilian. Air Transport Auxiliary.'

'Civilian? Still no excuse.'

She smiles. 'Sorry again. Bit of a dampener on the party.'

'We were winding up anyway. But why?'

After a time Billie says, 'Men. Cocksure, arrogant men, certain you'll do whatever they want, certain you'll get up and dance with them, do anything for them, then they leave you out there on the floor, abandoned in the spotlight—' She stops.

'He's not like that, Nikos,' I say. 'He doesn't mean to hurt anyone.'

'Men never do. Until they do.'

Eliza enters, yawning. 'Anything left in the pot? Yes, please.'

I pour her a cup and she sits down beside us in the sunroom. It looks out onto a garden with a shady pergola, and this morning it's full of light and colour.

Eliza says, 'Bill, come on, what's happened?'

Billie glances at me then shrugs and says, 'Suppose it's not really a secret. Ah, Lizzie. You know my mother died a few months ago—'

'Of course, you poor thing. Are you still feeling raw?'

'A bit. But then the doctor realised Dad had dementia. My aunts and I had noticed he was getting strange, but with Mum so sick, we didn't ... anyway, he had to go into a home, an expensive home.'

'But your family's well-off, isn't it?' says Eliza. 'They can afford it.'



## 1. Tina: Me Too

'Once upon a time. But we didn't realise how mad Dad had got. He'd thrown away all the family money—gambling, donations, bad investments. A lifetime of frugality blown in months.'

'Did it affect your flying school?'

'Could say that,' Billie says. 'Dad had a financial interest in it, so the creditors took my planes and my savings—couldn't even pay the mechanic or the hangar rent.' She laughs bitterly. 'Another man calling me out to the dance floor then leaving me helpless in the spotlight. My own bloody father.'

'And there's no way to recover?' says Eliza.

'Nah, it's done. And *this* time, Lizzie, I can't pick myself up and try again. You know how I have before, but whatever mainspring's kept me ticking all these years is broken, bloody broken.'

Billie's face is stony. She's not crying but it might have been better if she were. 'Oh, Billie, love.' Eliza puts her arms around her, and I take the teacups out to the kitchen.

When I return I say, 'So what will you do?'

Billie takes a deep breath. 'Dad's happy in the home now and all I've got is in that bag I brought last night. I can't stand Perth a moment longer, so I'm going to get a job, any job, here in Sydney.'

'Any job?' says Eliza. 'Not flying?'

'No, not flying. But I've done other things—jeez, Lizzie, remember the cardboard box company?'

Eliza smiles. 'Didn't you say bombing it was the only time the Luftwaffe did us a favour?'

'Look, I can cope with that sort of boring office stuff,' says Billie. 'But I can't take risks any more. And I can't trust some smug, fancy-footwork bastard to stand by me. Never again.'

I say, 'Okay, wait a minute,' then go and get a towel, a comb and some sharp scissors.

'Put this round your shoulders,' I say. 'I used to cut the girls' hair in Hut 12, and if you're trying for a job you've got to look at least semi-human.'

Funny what a haircut can do. Eliza gets all misty-eyed and Billie, who looks much better after my ministrations, says, 'Thanks, Teen. Feel a lot less godawful now.'

Later, Harry comes into the kitchen. 'Good move, Sis. The rest of us were so aghast we were useless, but what you did was perfect.'

I put a plate on a shelf and say, 'Glad to help, Harry.'

'You know, the other day I was thinking how we've spent so much of our lives apart, and I've never really got to know the grown-up married woman you've become.'

'Oh, not so grown-up. Maybe not so married either.'

'Ah. I wondered. Wartime relationships can be difficult.'

I sit down. 'I just can't cope. Nikos is never here and Stavros hates me. I want to scream every time I serve a meal, make a bed, sweep the floor. Of course it has to be done, but is it *me* who has to do it? Can't I do something interesting like I used to? When Billie said she was getting a job, I nearly cheered, *me too!*'

'But what would Nikos think about that? I assume he's got fairly traditional attitudes about women staying at home.'

'Oddly, no. His father would be horrified, but his mother's Australian and she's always been the bookkeeper for their business. She brought Nikos up with one or two modern ideas.'

'So it's not him holding you back?'

'No it's me. I have no idea what to do. Look, my WAAAF work wasn't very high level but still it mattered. I had responsibility, I did my job well and Harry, I *loved* it. But what could compare to that? It's peacetime now.'

Harry says, 'Not necessarily. The Russian atomic program is racing ahead to catch up to the Americans, and God knows what'll happen if they do. Wars never pass, Tina, there are just lulls. And look at all those colonies demanding their independence.'

'But the Yanks gave the Philippines their freedom and the Brits are letting India go too. Surely the rest will follow.'

'Doubt it,' he says. 'The French are tangled up in some spat in Vietnam, the Dutch have a death grip on the East Indies, and the Madagascans had a bloody uprising last year. The old colonies are

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simmering with rage: promised their freedom for helping in the war, then kicked in the guts as soon as we won.'

I shrug. 'But they're just little places, far away.'

He says ruefully, 'Little places have triggered some pretty big wars over the years.'

'Not *nowadays*.'

Harry smiles. 'All right, let's forget world affairs. Basically you want to do something like your wartime service.'

I think for a moment then shake my head. 'Actually, no. I don't ever want my job to be a matter of life and death again. What I'd really like is to work somewhere that brings people *happiness*. A restaurant, a theatre, a club perhaps.'

'Perhaps lack of experience might be a drawback?' he teases.

'Hey, I've got office skills and worked in a shop before the war,' I say, exaggerating only a little. 'I'll start where I have to, Harry, but I can organise *anything*. I just need the chance to prove it.'

## 2. Billie: Dancing and Flying

Holy hell, I look good. I gaze to the left, to the right. Tina's a miracle worker. She didn't cut the hair as boyishly short as it usually is, but left it shoulder length, with a fullness around the temples—don't know how, but jeez it's flattering.

And jeez, how I needed that small comfort.

I hadn't actually expected to turn up in Sydney looking like something the cat dragged in, but my flight was delayed for hours and some idiot spilled coffee over me.

That wasn't all. I'd spent the previous days moving everything from the hangar to a shed—my mechanic was going to sell what he could to recover his wages. So of course I was filthy and didn't have a moment to clean up before the flight.

I look in the mirror again. Stark collar-bones, wrists like twigs. I haven't felt like eating and anyway, I spent my last penny on the flight. I'm stupidly skinny, but Tina says she's going to feed me up.

She's a funny one. No-nonsense, bristling with good sense, but because she's small and buxom and bright, men treat her like an adorable fool.

But she's clever, as clever as Eliza. At least being tall and thin and cranky has helped me avoid a lot of unwanted attention. I sit down on the bed and laugh a little.

And poor old Nikos! He's been tiptoeing around me as if I'm an unexploded bomb. I tried to explain I was a bit touchy about losing my business, but didn't tell him all of it of course. Haven't told anyone, not even Eliza.

One almost-last straw was a bloke in Perth who'd follow me round with big mournful eyes. He drove me mad and I treated him like shit, but really, it was the poor bastard's sorrow I couldn't bear: that familiar, hopeless yearning. It hurt. I'd felt that way too often myself and couldn't stand it.

## *2. Billie: Dancing and Flying*

And Nikos? Everyone treats him like the man in charge, the confident big boss. But all I could see in that split second, as he grabbed my hand laughing and pulled me towards him, was the pain in his eyes. The vulnerability.

I couldn't bear it and wanted him to stop, to go away, to never show me those dark sad eyes again. So I threw my drink at him and it worked perfectly. He's hardly spoken to me since.

After the weekend Lizzie and Harry returned to Newcastle. I'm so happy to see Harry home safe from the war and Lizzie the mother she always wanted to be, and now we'll only be a hundred miles apart. Not much more than the distance from London to Southampton, and we used to go back and forth often enough then; between Toby's house and Pete's farm.

Pete's farm.

And there it is. The news I've been keeping secret, the last straw in the heap of last straws that's finally crushed me.

A fortnight ago a letter arrived from Pete's daughter, Vivian. She's only eleven but she's a good correspondent and, ten thousand miles apart, we're closer now than ever before. One of my most painful realisations (among many) has been recognising how little I offered Vivy when she was a small child.

Then, before the war, I was simply a friend of the family, the old affair with Pete a matter of history. I was with Wilf, a lovely man, and Pete was married to wild Charlotte. She gave him Vivy and ran away; then Wilf died and the war took over all our lives.

As a friend I still saw Pete and Vivy, but a child was so far beyond my experience all I could do was offer her the occasional toy aeroplane and take her for walks. A bit like playing with a puppy, I think with shame.

But finally Pete and I found each other again, and it seemed we'd broken through into sunlight: until the war ended and I wanted to come home. My mother was ill, I had no chance of a flying job in Britain, and I'd simply spent too long in that chilly country.

But Pete loved his farm too much to even consider coming back to his birthplace. So that was that. Yet funny little Vivy, who forgave her restless mother Charlie for flitting in and out of her life, forgave me too for leaving her.

Her letters are a great comfort. They remind me of the glittering stars above Hamble airfield, the old living room with its welcoming fire, autumn days in the hills around the farm, and the long sweet nights with Pete.

As everything got harder and harder here, I sometimes thought perhaps, perhaps? Could I swallow my pride and go back to Pete? Despite our separations, the love between us has always been deep and constant. Then, a fortnight ago, I got Vivy's letter.

Did I misunderstand? I sit and open my satchel (a handbag substitute that appals Tina), take out the letter and read it again.

*Dear Billie,*

*It's the middle of summer now and the holidays are such fun! I've been riding Taffy up in the hills, and out to the old field—remember the one with the poppies where we used to lie under the oak trees?*

*Guess what? Charlie came to visit us! She's looking very chic (that's a French word) and is getting married soon to a French General. She says I can visit them at his château in Brittany. I'm not sure what a château is but I love the little hat on top of the word. So I'll be getting a stepfather—I do hope he's nice.*

*My music lessons are going well. I'm learning jazz singing from my new teacher, Miss Price, and I love it. She's Australian like you, and it's so nice hearing her voice. Her name is Janet.*

*Daddy was worried about me learning modern singing, because my old teacher said I could have a classical career if I put in the work (and I do, Billie), so he went to see Miss Price and now they've become good friends.*

*She visits for dinner a lot and he takes her to the theatre. I don't suppose you'll mind about that because you and Daddy told me the two of you were parting forever. Daddy says everyone moves on and you've probably got another boyfriend by now. Have you, Billie?*

## 2. Billie: Dancing and Flying

*I hope some new students have joined your flying school. Only very silly people would be scared of learning flying from a woman! Daddy says you're the best pilot he ever met.*

*Remember when you took me up in his Moth before you left? I loved that day. A few weeks ago he took Miss Price flying too but I don't think she liked it very much. He's going to sell the Moth soon, he says.*

*Anyway, that's all for now. School starts again in a week (ugh) but it's so pretty here when the autumn leaves are red and gold, I don't really mind.*

*Love, Vivy (and Taffy)*

I was hoping it wouldn't hurt so much but it still kicks. I didn't misunderstand. There's no way back with Pete.

After the letter I stopped trying to salvage my life. I found foggy-eyed Dad a bed in a nursing home, my aunts said they'd close up our old house, and I emptied out the hangar and got on a plane to Sydney. And here I am.

Perhaps I can find a new life in Sydney and forget, finally, the life with poppies and oak trees and autumn leaves, the life with Pete and Vivy I was so stupidly, stupidly convinced I had to leave behind. Perhaps.

A month has passed since I turned up on Nikos and Tina's doorstep. They've been welcoming and the house is large, but sometimes there's more tension between them than was obvious at first. The son, call-me-*Steve*, is a bad-tempered presence as well.

At least I'm feeling calmer now. Every day Tina and I check the newspapers for work, but nothing so far. She's tried for jobs in a cafe and a pub and was laughed at. I applied to be a secretary and didn't even get an interview.

I drop the paper beside my chair in the sunroom, and the house cat, a grey thing called Shadow, leaps unasked into my lap. I've never had a pet so it's taken a while to get used to this.

She has the habit of lying coyly on her back, then tries to draw blood if you rub her tummy. I'm more cautious now, but she settles herself and lets me stroke her neck.

'Of course Pete's moved on,' I say to the cat and she purrs.

I told him he should, and said I would myself. Surely we'd simply returned to each other during wartime out of nostalgia for the past? But I've just turned forty-two and I've got to be realistic about two things: I can't go back to Pete, and I can't keep flying for very much longer. And although it's hard to admit, I'm not even sure I want to any more.

'I've given it up before,' I say. The cat looks unimpressed.

After Wilf died of his wounds from the Spanish Civil War I didn't fly a plane for three years. Not until the war demanded I do something useful, and the only possibility for a woman pilot was the Air Transport Auxiliary.

And now I don't even care about teaching any more, not the way I did in the early thirties. That was when I first met fresh-faced Pete, who strolled into my training school and declared (like every other young fool in the country) he wanted to be a pilot.

But even then I wondered if he lacked something essential. Perhaps it was the connection Lizzie mentioned, the link I've always felt between dancing and flying, and Pete hated to dance.

In his heart he's always been tied to the earth, the farm his deepest passion. At the end he said bitterly I'd never understood how he felt about the land, how it grounded him.

'Oh, I understood, Pete,' I say, and the cat yawns. 'It was you who didn't see it for so long.'

He learnt to dance at the end too, to impress me when he hoped we'd stay together. And I was impressed, but not enough to freeze forever in that old, smug, hypocritical country. Australia's hypocritical too, but it's warm and young and doesn't have a lot to be smug about.

I sigh. The cat turns around and settles itself again.

But now, what will I do with my life? I don't have Lizzie's focused intellect, nor her yearning for a child (had my tubes tied years ago).



## 2. Billie: Dancing and Flying

I don't have Tina's bluntness—well, yes, I do—but I don't have her desire to organise and push through obstacles. She must have made a great sergeant.

'Really, cat, all I *can* do is dance and fly.'

'Surely not,' says Nikos, coming in the door with two small plates of the nutty, delicious pastry his mother bakes and sends over. 'Baklava?'

'Oh. All right. Thanks.'

Now I've been here a month we're a little more comfortable around each other, but we still haven't spoken much. Nikos sits down and says, 'You've got a great throwing arm, Billie, so cricket's always a possibility.'

'Jeez, are you *ever* going to let me forget that night?'

He smiles. 'No, and nor is anyone else.'

'I can play hockey. Any future in that?'

'Not in Sydney. Now if you could sail a boat you might be useful.'

'Sail?' I laugh. 'Talk to Lizzie, she's the ship-mad one.'

'She and Harry only love their old windjammers. No, I need an extra hand for my yacht, a friend can't make it this weekend.'

'Well, don't look at me. The closest I've ever been to the sea is a flying boat, and the whole idea was to get off the water, not play around on top.'

He's surprised. 'I know you're a pilot of course, but flying boats? Where was that?'

'Hamble airfield, near Southampton. We taught snotty-nosed recruits for the RAF Reserve in the thirties.'

Nikos looks at me oddly, and I think, Typical. Yeah, mate, flying boats. And they were a doddle compared to the four-engined heavy bombers we had to ferry across the country with nothing but an old road-map on our knees.

'What sort?' says Nikos, leaning forward.

I shrug. 'Cutty Sark amphibians. Avro seaplanes. During the war I took a repaired Sunderland back to Pembroke Dock.' I look at him a little mockingly. 'ATA women weren't supposed to pilot flying boats but there was no one else around with the experience.'

He nods. 'I suppose you know there were Empires based here in Sydney before the war, out at Rose Bay? Civilian version of Sunderlands, massive beasts.'

'Of course. But it's mostly Catalinas now isn't it?' I lick flakes of baklava off my fingers.

'Yes, though a few outfits have war-surplus Sunderlands and the newer Solents, too.' Nikos is quiet for a moment then says, 'Billie, can you read flight plans and meteorology reports?'

I laugh. 'I'd have been dead long ago if I couldn't. Why?'

'What about using teletype machines?'

'Yeah, had one in an old office job. *Why?*'

'Well, I actually work at the flying boat base at Rose Bay.'

'Oh. You've never mentioned that before.'

'We've hardly spoken.'

'Tina's never said anything either.'

He smiles briefly. 'She's not much interested in what I do. But yes, that's where I work. Look, there's no chance at all of a pilot's job there—'

'—for a woman—'

'For a woman, but the Aeradio section needs a teletype operator. The word's come down from on high we must only use teletype for position and weather reports, but no one's got the experience.'

'Good pay?'

'Not great, but not awful. But look, I really do mean there's no possibility of flying. So if you're thinking it might be a way back into aviation, it's not.'

'I never said I wanted a way back—just a job,' I say. 'Where's this Rose Bay, anyway?'

'Oh, about six miles east of here, through the city and Kings Cross. It's out towards the Heads, the entrance to Sydney Harbour.'

'And what do *you* do there?' I say. 'I thought you worked with boats, not planes.'

'I manage the small vessels section. Our control launches go out day and night to clear debris and mark the takeoff and alighting areas. Bloody hard shifts and so is the teletype job. Still interested?'

## 2. Billie: Dancing and Flying

Nikos gazes at me, and his eyes aren't dark and vulnerable after all. That's a relief—perhaps I was simply overwrought that first night and quite misread him.

And he's offering me a job, so who cares how sad the sod's eyes are anyway?

Tina is amazed when I tell her. 'But I thought you wanted to get out of flying, Billie,' she says, putting a saucepan away in the cupboard. 'It's just typing, isn't it? Sounds pretty dull.'

'Pays better than a secretary, and I've done that before.'

'I'm sorry, I never even thought of the flying boat base for you. It's always seemed such a dull, bureaucratic place. I know they've got good equipment—we'd have killed for transmitters like that in the war—but I want *people* in my life, not bloody headphones!'

'Have you seen anything in the paper today?' I say.

She nods. 'One possibility. A restaurant that needs a bookkeeper.'

'Can you do that?'

'No.' She smiles. 'But Nikos's mum Ruby said she'd teach me the basics, then I'll try to bluff my way through.'

The phone on the hall table rings. Tina goes out and answers it and chats for a few moments, then calls me. 'It's Eliza,' she says, handing me the receiver. 'News about some old friends of yours.'

'Billie, guess what!' Eliza says. 'Klara, Yvonne and little Claire are coming to Australia!'

'Really? When? For how long?'

Eliza laughs. 'In two months, January. But it's not a visit—they've decided to *emigrate*.'

'But Klara always said she couldn't live anywhere but the romantic old cities of Europe.'

'That was before the war,' says Eliza. 'Now she knows what happened to Jews like her in those romantic old cities. Her letters have been horribly bleak lately and Yvonne says she's been depressed and is having nightmares. Now it's all too much and they want a new start.'

'Brave of them to pull up sticks and emigrate, though,' I say. 'Still, so many people have done that since the war, why not? It'll be fantastic to see Yvie again too.'

'And Claire—she's four now, and must have changed so much. Oh, Bill, isn't it *marvellous*?'

'So this Klara is a poetess?' says Tina.

'Yeah, Klara Virtanen. She was well-known in the thirties. Small, very fair woman from Finland, long hair to her waist, and she'd dress in all sorts of bizarre things.' I smile at the memory. 'When the war came she chopped all her hair off, so Toby called her a pragmatic little Nordic pixie.'

'And Toby was her husband, the author Toby Fenn?'

'But they only married to protect their daughter, Claire. Toby had no interest in women and Klara was living with Yvonne.'

'Then how on earth did they have a child in the first place?'

'Ah, Teen, you probably don't want the gory details, but it involved a glass jar and a syringe.'

'Good God. That's certainly pragmatic.'

'She and Toby were still very close. He was a dear man, killed in the war. He owned the house in London where Lizzie and our other friends lived. Yvonne and I would catch the train from Southampton to take them extra farm rations.'

'Is Yvonne one of those muscular, no-lipstick ladies? We had a few girls like that in Hut 12.'

I laugh. 'Yvie? No, she's tallish and dreamy, her hair always falling down. You mightn't notice her in a crowd but she's got a lovely smile. She was a good friend to me at Hamble, a great pilot too.'

'Well, they're very welcome to stay here when they arrive in January,' says Tina.

'You're a hospitable lady, Teen.'

'I am, aren't I?' Tina laughs briefly. 'Nice to have people around, really. That's all.'

### 3. Yvonne: Calm Blue Harbour

'I can see *Billie!* Look, near that blonde woman,' I say, leaning on the bulwark as the liner nudges slowly against the dock and the wharf labourers secure the lines.

'Beside that bearded man? Oh, Yvonne, yes!' says Klara. 'She is waving, she sees us. What a crowd is down there.'

'I suppose most people have friends or family here. It'd be hard to emigrate if you didn't. We're so lucky *Billie's* here, and Harry and *Eliza* just a hundred miles away.'

'We shall find our new home in Sydney, my love, I am certain of it.' Klara bends down. 'Look *Claire*—see the woman with red hair who is waving to us? She is our old friend *Billie*, who knew you when you were a baby.'

'I don't remember her, but that was a very long time ago.'

Klara and I smile at each other over four-year-old *Claire's* head.

'Well,' says Klara. 'Let us go now to see this new land.'

After we've collected our baggage and satisfied the burly Customs man we're not smugglers, we go out to the visitor area, and there's *Billie* at last. We laugh and kiss, and she introduces her friends.

The blonde woman is *Tina*, Harry's sister. Petite and pretty, she has his grey eyes and no-nonsense air. Her husband *Nikos*, the tall bearded man, takes charge of our baggage trolley.

'Now, you don't need to find a hotel,' says *Billie*. 'Tina and *Nikos* would love you to stay with them—and me—until you get settled.'

'All of us? Are you certain?' says Klara.

'Of course,' says *Tina*. 'And *Nikos* has a cousin in real estate so he'll help you find a place to live.'

*Claire* is gazing around wide-eyed and *Nikos* lifts her onto the baggage trolley. 'You'll have a much better view from there, young *Claire*,' he says. She thinks for a moment, then settles herself and smiles regally at those of us unfortunate enough to have to walk.

Billie says, 'Lizzie and Harry are staying with us overnight—they've come down from Newcastle especially to see you.'

'Wonderful!' I say, and Billie grins her dear familiar smile. With Claire on Klara's lap, we all fit into the car, and Nikos drives us to Rozelle. The sun is shining in a deep blue sky, the air is warm and fresh, and I sigh with relief.

Everything will be all right now.

Billie and I first met in 1942, when I joined Ferry Pool 15, the ATA women's unit at Hamble. I was twenty-four, shy, and loved classical music. I loved a woman too, but she'd left me by then. Billie was my first friend at Hamble and we'd swap books and listen to records in the mess when things were quiet.

Women flyers were accused often enough of being 'man-haters' and 'lezzos,' so those of us who weren't actually much interested in men had to play it straight. But Billie didn't care who you liked in bed as long as you flew well. It turned out she knew the poetess Klara Virtanen, my idol for years, and introduced us. It was the start of my life, my real life.

Billie and I did the same hard job and knew each other's fears as only another pilot could. Once her fuel almost ran out, and when she landed I wrapped her in a blanket and rubbed her frozen hands until the blood returned. Another time, after a near-crash, I was shaking uncontrollably and she held me till I was calm enough to take my delivery chit to the airfield office.

To the world we were absent-minded Yvonne and sardonic Billie, but we understood each other like sisters. On the long train trips from Southampton to London, taking precious eggs, vegetables and bacon from Pete's farm to Toby's house, we used to talk about our hopes for the future.

Hers were to leave 'this bloody *refrigerator* of a country,' return to Australia and teach flying once more. When she and Pete became lovers again they were so happy I thought she might stay in England, but in the end she still left.

### 3. Yvonne: *Calm Blue Harbour*

My hopes were always to go into publishing—my father ran an old-fashioned printery and taught me the trade. It turned out that Klara used her own small letterpress to hand-print her poetry books, and when it broke down it was Billie who sent me to help her mend it.

When Klara and I first met I swear light radiated from her face, that elfin face with its dawn-blue eyes and short silvery hair. People call her angelic, but they have no idea of the lusty woman who drew me laughing into her bed, both of us covered in ink and dust, stars glimmering through the window and, in my sweet, foolish mind's eye, drifting around us as we made love.

Klara always called London her spiritual home, and it was in London she worked tirelessly for the *Kindertransport* refugees, the children sent away by their parents to save them from the Nazis. But a rocket killed Toby and almost killed her, and after that she seemed to lose some essential strength of heart.

When the war ended we went to Finland to visit her parents (alive because Finland protected its small Jewish population) and Klara discovered that her family tree had almost ceased to exist.

Cousins and aunts and grandfathers and babies living quietly all over Europe had been slaughtered without mercy by a bureaucracy beyond comprehension—although not beyond the comprehension of the sadists, the *infinitely* damned sadists, who did it.

Back in London the papers endlessly reported what had happened to the Jews, and every day, although it seemed impossible, every day was worse than the day before. One evening I came home to find my love sitting in the dark.

'The Americans found a warehouse, Yvonne, full of children's shoes,' said Klara evenly. 'Jewish children's shoes, taken from their soft baby feet to become the shoes of German children who, being alive, naturally had greater need of them. Such impeccable logic.'

'Oh, my darling, have you been thinking about that for hours? Where's Claire?'

'Claire?' she said.

'Our *daughter*. Where is she?'

Klara shook her head, puzzled.

I raced into the bedroom and there was the child, lying still in her cot. I felt rigid with horror, then Claire murmured. Trembling, I went back to Klara, who now simply sat, unresponsive. She lay without moving in bed all night. Every time I checked, her eyes were still open. Next day the doctor gave her laudanum drops, and she slept at last.

She stayed in bed for two weeks. She'd eat a little food from a spoon and relieve herself as obediently as a child when I took her to the bathroom, but for two weeks she didn't say a word.

Then she spoke again, as elusively as she always had, the voice of her poetry. She was sorry she had *gone away*, she said, but now she was back. And she was indeed back, the loving mother of Claire and companion of my heart: in the day at least.

At night she would wake up trembling, crying out, sobbing. Of course she could no longer write her beloved poetry. For two years I looked after Klara, our child, our flat and the other tenants in the house, and every moment was razor-edged with anxiety.

Then one day Klara said, 'I think we must leave, darling Yvonne. London has become a place of death, and we need to see different light and hear different sounds and live beneath different skies.'

We considered moving to the country, to Finland, to America: but Australia, home of our dearest friends, seemed right. We packed our things and sold the house and got on a ship.

It's marvellous to see Eliza and Harry, but next day they return to Newcastle, insisting we visit them as soon as we can. We spend the following weeks with Billie, Tina and Nikos, although we don't see much of Nikos's rather surly son, Stavros.

Nikos introduces us to Kostas, his cousin in real estate. We already like this part of Sydney very much, so Kostas helps us find a house to buy in Balmain, close to Rozelle.



### 3. *Yvonne: Calm Blue Harbour*

Balmain rambles across a broad harbour peninsula, with shipyards, warehouses and factories clustered along the water's edge. It's a proudly working-class area and we're greeted with kindness in the small shops of Darling Street, especially when Claire is with us.

Our new home is near a park on the water. It's a run-down Victorian terrace, with two storeys and a basement flat. We can afford to buy it because we're not badly-off—I have a small inheritance, while Klara gets the royalties from Toby's books and also did well on the sale of their London property.

The rear of the house faces north, which in the southern hemisphere is the warm side, and from upstairs it has a striking view to the water over the next street's buildings. Klara and I love the place. We have it repainted and tidy the garden, and buy furniture from local second-hand shops.

Klara makes one bedroom her study and tries to write poetry, but even in this new land she cannot. She slowly becomes more silent and I wonder if she's slipping away from the world again. And if so, dear God, what will I do?

Still, we go to the park and sit under the great trees, and take Claire to splash in the nearby swimming pool. It's protected with wire netting, a shop-keeper tells us, because there are sharks in that calm blue harbour. (Are there sharks circling Klara too?)

Claire goes to kindergarten three afternoons a week. We see our old friend Billie and new friends Tina and Nikos. We walk around the steep twisting streets of Balmain, and discover this country does indeed have different light and sounds and skies: and all are brash and enchanting.

But Klara still sometimes wakes up sobbing and I am still afraid.

Toby's house in London's Fitzrovia was also Victorian—a red-brick interloper among the elegant Georgians, Toby would say. We called it simply 'Whitfield Street' as if it were the only thing in the neighbourhood, despite the pubs and nearby police station.

Toby's house had a cellar, four floors and an attic. Klara had a study in the attic but after D-Day, when the Germans started raining V-1 rockets onto London, she started working downstairs.

So it was cruelly bad luck that she and Toby were up in the attic one morning. Klara was packing books, Toby telling her the new ending he'd dreamt up for his novel, when a V-1 exploded in Whitfield Street. It wiped out the police station and half a pub, but amazingly left Toby's house almost untouched. Almost.

The V-1's engine sounded like a motorcycle, until the moment it stopped and the rocket spiraled down. Toby heard the clatter and the silence, and flung Klara beneath a desk to save her: but could not save himself. She held his body, promising him she would not forget; and went on to complete his novel just as he'd wanted.

All his life Toby had loved a man named Stefan, and Klara loved me, but she yearned for a child. Farmers had long used artificial fertilisation with their stock, and clinics in Switzerland had started discreetly providing the same service for humans, but with a lot less fuss we only needed kind Toby, a jar and a syringe.

Klara conceived almost immediately, as if her body had been waiting for such a miracle. She and Toby married to protect the baby and she became Klara Fenn, no longer Klara Virtanen.

She says she's glad to carry Toby's name and it doesn't matter to her readers: she won't be publishing any new poetry for a long time. (*If ever* remains unspoken.)

Toby died four months before Claire was born and how I wish he'd had a chance to see her. She has his blue eyes and high cheekbones, but more than that she has his calm air of remoteness from the world.

Sometimes he'd say, laughing, he'd always expected to observe the human condition from a distance, at least until Klara's blessed glass jar came into his life: but I think his shell was shattered long before that, when Stefan left him.

Poor Toby. I didn't know him very well, but still I miss him.

### 3. Yvonne: *Calm Blue Harbour*

Our house is one of a pair with a common wall, and the inhabitants of the mirror residence are Valma and Reg. We meet them one day as they're going out, and they stop to admire Claire.

Valma has a permanent wave and Reg has slicked-back hair and a walking-stick. Reg says, 'And what brings you lovely ladies all the way from England to Balmain?'

'Klara was married to my cousin Toby in London,' I say. (He wasn't really my cousin but a family connection makes our shared life more plausible.) 'He died in the Blitz and Klara wanted a new start. I came too to help with Claire.'

Reg nods sagely but Valma's smoothly pencilled eyebrows lift slightly. I expect she thinks Klara is an unmarried mother—the war has provided rather a lot of useful cover stories.

Claire points to the walking-stick. 'Why have you got that?'

'Lost my leg at El Alamein, chicken,' says Reg, which confuses me for a moment till I remember it was a battle in Egypt. 'See, it's a wooden one now.'

He taps his ankle with the stick and it clacks.

Claire is impressed. 'Does it hurt?' she says.

'Not any more.' His forehead tightens fleetingly and I expect it once hurt a great deal.

'But how do you do your work?'

'Sitting down, princess, sitting down.' Reg chuckles. 'Used to be on the presses but my boss found me a desk job.'

Klara hasn't been paying much attention, but she looks up and says, 'Presses?'

'Williams Printery. In the lane behind the shops.'

'Oh yes,' I say. 'Thought I smelt ink there the other day.'

'Small publisher. Magazines, catalogues, textbooks,' Reg says. 'Not going very well though, the equipment's too old.'

'You have old presses?' says Klara. '*Hand* presses?'

'Oh no, they'd be too slow. Electric ones, but the boss won't do the maintenance so they break down a lot.'

'I had a hand letterpress once,' says Klara, 'but we left it in England. I miss it.'

Reg looks at small, slight Klara in surprise. 'You had one? Whatever for?'

Valma shifts impatiently.

'For printing books, of course,' says Klara.

'Well, I never,' says Reg. 'Now I think of it, we used to have an old hand press at the back of the shed. Maybe the boss'd sell it to you cheap.'

'If we don't get a hurry on, Reg, we'll miss the tram,' says Valma.

'Must go. Tell me tomorrow if you want to have a squiz.' Reg tips his hat and they leave.

We go to the park and sit under a tree, watching Claire as she plays on a swing.

Klara says, 'I would like to have a squiz, Yvonne, if that means to have a look.'

'I expect so. But if you did get another press, love, what would you do with it?' I say gently.

'Yvonne, I have written nothing worthwhile lately. I know I must be patient, but I have been thinking about all the poets of today, not just myself. The war was a cacophony, a clamour that drowned out every human voice.'

She looks up, her eyes tired but smiling. 'It occurs to me I could edit a book of some of the poetry that went unheard over those years. I cannot create fierce words of my own, but still I would like to be surrounded by them.'

With relief I realise Klara's silence has been one of contemplation, not despair. 'My dear,' she says, 'will you help me?'

The following Saturday Reg takes us to the printery. It's closed but the owner is there anyway, a harried elderly man flicking through a pile of papers on his desk.

'The *hand* press? Are you serious, Mr Frisket?' he says. 'It's ancient. Well, you can show the ladies, I've no time to do it.'

Reg takes us to a large shed. Two long machines and three smaller ones lie beneath dustcovers. At the rear is a square form beneath a

### 3. *Yvonne: Calm Blue Harbour*

blackened canvas, which Reg removes. Klara steps forward and gazes at the old press.

She slowly runs her fingers over a beam and says, 'The platen is rotted, the frisket is gone and the screw is stripped. The stand has termites and the metalwork is corroded beyond repair.'

'Perhaps not beyond repair,' says Reg uncertainly. 'But a big job, no mistake. A big job.'

Klara sighs. 'We could try to mend it, but I do not love this press. I loved my own, but that was a long time ago. Now I realise I no longer have the patience or the strength for such labour.'

'That old skinflint never has anything properly maintained,' says Reg. 'Mind you, he probably discarded this one some time around the Boer War.'

Klara smiles a little and looks at me. 'I think I shall still do the book, Yvonne, but I will use modern machinery. It is the poetry that matters, not how it is printed.'

'Well, we've got a few good presses, don't get me wrong.' Reg looks around. 'With a bit of care this could be a good printery, but the old sod wants out. If he doesn't get a buyer soon I reckon he'll just shut down.'

We walk to the exit and Mr Skinflint scowls from his desk.

At the door we thank Reg, then Klara says, 'Is your name really Mr Frisket?'

He grins. 'Had to be a printer with that, didn't I? No. Matter of discretion, really, sometimes you got to get yourself a new name. Thought it fitted.'

## 4. Harry: The Double Tenth

What a treat to see Klara again! Last time I saw her—my God, ten years ago—she was as flighty as a finch. As a mother now she's more settled, although she still has that elfin air. I haven't met Yvonne before, of course: she's tall and wispy and a little other-worldly, but she seems pleasant and Eliza is very fond of her.

After dinner we sit in Tina's lounge room, and Claire goes to gaze at the book-case. I haven't met her before either: she was born in London while I was in Changi. She's a striking child with a cloud of silvery-blond hair and her father Toby's deep blue eyes.

'How did you enjoy the ship, Claire?' Eliza says.

'I don't like travelling,' she says with composure. 'I like our house because my books are there now. They had to go in a crate on the ship and I couldn't read them.'

'Claire is not fond of disruption,' Klara says. 'Yvonne says she has the look of an angel and the soul of a librarian.'

Claire nods firmly. 'I like libraries. Yvonne used to take me to one in London and now we're going to join one here.'

She yawns and rubs her eyes. It's clear they're tired. We don't have much time to chat that night, but they're invited to stay with us in Newcastle after the dust has settled.

On the train home next morning I feel refreshed: surprising given that Eliza and I were enjoyably awake together in bed until the early hours. She turns to me and sighs with pleasure.

'Oh, wasn't it *lovely* to see Klara again? And did you like Yvonne?'

'Very pleasant woman,' I say. 'Do you regret living in Newcastle, so far from your old friends? Would you prefer to be in Sydney?'

'No, I like Newcastle and besides, it'd break your mother's heart if we took Leo away.'

#### 4. Harry: *The Double Tenth*

The train arrives at Hornsby, the big station on the outskirts of Sydney, and I notice a man walking beside our carriage as we slow down. I think, shocked, surely that's not ...? Christ, it is.

Eliza says, 'What? You look so surprised.'

'Ah, someone I used to know.'

She glances back but the man doesn't come into our carriage.

'What's wrong, Harry? Was he a friend?'

I take a breath. 'No, not a friend.'

'From Changi?' She sighs and takes my hand. 'Oh, love.'

We've talked about my imprisonment, of course. There was no avoiding it when I first came home, but I didn't go into the details and she knows I'm determined to put it all behind me.

'A horrible man, but I never thought at the time—well, you wouldn't have been so naïve, but I was. I simply couldn't imagine one of ours could betray ...'

'A spy?' she says.

'That sounds so melodramatic, all trenchcoats and invisible ink. No, more a seeking of favours, of privileges granted. I'd see him with the high-ranking Japanese, and wonder. Of course our senior men had to talk to them, but there was something in his bearing, even his eyes, suggested ... he *approved* of them.'

'You can't conceive of that?' says Eliza.

'Good God, no.'

She pauses. 'Darling, more people approved of the Fascists than you could imagine. And they didn't give up their fantasies when the war started—and sometimes not even when it ended.'

'But how could anyone want to *help* those bastards?' I say.

'Perhaps they had grudges against their own,' she says. 'Perhaps they were so afraid they'd have done anything to save their bacon. Perhaps they simply hoped to be on the winning side.'

I sigh. 'I've always hated that tribalism, our side and theirs. Despite Changi, despite everything, I still hope our common humanity will bring us all together one day.'

She says gently, 'Oh, Harry. Many conservatives are still in power and they'd say your hopes are treacherous and Communistic.'

I nod wryly. ‘Remember when we met on the barque? I made it clear then I was a Socialist, my mentor that notorious Red, Professor Fischer.’

‘I admired you for it, and Otto became one of my dearest friends.’ She elbows me. ‘But you didn’t have to go and marry his bloody daughter.’

I laugh. ‘That was a certainly a mistake, but be fair—I got out of it as soon as Charlotte ran off with Pete. I can’t blame her on Socialism, or Socialism on her.’

‘Charlotte’s certainly more a force of nature than a philosophy. A cyclone perhaps.’

I gaze at Eliza. ‘Did you mind, love, really? All that time we had to wait until I was free?’

‘I minded that she made you so sad, but no, that’s the odd thing about Charlotte. She behaved appallingly but she always had such a brave, vulnerable side. Even when I was furious with her, I couldn’t hate her.’

‘So when does her third lot of nuptials take place?’

Eliza opens her handbag and pulls out a letter.

‘Um, in a couple of months, at the famous château. She sent us a snapshot—look. So well-groomed and Parisian now, hardly the blonde seductress we once knew.’

‘Well, she’s got a French general to live up to. Did we get an invitation to the wedding?’

‘We did, as it happens,’ Eliza says as she puts the letter away. ‘I’ll have to write and *ever-so-regretfully* decline.’ We laugh and chat about getting home, and soon I completely forget who’s sitting in the next carriage.

After a time Eliza yawns. ‘I still haven’t caught up on sleep. Leo was awake half the night before we left.’

‘It’ll be better once he’s older. Or so total strangers feel obliged to tell us all the time.’

‘Don’t they just. But motherhood’s so *complicated*. Sometimes it seems as if I’ve gone to the moon and back and have no idea where I am. Or even who I am.’



#### 4. Harry: *The Double Tenth*

That worries me. When we first met on the sailing ship *Inverley*—Lord, nineteen years ago—she was such a wise, brave young woman.

After we married in 1938 we wanted a child, but time passed and our hopes slowly faded. Four years later, when Singapore fell, our hopes became a little more basic: would either of us survive? Brutal days.

Yet even the worst of days must end, and by a miracle Eliza became pregnant as soon as we were reunited. I wasn't much more than a walking skeleton myself, but nothing mattered then except to lose myself in the sweet slim body of my wife.

I say, 'Put your head on my shoulder and have a snooze.' She kisses me and in moments is fast asleep.

As a lad I'd often take this train between Sydney and Newcastle, and always loved the trip. Soon we're approaching the new steel bridge across the Hawkesbury River. The old bridge's remaining sandstone piers are like miniature castle towers set in the swirling green eddies.

Rows of timber posts out on the river bear racks of shellfish that grow plump and delicious in these pristine waters. Most of the Hawkesbury oyster farms are family businesses, Nikos tells me, many run by Greeks.

His uncle owns one and wants Nikos to take it over, but my cosmopolitan brother-in-law just ruefully shakes his head. He's Australian-born and hasn't the slightest interest in that kind of hardscrabble life.

Nikos is a few years younger than me, although still a lot older than my baby sister Tina. She's not a baby now, of course, just turned thirty. But I must say I was surprised a few months ago when she said she was unhappy, even yearning for the past.

Most people were delighted to put their war years behind them. I bloody was. I shift a little in my seat to ease my back—it never quite recovered from a vicious beating in 1943 and still gives me trouble.

Across the river, I see glimpses of old shacks, the homes of the local fishermen and oyster farmers, set along the waterline of the steep, stony hills; then they disappear as we pass into a tunnel.

Through a few more short tunnels, then we reach Woy Woy. After a brief stop we steam across the causeway, and soon other station platforms are flashing past as the line runs beside sunny Brisbane Water.

When we reach Gosford, half-way home, Eliza stirs but doesn't wake up. I'd hoped meeting her old friends again would help her feel more like herself. They were in London together through much of the war, although the last time I saw them was in 1939.

That was when Eliza and I sailed away on what we so innocently called our Singapore adventure. (Turned out to be too much bloody adventure for anyone's liking. But it's over. I refuse to let myself be defined by that time. It's *over*.)

I unclench my fists and take a breath.

The whistle toots and we're off again. The green scrub and grey-trunked trees flickering past the window are hypnotically soothing. We stop at Ourimbah and Tuggerah, and then to the west emerge the indigo mountains of the Watagans, the range that ends in symmetric blue Mount Sugarloaf, a sight so reminiscent of home it always tightens my throat.

More bush, a stop at Fassifern to pick up people from the Toronto line, then a string of little stations, their names as familiar as my own—Booragul, Teralba, Cockle Creek, Cardiff, Kotara, Adamstown—and finally, Newcastle.

Yawning, I get our case down from the luggage rack and we leave the train. I know I should be cautious now. When I get too tired I jump at noises and fear the guards will ... (Stop it. The guards won't. The guards are *gone*. Retribution for speaking or moving or just existing will not descend upon me, not ever again).

As we're queuing to hand the inspector our tickets I turn and he's there. I feel nauseous. His eyes are as colourless as I remember, although they're baggier, his jowls heavier.

He stares at me. 'Bell.'

#### 4. Harry: *The Double Tenth*

After a moment I say, 'Godfrey.'

The queue isn't moving, a woman ahead is arguing about her ticket. He glances at Eliza. She says calmly, 'How do you do, Mr—Godfrey, is it?'

'Doctor.'

'My wife, Eliza,' I say. I'd rather introduce her to a crocodile.

He clears his throat. 'Visiting?'

'No, we live in Newcastle East,' says Eliza. 'You?'

His face is pale, but that's his usual dead-fish complexion.

'Just here till tomorrow.'

I say, deliberately, 'An old comrade of ours lives in Newcastle too. Maybe you'd like have a drink and catch up.'

'Oh?' He swallows and Eliza glances at me.

'Caswell. You'd remember *Caswell*, of course.'

The queue shuffles forward and I hand the inspector our tickets. We pass through the gate and I turn as Godfrey comes out.

'Will I give him your regards?' I say. He looks at me with hatred, pushes past and hurries away.

I left the car parked at the station so we drive to Mum's house, a few streets from ours. After Leo's ecstatic greeting he falls asleep on the sofa, and we sit down to a nice hot dinner.

When she was a young teacher Mum was as pretty as Tina, with the same red-gold hair. Now hers is white and neatly coiled but she's kept her sharp mind and good looks, and is always amused to hear of my ex-wife Charlotte's adventures.

'French *general*, is it?' she says in her soft Scottish accent. 'Oh my. He'll have his work cut out for him. He's used to telling people what to do and I doubt the lassie'll pay him any heed. Whatever happened to that lad Stefan she was going to marry?'

'He promptly moved on,' Eliza says. 'He'd already flitted from Toby to Charlotte, then he married some poor girl with a title and a bun in the oven. Last I heard he was living it up on the Riviera with a famous playwright.'

Jessie solemnly shakes her head. 'Changeable young things. Nothing like that in my time.'

I smile. 'Mum, you're hardly some ancient dowager and I'm sure people aren't very different today.'

She laughs. 'Och, I was just teasing. My best friend at school was never quite sure if she was Arthur or Martha. So you're not going to Charlotte's nuptials, then?'

'Too far, too costly, Jessie,' says Eliza. 'And can you imagine Leo on an aeroplane for a week?'

'The bairn's always welcome here, but I take your meaning.'

We finally get Leo home to his cot, and as we're getting ready for bed, Eliza says, 'Why did the name Caswell make that nasty little man flee?' She turns. 'Ned? That man had something to do with what happened to poor Ned?'

'I was always pretty certain of it. Did he seem guilty to you?'

'Yes. Completely, Harry. Tell me.'

'Not tonight, love. Let me dig out something to show you first.'

Before the Japanese invaded Singapore I was head of a malaria unit at the General Hospital. My duty was to stay with my patients, but I insisted that Eliza leave. I could hope she was safe, but she had no such comfort, especially after the massacre at the Alexandra Military Hospital.

Most of our staff survived capture, although some of the patients weren't so lucky. We were marched to Changi peninsula, the site of a prison and three army barracks. Allied soldiers were sent to the barracks while we civilians were interned in the prison.

It was built to hold eight hundred, but three thousand men and five hundred women were crammed inside, rigidly segregated. As the days, then weeks, then months crept by, our hopes of repatriation faded.

It took half a year for the Red Cross to pry even a list of our names from the reluctant Japanese: Eliza says she'll never forget as long as she lives the day she heard I was still alive.

#### 4. Harry: *The Double Tenth*

Life at Changi was dull and repetitive, although we held games and concerts and gave lessons to keep our minds active. Rations were slashed to killingly low levels, so we dug gardens and ate anything that grew, including weeds, but there was never enough.

People died from illnesses that we helpless, humiliated doctors could do little about: malaria, dengue, typhus, cholera, and the cruel vitamin deficiency beri-beri, with its water-swollen limbs and fist-deep tropical ulcers.

I was sick myself, but in truth I was lucky too, so lucky. Civilians didn't get sent to work on the railway in Burma, and although we endured bizarre, unpredictable cruelties, I was never beaten so badly my bones were broken.

A spirit of resistance bound us all, marred only by some of our own who were once in power and now were not. Men like Godfrey, who did not despise our captors, but preferred instead to curry their favour.

In the kitchen next day, while Leo is asleep and we have an hour or two of peace, I open a dusty cardboard box on the table and take out three old sketchbooks.

'I've never shown you these before—' I say.

'Why not, love?' says Eliza at the sink. She wipes her hands on a tea-towel and sits down.

'Just wanted to put it all behind me. But they might help you understand. Of course you know what the papers said about Changi, but that wasn't the whole picture. Well, I laugh a little, 'nor are these, but—'

'Oh Harry, were you still *drawing* all that time? You never said.'

'I wasn't the only artist in the camp, either. It was hard to get pencils, but one of the blokes was a genius at making pigments out of odd things, so I ended up doing more painting than drawing.'

Eliza gently opens one of the three scruffy booklets. 'You were always so good with people's faces and bodies—I remember those sketches you did on the ship years ago.'

‘That was mainly trying to capture you, the rest was just for camouflage.’

Eliza laughs, and slowly turns the pages. ‘Oh, there’s Ned! But he looks so young.’ She looks up at me. ‘And unscarred.’

I nod. ‘He was.’

Edward Caswell—Ned—was a young surgeon, a bone specialist, who arrived at Singapore General a few months before the Japanese declared war and, when we were taken prisoner, marched beside me on those agonising twenty miles to Changi.

Eliza turns another page. ‘Where are the men in the lorry going? They look pleased.’

‘Soldiers from Changi Barracks being taken to work on the railway in Burma. The Japanese told them they were going to new, healthy camps, and the boys were joking about freedom and fresh food and wild women.’

Eliza turns some more pages and looks up at me. ‘Oh, *Harry*.’

‘Yes, that’s a few of the poor bastards who came back. If I hadn’t seen those broken bodies myself I couldn’t have imagined the kind of abuse they went through.’

She turns a page. ‘Godfrey with some of the guards?’

‘They didn’t mind us painting, as long as we did a portrait of them now and then. The one on the left wasn’t too bad, but the man in the middle was pretty awful. And on the right, he’s one of the officers Godfrey was so fond of.’

‘He’s certainly cosied up to him, isn’t he?’ She turns another page. ‘Ah. Ned and the boys playing football. My goodness—look at Godfrey’s malevolent face, watching them.’

‘He always was a spiteful little bureaucrat. He disliked most of the doctors, but he absolutely loathed poor old Ned. It mightn’t have been important, but see the date at the bottom?’

‘28th September, 1943. Why?’

‘That was the day we heard that six enemy ships had just been blown up in Singapore harbour.’

‘Oh yes, the famous commando raid, Jaywick. But how did you hear about it?’

#### 4. Harry: *The Double Tenth*

‘Some of our men built radios to get the BBC news, hiding them in shoes, brooms, buried in the gardens. Unfortunately the secret police decided it was us who’d guided the saboteurs with our hidden receivers. Of course it wasn’t, although every man would happily have done so.’

Eliza sighs. ‘So that was the start of the—what was it? Double Tenth? The tenth of October, when the secret police started dragging civilians away to force them to confess?’

‘Yes. They took nearly sixty people—even a bishop, a woman doctor and a military doctor’s wife. The poor bastards endured months of gaol and starvation and bestial torture.’

Eliza is pale. ‘And they took Ned.’

‘What none of us could figure out was how they chose who to question. But when they arrested Ned I saw Godfrey’s face, and painted this.’ I turn a page.

She gasps. ‘Harry, he’s *pleased*.’

‘I went over and said, What the hell are you smirking about, Godfrey? He just sneered and said, Shut your mouth, Bell, or you’ll be next. Then he strutted away.’

‘*You’ll be next?*’

‘But too many people had noticed, and after that Godfrey was shunned. They called him the *White Jap*.’ I sigh. ‘It was five months before Ned and the others came back. Well, some did—a lot died. After the war, the torturers were prosecuted and a few were hanged. Not enough of them, though.’

‘And Godfrey?’

‘Slithered through the cracks. The military, the government, they were all too busy hiding the evidence of their own stuff-ups. Who cared if someone ratted on his mates? Of course a few did it to survive, but I doubt many did it out of sheer spite.’

‘But why on earth did he hate *Ned*? Such a dear man.’

‘Remember Jean, that nurse in my ward who was killed just before Singapore fell? I think he fancied her, but she preferred Ned. I have to assume Godfrey’s wounded pride made him want revenge, but that’s the sane rationale.’

I gaze at Eliza. ‘We both know by now there are plenty of people around who don’t need any sort of rationale to do terrible things.’

She nods. ‘After this war I don’t understand very much about human psychology, Harry. I’m simply glad we have each other and Leo, and can live out our lives here in peace.’

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