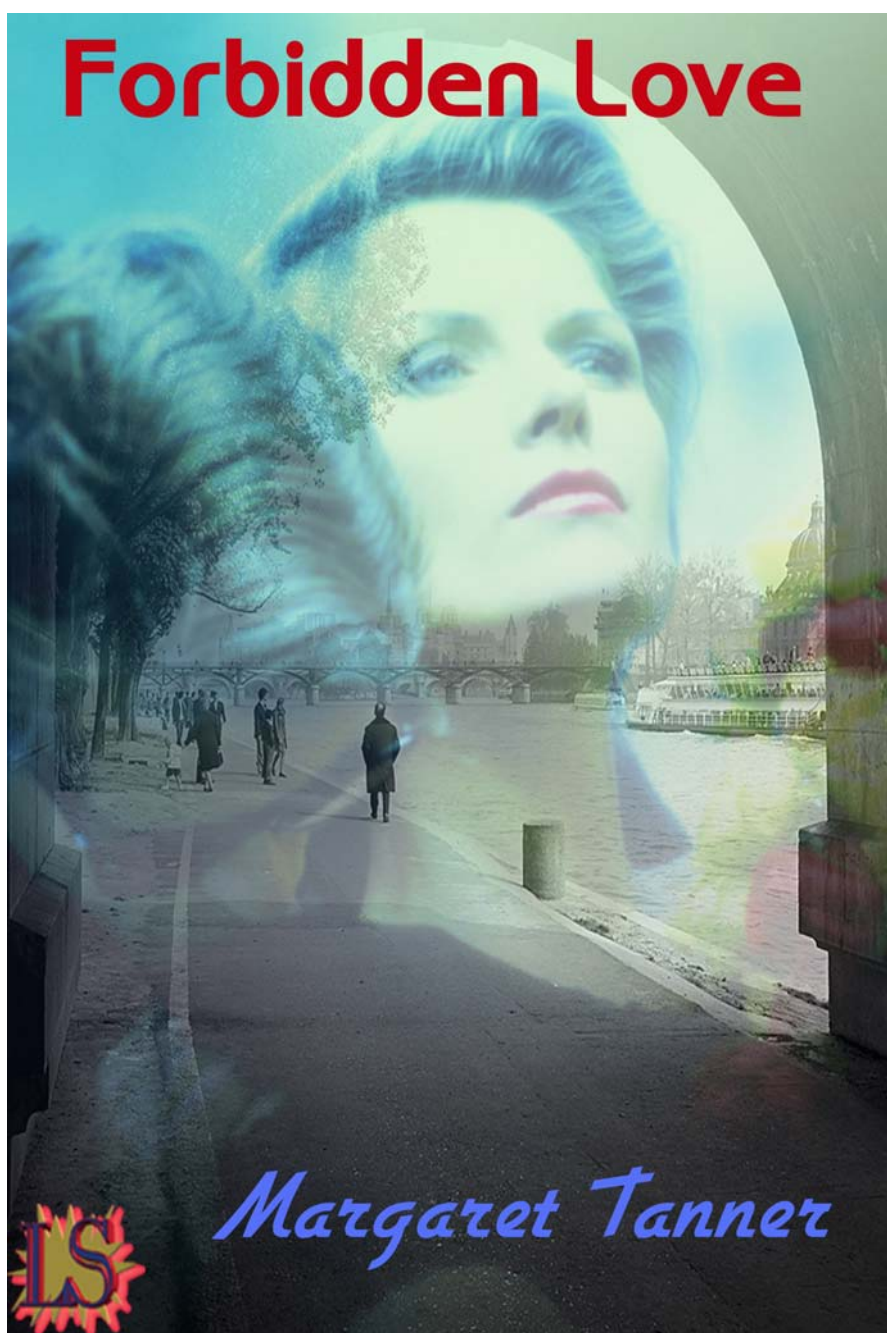


Forbidden Love



Margaret Tanner

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locals is entirely coincidental.

CREDITS

Editor: Michelle Levigne
Cover Art: Sara Williams

For my late father, Private Edward Crosher,
2/29th Australian Infantry Battalion, who was
wounded in Malaya and escaped from Singapore two
days before the surrender.

Chapter One

ou're a bastard."

Paul Ashfield felt the colour bleach from his face. "Liar." He cut off his mother's drunken tirade. He bunched his hands into fists as he listened to a string of obscenities no respectable man would use, even in the worst state of intoxication. "Who is my mother?" he demanded.

"Some insignificant slut your father bedded in Australia before the war," she shrilled.

The words slammed into him with such ferocity, they punched the breath from his lungs and he feared he might suffocate. With strength dredged from God alone knew where, he staggered out of the room with her maniacal laugh following him.

Once in the hallway, he started shaking. He dragged in several shuddering breaths before he regained some of his composure. It was almost a relief to know this whisky-soaked neurotic was not his mother.

Slowly, he walked to his own suite of rooms in the large manor house that had been in the family for generations. He

always hated coming back to this dark, gloomy place at the end of term school holidays. Their country house proved much more to his tastes. Even the apartment in Mayfair, where his father usually kept some mistress in residence, was preferable to this dark mausoleum.

Over the years, Sir Phillip Ashfield's numerous affairs were known in certain circles, but lately he had been quite indiscreet. Now past middle age, it obviously bolstered his esteem to be seen with girls almost thirty years younger than himself. They were always blonde, quite often not naturally so, but nevertheless blonde. It seemed a fetish with him.

Paul flung himself down on the bed and morosely stared at the ceiling. He felt bored to death with life at the moment, and the constant attention he received from doting mothers with daughters aged anywhere between sixteen and twenty-five. He was twenty-four years old and knew without vanity his looks were better than average. Money and position over rode any faults he might have, he thought with a twinge of bitterness. Sir Phillip Ashfield's only son was a wealthy, socially acceptable husband for their precious offspring.

None of them were interested in the way he felt, or what he wanted out of marriage. Hell, he wasn't even sure himself, but he certainly didn't want a money-hungry, poisonous wife like his father had.

What would these ladies think now if it were revealed his mother was in fact not his mother at all? This cold-hearted drunkard had never shown anything but animosity towards him. No wonder the old man always tried to keep them apart.

Of course, it had all been hushed up about the drinking binges and hysteria attacks, but people must suspect something. To give her credit though, she always managed to act the perfect hostess at their various balls and parties. Only the servants knew that for a week afterwards she would be in a

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drunken stupor, and they were too well paid to let anything slip out.

Who was his mother? Some insignificant slut? Not likely, he thought with a grimace. Up until recently, the old man had been extremely fastidious in his tastes. Always good-looking young girls. His mother would certainly not be some whore plucked off the streets.

He tried to image what type of woman would give up her child. Let him be taken halfway across the world and never bother to contact him. The usual mercenary types his father associated with, no doubt. It hurt, a pain so sharp he felt as if his insides were being pared open. His mother had abandoned him, tossed him away like a piece of garbage.

Over the years, there were elusive memories of other places. Lavender always made him feel unsettled whenever he smelt it. The aroma of freshly baked bread, even though he had not ventured near the kitchens for years, sometimes permeated his dreams. Now he understood why.

He made up his mind, then and there, to find out about his origins, and there was only one way to do it: front the old man when he arrived home. *At least something's going my way*, he thought savagely. His father had an official engagement, so the old boy would not miss that. Oh no, Sir Phillip took his obligations seriously, and now the mill had been completely modernised there must be an official opening. *God, what a farce.*

Paul never really analysed his feelings towards the old man before. Sir Phillip had given little outward show of affection over the years. He had never quibbled about handing over some extra cash when he overspent his allowance. Always came to the most official occasions at school or sent Uncle Tony along. Bought him anything he asked for, yet gave nothing of himself.



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In the English summer of 1938, Sir Phillip Ashfield still looked impressive. His black hair was thick, but Paul, waiting in the drawing room to confront his father, saw for the first time signs of dissipation about the lean, angled face. His lips had a cynical twist and that sarcastic tongue of his could flay a person to shreds. There was a slight purplish tinge about his nose now, a sign of frequent whiskies. Never outwardly drunk, of course. Sir Phillip would not be so common. A superbly tailored suit fit the lean frame perfectly, and not one speck of dust could be seen on his glossy black shoes.

"Well, Paul my boy, thought you might be out with Caroline tonight. Now there's a good looker for you, Lord Bowater's daughter. What more could a young man want?"

"She hasn't got a brain in her head."

"With a body like hers who needs a brain?" This recent father and son jocularly bordered on crudity. "Heard you exchanged heated words with your mother."

"She's not my mother."

Paul felt a weird sense of satisfaction watching the colour fade from his father's normally tanned cheeks. His hand on the whisky decanter trembled slightly, but Sir Phillip got himself under control within seconds.

"Oh, really? Who gave you this piece of information?"

"She did. Your wife."

"What!" His lips became bloodless and the veins engorged at the side of his throat. For the first time ever, Paul saw his father really shaken.

"For heaven's sake, I'm twenty-four, it's time I learnt about my origins."

"You're an Ashfield," Sir Phillip ground out.

"Was my mother a slut?" he asked furiously. "Some whore you bought for a few nights?"

"No." The hard planes of Sir Phillip's face momentarily

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softened. His eyes darkened with pain. Only a fleeting instant in time, but he looked like a man mourning the loss of something special. His usual hard mask swiftly settled back into place, however, leaving Paul to wonder whether he imagined his father's sadness.

"You're my son, let the past rest."

"I have a right to know."

"You have no rights, unless I give them to you." Sir Phillip's voice became harsh and guttural. "Your mother deserted you, never forget it. You've had everything a young man could wish for." The lines about his mouth deepened ruthlessly. "I think you should officially announce your engagement to Caroline."

"The hell I will. You might manipulate others, but not me, Father. I will not marry just to suit your plans and aspirations."

"It's a good match."

"Like your marriage?"

"Watch your mouth, boy."

"I'm not a child, and I won't be stuck with some woman I will never be able to love."

"Love be damned. You're a fool. Money and power is what counts."

"Is it, Father? Your marriage certainly hasn't made you happy, God knows, and that's public knowledge."

"Why you..." Sir Phillip raised his hand, then dropped it again. "The matter is closed. Tony should be here soon, I invited him over for dinner."

Paul strode out of the room, before they had a full-blown argument. Now was not the time to get into a fight with his father, but later, after Tony left, he would press the matter further. Demand the information about his birth.



After dinner, the three of them retired to the smoking room. Paul liked Tony, who was probably Sir Phillip's only

real friend. He was also a business partner. Tony had always come to school to cheer him along at football or cricket, whereas Sir Phillip came if and when he could afford the time.

Why Tony never married remained a mystery for years. A drunken sneer overheard at a party about eighteen months ago set Paul thinking. Could he be homosexual?

Sir Phillip puffed carefully at a cigar; Tony sipped his drink, while Paul did neither.

"Well, who are you going to send out to Australia to represent us on the Wool Board?" Tony finally asked.

"I'll go." Paul volunteered quickly.

"No you won't, son, I need you here."

"I've never been to Australia."

"There's nothing there for you," Sir Phillip said.

Paul often wondered why the mention of Australia always brought a sharply negative response from his father. Now the reason was clear. *I'll be going there*, he vowed, no matter what Sir Phillip said or did to stop him.

"What did you want to discuss with me, Phillip? I've an engagement later." Tony glanced at his watch.

"Come to my study."

Paul decided to take a stroll in the grounds. No way would he be able to sleep right now, he felt too wound up.

"That drunken bitch told him." Sir Phillip's savage tones punctured the air outside the study window.

"I warned you, Phillip."

Paul edged closer, despising himself for doing such a contemptible thing as eavesdropping, but a team of wild horses could not have dragged him away.

"He should have been told before. He's a man, not a little boy."

"I'm not telling him, the fact Allison is his mother means nothing. He's an Ashfield."

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"He's bound to find out one day, especially with the letter. Have you still got it?"

"Of course I have. I might need it for proof one day in case something happens. I can't risk that crazy bitch upstairs getting her hands on my money."

"Did you ever wonder what happened to Allison?"

"Yes."

"You were a bloody fool to have let her go, Phillip."

Paul waited, hoping for more details, but once they started talking about the mill, he walked away. At least he knew something now. He felt a sudden surge of excitement. His mother's name was Allison.

When he got up the next morning, his father had already left for London. Damn it all. He stewed over the matter of his birth for a couple of hours. A letter, somewhere there was a letter, which would clear up everything. He would go out of his mind hanging around, waiting for his father's return. He would find the letter himself, even if it meant tearing the whole place apart. Where would the old man keep it? The safe in his study most probably.



Paul made his way to the study. The blood pumped through his veins at breakneck speed; even his breathing became rapid. He felt like a gladiator on his way to the colosseum. As always, the keys were left in the top right hand desk drawer. Bloody careless, really, but without a twinge of conscience, he lifted them out.

As an inquisitive child, he often used to watch from behind the long drapes as his father opened the safe. To those who did not know, there was only a panelled wall, but he used his fingertips to touch the hidden spring. A door sprang back to display the safe, and he grinned at his easy success. Maybe he should have been a safe cracker.

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There were several bundles of notes, contracts and titles concerning the mill and numerous other properties they owned. Not a bloody thing. Frantically he reached further back, stretching his arm out full length. Suddenly his fingers came in contact with dry, brittle paper. He drew out an envelope, dirty and crumpled, and dear God, could that be blood? A dark, brown splotch covered the back of the envelope. His hands shook as he turned it over.

He could not decipher the name or battalion but read, 'First Australian Division - France.' He hesitated before returning the envelope. The old man had served in France during the war, but why the hell would he keep a souvenir like this? Paul took the letter out. No address, just the name, Dixon's Siding, and the date, March 30th, 1916.

Darling Tommy, he skimmed over the lines quickly. They were bright and loving, penned in a neat schoolgirl hand. Scarcely taking any of this in, he stopped, and stared at the vital lines.

Paul is starting to toddle now, I'll have to do as you suggested and invent a long lost relative with dark hair. It's uncanny, Tommy, he's a little miniature of Phillip Ashfield.

Paul started shaking. He gritted his teeth, fighting to get himself under control. Finally, he recovered enough to scan the letter for more information, but drew a blank. How the hell did the old man come by it?

Who was this Tommy? Allison's husband? A brother? I must have been four or five when the old man brought me to England, he deduced. *He had been seriously wounded in France just before the Armistice, so it would have to be 1919 or even 1920 before he could get to Australia to claim me.*

He dashed to the library and found an atlas. Frantically, he thumbed through it until he found a map of Australia. *Damn it all, Dixon's Siding must be too small to warrant a mention.*

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Dixon's Siding, he repeated it over in his head a couple of times, but it didn't ring any bells. *I must have lived there once*, he thought, closing his eyes in an endeavour to remember, desperately trying to grapple with facts that eluded him.

I'm going over there, and to hell with the old man. If he doesn't like it, he can disinherit me, but I'm searching for my mother. I want to find out why she abandoned me. Maybe then I can fill in the strange emptiness and feelings of loss that have haunted my dreams for years.

When Sir Phillip arrived home Paul confronted him immediately.

"I want to know more about my mother."

"Forget about her."

"I'm going out to Australia to find Allison." Paul watched the colour bleach from his father's face, leaving his skin grey and sickly.

"I forbid it."

"Too bad, I'm going anyway, and you can't stop me."

"I'm warning you," Sir Phillip snarled. "Defy me..."

"And you'll what?" Paul cut in furiously. "Disown me? Cut me off without a penny?"

"For God's sake, Paul, let the past rest, for everyone's sake."



The Australian sun scorched down from a sky so blue it hurt Paul's eyes, but none of the populace seemed to be worrying. There had been no pressing urgency, so he enjoyed himself on the ship coming out, but now he had arrived, in the land of his birth, he felt a quickening of excitement. His feelings towards Allison had softened somewhat. She sounded very young in the letter, and no doubt his father would have brought considerable pressure to bear.

Dixon's Siding was a small town in North Eastern Victoria, according to the map he held in his hand. Smithers, from the

Australian office, had met him on arrival, taken him to a hotel and provided a car. Everything had fallen into place effortlessly. The Melbourne office obviously ran on well-oiled wheels, but Sir Phillip would expect nothing less from his employees.

Now, as Paul prepared to commence his journey of discovery, his heartbeat quickened. He felt like an Olympic runner, primed and ready, waiting for the starting man's pistol.

The Australian girls looked pretty, tanned, leggy as young colts, his appreciative male eye immediately noticed. Later, he would look up one of his pals from school who lived in Melbourne, and see if he could introduce him around.

As he drove towards Dixon's Siding, Paul's initial excitement became tempered by wariness. Was he doing the right thing? He didn't want to cause any trouble for Allison if she had started up a new life, but he couldn't live with himself if he didn't at least try to find out about her.

His father refused point blank to tell him anything about Allison. He winced when he recalled the vicious words they flung at each other and his ultimatum. Let him go to Australia to represent the business and try to track down Allison, or he would travel to Australia under his own steam and disappear.

He passed miles of remarkably similar country, tall eucalyptus and other scrubby plants, even a kangaroo or two flashed by. Birds in a multitude of gaudy colours flew about, not in the least worried by the dust rising from the wheels of his yellow Buick.

On arrival in a town called Euroa, he found a hotel to have lunch at. It was a single-storied red brick place surrounded by a wide veranda. The roast lamb tasted good even on such a hot day, but the cold beer proved a lifesaver, he thought, licking the froth from his lips.



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Mid-afternoon, he found the small settlement of Dixon's Siding. Just one long main street with a few empty, veranda-covered shops. It had the appearance of a ghost town, run down, deserted, somehow lonely. An old dog, resting just outside the dusty general store, eyed Paul with indifference as he hesitated in the doorway.

If Allison refused to acknowledge him, could he take rejection from her yet again? Worse still, what if he didn't like her? What if she turned out to be low and coarse? His hands started sweating and his heart pounded with a fearful anticipation. He could still leave, and no one would ever be the wiser. *I've come all this way*, he thought, steeling himself, *and I won't take the cowardly option of running away*. Taking a depth breath, he pushed the door open and purposefully strode to where an elderly man waited behind the counter.

"Excuse me."

"Yes?" Faded eyes in a wrinkled-up face peered from behind gold-rimmed spectacles.

"I'm looking for a girl named Allison who lived here in 1916."

"Don't know anyone of that name. Hang on, there was little Allison Waverley who married the Calvert boy. He got killed in the war. Her brother did too, I think. My memory's not so good now."

"Do you know where she lives?" Paul clenched his hand in his pocket. The search was already over and it had been surprisingly easy.

"No, just left town kind of sudden years ago."

"You remember if she had a little boy?"

"Yes, a fine little fellow. They were close, those two. Without fail he always got a penny worth of boiled sweets, even though she could scarcely afford it most times. Governments don't worry much about soldiers or their

widows once a war is finished.”

“What happened to them?” Paul asked, trying to quell his excitement.

“I think she went to Melbourne. Never saw the boy again, but she came back with the girl baby...”

Paul cut the old man’s flow of words off with an imperious wave of his hand. He wasn’t interested in this other baby, it only confirmed his worst suspicions. Her husband was dead, yet she had another baby. He felt somehow cheated, because he had started building Allison Calvert up as some innocent young girl seduced by an experienced older man.

“Would anyone else know their whereabouts?”

“No, I’m the last of the originals left now. A fire went through here in the twenties, wiped nearly everything out.”

“Can you tell me where they used to live?”

The man gave him directions and Paul returned to the car, feeling very let down. Calvert. Paul Calvert. It didn’t sound familiar. Had he once answered to that name?”

When he arrived at the house, it looked derelict and overgrown with creepers, the garden an absolute jungle. He parked under the shade of a huge tree and dubiously walked up the broken path. The veranda sagged, and most of the floorboards were missing or broken. The door hung crazily on one rusty hinge, and judging by the odour emanating from within, animals lived here now.

He wandered around the back. The windows, strangely enough, were still intact, just filthy. Something drew him to a large peppercorn tree, and yes, there it was, much the worse for wear, but still recognisable. A swing.

A memory started stirring. “Higher, I want to go higher.” There was no mistaking it, the feeling proved to be so strong, Paul knew for certain he had spent time here.

He explored for half an hour or so, carefully picking his way

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amongst the tumbledown outbuildings until he came to an old orchard. Pictures flitted through his mind, but they were misty and unattainable, no matter how hard he grappled to remember.

His journey into the past had come to an abrupt halt, yet he wasn't sorry for starting it. Maybe Sir Phillip had been right after all, leave the past buried where it belonged.

He didn't doubt for a moment that he could find Allison if he really tried, not with the resources at his fingertips. He could easily hire a private investigator, pay someone to trawl through government records, but he wouldn't. Allison had obviously started a new life for herself somewhere else. Who was he to interfere with it after all these years?



On impulse, he decided to look up some family friends in Sydney. He flew there, and after only a few days, wished he hadn't bothered. Things never changed. Once the society women knew he was Sir Phillip Ashfield's son, they threw their daughters at him, inviting him to every imaginable function. If he went to another presentation ball, he would surely be ill. Good manners forced him to tolerate it, instead of telling them all to go to hell and leave him alone.

Ian Jamieson proved to be a lifeline, and as quickly as possible Paul headed back to Melbourne to visit his friend. Ian, an architect, lived in a double-storey terrace house in the inner suburb of Parkville.

Attired in casual slacks and an old shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the elbow, Ian greeted him cheerfully. "Heard you were in Sydney, old boy. Did you have a good time with the society ladies?"

"They were boring as hell." Paul grinned at his friend. The third son of wealthy parents, Ian had nevertheless kicked over

the traces of his social background. Pity he couldn't do the same thing. Being an only son, he did have certain responsibilities, even if he did find them onerous.

"Why don't you temporarily delete Ashfield from your name, and use your second one. Thomas, isn't it? It would keep the Melbourne society matrons off your back and give you plenty of freedom," Ian suggested with a grin. "You might as well enjoy your time out here in Australia. I bet Sir Phillip has already got some blue blood lined up for you to marry."

"Unfortunately he has. Caroline Bowater," Paul said with a grimace.

"Say no more, dear boy, say no more. Leave yourself in the hands of Uncle Ian. I'll introduce you to the most liberated women in Melbourne."



Ian proved to be a great one for parties, and the tempo of Paul's social life became hectic.

"How are you enjoying Australia, darling?" Kitty, a blonde divorcee drawled.

"Very much."

Kitty was fun. She liked to think of herself as thoroughly modern and completely liberated. Her hair was bottle blonde, cut in a short, almost mannish style. She constantly smoked cigarettes through a long tortoise shell holder. She had a sensational figure and knew exactly how to please a man. The owner of a fashionable Collins Street dress shop, she only worked if she felt like it, as a generous allowance from an extremely rich ex-husband enabled her to live in luxury.

Jean, Ian's current girlfriend, worked part-time as a receptionist in a Melbourne hospital. All the people in Ian's set were young, high spirited, and intent on having a good time. They enjoyed life in the fast lane. Champagne breakfasts on the Yarra River, dinner at exclusive restaurants, dancing until

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the wee hours of the morning, and Paul found himself easily fitting in with them. What a life. No responsibility, plenty of pretty, willing female companions. A man couldn't ask for anything more. Could he?

Chapter Two

Daphne Clarke dashed towards the tram stop. If she turned up late one more time, Matron warned she would be severely dealt with. Dismissal, most probably. After all her months of hard, slogging work, it was unthinkable. Why did she promise to get those cottons for Mrs. Dalton in her lunch break, or the sweets for old Mrs. Vincent?

Bang. The impact almost knocked her over, would have, except two strong male hands caught hold of each shoulder.

“Frightfully sorry, Miss.”

“It’s my fault, really, I didn’t look where I was going,” Daphne apologised.

Paul found himself mesmerised by a pair of laughing hazel eyes, and a mouth quirking up at the corners with amusement. The girl’s hair, a bright chestnut colour, was cut short and fell into waves about her pretty, heart-shaped face.

“Could you release me, I’ll be in trouble if Matron catches me being late again.”

“What’s your name?” Paul asked, refusing to let go.

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"I beg your pardon?" Daphne, staring into the face of this overconfident, brash young Englishman, felt as if she had been electrocuted. Shock sizzled all the way through her. His chocolate brown eyes, hypnotic in their intensity, held hers for a moment until she dragged her gaze away. She wriggled slightly, wondering why she didn't kick him in the shins, or scream out for assistance from passers-by.

"Please, I'll be late. Matron will be furious."

"If you tell me your name and where you work, I'll let you go."

Who did he think he was? Cheeky devil. She twisted out of his arms and dashed off.

Paul stood staring after her. She was such a pretty little thing, this girl with her bright floral dress and sunny smile, he wanted to meet her again. She jumped on a bus. He tried to board also, but it lumbered off just as he reached the back of it.

"Damn." In desperation, he flagged down a passing taxi. "Quick, driver, follow that bus."

"What, mate?"

"The bus, follow it. I'll double the normal fare."

They had only travelled a few blocks when he saw his mystery girl alight. "Stop." The driver slammed on the brakes. By the time Paul thrust a pound note at him and clambered out of the cab, she had disappeared. Now what could he do? He suddenly remembered her mentioning the word 'Matron.' Was she a nurse?

"Is there a hospital near here?" he asked a passer-by.

"Yes. The Queen Victoria is over there." The man pointed across the road.

"Thanks." Tomorrow, he vowed to find his mystery girl. He would have done it today except he had promised to meet Kitty for lunch.

He strode towards Kitty's smart little dress shop. "Are you

there, darling?" he called out on arrival.

Kitty's blonde head came out from behind a curtain. "I'll be with you in a moment. Got a customer." She mouthed the last three words.

He lit a cigarette, noticing for the first time that the gowns on display came from Paris. All Kitty's clients were rich society women, the only ones able to pay the exorbitant prices she demanded. He waited until the middle-aged customer left, before turning the 'closed for lunch' sign out.

"Paul. Darling." Kitty glided into his arms and turned her painted mouth up for a kiss.

For some strange, inexplicable reason the strong perfume she always favoured seemed rather cloying today, and after a perfunctory peck on the cheek he stepped away.

"What's the matter, Paul?"

"Nothing."

"Our table isn't booked until one. We've plenty of time for..." She ran her tongue provocatively across even white teeth. "Other things."

"I'm not in the mood," he admitted, surprising himself as much as her.

"Darling." She hooted with laughter. Gliding up to him again, she started unbuttoning his shirt, all the while moving her body against his in the slow, sensuous way that normally excited him. Today he only felt annoyance.

"Look, Kitty, are we going to have lunch or not?"

"My, we are grouchy today. Get up on the wrong side of the bed?" she asked with a chortle. "You should have stayed the night with me."

"Kitty!"

"All right. You won't make love to me in the same house I shared with my dear, dull ex-husband, but we can't keep going to hotels all the time. They bore me. Why don't you get a

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place of your own?"

"I'm thinking about it, actually." He chewed his lower lip thoughtfully. "Make things a lot easier."

It wasn't a successful meal. Paul didn't know why but he found the food tasteless, although they were eating in one of Melbourne's best restaurants.

"Let's go down to my holiday house in Frankston for the weekend," Kitty suggested.

"No, I'm not in the mood."

"But why, Paul? We'll have it all to ourselves, no interruptions, complete privacy."

"I don't feel like it." He ignored Kitty's pout, and pulled his hand away from hers.

Roses, that's what his mystery girl smelt of. Her lips, though pink, were unpainted, and the peaches and cream complexion needed no cosmetics to enhance its beauty.



For three days, Paul waited unsuccessfully outside the hospital for a glimpse of the pretty girl, who intruded on his thoughts during the day and disturbed his sleep at night. He became so obsessed with her he gave her a pet name, 'Sunshine,' because she seemed so happy and bright. Suddenly she appeared, laughing and chattering to Ian's girlfriend, Jean. What a stroke of luck. He sent up a silent prayer of thanks.

As he strode over to them, his heart slammed against his ribcage. Excitement swirled around in the pit of his stomach. "Hello, Jean. So we meet again."

"Hello, Paul. Do you know Daphne?"

"Sort of." He gave a lazy grin, hoping it would mask his exhilaration. "I nearly bowled her over in the street the other day."

"You just about sent me sprawling. How did you find me?"

"I followed you in a taxi, Sunshine."

"Sunshine!" Daphne started laughing.

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"I was desperate to call you something, you wouldn't give me your name."

"I suppose I should formally introduce you to each other after a statement like that," Jean said with a grin. "Sunshine indeed. Paul Thomas meet Daphne Clarke."

Paul felt a twinge of annoyance. For some reason he could not even explain to himself, he wanted to tell Daphne his correct name.

"How do you know Jean?" Daphne asked in a sweet, melodious voice that did funny things to his insides.

"Through a mutual friend. I'm staying with him."

"Paul belongs to the class known as the idle rich," Jean said with a grimace. "Doesn't need to work like us mere mortals."

He watched the light die in Daphne's eyes, as suddenly as a night lamp being switched off. What was wrong with her?

"Here's my bus. Goodbye, Paul. See you Monday, Jean."

He made to follow, but Jean's hand restrained him. "She's a good kid, Paul. Do yourself and her a favour. Stick with the Kittys of this world. You'd only break her heart."

Momentarily, Jean's words shocked him into silence. "What makes you think I'd want to hurt her?"

"You're a playboy, out for a good time, no strings attached. If Daphne gives her heart it's for keeps. Can I give you a lift? I'm going straight to Ian's."

"No thanks, I've got my car."

"I'll see you at Ian's then."

Later that evening, Paul unashamedly grilled Jean about Daphne, and the more he heard about this lovely girl, the more determined he became to see her again. Because she only worked part-time, Jean did not go into work the next day, but he waited impatiently outside the hospital for Daphne.

She walked out on her own this time, and he watched, surprised pleasure give way to a certain wariness.

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"I thought I could offer you a lift home."

"Thank you, I can catch the bus."

"Have I offended you in some way?"

What lovely, clear eyes she had. They were almost green today, probably a reflection of the dress she wore.

"You haven't offended me, it's just best if I get the bus."

"Don't you like me, is that it?" Picking up her hand, he held it firmly as she tried to pull away. "Tell me the truth, Sunshine. Don't you like me?"

"I think..." She stared him straight in his face, "I might get to like you too much."

It was his turn to stare, now. Her frankness surprised him. He wasn't used to a woman being so honest. "Let me take you out for dinner."

"No."

"Why not? If you like me, and I certainly like you." Jean must have damned him. "Did Jean tell you things about me?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"Nothing much, except you're rich and you're a..."

"I'm a playboy, is that it?"

"Yes. I don't want to be hurt, Paul."

"What makes you think I'd hurt you?"

"A rich young Englishman betrayed someone very dear to me, once. I don't think she ever really got over it, and I don't want to run the same risk. You lead a different existence from me. Jean's told me some of the things you do. A fast life isn't for me. I don't like casual affairs. It all seems rather sordid. Old-fashioned maybe, but that's how it is."

She turned and walked away, a slim little figure in a green cotton skirt and white, lace-trimmed blouse.

"Daphne, please." He strode after her; he couldn't let her get away from him. "We could just be friends. I'm new to

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Melbourne, you could show me around,” he went on desperately. “Please.”

“I don't think so.” She smiled, and the day seemed somehow brighter. “I'm new to Melbourne myself.”

“We could explore together.” Still she hesitated, and he cursed the unknown Englishman under his breath. “Just friends, nothing else.”

“All right.” She capitulated against her better judgement. Rich young men only toyed with ordinary working girls, and she forgot it at her peril.

“Where do you live?” With a hand at her elbow, he steered her towards a yellow Buick parked in a laneway near the hospital.

“In Brunswick, at a boarding house. It's cheap and easy for me to get to work.”

“Oh?”

“It's quite respectable. My parents thoroughly checked it out, even though it came highly recommended.”

“Do you work night duty?”

“Yes. When I do, I sleep in at the hospital.”

“Where do your parents live?” he asked.

“In Wangaratta. My father runs a small accountancy business there.”

“Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

“Two brothers. Tom's older than me, Robbie's sixteen and doing his final year at school. What about you?”

He didn't answer until she was settled into the car. “I'm an only child.”

“How sad,” she said, smoothing down her skirt.

“Is it?”

“Oh yes, my parents would have liked more children, only they weren't lucky enough.”

She directed him to a large, rambling bungalow of white

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painted timber. "Well, this is it."

"Will you come out to dinner with me tonight? I could ring up and book us a table at the Windsor, they know me there."

He had made a monumental mistake. The moment the words left his mouth, he inwardly cursed himself for choosing one of Melbourne's most exclusive hotels.

"I don't think so, thanks."

"Somewhere else, you choose. Please, Daphne, we could eat fish and chips out of a paper bag in the park if you prefer."

She laughed, a happy, lilting sound that gave him a feeling of well-being.

"You're sweet. Did anyone ever tell you that before?"

"No."

"You are." He desperately wanted to take her in his arms and kiss her soundly, but forced himself not to. "Have you ever had a boyfriend?"

"No, but you've got lots of girlfriends."

"Well..."

"Don't ever lie to me, Paul. I couldn't stand it."

"Daphne, there's something I should tell you."

"Ooh, look at the time, I'll have to change. When will you pick me up?"

"About seven." He bit back the confession hovering on his lips. Later on tonight he would tell her his full name, would tell her everything and anything she wanted to know about him. Could this be the girl of his dreams? The one he had waited all his life to meet?



They sat on a park bench to eat their fish and chips. While he found them just palatable, Daphne ate with youthful enthusiasm.

"Next to Mum's cooking, this is my favourite food," she said, licking the salty residue from her fingers.

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He laughed, flicking a stray tendril of hair away from her face. "Will you come out with me tomorrow? We could go for a picnic. I understand Frankston is quite pleasant."

"Frankston!" She recoiled as if he had struck her. Jean once mentioned that Kitty, a divorcee with a reputation, owned a holiday shack there. Daphne suddenly shivered. Had Paul stayed down there with her?

The changing expressions on her face puzzled Paul. "Daphne, what is it?"

She edged away from him. "I'd like to go home now, please."

"We were going to walk through the gardens."

"So we were." Her forced laugh sounded brittle, but she couldn't help it.

The mention of Frankston did it, he suddenly realised. How much did Jean reveal about his relationship with Kitty? "You're jumping to conclusions. I've never been to Frankston before."

"Haven't you?"

"No, I just heard of it."

"From a friend?" she queried.

"No, I wouldn't call Kitty a friend exactly, she's um..."

"Your mistress?"

"My, the little kitten has got sharp claws," he retorted sarcastically. "You could call her my mistress I suppose, not that it's any of your business."

"I know."

When she looked up, tears shimmered in her eyes. "Thank you for the chips." Tears ran down her cheeks, yet she walked away with a quiet dignity.

Anger quickly turned to remorse and he started after her. "Daphne, come back."

Paul saw the car first, speeding around the corner, then

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the child toddling out from the park straight towards it. He sprang forward and started sprinting, but Daphne was yards ahead of him.

As she charged after the child, he knew he would never catch her in time. Dear God, no way he could make her stop before she sacrificed herself under the wheels of the car. In that split second, with his heart pounding like it would burst, he knew for certain he had finally found the girl of his dreams, only she might be cruelly snatched away from him before their relationship even started.

She brought the toddler to the ground with a flying tackle any footballer would be proud of. The immediate screams of the child were drowned out as the car roared past, only inches from where they both lay on the road.

Daphne climbed unsteadily to her feet just as he arrived on the scene, with a white-faced young woman a couple of paces behind him.

"You saved my baby. I'll be indebted to you for life."

"I didn't do anything much," Daphne replied shakily

"I just took my eyes off him for a moment, he was so quick."

"Don't distress yourself any further," Paul said, picking the child up and handing him to his mother. "Hey, don't cry little man, it's all over now." He ruffled the child's hair. "Could we see you home?"

"No, thank you, I only live around the corner. God bless both of you."

For a moment Paul watched the woman walk away, then he turned towards Daphne, who suddenly looked as white as death.

"My God, Daphne. Are you all right?"

"Yes. At least the little fellow hasn't got a scratch." She ruefully surveyed her bleeding knees.

"It was a plucky thing you did. You might have been

killed.”

Daphne forced a smile even though her knees stung, because Paul looked so anxious.

“You’ll have to let me drive you home now,” he said.

“I suppose you think I did it on purpose to cadge a lift,” she teased.

“I don’t care why, but it was the bravest act I’ve ever seen. I say, you look awful.”

“I think I’m going to faint.”

When Daphne came to, she was sitting on the ground supported by Paul. “How silly of me.” He looked as white and sickly as she felt. “I’m all right now.”

“I better get you home.”

On arrival at the boarding house, he automatically followed her inside.

“My room is at the end of the hall, I’ll be fine, thank you. We aren’t supposed to have men visitors,” she apologised, giggling nervously. “Hello, Mrs. Rogers.”

Paul found himself confronted by the largest woman he had ever seen. She must have been six feet tall and a couple of axe handles wide.

“My dear, what have you done?” She glanced at Daphne who was inspecting her battered knees.

Briefly Paul explained what happened.

“Well, what a courageous little lass you are.”

“I’m all right, Mrs. Rogers. Honestly, Paul’s making too much out of it.”

“Would it be all right if I help Miss Clarke to her room, and see she attends to the lacerations on her knees?”

“Certainly. I can see you’re a gentleman, and Daphne’s a real little lady.”

The hallway was carpeted. When they came to her room, he took the key out of her trembling hand and opened the

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door. The smallness assaulted him momentarily. It was a bed/sitting room combined, but everything looked fresh and pretty. No stove, obviously she shared a kitchen and prepared her meals elsewhere.

"It's small, but it suits me." There was no apology in the statement. Daphne was proud, he realised straightaway.

Daphne bit the inside of her lip. "You shouldn't be in here, I mean, it isn't proper."

"I'm not about to ravish you, even if I am an Englishman. Some of us are quite civilised."

Daphne realised he was having a little jibe at her.

"There's some cold water in the jug and disinfectant in my first aid kit."

His hands when they bathed her knees were gentle, and she scrutinised him closely. She liked him so much it terrified her. Love at first sight? She always scorned such a thing before, but now?

His eyes were a warm chocolate brown, his black lashes thick and long. His hair, though cut short, was nevertheless an unruly mop. It was dark, but some of the strands were shot with gold. Heat burned her cheeks when he glanced up and caught her staring.

"Do you think you might recognise me next time, Sunshine?" The way he lowered his voice when he said the name gave her goose bumps. He smiled, revealing a deep cleft in his chin.

"You've got a dimple." She blurted out the first thing she thought of to cover her confusion at the feelings he aroused. *Danger*, warned a little inner voice.

"And you're beautiful." His face moved closer, so she could not avoid his questing lips when they fastened on to her own. His mouth felt warm and firm, his caress sending tingling sensations all the way through her. She had been kissed on a few occasions before, but never like this. When he finally

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pulled away, she trembled.

“This isn’t just a line, but I like you more than any woman I’ve ever met before.” He watched her lips tremble. “I’m twenty-four, unmarried. It wouldn’t be reasonable to expect me to, well...I mean there have been a few Kittys. Are you disappointed in me?”

“No.”

“Will you let me pick you up tomorrow? About ten? We could go for a drive in the country, maybe see a picture show in the evening.”

“I’d like to, thanks, Paul.”

After he left, she sat on the couch, gnawing her lip. It was foolish allowing emotion to cloud her better judgement. Nursing had been an all-consuming, driving ambition for years. Not being academically brilliant, she had worked extremely hard to obtain good marks. This incredible attraction for Paul could prove dangerous when they knew so little about each other.

Chapter Three

Daphne, wearing a navy linen dress piped with white pique, and a matching linen hat, waited for Paul to arrive. She kept twisting the strap on her handbag. What if he decided not to turn up? It was foolish thinking a man like him would be interested in an unsophisticated working girl, regardless of what he said.

The Buick screamed to a halt, just feet from the front gate, and Paul practically leapt from the car. “Sorry I’m late.” He smiled, but Daphne thought he looked tired.

Dressed in a pair of tailored sports pants, with a blue casual shirt opened at the throat, he looked what he was, a devastatingly handsome playboy. Fear escalated until she was almost overwhelmed by it. Paul had the power to destroy her.

“You look lovely.”

“Thank you.” Her smile was tremulous as she allowed him to help her into the car.

He didn’t wear a hat, the sun picked out the strands of gold in his hair, bringing them to brilliant life.

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"Aren't you curious about where I'm taking you?" He watched her from the corner of one eye. It had been bloody idiotic going out last night. "I'm sorry for being late, I slept in."

"It's all right." *What's wrong with you Daphne Clarke? You have no right questioning him about what he did last night, it's his own business,* she inwardly scolded.

"Where are we going?" She lightly touched his arm.

"To Healesville."

"Healesville! It's miles away."

"Not in a car. I thought we could go to the Sir Colin McKenzie Sanctuary, would you like that?"

"Love it." She laughed happily.

"Jean's suggestion," he admitted with a grin.

"Oh."

"I spoke to her last night. Wallabies, koalas, wedge tailed eagles, just Daphne's cup of tea."

"It makes me sound dull."

"You're interested in tropical diseases, or so I hear."

"Jean again. Yes I am. Molly Gratton, one of the Interns I'm friendly with, well her father practices medicine in Singapore and she got me interested. She intends following in his footsteps."

"Do you mind if I drive with the window down?" he asked.

"No."

"It might clear my head."

"Does it need clearing?"

He gave a rueful grin. "Yes, afraid so."

They drove along in companionable silence for a time, and it did not take long for them to pass through the suburbs leading on to the open road.

"Tell me about yourself, Paul. Where you went to school, that sort of thing."

"I attended Eton, after that Oxford for a couple of years, left

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before finishing my course, and went into the family business.”

Daphne took her hat off so the warm breeze could blow through her hair, and she laughed out loud at this unaccustomed feeling of freedom. “This is wonderful. Do you lead a very social life in England?”

“I suppose so.”

His fingers on the steering wheel were long, slender and quite tanned, as were his arms, she noticed. A gold watch on a brown leather band nestled amidst the dark hairs growing just above his wrist. Obviously he would have shaved recently, yet his cheeks and chin still had a slightly bluish tinge.

When one of his hands clasped hers, red fired her cheeks, but she did not try to pull free, even when his thumb started caressing her knuckles.

“I don’t bite, you know.” His voice flowed over her in a feather light caress.

“I suppose you get plenty of invitations during the Debutants’ coming out season?”

He laughed. “Unfortunately, I’m on the eligible males list.”

“Right background and everything?”

“Yep,” he answered with a wry grin.

“I think it must be really exciting. Tell me about it. Some of the things you might do, so I can compare it to the information I’ve read.”

Was she teasing him? Here was a chance to tell her his correct name, yet he did not. Just launched into a description of the last Eton versus Harrow cricket match, and about Simpsons in the Strand, where only men were allowed to lunch in the ground floor restaurant.

“Oh, how unfair,” Daphne said.

“It opened in 1828, or thereabouts, as a chess and coffee club.”

“The Henley Regatta, tell me all about it.”

“I missed going last year, but it’s rather fun.”

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"Is it true men have to wear tails and opera coats when attending the Royal Opera?"

"Yes, carry silver-topped canes, too. Enough of my social life, what about yours?"

"I don't do anything much. Sometimes a couple of the other nurses and I might go late night shopping on Friday, and treat ourselves to supper. A pie, chips, peas and tomato sauce, not bad for a shilling, especially with a cup of tea thrown in as well."

Dear God, she felt happy with that. After an evening out, a snack laid out for his friends might include smoked salmon sides, lobster, caviar, game pies, champagne and cigars.

"What else do you do?" he queried, cursing the fact that their backgrounds were so different.

"Nothing much. I spend a lot of time studying. My parents sacrificed a lot so I could become a nurse, and I want to do well."

She would be good at nursing he decided. Behind the laughter lurking in her eyes there was real compassion. He had never come across anyone so caring, so sweet or unspoiled. Working class—completely unsuitable, as Sir Phillip would say.

"I wouldn't mind being one of your patients. Would you visit me after hours, or do my shopping in your own time?"

Her cheeks flamed and she hung her head. "Jean exaggerates. At home it's different. I go to church dances, oh a ball or two, the odd card evening. In summer I swim in the river with my brothers. Sometimes a group of us might get together for a ride on our bikes, from one town to another just for fun."

"I normally use a car for getting around in."

"Do you work?" she asked.

"Yes, I look after the managerial side of things in the family business." His lip twisted slightly. "I'm not a complete layabout, you know."

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"I didn't mean to imply you were. Everyone is entitled to a holiday."

"Strictly speaking, this isn't a holiday. Well, it's a working one, anyway. We have some interests out here."

"Oh?"

"We're into wool." He didn't want to sound evasive, but didn't want to elaborate too much, in case he scared her off. For once, having wealth could prove to be a curse.

"Are you?"

"Yes, my father owns a mill among other things."

"What a coincidence. My brother Tom worked in the woollen mills at Wangaratta for a while."

He opened his mouth to confess the family company had connections there, then quickly shut it again.

"You're terribly rich, aren't you?" Her speech sounded very English at times.

"Yes, I suppose so."

"I wish you weren't, Paul, I mean, so rich."

"Why should it matter?"

She didn't answer, just stared at the passing countryside.

"I thought we might go to the sanctuary first." Paul finally broke the silence between them

When they alighted from the car, he took her hand. She liked the feel of his strong fingers, he, the soft, subtle perfume of her skin. He liked everything about her. More than liked, if he were honest.

"Leave your hat. In the sun your hair turns red."

"Tom called me carrots for years, used to send me into screaming fits once," she confessed with a girlish giggle.

"You get on well with your brothers?"

"Yes. You'd like Tom, everyone does. Rob is quieter, but he's a good kid."

"I would like to meet your family, Daphne."

“Really?”

“Yes.” She stared into his eyes. Something flashed in their deep, chocolate depths, something dangerously sweet, a secret promise that she couldn’t quite understand.

“I’m going home for Christmas. My parents would make you welcome, provided you don’t mind bunking in with Rob, and Tom if he’s home.”

“I went to boarding school for years, so I’m used to sharing.”

They wandered off into the bush. A kookaburra laughed loudly from somewhere close by. A grey kangaroo, so tame it came right up close, watched them with large, soulful eyes.

“I haven’t got anything for you to eat. You needn’t laugh, Paul. I’m sure he understood every word.”

They crossed over a creek, jumping from stone to stone until they reached the other side, where giant tree ferns grew. It felt cool and damp, and they were alone, so when Paul drew her into his arms she made no protest. His lips were warm and firm against her trembling mouth.

“You’re beautiful.” With a hand gently cupping her face, he lifted her head and gazed into her eyes. “You’re as lovely as the flower bearing your name,” he said softly.

Hand in hand, they strolled back the way they had come, and once out of the shade, the sun burned fiercely.

They lunched at a guesthouse, on a trellised veranda overlooking neatly trimmed lawns. There were beds of roses and camellias, even a tennis court and private swimming pool. Daphne sighed enviously. If she only were rich, this would be a delightful place to stay for a few days.

“Tired?” he asked.

“No. I just thought what a lovely place this would be for a weekend. Thank you.” She smiled at the maid who handed over the menu.

She tried not to ooh and ah too much over the exotic food.

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For once, she wouldn't even worry about the expense. Paul was wealthy. There had not been even a flicker of surprise in his eyes as he examined the menu.

"I'll have crayfish, thank you," she decided, suddenly feeling reckless.

"Roast suckling pig for our main course," he suggested. "We'll have a bottle of your best wine too, please."

She acted differently from his usual female companions. He smiled indulgently at the almost nervous way her eyes darted everywhere, like a child frightened it might miss out on some special treat.

"Thank you, I really enjoyed that, Paul."

He watched the way her dimples came and went, the dainty way she used her table napkin. Working class, maybe, but Daphne was a lady.

"More wine?"

"No, thank you. I've drunk too much already."

"Would you care to come to a party with me tonight?" he invited impulsively.

"I don't know. What kind of party?"

"Just a party. There'll be a band, the house backs on to the Yarra River, should be fun."

"Thank you. Sounds lovely."

"It's three o'clock, we'd better head back. I'll call for you about eight."

He drove fast, his hands firm and confident on the wheel, and Daphne leaned back, revelling in this unaccustomed luxury. At home, they always rode bicycles. Even her father didn't own a car.



Daphne dressed carefully for the party in the only long evening gown she possessed, a gathered jersey in japonica

pink. She waited nervously, wondering whether she had been too heavy-handed with the face powder. Was her lipstick too bright? She didn't want to look cheap.

It was nearly eight thirty before Paul arrived.

"I thought you'd changed your mind and didn't want to take me out."

"Darling, I'm sorry for being late."

For some reason it hurt when the endearment fell so carelessly from his lips.

"I got held up. You look lovely." He surveyed her appreciably from head to foot. She was exquisite, delicate as the finest porcelain, and just as easily broken, he realised with a sudden twinge of guilt. Could she survive running the gauntlet of Kitty and her spiteful friends?

"Thanks, you look extremely dashing, too." Daphne had trouble forcing the words out past a lump in her throat. In a superbly tailored dark evening suit with a pristine white dress shirt, he could have been a movie star.

Outside, Daphne was surprised to see a dark-coloured Rolls Royce, driven by a uniformed chauffeur.

"Is this yours?" she squeaked.

"It belongs to the business."

"I'll feel like royalty driving along in this. If you're trying to impress me, you have."

Laughing, he dropped a kiss on her head. Daphne blushed, but the chauffeur's features remained impassive. Paul sat close enough for their thighs to touch, and she felt a tingling, excited sensation through the whole of her body every time he moved. *You're just an ordinary working girl. When he returns to England it will be back to buses and walking*, she reminded herself.

"You're rather quiet."

"Am I?" She laughed. What was the harm in enjoying this

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kind of pampering for once? “I’m just reminding myself not to become used to such luxury.”

“I can’t ever recall meeting anyone as sweet and honest as you, Daphne.”

“Honesty is very important to me.”

His heart sank. “What about love?”

“Without honesty, there couldn’t be sincere love. Oh, we are silly talking like this.” She touched his arm, just a feather light caress, yet every nerve end felt it. Dear God, he should tell her now.

“What’s your favourite city, Paul?”

The moment for confession passed. “Paris, I think.”

“I thought you might have said London.”

“I like London, but there’s something special about Paris. Very sophisticated, yet, well, romantic I suppose.”

“Do you go there often?”

“Every couple of months or so.”

Daphne hated herself for wondering whether he had a pretty little French girl tucked away in some chateau over there.

Within a short time, they arrived in Hawthorn. The double storey mansion at the end of a tree-lined street appeared to be built of painted white brick. She tried to contain her awe as they walked up several marble steps to an impressive portico entrance.

A uniformed manservant ushered them indoors. A young maid took her wrap, then Paul slipped his arm through hers and they entered the ballroom. Chandeliers, Louis XV settees and chairs, Daphne’s legs fairly shook. The dress she had thought beautiful looked cheap compared with the Parisian creations here.

“Paul, darling. How good of you to come,” gushed their hostess.

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"Pleased to be here, Angie. You haven't met Daphne yet. Angie Fairbrother, Daphne Clarke."

"Good evening, Mrs. Fairbrother." Daphne immediately noticed an enormous diamond ring on the woman's left hand.

"Angie, please, darling. I'm between husbands at the moment. Now tell me, Paul. Where's Kitty?"

"She'll be along in a while, I should imagine," he answered carelessly.

"You naughty boy." Angie tapped his cheek with a long, red nailed finger. "She'll sulk for weeks now because you weren't her escort." She looked at Daphne and sniffed slightly.

"Those people over there are waving to you," Daphne said.

"So they are." He casually lifted his hand in acknowledgement. When the orchestra started up, Paul swept her into his arms and Daphne forgot everything except the wonderful feeling of being held so closely against his hard, warm body.

The party seemed to be awash with Champagne. There were biscuits covered in caviar, wafer-thin shrimp sandwiches and little creams of *foie gras*. Some of the voices sounded overloud, greatly affected, and the gushiness of several women over Paul quickly became nauseating.

Daphne recognised Kitty the moment she swept into the room. Dressed in black velvet, with a high back and low V showing a large proportion of her creamy white breasts. The skirt was bunched up into a bustle effect at the back. She looked sensational. Her pictures in the society pages didn't do her justice.

"How are you? Daisy, isn't it?" Kitty removed a long cigarette holder from her mouth, and languidly blew a cloud of smoke into Daphne's face. "Darling, I hope you aren't taking too seriously anything this Casanova tells you."

Paul's eyes hardened, but his voice remained even as he

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drawled, "I'm not all that bad, am I, darling?"

He sounded as insincere as ninety-five percent of the other people here, Daphne thought with a pang. The music started to become overloud, people more boisterous, and like a trapped animal she looked for a place to flee. Paul stood chatting with Kitty and a group of other people. Several men gave her bold, speculative looks, but Kitty's eyes burned with hostility.

Glancing up, Paul saw Daphne sitting alone, as out of place as a rose in the desert. He wanted to knock Kitty's possessive hand off his arm.

"Excuse me, I should be getting back to Daphne."

"She's a pretty little thing, old boy. Hardly your type, though. Start anything with her and Daddy would insist on marriage."

Paul gave Ralph Hughes a look of utter distaste. Without replying, he turned on his heel and strode off.

After Angie waylaid him, it took another five minutes before he could extricate himself. By then, Daphne had disappeared.

"Excuse me, the young lady in pink, did you see where she went?" he asked a hovering waiter.

"Through the French doors, Sir."

It felt cool in the garden. Daphne hurried to a section well away from the house and rested her hot cheek against the smooth trunk of a weeping willow tree. Paul was right in saying the property backed on to the Yarra River. She had acted like an idiot by rushing off, but couldn't stand to be near such artificial people.

"Daphne, where are you?"

"Over by the big willow."

He saw her, an almost wraithlike silhouette.

"Is anything wrong?" he asked.

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"No. Well, yes, I didn't like the party over much, sorry."

"I shouldn't have brought you here. They aren't your type of people."

"But they are yours," she whispered sadly. "I'd like to go home please."

"Let's go for a walk along the river first."

She hesitated.

"Please, darling," he pressed.

The pain of his constant, careless use of the endearment became unbearable. "Don't call me that."

"Why?"

"Because you don't mean it."

"How do you know?"

"You've said it to at least five different women tonight."

"It's just a figure of speech really."

"Not to me it isn't. It's special, I'd only use it for someone I love."

"For God's sake," he flared angrily. "You don't like parties. You don't drink or smoke. Are you a bloody Quaker or something?"

"No, a Methodist."

"Hell, I don't want to talk." He pulled her into his arms, and his mouth closed over hers. It was a gentle, restrained kiss at first, but as she shyly responded he moulded her closer, his lips hungry, demanding. He coaxed her mouth open and excitement fluttered around in the pit of her stomach.

When he brushed her gown down over one shoulder, Daphne realised she had let him go too far. "Stop it, Paul." She shoved him away. "I'm not a call girl."

"I didn't think you were!"

"A cheap pickup?"

"Of course not, for God's sake. I only wanted a few kisses."

"Take me home please."

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He escorted her to the Rolls Royce. "I'll let Angie know we're leaving."

"Comfortable, Miss?" the chauffer asked after helping her into the back seat.

"Yes, thank you." She wondered if he detected the huskiness in her voice. If he did, he gave no sign, just made his way to the driver's side of the car and silently waited.

Even on such a warm night, she felt icy cold. When Paul joined her he did not speak, and they drove along in a fraught, angry silence. On arrival at the boarding house, he saw her to the door, waiting without speaking until she stepped inside.

"Goodbye, Daphne."

The darkness swallowed him up and she knew she would never see him again. *It's for the best*, she told herself fiercely. *You're not into casual affairs, and that's all a wealthy, sophisticated man would ever want from an ordinary working girl.*

Chapter Four

Sunday dawned, a scorcher of a day. After breakfast, Daphne walked to church with Fay, another country girl who resided at the boarding house. It was a simple service of hymns and Bible readings, which did a lot to ease her heartache. *How could a man you had only recently met become so important in your life?* she wondered.

Whilst shaking hands with the minister, she glanced up and her heart fluttered like a caged bird. Paul lounged against the Buick, which was parked right outside the church gates. Maybe, just maybe he did feel something more than craven lust for her.

Paul felt his heart lift on seeing Daphne. He had spent half the night tossing and turning, thinking about her. Ian was right, they were not suited, and he should do the decent thing and stay away from her. She was too sweet for him to trifle with. He made up his mind never to see her again, but come morning, he just couldn't stay away.

"Hello, Paul." Daphne greeted him warily.

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In a simple white, lemon and green dress, and with a white straw hat perched at a jaunty angle on her bright hair, Paul thought the radiance of the sun faded into insignificance.

"Hello, Daphne. I'm sorry about last night. I acted like a real bastard. Will you come out with me? I thought we could catch the 'Weeroona' to Queenscliff. I've brought along a picnic hamper."

She hesitated only for a moment. "I'd like that." Common sense told her to refuse him, but she wasn't sensible, not when it came to Paul.

"Do you need to get anything from home?"

"No, but I walked up with a friend, Fay." She beckoned the other girl over.

"Don't worry about me, Daph." Fay obviously overheard. "I don't mind walking back on my own."

Paul mouthed what he knew they both expected to hear. "I can drop you off first."

"No thanks, the walk will do me good. Have a nice time. Oh, will you be late getting back?"

"I don't know." Daphne's eyes searched out Paul's.

"Most probably."

"I'll tell Mrs. Rogers, she can leave the door unlatched." With a cheery wave, Fay left them.

Paul saw Daphne into the car. Still bent over, he stared straight into her face. "After last night, I made up my mind not to see you again."

"I know," she whispered.

He stroked her smooth, soft cheek and inhaled the fresh, sweet perfume of her skin. "Only I couldn't stay away."

His eyes were dark and somnolent today, and she was frightened of the feelings he aroused in her, a rush of blood to her head, and swirling butterflies in the pit of her stomach. Why did he have to be so handsome and wealthy? Why were

their backgrounds so different? Why couldn't he just be an ordinary working man? She fought to suppress a moan of anguish because they had no future together.

"Don't be afraid, I wouldn't hurt anyone as lovely as you." His lips were only inches away from hers, his breath warmly fanning her face. "Sweet Daphne." The flat of his thumb gently traced the outline of her jaw, but their lips did not quite touch. For a moment, the world stood still.

"I understand we catch the 'Weeroona' at Station Pier," he finally said.

"I've always wanted to take this trip, but never got the chance." She pushed aside the hopelessness of their having a permanent relationship, deciding to just enjoy whatever time she did have with him. "It's a paddle steamer, did you know, Paul?"

"No, Ian didn't go into much detail, just said it would be a splendid outing."

"Is he Jean's boyfriend?"

"Yes. We were at Eton together."

"Jean says he's a very good architect."

"Top class."

"Do you think, what I mean is, she's very fond of him."

"I doubt if he'll marry her, if that's what you mean."

He weaved in and out of the traffic with an arrogant confidence. Daphne thought Ian was selfish. Jean was in love with him, often staying overnight at his house, yet he wasn't prepared to do the decent thing by offering marriage.

"Do you have to work tomorrow?" he asked, after they were on the boat.

"Yes."

"Couldn't you take the day off? We could go somewhere else, Mordialloc perhaps."

"I'd like to, Paul, but I'm a working girl remember."

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“Just one day.”

“Nursing is important to me. Look at the seagull, he’s lost a leg.” She pointed to the bird that hopped about on his remaining one, as he fought with several others over a crust of bread. “Hope he wins.”

Paul laughed. “Seems to be doing all right for himself. Do you want to go on the inside deck?” he asked, suddenly feeling carefree. He wouldn’t think of the social chasm that divided them. England, with all its high society requirements and restrictions, was thousands of miles across the sea.

Daphne took off her hat and the wind whipped strands of hair across her face. “No, let’s stay here, I love the breeze.”

They found a spot along one side, and Paul deposited the picnic hamper under the seat. The laughing, chattering crowd, jostling each other for the best position, gave it a carnival atmosphere.

The water, greenish blue in the distance, sent up little white spurts as the waves nudged the sides of the boat, but they positively foamed as the big wheel started turning. Daphne, leaning over the rails, felt Paul’s arms go about her shoulder, and they stood like this for a time without speaking.

“I hope I’m a good sailor.”

He laughed. “Haven’t you been on a boat before?”

“Only a row boat, nothing as big as this, and on the open sea, too. Will it get rough?”

“I don’t know, but if you start turning green, I’ll shove you overboard,” he threatened.

Daphne, excited as a child, tugged at his hand often as she pointed things out, and he thought her the sweetest, most unspoiled girl he had ever met. Devoid of makeup, and with the chestnut waves blown into disorder by the breeze, it was hard to believe she was more than sixteen.

“How old are you?” He bit back the usual, casual

endearment springing so readily to his lips.

“Eighteen.”

Only six years difference in their ages, but dear God, in experience they were decades apart.

The blue sky dazzled in the sunlight, and the almost-white sand shimmered in the heat as they left the boat. Paul felt so hot, he cursed himself for not bringing along some bathing trunks. What would Daphne look like in a bathing suit? His groin clenched just thinking about it.

Around a point, they found a secluded spot for their picnic. Selfish in this newly found attraction, he wasn't prepared to share her with anyone else. The heat did not appear to worry Daphne as she enthusiastically demolished the hard-boiled eggs, cold chicken, ham, and freshly baked rolls prepared by Ian's housekeeper.

“Ah, beautiful,” she sighed. “Makes me feel drowsy.”

She packed everything neatly in the hamper. Hand-in-hand, they sought relief from the heat under the shelter of some trees.

Paul lay down first, and she hesitated for a moment before doing likewise. Resting her head on his arm, she lay quietly. Daphne closed her eyes to better savour his scent and the male heat emanating from his body.

They were both stretched out flat on their backs. Without warning, he rolled onto his side, moving his arm to connect with the one that cradled her head, and she trembled.

“It's all right.” His warm breath fanned her face. He gave a sudden strangled groan, and covered her slightly parted lips with his own. “Open your mouth for me, Sunshine.”

She obeyed the husky instruction, and almost immediately felt the thrust of his tongue as it eagerly probed the innermost depths of her mouth. He moved slightly. His leg came over to cover hers and she was pressed along the full length of his

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body, with her breasts crushed against the hard wall of his chest. She had gone out casually with a few young men from home, but had never been confronted with a man's passion in such intimate circumstances before.

Paul hardened with arousal. She must have felt it, yet was so innocent, especially for a nurse, that he wondered whether she really understood what was happening to him. How easily things could escalate out of control. With a growl of deprivation, he rolled away while he still had the strength to do so.

"I'm sorry, Daphne, I took advantage of you."

Her eyes, almost green and very wide, were slightly shadowed. "I should have stopped you," she whispered.

She quickly lowered her head, but not before he noticed that the lips he had so recently tasted trembled with emotion.

"I saw a kiosk near the pier, would you like to go back there for some tea?" he asked, annoyed with himself for treating her with such little respect.

"Yes, please." A smooth, dainty hand slipping trustingly into his, made him feel an absolute cad.

They both ordered Devonshire tea. The scones were light and fluffy, the cream and jam spread lavishly. "Delicious, nearly as good as Mum makes."

He laughed at her enthusiasm.

"Dad says she's the best cook in Australia."

As they walked outside again and stood looking out over the water, Paul wondered what his own father would make of this woman/child, and for that matter, what she would make of him. A working class Australian. No, Sir Phillip would certainly not be impressed.

He wrapped his arms around her, drawing her back to lean against his chest. "Where would you like me to take you this evening?" His breath stirred her hair, and his heart beat strongly into her back.

Margaret Tanner

"I can't be late." She turned around, and their faces were so close they bumped noses. "I have to work in the morning."

"Couldn't you miss it, just for once?"

"No, I have to earn a living."

"If it's the money, I'll make up whatever you lose in your pay."

Daphne's heart suddenly turned to stone. He wanted to pay her for going out with him.

"I couldn't let you do that."

Her voice sounded normal, yet when he looked into her eyes, he felt like cutting his tongue out. She looked absolutely shattered, as if she was crying, but there were no tears.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean it to sound so crass. I'll pick you up after work, we could dine out somewhere."

She didn't answer, just turned her head away and stared out to sea. Damn it. Paul cursed the differences in their background and outlook. Several times over the years he had made similar offers, and they were readily accepted. He did not expect a working girl to be out of pocket by going out with him. What the hell was wrong with her?



The Queen Victoria Hospital was staffed and run by women. The patients were all female, and Daphne wondered what it would be like to attend the needs of a male. Had she been more familiar with the traits and temperament of worldly men, maybe she could have behaved in a more sophisticated manner with Paul, instead of taking every word he uttered to heart.

The fact that he was a rich young Englishman made her wary and suspicious of him. *I'm afraid*, she thought with an insight that pared her heart wide open, leaving it vulnerable and exposed. She had fallen in love with him, ridiculous and futile though it was.

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She would be nothing more than a frivolous diversion for him, something different from his usual pursuits. A curiosity, a little colonial nurse he could tell his flash friends about when he returned home. Boast about how 'easy' she was. How she fell into his hand like a ripe plum. That should raise a few laughs over their champagne and caviar.

Thinking about how far she let his lovemaking progress before calling a halt made her cringe. *You're a fool, Daphne Clarke*, she scolded herself. *You want to be a nurse don't you? You've slaved for months, studied for years. Surely, you're not going to jeopardise your chances by falling in love with a rich, spoilt young man, who thinks working class girls are fair game for a causal dalliance.*

She felt tired and drained by knock-off time. Had the Tutor Sister been over-critical today? It was hard concentrating on splints and bandages with a broken heart, but how could you explain this to a fifty-year-old spinster?

Mrs. Gleeson had died that morning. Such a nice old lady too, and no visitors in the whole ten weeks she spent at the hospital. How pitiful to be so alone, with no one to even mourn your passing.

"What's wrong with you, Daph?" A smiling Jean caught up with her. "Not letting Paul break your heart, are you?"

"No." A pale, pinched face and wounded, haunted eyes belied the word. She held her head proudly, summoning up a wistful smile, and Jean admired her courage.

Men were such bastards. She guessed something was wrong as soon as Paul arrived back at Ian's after the outing, sullen and uncommunicative. After changing his clothes, he went out, not returning until the wee hours of the morning. She herself hadn't meant to spend the whole weekend with Ian, but somehow did. He would never offer marriage now. Yet she continually let him use her in the vain hope that he might

change his mind.

He was as selfish and spoilt by women as Paul, and had just as little regard for them. Girls like her could take the hurt. Could even laugh at it sometimes, before moving on to another man. For someone like Daphne, deny it as she might, the betrayal and pain would scar her for a lifetime.

Chapter Five

One Monday, two weeks after the disastrous ‘Weeroona’ trip, Daphne trailed forlornly out of the hospital. Another evening at home, eating a solitary meal, was not appealing. She had thrown herself into work, taking on extra shifts, anything to stop pining for Paul. Tomorrow she started afternoon shift, then it would be Christmas, and ten day’s holiday. She could hardly wait. Like a wounded animal she wanted to make for the safety of home and family.

“Hello, Daphne.” She jumped when Paul spoke. “You were going to walk straight past me.”

“Sorry.”

“How have you been?” What a stupid question, she looked as miserable as he felt, and for possibly the first time ever, he was lost for words.

“I’m all right.” Her eyes flew to his face, and she was surprised to find he looked tired and drawn. *Tell him to go away and leave you alone*, the voice of reason urged, but she ignored it.

Margaret Tanner

"It's been a terrible couple of weeks, I've missed you like hell."

"Have you, Paul?" Disbelief widened her honest hazel eyes. Bloody Jean must have regaled her with his activities over the last fourteen days.

"I tried to get you out of my mind, but you kept coming back no matter what I did. Will you have dinner with me tonight?" They stood in a side street close to where the Buick was parked.

She hesitated. He thought she was going to refuse him, but her softly spoken words caused his heart to constrict.

"I did everything I could to forget you, Paul. I worked double shifts, did extra study, but it didn't help," she confessed with a wistful smile."

"Oh, Sunshine, I'm so sorry for the way I acted." He pulled her into his arms and regardless of any passer-by, who might witness it, kissed her deeply. It was good to taste lips unsullied by alcohol or cigarettes, and smell the sweet, natural perfume of her skin.

"Where would you like me to take you?" he asked.

"Somewhere quiet, please."

When she slipped her hand into his, he squeezed her fingers gently and sent up a silent prayer of thanks.

"I'll have to ring Mrs. Rogers to let her know I'll be late. She worries otherwise."

He could understand that. A girl like Daphne brought out the protective instincts in people.

He saw her into the car, and it was good to hear her chattering away next to him. How he missed it. He had tried to follow his father's panacea for unsatisfactory romances, with parties, women and alcohol. It didn't work. The old man would disapprove of Daphne for anything more than a casual fling, but to hell with Sir Phillip and his plans and aspirations.

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What could he do about Caroline? She considered them to be unofficially engaged, thanks to his father's meddling, and foolishly he had let the situation drift along. Daphne wouldn't understand, no woman would. If she were to find out about Caroline, at this delicate stage in their relationship, he would lose her for good. He dared not take the risk.

They partook of their meal at a leisurely pace, as an orchestra played softly in the background. "Would you like to go for a walk?" he asked.

"A walk!"

He laughed softly. "There's a garden out back, with an artificial lake and secluded little nooks for lovers. I want to kiss you, Daphne, but not in here." He wanted to do more than kiss her, he wanted to make wild, passionate love to her for hours on end.

It was warm outside in the darkness as they wandered along, arm-in-arm. A strong, sweetly overpowering perfume came from a clump of bushes, but Daphne could not see what they were. This place was at Brighton, not far from the sea. Did she imagine it, or was there really a touch of salt in the air?

It was pure magic. When Paul drew her into a small, darkened alcove, she made no demur, even though she knew she should. Gentle at first, his lips were just a featherweight caress against hers, but when she responded, the tenor changed into a hungry, all-consuming passion. Their bodies became fused together. Shyly at first, but gaining in confidence, she returned his kisses, tasted his mouth and got drunk on his male scent as it permeated every corner of her being.

Daphne knew she should stop his hands from wandering over her breasts. It was wrong allowing him such liberties, but she didn't want his lovemaking to stop. She wanted it to go on for all eternity.

When Paul finally pulled away, he was trembling. Dear God, much longer and his passion would have been completely out of control. He had never known a woman who affected him so much, who could quite unconsciously arouse him to fever pitch. She was so sweet, so clean and unsullied, he wanted all her freshness and beauty for himself.

They started walking again, following the narrow path curving around the garden beds.

"I love you, Daphne." They stopped beside a huge tree. "You have to believe me, Sunshine, I've never said that to any other woman."

"I do believe you, Paul and I love you desperately, but it's too soon. It doesn't seem, well, decent somehow. We know so little about each other."

"We can learn as we go along. Would you be prepared to live in England?"

"What!"

"I mean, if we got married."

"Marriage! But ..."

"Would you, I mean, could you leave your family, your nursing, everything and come with me?"

It would be a wrench to leave everything she held dear, to have her plans and aspirations thrown into chaos, but Daphne knew there was only one answer she could give. She only felt truly alive now when she was with Paul. "Yes," she replied firmly. "I would go anywhere, do anything for you," she vowed passionately. No sacrifice would be too great for Paul.

"We don't have a lot of time, I mean a couple of months at most, then I have to return home. I want to take you with me as my wife, but first I must tell you, my real..."

"You wouldn't lie to me, would you? Everything you told me is the truth." He detected fear in her voice, a frantic hoarseness that tore at his heart, filling it with dread.

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He swallowed quickly, before answering. "Yes, I've told you the truth about myself." Only he hadn't, but this thing between them was so new, so precious and tenuous, he dared not risk saying anything now. Why on earth had he been stupid enough to let Ian persuade him? And Jean, he must warn her to watch what she said. God, what a mess he had made of things.

There was still the old man to worry about. He certainly wouldn't be impressed with Daphne's working class background, or his thwarted plans for a marriage with Caroline. *He can cut me off without a penny*, Paul thought determinedly, *because I'll never give Daphne up. It would be easier to stop breathing.*

"You'll have to come home with me at Christmas. I want Mum and Dad and the boys to meet you."

"Yes, I'll have to speak with your father about us. He wouldn't withhold his consent, would he?"

"I don't think so."

"He mightn't like me taking you all the way to England. You could come back once or twice a year for holidays, or they could come to us. I suppose I should get you home now. We can go out for dinner tomorrow night. The Windsor, I think, to celebrate."

"I start afternoon shift, Paul. we don't finish until eleven."

"What time do you start?"

"Two o'clock."

"Hell, nine hours, I don't want you slaving away like that, it's too much. Resign tomorrow, tell them you're getting married."

"No, it wouldn't be fair. I have to at least see the year out. They're short-staffed as it is. I couldn't let them down, no matter how much I want to be with you."

He hit his forehead with the flat of one hand, and bit back

the offer to be financially responsible for her until they were married.

"I'm sorry." She rubbed her cheek against his arm. "You could take me to lunch at the Windsor, I've never been there before."

"All right, lunch it is. What kind of ring would you like?" He nuzzled the soft skin of her throat, before blazing a trail of fiery kisses up to her earlobe.

"Ring?"

"An engagement ring, silly."

"I don't know. It's so sudden."

"We could pick something out together." He reluctantly tore his mouth away.

"You'll have to speak with Mum and Dad first, before announcing anything official. They won't object, I'm sure, not once they meet you, but they would be terribly hurt if they found out from someone else."

"Of course, anything you say, Daphne. I'm glad you're such a caring person. I'm pretty selfish myself, perhaps some of your generosity will rub off on to me."

They did not speak on the drive home, as words were unnecessary and would only break the spell surrounding them. Paul drove with one hand on the steering wheel, and she liked the feel of his body pressed against hers.

Daphne felt so happy, she wanted to shout out loudly, to tell the world that Paul loved her, and she would soon be his wife.

His goodnight kiss at the door was a long, lingering one, sending excited tingles all the way down to her toes.

"I'm sorry I can't invite you in for tea, but..."

"Shhh, it's all right, Sunshine, I understand." He put a finger to her lips, thinking it was for the best anyway. Once he got inside, he would want to stay. They would have to be married soon. He would not be able to abstain for too long, not when

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he wanted her so desperately, and it would be just too filthy to even contemplate taking another woman.

"I love you so much, Paul, I'm frightened something is going to spoil things for us."

"Silly girl." Regretfully, he put her aside. "I'll pick you up about ten, we can look around for a ring before lunch. After work, we could have supper somewhere."

"I usually sleep in at the hospital."

"Hell, Daphne, when am I supposed to see you?"

"If you like, you could meet me after I finish. I only sleep at the hospital to save going home alone."

"I'm a selfish swine." He pulled her back into his arms and held her close, resting his chin on her soft, shiny hair. How good it smelt. "It's just that I want you with me all the time. I hate the idea of sharing you, even with your work. I'll be a jealous, possessive husband."

"I'll probably be that way myself, but if there's anything you really have to do on your own, travel for work, I mean, I wouldn't stand in your way."

"You're sweet and unselfish, but we can travel together, all over Europe, if you like. America, too. My father has interests over there."

After he left, Daphne went to bed with a singing heart. She had already written home about Paul, and she wondered whether her parents would read between the lines and come to the right conclusion.



When Paul arrived, he wore a navy suit. His kiss, a long lingering one, caused her heart to perform cartwheels.

"How's my sweet girl today?"

"Very well, thank you." Her tone was prim and proper, but her eyes were alight with teasing.

They went to an exclusive jeweller and looked at several

trays of rings.

“Oh, Paul these are too expensive. I wouldn’t expect you to spend so much money on me. These look nicer.” She moved towards the most inexpensive tray. Even these prices were more than her father would earn in weeks.

They finally decided on a solitaire diamond ring, with an emerald on either side. Paul also bought a heart-shaped emerald pendant on a fine gold chain. He put the pendant on her straight away and slipped the ring into his pocket.

Daphne often passed by the Windsor Hotel, but had never actually gone inside. It was near Parliament House. Robert Menzies, the Australian Prime Minister refused to stay anywhere else. These hallowed walls had seen the English Test cricketers, and the old, established pastoral families always stayed here.

Paul must have made a reservation. She felt like royalty as the Maitre de escorted them to a table. Her eyes swivelled upwards to the huge cupola lights, ten feet in diameter at least. Paul laughed at her obvious awe.

What a delight it would be, taking her to Paris, Rome, even London. It would put a fresh slant on everything for him also. She was so sweet and unspoiled, he must guard her carefully once they returned to England, and keep her out of his father’s clutches.

He hated dropping her off at the hospital and driving home alone. To kill time until she finished work, he would attend to the business side of things. Those few cryptic lines from Sir Phillip were threatening. *Put the interests of the firm first, or return to England immediately.*

No way would he tell anyone at home about Daphne. He would just arrive with her as his bride. Then it would be too late for the old man to do anything about having his plans thwarted.



Forbidden Love

Every evening, when Paul picked Daphne up from the hospital, they would go for a light supper somewhere or drive to an inner suburban beach. They sometimes strolled through the city streets looking at Christmas decorations, and each night it became harder to part.

Three days before the start of Daphne's holidays, they planned to eat at a quiet little restaurant not far from Ian's place. Paul drove Daphne to the house.

"Why don't we walk, it's such a lovely evening," she suggested. It was a magical night. Stars were popping out everywhere and the breeze was just enough to cool the heat still rising from the pavement.

When they arrived at the restaurant, they were refused admittance because Paul wore slacks with an open necked shirt.

"Who the bloody hell do they think they are?"

Furious, he strode back to Ian's place, with Daphne almost running to keep up with him.

"You could offer me some tea," she suggested, trying to placate him.

"I don't think it's a good idea. Ian's away until after Christmas, and his housekeeper doesn't live in."

"I trust you."

"Well, you shouldn't, because I don't trust myself. I'm mad for you, Daphne." He pulled her into a darkened corner of the garden and his lips were fierce, hungry and determined. He wanted her so badly it was killing him to be denied.

"Paul, I love you so much."

Common sense warned Daphne they should not go into an empty house together, but she hated their hurried meetings, and the pain of separating after such a short time. Holding hands, they walked up on to the porch. Paul unlocked the front door and she hesitated before following him over the

threshold.

"What a lovely room." She glanced appreciatively around the sitting room.

"It's not bad." His nonchalant acceptance of what she considered luxury was rather disconcerting.

"Would you like me to make our tea?" she asked.

He grinned suddenly. "I'm not used to doing for myself, but I can make a decent brew. Could even cook you some toast, if you like."

"No, just the tea please."

When he returned, Daphne sat in one corner of the couch, with her eyes closed, her feet tucked up underneath her. How young and vulnerable she looked. He hated the fact she worked so hard. It was pure selfishness, expecting to see her every night, instead of letting her go straight home to bed. If the Clarkes agreed, they could be married before the New Year and there would be no need for her to go back to the hospital again.

"Daphne," he spoke her name softly.

"Oh Paul, you were quick."

"I thought you were asleep."

"No, just resting my eyes." She made to move.

"Don't, if you're comfortable." He sat next to her on the couch and picked up her hand.

She swung her legs down to the floor and he looked at her tiny, shapely feet. Everything about Daphne was dainty, and she wore an air of fragility tonight that he hadn't noticed before.

"Tea, all right?" he queried.

"Yes, thank you."

"Biscuit?"

She shook her head.

"They're your favourite, chocolate," he persisted.

"I'm not hungry."

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"Aren't you well?" He drew her hand to his lips. "What is it? Tell me, sweetheart."

"I shouldn't be here like this." She gave a hunted look around and set her cup on a small side table. "If anyone ever found out, my reputation would be ruined."

"No one will find out." He pulled her into his arms and felt a tremor of apprehension run through her. "Just a few kisses before I take you home."

What was meant to be a session of light lovemaking quickly turned into a thing of passion, as Paul kissed her mouth, her eyes, and the warm, vulnerable softness of her throat. He nibbled at her ear lobe, his warm breath teasing the hair at the side of her neck.

"I'm just about out of my mind with wanting you," he groaned hoarsely.

She didn't reply, she couldn't, the words seemed to be trapped behind an emotional lump in her throat. He manoeuvred them until they both lay full length on the couch, then he undid the buttons on her blouse and brushed it aside. He slipped her brassiere down, freeing her creamy white breasts. His passion suddenly ignited, burning fiercely, completely out of control.

He kissed her breasts each in turn, circling the nipple and areola with his tongue. Drawing her left nipple into his mouth because it was the closest one to her heart, he suckled it hard, quickly bringing it to life. Never had he tasted anything as sweet as this tight, rosy bud. His hands touching and stroking her bare flesh evoked a response that shocked both of them.

Daphne returned his kisses shyly at first, but quickly gaining in confidence. Slipping her hand inside his shirt, she felt his warm, hair-roughened chest against her fingertips. Emboldened, she caressed his nipple, rolling it gently between her thumb and forefinger until he groaned with pleasure.

Margaret Tanner

They were both trembling with emotion as his hand went up under her skirt, so his fingers could scorch a fiery trail across the quivering flesh of her thighs. She felt him removing her stockings, her undergarments quickly followed. When he eased back a fraction, so he could gaze upon her naked body, she felt no shame only exhilaration and excitement, because his blazing eyes told her he liked what he saw.

His hands and mouth began a thorough exploration. Not one inch of her body was left unexplored, no secret left unshared. A sudden raging inferno of desire engulfed her. White hot, it seared into her very soul and she closed her eyes to block out the heat. A million stars exploded inside her head. They were so bright she didn't know how she could endure such brilliance.

Frantically Paul dragged off his clothes. He came down on top of her, his hands smoothing a path between her thighs so his fingers could gently probe the soft folds of her inner sanctum, until the bud of her ripening womanhood blossomed under his touch. Her soft loveliness became a marked contrast to his throbbing hardness. He entered her body slowly, savouring every moment of this delightful journey, which would take him where no other man had ever been before. Paul felt almost light-headed with the effort to control his rampaging desire so as not to hurt her when he breached the veil guarding her virginity.

"Paul." Momentarily she cried out in pain, but this was quickly forgotten as he transported her to paradise. They rocked together in a frenzy of passion, each taking, giving, but still wanting more. Fear of getting Daphne pregnant suddenly sliced into his passion. Oh God, he couldn't put her at risk. With an agonised groan he withdrew, just before reaching his ultimate climax.

"I couldn't risk getting you pregnant," he rasped at her

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shocked intake of breath. "Withdrawing from you was the hardest thing I've ever done in my whole life." He lifted her tears away with his tongue.

"I'd be proud to have your baby."

"But not before our marriage, huh? Your father and brothers would be after me with a shotgun for sure if I did. Probably go for me now, too, if they knew. You aren't sorry are you, my love? I mean, that we anticipated our wedding night."

"No." Her lips trembled slightly and her eyes were shadowed, now the passionate fire had burned itself out.

"Hell, I should have waited, but I couldn't." He rocked her gently.

"You do really love me, Paul."

He picked up the uncertainty in her voice straight away.

"You haven't lost respect for me?"

"I love you, Daphne, I'll always respect you. Don't make me take you home tonight, I never want to be parted from you again."

He stood up and reached for his pants. "I'll go upstairs and get you something to put on. Afraid I don't have a nightgown to loan you. Will a pyjama top do?"

"Yes." Her answer came out in a husky whisper.

Her cheeks turned fiery red, yet strangely the rest of her face remained lily white. He cursed his rampaging libido when he saw her distress, but it was too late for regret or recriminations now. He was a selfish bastard, though. Thinking of his own carnal needs instead of Daphne's well being.

As soon as he left, Daphne covered her nakedness with her discarded petticoat. With shaking fingers, she tried to tidy up her tousled hair. Dear God. Why hadn't she stopped him before his passion got completely out of control?

Don't blame him, the little voice of honesty asserted itself. *You wanted his lovemaking, you craved it. Didn't want it to end.* Would anyone notice that her innocence was gone, because she had been fully awakened by Paul? If her parents noticed, would they be disappointed she hadn't waited to make the ultimate commitment on her wedding night?

He returned and without a word, draped a navy silk robe about her shoulders and spun her around to face him. "I'm sorry, my darling. I should have waited." He held her close and Daphne rested her face against his warm, still naked chest.

Hours later, Daphne still lay wide-awake with Paul's arm draped across her waist. She felt dog-tired, yet sleep was impossible. His breathing sounded regular and even, and it hurt that he could sleep so soon after what they shared. It would be different for a man. All this was so new and wondrous to her, whereas for him...She suddenly shivered. Would he soon tire of her youthful inexperience and turn to the arms of a more sophisticated, exciting woman like Kitty?

Daphne tried not to torture herself with such thoughts, but she felt so unsure of this newly found emotion. She desperately wanted to shake him awake, so he would comfort her with words of love.



When Paul awoke next morning it was broad daylight. Somehow the rays of the sun penetrated the thick window drapes. He raised himself carefully on one elbow, so he could gaze upon Daphne.

She slept like a baby, he decided. Those soft, sweet lips were slightly swollen still from the fierce onslaught of his kisses, and there was a faint redness across her cheeks from the stubble of his beard. Dear God, she looked lovely, fragile as Dresden china. Heat started to fire his loins again when he remembered last night's passion.

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He couldn't wake her, not yet. There were dark smudges under her eyes and she still had to work a nine-hour shift at the hospital. Why did she have to be so proud and stubborn? Money was no object to him. He could easily take care of things until they got married. Carefully, he slid out of bed so as not to waken her, then strode into the bathroom to shower and shave.

Daphne woke up to the sound of crockery. Still dazed, she blinked several times on seeing Paul walking into the room with a breakfast tray. What was she doing here? Suddenly she remembered last night and embarrassed heat burned her cheeks.

"Good morning," he greeted her, with a cheerful grin.

"Hello, Paul."

"Don't be embarrassed." He sat on the bed to kiss her mouth. "You look beautiful." She had just woken up, yet she was as pretty and fresh looking as a dew-kissed flower. He tried to dampen down his ardour. Oh God, he wanted to join her in the bed and make mad, passionate love to her for the rest of the day.

"Breakfast in bed. I wanted to spoil you."

There was cereal, toast and marmalade, and a cup of tea. "I've already eaten." He answered her unspoken query. "Might take a stroll to the corner shop for a paper. Anything I can get you?"

"No thanks, I'll have to go home for fresh clothes before I go to work."

By the time Daphne ate, bathed and dressed it was after eleven. Goodness, how the morning flew when you slept in late. Normally, she rose early. It was the only way to get everything done on time.

What a lovely house Ian had, with heaps of modern conveniences. Obviously he was rich, too. Would all Paul's friends be like this? Would she, a nurse from a working class

background, be able to fit into their careless, moneyed lifestyle? And what of his father? Would an aristocratic Englishman welcome her into the family? Not likely.

Paul was in the sitting room reading a morning paper and he rose when she entered. "Well, it doesn't take you long to get up and about." Surprise clearly registered on his face.

The usual type of woman he associated with would take ages with their makeup and dress before presenting themselves to him. Some of these thoughts must have shown on her face.

"I can't change what happened in my past, it's only the future you need concern yourself with."

"I didn't say anything."

"I know, but you have expressive eyes."

"I'm sorry, I'm being an absolute beast. It's just that I love you so much, I'm jealous of all your previous girlfriends." The last few words came out in a breathy little rush.

"Don't be, you're the only girl I want now." He kissed her mouth, and Daphne pressed herself closer as he tried to move away.

Passion flared instantaneously between them. His tongue moved across her teeth, and his hand came up to cup her breast. By the time he pulled away, he was breathing heavily.

"That's enough." Desire darkened his eyes to ebony. He raked trembling fingers through his hair. "I'd better take you home, while I've still got the willpower to do so. If we go back upstairs, there's no way you would make it to work on time."

"Paul."

He laughed at her embarrassment. "It's true. We'll have lunch after we've been to your place."

Once in the car, they did not drive off straight away, instead he took hold of her hand and brought it to his lips. "Daphne, there's something I have to tell you about myself. I should have done so before, I tried to tell you a couple of times, but

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we always seemed to get interrupted.”

“What is it?” Fear blazed in her eyes.

“The longer I left it, the harder it got.”

“You’re married.” Those two agonised little words tore at his heart, and he suddenly realised how much she had given him last night.

“No, I’m not married.”

She sagged against him in relief.

“It started out as a joke, Ian’s suggestion, but I’m a bloody idiot for going along it. When you marry me, you won’t be Mrs. Thomas, you’ll be Mrs. Ashfield.”

“What?”

“My full name is Paul Thomas Ashfield.”

“Is that all? I thought it must have been something really terrible.”

“Tell me you’re not angry.”

She nibbled her lip. “I did tell Mum and Dad your name was Thomas.”

“I’ll explain to them, of course.” He didn’t tell her his other secret. He was too fearful of losing her if she knew that the woman married to his father was, in fact, not his mother. Nothing like illegitimacy to scare people off. *I can’t even tell her who my real mother is*, he thought, feeling suddenly desperate. Later on, after they were married, he would explain what little he knew about his birth.

When they reached the boarding house, he did not let her out of the car at once. “Daphne.”

“Yes.” She instinctively knew what he was going to say.

“Stay with me at Ian’s until we go to Wangaratta.”

“Paul.”

“Please, Sunshine.” He always lowered his voice when he used her pet name. It somehow added to the intimacy between them. “We’ll be married soon, I can’t bear to let you out of my

sight for long. No one need know. Everyone at the boarding house will think you're staying at the hospital and vice versa. We can leave for your parents' place in the morning, give us an earlier start."

"I don't know, it seems, somehow sordid."

"Please, Daphne, we love each other. I liked waking up in the morning to find you next to me. Once we get to Wangaratta, it wouldn't be decent, not in your parents' home, and it might be a couple of weeks before we can marry."

"All right," she said, finally giving in to his pleading.

Paul waited in the guest sitting room while she changed and packed her case for home. She hated lying to the fat, amiable Mrs. Rogers.

"I'll be staying at the hospital until I go home, Paul's coming back with me to meet my parents. I might have something to tell you when I return."

"I think you might, too. Your young man can't take his eyes off you."

"It's a secret." Daphne laughed. "Paul has to speak to my parents first. What I mean is..."

"You can trust me. Have a Merry Christmas, dear."

"Thanks, same to you."

Chapter Six

Mid morning they left for Wangaratta in the yellow Buick. They drove with the windows wound down. Daphne wore a pink linen dress, Paul, tailored sports pants and an open-necked white shirt.

They stopped at Seymour for lunch, before journeying onwards. The tinder dry grass in the paddocks shimmered in the summer heat.

“It’s good to be out of the city,” she said on a sigh. “I can hardly wait for you to meet my parents, I know you’ll like them.”

“If they’re like you, I’m sure I will, but what if they don’t take to me?”

“They will, silly.” She gave him a friendly little punch on the arm.

Euroa, Glenrowan, Benalla, the closer they got to Wangaratta the more excited she became. She couldn’t wait to show Paul off to her family and friends.

Paul thought it wiser not to mention that he had recently passed this way. Would she have been to Dixon’s Siding? He

was tempted to ask, but decided not to for the moment, it could lead to awkward questions that he didn't have the answer to.

They finally arrived in Wangaratta. After they crossed the railway line, Daphne pointed out the Woollen Mills, which employed much of the town's population, the school she attended and the shops in Murphy Street. She was eager to impress.

The Clarke house was painted white with a green galvanised roof. The garden beds were a riot of colour, he noticed, the lawns green and neatly tended. Smoke, drifting lazily from the red brick chimney, hovered for a moment before disappearing into the atmosphere.

There was a green rocking chair on the front veranda. An old black dog of indiscriminate breed lay stretched out on a mat.

"That's Max."

Paul just stared at her.

"The dog." She smiled. "He's terribly old, belongs to Rob. He just whiles away his time eating or sleeping."

They barely stepped from the car, when a slim, attractive lady with wavy, corn-coloured hair hurried towards them. Surely this couldn't be Mrs. Clarke?"

"Mum!" Mother and daughter hugged each other enthusiastically. "Oh Paul, I'm so sorry, Mum, this is Paul..."

"How are you, Paul?" Mrs. Clarke cut off Daphne's introduction. She spoke in the same quick, breathy way Daphne did.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Mrs. Clarke." He spoke formally, feeling suddenly stiff, ill at ease. He had the strangest sensation. Had they ever met before? Ridiculous, they couldn't have, and yet...

He carried his own and Daphne's cases inside. It was cool indoors away from the heat of the sun, and he glanced around

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quickly, as they passed down a hallway leading into a sitting room.

The furniture looked shabby, but well cared for. The place positively shone, yet a paper left carelessly on the arm of a chair, a pipe and tobacco pouch on the mantel beside several photographs, gave it a comfortable, lived-in ambience.

"You won't mind sharing a room will you, Paul?" Wide blue eyes, surrounded by only a few wrinkles, looked at him enquiringly. "We moved Tom's things out on to the veranda. He won't mind sleeping there, he's coming home for the holidays too."

"It will be a real family Christmas, Paul. You'll like Tom, everyone does. Where are Dad and Rob?"

"Your father's still at work, he wants to clear everything up today so he can finish early tomorrow. Rob's tinkering around in the shed, I think. You'll have some tea, won't you, Paul?"

"Yes, thank you."

"While I'm putting on the kettle, Daphne can show you to your room. You're much too pale, darling. You've lost weight, too. City people don't eat or rest enough, too busy dashing around all the time."

Paul smiled. Instantly he knew he was going to like it here, especially if the rest of the family were as friendly as this pretty blonde lady. There was a presence about Mrs. Clarke, he felt it immediately, a special warmth that created a comfortable, nurturing environment. When he thought of his own cold, impersonal upbringing, he suddenly envied Daphne.

"Come on, Paul."

He picked up both cases and followed Daphne back into the hallway.

"This is my room."

He put the case down just inside the door of a pretty room decorated in pink and white. Yes, he could visualise her in there quite easily.

At the back of the house, really a closed-in section of the veranda, was a large sleep out, with twin beds. The boards were bare and unstained, but there were colourful mats scattered about. One complete wall was lined with books.

"Someone likes reading," he remarked.

"Rob."

Paul put the case down and pulled her into his arms. "Sunshine, I've been wanting to do this all afternoon." His lips covered hers in a long, searing kiss, and their bodies strained close together.

"Oops, sorry,"

Paul stepped back quickly. A tall, thin boy, with dark curly hair grinned at them.

"I'm, Rob, you must be Paul."

Paul shook the grease-stained hand that was thrust at him.

"Your hands, Rob, they're filthy," Daphne scolded.

"I've been tinkering with an old motor Dad gave me. Know anything about cars, Paul?"

"A bit."

"You can help me, I'm making myself a car."

He was over six feet tall and rather gangly, almost too thin, really. He would be a big man later on when he filled out, Paul thought.

"How are you, Sis? Let's go, Mum's sure to put on a spread. A fellow could starve around here. She's been cooking all week, Daph, wouldn't let me touch anything except for a couple of burnt cakes."

"Serve you right." She gave him a little punch. "You'd have scoffed the lot."

The three of them went back to the sitting room together. Paul and Daphne sat on the couch while Rob dropped himself carelessly into an armchair.

Paul rose to his feet when Mrs. Clarke entered, carrying a

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tray.

"I could have helped you, Mum," Daphne said.

"It's all right, darling, you look tired. Afternoon shift must be quite wretched."

"Oh it's all right, night shift is worse."

"Milk and sugar, Paul?"

"Yes thank you, just one sugar." He ate a piece of jam roll, complimented her on it, and looked with interest around the room.

"I'm home, Allison."

"Frank, you're just in time for tea."

Paul watched the tall, grey-haired man enter the room. Daphne said he was an army officer during the war, and he still had a military bearing. He stood well over six feet in height, with the same slimness as his children. No wonder young Rob was so tall.

"Dad!" Daphne flew into his arms and they hugged and kissed until he disentangled himself.

"Now, where's this young man you want me to vet?" His smile took the sting out of his words.

"Dad, please. Paul, this is my father."

They were close, Paul noticed immediately, and he felt a twinge of envy. Their relationship was so different to the one he had with his father.

"How are you, Mr. Clarke?"

"Frank, please. I'm happy to meet you, Paul. I hope you enjoy your stay with us."

"Thank you for putting me up."

"Daphne's welcome to bring any of her friends around," Frank said.

"Never brought a man friend before, though," Rob chipped in with a grin. "Always silly, giggling girls."

He neatly fielded the cushion his sister threw at him.

"At least my friends aren't grubby like yours."

Paul enjoyed their friendly banter.

"I'll go and give Mum a hand," Daphne said as she left the room.

"Go on, Dad, ask him his intentions."

"All right, son, you've said enough. Do you follow the cricket, Paul?"

"Yes." They chatted in a desultory manner about the cricket, the soccer and England in general. Paul knew he was being summed up, yet it was done in such a skilful way as to be inoffensive.

"Tom will be home either tonight or tomorrow. Can never tell really when he'll breeze in, but he knows how much Christmas and the family mean to his mother, so he won't let us down. He's rather a rolling stone, always wanting to try something new."

Paul got up to inspect the pictures on the mantel. His eyes were drawn immediately to a large coloured photograph of Daphne when she was about eight, sitting between two boys, the small one would be Rob, the older, fair boy probably Tom. Another photo showed Daphne as a toddler, and in the corner stood a sepia photograph of two young men in army uniform.

The women returning with a fresh pot of tea interrupted his inspection.

"You'll have another cup, Paul?" Daphne smiled into his eyes. "Stop eating all the cake, there won't be any left for Dad," she scolded her brother.

"Nothing to eat, thanks, Princess I'll spoil my dinner."

Paul refused the cake also, but not Rob, he devoured it like a starving man. Paul drained his cup and stood up.

"If you would excuse us? Come on, Daphne?"

"Well, what do you think?" Daphne asked as they strolled hand-in-hand towards the back of the house.

"They're nice, I like all three of them."

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"I'm glad." She rubbed her cheek against his bare arm. "Mum thinks you're very English."

"Oh." He nearly told her he was in fact born in Australia, but stopped himself just in time. He was too scared of the ramifications of illegitimacy to risk unburdening himself right now.

The apricot trees in the orchard were loaded with plump, ripe fruit. He lifted Daphne up and sat her on the top rail of a wooden fence, bringing her face on a level with his own. They fed each other plump, ripe apricot halves.

"Love you," he said softly.

"I love you too, Paul."

"I'll speak with your parents as soon as I can about us, but I suppose they must guess something is in the wind."

"Mum does, anyway." She didn't tell him of the talk they had had in the kitchen while preparing afternoon tea, when her mother warned her to be careful of him, so she wouldn't get hurt.

Paul, seeing the shadows in Daphne's eyes knew that even now, she felt unsure of his love. He couldn't find the words to reassure her, just held her close. "I'll never hurt you, Sunshine, you have to believe me. I only wish we could go away and get married straight away."

"Wait until after Christmas to talk with Dad."

"I planned to say something tonight when we got your parents alone."

"It's only a couple of days. Speak to Dad on Boxing Day. I always feel flat then. Mum says there's a Christmas Eve dance at the North Wang hall."

He grimaced.

"If you don't want to go, we won't, but I'd like to show you off to all my friends. We could go the midnight service afterwards."

"Midnight service?"

Margaret Tanner

"At Holy Trinity," she said.

"Oh."

"It's Church of England. You aren't Roman Catholic are you, Paul?"

"No, I'm Church of England."

"You don't want to go to church with me?"

"If you want to go, we will, only I thought I picked you up from a Methodist church."

"I am a Methodist, but lots of my friends up here are Church of England, and I used to go with them sometimes. Mum's Methodist, Dad's Church of England, but he never goes. He's very bitter about them for some reason, believes in God but not in churches."

"I share his sentiments."

"Paul."

"Mm," he said, nuzzling her throat.

"You've never told me much about your family."

"There's not much to tell really. My mother," his mouth twisted, "is a very social person. An utter snob, in other words."

"Paul!"

"It's true. She's never shown any interest in me. My father, well, the old man's not so bad, ruthless as hell if you cross him, though. He got a knighthood a few years back."

He watched fear darken her eyes, and her lips started trembling.

"It won't make any difference to us," he reassured.

"I'm frightened, our backgrounds are so..."

"Shhh." His lips cut her off. "We love each other. We won't live with my parents. My grandfather left a half share of the business to me, held in trust until I came of age, so we can live without any financial support from my father."

"They won't approve of me, you know they won't. They

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would expect you to marry someone from a similar background.”

“My father has already picked someone out for me to marry.” He felt the tremor passing through her, and tightened his hold. “I told him before I left England, I would only marry for love. Caroline’s all right, I suppose. Her father’s a Lord.”

“Oh, Paul.”

“I’ve never had any intentions of marrying her. I told the old man that. We had a hell of a row before I came out here. He’s not going to run my life, Daphne. I love you and we will get married. If he doesn’t like it, too bad. Once we present him with a grandson to carry on the name, things will be all right, wait and see.”

“I love you so much, I’m frightened something might happen to spoil it.”

“Silly girl.” He tweaked a strand of chestnut hair. “I suppose we better go back inside or your parents will think I’ve spirited you away with lecherous intent.”

“Did you?” She laughed.

“Yes. Give me a kiss before I lift you down.”

Her lips were soft and warm as she shyly did as he asked, but his mouth soon took over, drawing from her all the sweetness of youthful ardency that he could not get enough of.

Regretfully, he finally pulled away. He lifted her down, and they started back towards the house. Pink-breasted galahs and brightly coloured rosellas covered the trees now. A roughly made scarecrow, flapping his arms limply in the slight breeze, proved to be useless against the greedy marauders.

“Shoo, shoo.” Daphne, dropping Paul’s hand, ran around waving her arms madly, and he just watched her, drinking in every movement. What a lovely girl she was. He wanted to go away somewhere, just the two of them, so he wouldn’t have to share her with anyone else.



Paul enjoyed the lively discussion over the Clarke dinner table, although he did not agree with their politics. If only his conservative father could see him now, in this staunchly socialist home.

"You're not one of us, Paul?" Frank asked.

"Afraid not." He grinned broadly. "Politics doesn't hold much interest for me, really."

"What religion are you?"

Daphne's fork clattered against her plate. "Dad!"

"I'm Church of England."

"What do you do for a living?"

Paul glanced across at Mrs. Clarke, whose eyes danced with merriment. Something struck a chord in his memory, but it was so elusive he could not fathom it out. Had they met before? Of course they hadn't, still...

"I work in my father's business."

"Business?"

"Wool, importing and exporting."

"You're from Yorkshire, I understand," Frank said.

"Yes." Something made Paul glance up. The laughter had disappeared from Mrs. Clarke's eyes, her face turned ashen. She looked as if she had seen a ghost. He had a sudden inexplicable desire to rush over and comfort her, but forced himself to remain seated.

"Are you all right, dear?" Frank must have noticed also. "You've lost all your colour."

"I'm fine. More custard, Paul?"

"No, thank you."

"Rob and I can do the dishes for you, Allison."

Paul's spoon clattered against his plate. What a coincidence. Daphne's mother was called Allison too.

"Fair go, Dad, blokes don't do the dishes."

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"It's all right, I can do them, maybe you could help me, Paul." Daphne's eyes twinkled.

"Certainly not. Paul can go to the sitting room with your father and Rob."

Later in the evening, they all sat on the veranda listening to the nightlife, and Paul was glad to feel the caress of a cooling breeze. He still wasn't acclimatized and up here it was even hotter than in Melbourne. The aroma of Frank's pipe tobacco drifted into his nostrils. It was peaceful. Pinpricks of light a short distance away was obviously the town, yet further out he could see nothing except the black emptiness of the Australian bush.

"What would you like to do tomorrow?" Daphne suddenly asked.

"Let's take a drive, we could have a picnic somewhere."

"Sounds nice." She sat on the step next to him, but shifted closer to rest against his arm.

"Will you come for a walk with me now?" he asked softly, so the others would not hear.

"I don't know," Daphne whispered back. "What about Mum and Dad?"

"They would expect me to want a goodnight kiss. They're not so old they would have forgotten what it is. I'm going to hate sleeping alone tonight."

"You'll have Rob."

"I want you. I only wish it were possible for us to spend a couple of days away from here, just the two of us."

"I couldn't, it wouldn't be fair."

"I wouldn't expect you to, but a chap can't help thinking about it. I'm mad for you."

He stood up suddenly, bringing her with him. "Mr. and Mrs. Clarke, would you object if I took your daughter for a short walk?"

The sudden silence following Paul's request caused Daphne

to feel hot all over.

"No, we don't object, just don't go too far," Frank instructed.

"You're forgetting they aren't ten years old, Frank," Allison reprimanded him with a smile.

"Daphne's very young."

"I'm eighteen."

"We won't be long." Paul took Daphne's hand. "It's such a pleasant evening."

They walked in the opposite direction to town, and the gravel along the roadside crunched loudly in the stillness. Within a short time they were out of the built-up area and concealed from the roadway by a clump of saplings.

Paul took Daphne in his arms. His lips burned fiercely against hers and his tongue teased and stroked the inside of her mouth, darting, flicking, as he stoked the fires of his passion. Soon this wasn't enough. He wanted to taste her flesh.

"Oh, Sunshine." He worked frantically at her clothing, until his fingers felt the creamy fullness of her breasts. His tongue caressed the nipples into throbbing, sensitive peaks and she pressed herself closer to him. The top two buttons on his shirt came undone, so she put her lips to the hot, damp skin of his throat and a thousand stars exploded inside her head.

Common decency forced him to let her go eventually. He could not take her here on the side of the road like some rutting animal, not with her parents less than a quarter of a mile away.

"We better get back." He couldn't decide which was worse, not touching her at all, or suffering the agonies of non-fulfilment after kissing and caressing her. She was so beautiful, her unblemished loveliness drove him crazy with desire.

They walked back slowly, and once in the lighted area he checked to make sure her clothing was back in place.

"Did you have a nice stroll?" Frank casually asked from

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behind the evening paper.

“Yes, thank you.” They answered in unison. Daphne’s voice sounded low, almost husky. A faint redness flawed her cheeks from the roughness of his beard. Her lips were slightly swollen from his fierce kisses, and Paul wondered whether the Clarkes noticed or not.

Mrs. Clarke kept watching him when she thought herself unobserved, her blue eyes puzzled, almost bewildered, as they took in his every movement. Paul found himself watching her also. The way she walked, the almost nervous way she kept touching her hair. They were two actors playing a part neither of them quite understood.

Chapter Seven

Next morning Daphne woke early. It felt good being home in her own room, yet the single bed she had slept in since childhood seemed empty, over large because Paul wasn't sharing it with her. It could not be wrong for them to have made love, even when they weren't married, because they felt so deeply about each other. Yet her behaviour went against everything she had ever been taught.

Later, bathed and dressed, she wandered out into the kitchen. The aroma of bacon and eggs assailed her nostrils and she realized just how hungry she was. Surprisingly, Paul and Rob were already tucking into breakfast with gusto.

"Good morning." Paul made to rise.

"Stay there, did you sleep well?"

"Yes." He subsided back into the chair with a grin. "Except this young wretch woke me up at daybreak."

"It was five o'clock, best part of the morning. We went for a ride out to Milawa."

"Rob, you didn't"

"Why not? I loaned him Tom's bike."

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"They were both up before your father, Daphne, you were the lazy bones today," her mother said.

"Has Dad gone to work?"

"Yes, he's got a few things to tidy up. He's decided to take the days off between Christmas and New Year."

"Why don't you go away for a holiday?" Daphne asked.

"Who would look after you children?"

"We're not children, I could look after us. Paul could help me keep young Robert in order."

"Daffy, Daffy," the youth teased back.

Paul raised his eyebrows.

"Tom's nickname. Reckons she's a bit on the daffy side. Used to throw tantrums as a kid, scream, kick, all that kind of stuff."

"Robert Clarke, you're exaggerating. What about it, Mum? Why don't you and Dad go somewhere for a few days?"

"We couldn't even if we wanted to, it's too late to book in somewhere. Besides, Tom's coming home."

Mrs. Clarke's expression became tender, giving her face a poignant beauty, as she spoke the name softly.

Why was this Tom so special? She loved Daphne and Rob it was obvious by the way she spoke to them, the caresses, the endearments, yet when she mentioned the absent Tom, it seemed somehow different.

After breakfast, Daphne prepared their picnic lunch. Paul asked Rob to come along as a matter of courtesy. Whether he realised this, or perhaps just couldn't be bothered, she didn't know. Nevertheless, she was glad when he refused the invitation. It meant she could have Paul all to herself.

The countryside looked its best right now. Wild, almost impenetrable bush on either side of the road, and in the distance the pine-covered mountains sent out a perfume all of their own. Driving at a leisurely pace, they admired the rugged grandeur of the Alps far into the distance. In such bright

sunshine it was hard to believe that the mountains would be capped with snow in the winter.

Finally, they drove off the road, following a rutted track right into the heart of the bush. In the shelter of some trees, they laid out a rug and set up their picnic.

With his hair blown into wavy confusion, Paul looked younger and more carefree than she had ever seen him before. Together they gathered wood to start their fire in a cleared section close to the track. Water from a stream close by was cold as freshly melted snow.

Like children freed from parental restraint, they chased each other, laughing and kissing often. Their appetites sharpened by exertion, they soon disposed of the food, which somehow tasted better up here.

Holding hands, they climbed and explored. From some rocky outcrops, they could see for miles. The cattle in the distant valleys looked like ants, and a wisp of smoke now and again was the only sign of human habitation.

It was inevitable. Such beauty and aloneness, Paul could no more control his passion than he could tame the wind. Soon, kissing wasn't enough. He wanted all of Daphne's sweetness, and with the scented pine needles carpeting their bed, he thought to assuage the hunger and sheer carnal need built up over the last two days.

He wasn't being fair to her. What he expected went against the very upbringing she had received. After meeting the Clarkes, he knew this for certain, yet still he took what she offered and craved more. Thank goodness he remembered to put some French letters in his wallet. Coitus interruptus was dangerous when he wanted Daphne so desperately.

When his passion was finally spent, he carefully slid out of her love canal and rested his cheek against her soft pubic curls, inhaling her special womanly scent. "I'm sorry, Sunshine." His

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hand cupped her bare hip. "I shouldn't expect so much from you."

"You do love me? I couldn't bear it if you were just using me."

"Of course I love you. I adore you. Worship you." He shifted his hand and reached up, using the flat of his thumb to wipe the tears away from her cheek. "Don't cry, please. I love you more than life itself. It's the truth, Daphne, I swear it. Let me speak to your parents. If I use my father's influence, we could be married before the New Year."

"On Boxing Day, please, Paul. It isn't long to wait."

"It is for me. An hour is too long."

"Please." A finger against his mouth cut off the retort springing to his lips.

"All right," he finally capitulated.

They arrived home late in the afternoon, and Allison watched them walk inside hand in hand. Paul's hair was tousled and already there was a bluish tinge about his jaw, but Daphne... dear God...she looked so vulnerable. One glance at the over-bright eyes following the young Englishman's every move, and Allison knew he had made love to her while they were away.

She wanted to scream at him. Beg him not to hurt Daphne. They knew so little about this handsome, rich young man who had stolen their daughter's heart. After Christmas, Frank would have to speak with Paul and find out if his intentions were honourable. *Dear God. Please, don't let her be hurt. Don't let her be used and betrayed.*

Paul watched as the spurt of anger that initially flashed through Mrs. Clarke's big blue eyes suddenly gave way to dread. He felt hot with embarrassment, like a guilty schoolboy. She knew. Daphne's mother knew what had taken place today. He would stake his life on it.

"Tom's home," Allison said.

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"Where is he, Mum?"

"In the sitting room."

"Come on, Paul, I want you to meet Tom." Daphne tugged at his hand.

They entered the sitting room together. A tall young man with a thick thatch of blonde hair bounded to his feet.

"Daffy, Daffy." Laughter lurked in his sparking blue eyes. Paul watched in astonishment as strong, tanned arms enfolded Daphne's waist and she was literally picked up from the ground and swung around several times.

"Don't be an idiot, Tom. Put me down. I want you to meet Paul."

As Daphne introduced the two men, she anxiously watched each man summing the other up. She desperately wanted Tom and Paul to be friends.

"Pleased to meet you, Tom."

"G'day." The grin softened his abrupt greeting. "Well, how's things, Daffy?"

"Good, but don't call me that."

The atmosphere became charged now. Tom teased and tormented both Daphne and Rob, but never maliciously, and Paul found himself liking the young man instantly. There was a special bond between mother and son. Nothing was said, but he felt it just the same.

"Ah, Tom." Frank Clarke greeted him cordially when he arrived home. "I suppose we can expect a never-ending stream of young women passing through the house now. How long are you home for?"

"A few days."

"Tom has dozens of girls. Half the women in Wangaratta are in love with him," Daphne said. "He breaks their hearts on purpose."

"Rot."

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Paul deftly caught the bread roll aimed at Daphne. The whole family were laughing and happy because Tom was home.



Daphne dressed carefully for the Christmas Eve dance in a powder blue crepe dress, which had a shirred bodice and sleeves. The waistline was embroidered with beads, just a shade or two darker than the frock. Tom and Paul both wore suits.

The hall was already crowded when the three of them arrived. There were not many cars parked outside, but numerous bicycles, even a couple of horses.

Inside the simple wooden structure, brightly coloured paper streamers gave it a rather schoolroom look, Paul thought. Daphne, smiling and laughing happily as she introduced him to her friends, was easily the most beautiful girl in the room. He felt annoyed with Tom when he literally snatched her out of his arms to have the first dance. He would have to be blind not to notice the number of male eyes following Daphne around. He didn't know how he had the strength to stop himself from dashing out on the dance floor and snatching her out of Tom's arms.

"Here she is, safe and sound. I've done my duty by you." Tom grinned. "So you'll be stuck with her now, mate." Still laughing, Tom strode towards a group of girls on the opposite side of the hall.

It felt wonderful having Daphne back in his arms again. Paul held her close, savouring the sweet, subtle perfume of her. She was in great demand from various young men, but one in particular set his teeth on edge. Tonight, for the first time in his life, he tasted real jealousy. White hot, it seared right through him. He hated the thought of any of them touching her at all. When this particular young man drew her into a close embrace, he could stand it no longer and pushed

his way through the dancing throng.

"Excuse me, it must be my turn." He drew Daphne away. "You're flirting," he accused jealously.

"I am not."

"You are." He crushed her hard against him.

"Stop it, you're hurting me, Paul."

"I feel like breaking your neck and theirs too."

Wide were her eyes now, and her lips suddenly curved into a smile. "You're jealous."

"Hell, Daphne, I've hardly had you in my arms all night."

"They're my friends, I went to school with most of them."

"God, I've never been jealous before in my whole life."

"You don't have to be." She gently stroked his cheek. "I love you, Paul, there won't ever be anyone else for me."

"Let's get out of here. I want you to myself for a while."

"We can't, I mean, people will see."

"To hell with them."

"They know my parents. I don't want to get myself gossiped about."

It turned out to be a wonderful evening for Daphne. A chance to meet old friends, catch up on all the latest gossip, and most importantly, to show Paul off. He was polite to them all, but rather distant, and she knew he wasn't particularly enjoying himself.

After supper, a number of people decided to go to the midnight service at Holy Trinity.

"Don't go with them," Paul urged.

"But I always go. It's a special service."

"Please, we could go for a drive."

"A drive?"

"Well, a walk then. I want some time alone with you. Tomorrow there'll be your family. It's Christmas Eve, our very first one together. I only want to share it with you, no one

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else.”

“Paul.”

“Please, Sunshine. Let me have tonight. Go to church tomorrow.”

When he called her by his pet name in that soft, intimate voice, she could refuse him nothing.

They left the hall with the group, but once in the darkness detached themselves, waiting until the others left before making their way to the car. Paul drove slowly, with Daphne pressed up close to his side. He did not speak, but his arm, draped across her shoulder, moved every now and again, so his fingers could caress one side of her face. From the main road they followed a small, rutted track heading away from civilisation.

They left the car, walking slowly, hand in hand towards the river. Here it was quiet and dark. The water flowing silently by looked black, fathomless. They chose a grassed section beneath the thick overhang of a weeping willow as their love nest. Even if someone should wander down to the river, they would remain hidden from view.

Paul was as ardent and demanding as before, but there was consideration and a gentleness about him tonight. He had thoroughly explored and caressed her body each time they made love. Tonight, for the first time, she allowed her hands to wander freely across his taut, hard stomach until her fingers tangled in the coarse springy hair crowning his throbbing arousal.

He was so powerfully male, so thrillingly exciting, she thought, sliding her hand along the silken, hard length of his manhood.

“Oh, God.” His breath came out in a harsh, laboured pant, as he fumbled for a French letter and sheathed himself. He didn’t want to use them with Daphne, they were so desensitising.

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Once they were married, he would be damned if he ever used them again.

They lay together for a time, just savouring each other's nearness, touching, kissing, caressing. Daphne never wanted to leave the safety and protection of his arms.

"We should be going now. After we're married, I'd like us to consummate our marriage here," he told her huskily. "But no bloody French letters. It's like having a bath with your socks on," he complained, giving a rueful laugh.

"You poor man," Daphne teased him, but she was glad he wanted to protect her from conceiving a baby out of wedlock. It made her love him even more.

The house was in darkness when they arrived home, but the veranda light had been left on. They kissed each other in the hallway before going their separate ways to bed.

Chapter Eight

On Christmas morning, Daphne was so excited she did not even wait to dress, just slipped on a dressing gown and raced barefooted, out to the sitting room to check on the presents under the Christmas tree. Tom lay sprawled out on the couch, fully clothed. She had heard him come home hours after them. Gingery stubble covered his jaw, and his long, thick eyelashes almost rested on his cheeks.

“Tom.”

He slowly opened his eyes and gingerly sat up. “Ooh, my aching head.”

“I’ll make you some tea if you like.”

“Thanks, nothing to eat though,” he groaned. “Had a few too many beers last night.”

“A lot too many, I’d say. You’ll get no sympathy from me. I saw you sneaking off.”

“I came back and you were gone too.”

She flushed guiltily. “There was the midnight service at Holy Trinity.”

“You weren’t there, Daph.”

“Oh?”

“I went past about midnight. No sign of the car. Be careful of him, I’d hate you to get hurt.”

“Don’t you like Paul?”

“Yes, seems a decent enough sort. Bit of a snob, though.”

“He isn’t, Tom.”

Rob wandered in, still wearing his pyjamas. “Merry Christmas all.”

His arms were laden with neatly wrapped presents. “I forgot to put them under the tree last night. Bit late back weren’t you, Daph?”

“Let’s give Mum and Dad breakfast in bed,” she suggested. “Remember how we used to?”

“Ugh, burnt toast and cold tea.” Tom grimaced. “I don’t know how they were able to swallow any of it.”

While Tom made toast, Daphne set up the tray. “Just toast and tea, we don’t have time for anything fancy or Mum will be up.”

Paul wandered in next, wearing burgundy silk pyjamas with a matching dressing gown. “I wondered what all the laughter was about.” He spoke to no one in particular, but his eyes went straight to Daphne.

“We’re organising breakfast in bed for Mum and Dad,” she told him cheerfully.

“Really?”

“When we were kids, we did it without fail.” Tom chuckled. “Burnt toast and cold tea, slopped in the saucer.”

“It’s the thought that counts, don’t you think, Paul? You can help us if you like,” Daphne invited.

“No, I’ll just watch. Too many cooks spoil the broth as the saying goes.”

When it was ready, Tom dashed outside to pick a yellow rosebud. “The final touch.” He laid it beside the neatly folded napkins with a flourish.

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Later, they all drank tea and ate Christmas cake and mince pies in the sitting room. Finally, the time came to open their presents. Daphne had added Paul's name to her gifts, but she was pleased when he handed out a neatly wrapped parcel to each parent.

"Thank you, Paul." Smiling, Allison showed the others the tin of imported chocolates, and Frank looked pleased with his bottle of Port. Daphne bought items of clothing for each parent, and handkerchiefs for her brothers. Tom and Rob combined to buy her some pretty, embroidered placemats and doilies.

Paul's present to her was a gold watch, with diamonds encrusted around the face. Her hand shook as she let him put it on for her. It made the plain gold cuff links she bought him look paltry.

"It's beautiful, but you shouldn't have spent so much money," she protested. Even Tom stared in amazement and stopped his teasing banter.

"We'd better have some more tea." Allison suggested, and Daphne followed her mother out into the kitchen to help. "Darling, what an expensive gift for Paul to buy you."

"I know. He didn't mean it to be, but it made my cuff links look pretty miserly."

When they returned to the sitting room, the men were discussing Germany's Adolf Hitler.

"I reckon there's going to be a war," Rob predicted.

"Absolute rot, son, those Germans won't want another licking."

Daphne sat down next to Paul, who made no comment while her father aired his views.

"We beat them once and they know we can do it again."

Tom, who lounged in an armchair, suddenly stood up. "I might tidy myself up, I'm going out after. If a war does come, I'd join up straight away or it might..."

"End before we get there?"

Paul watched Mrs. Clarke's face turn deathly white as she recited the words, as if she had learnt them off by heart.

"I was going to say that, Mum."

"I know you were, Tom. How many other boys said those very words in 1914? And how many of them were killed?"

"If a war came, I'd be a coward not to fight."

"Tom, be silent, you're upsetting your mother."

"All right." Tom subsided into his seat.

"Are you going to church, Mum? I'll come with you." Daphne went over to her. "We could go as a family."

"Yes, dear, I'll come too."

She watched in shock as her father stood up. The only time she could ever remember him going to church was when Rob got baptised.

"Best wear a suit, I suppose. There won't be any war, Allison."

Paul watched Tom open his mouth then close it, without speaking again.

"I won't bother with church. Sorry about before, Mum. I just didn't think."

"It's all right, Tom, I shouldn't live in the past."

"Will you come, Paul?" Daphne asked.

He hesitated. "I don't think so, you go with your parents. I can keep your brother company."

After the others departed for church, Tom opened a bottle of beer and they discussed the cricket.

"I'm off in a while, hope you don't mind, mate, but there's a girl I promised to meet."

"I understand."

"I'm sorry about before, bloody stupid of me. Mum hates the very mention of war, conjures up too many painful memories for her."

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"Terrible thing to have lived through, I suppose. My father's regiment almost got wiped out in France. He hardly ever speaks of it," Paul mused.

"Look, mate," Tom apologised again. "I really have to go, sorry."

"I don't mind, I'll just wander around the place for a while. Daphne talks about it so often, I'd like to get to know it better myself."

Tom suddenly gave a wicked grin. "Daphne will kill me for this, but there's a couple of boxes full of old baby photos and things out in the back shed. Sure to be something out there to embarrass her with, mate."



After Tom left, Paul wandered down to the orchard for a while, then he decided to look through the photographs. He loved Daphne so much he wanted to know everything he could about her. There were a couple of old trunks, some dusty baby furniture, and two old boxes tied up with string.

He started rummaging through the bottom box first. The photographs here were old, before the turn of the century most likely. One wedding portrait was probably that of Daphne's grandparents. Another portrait showed a small girl with golden curls sitting beside an older, dark-haired boy. Mrs. Clarke most likely. More pictures of the two young soldiers whose photo was on the mantle. One of them looked so like Tom he must be related.

Damn it, he must be searching through the wrong box. When he pushed it to one side, it all but disintegrated, causing the photos to spill out.

"Hell." As he squatted down to gather them up, he noticed an old exercise book. Printed across the front were the words *Allison's Diary*. He didn't know why, maybe because he wanted to know more about Tom's relationship to the young

soldier, but he started turning the pages.

There was not much in it, really, just the inconsequential prattle of a young farm girl, and he skimmed over the pages. In 1914 she apparently met a handsome young Englishman named Phillip. Paul's hands shook. It was a coincidence that the names were Allison and Phillip, he told himself, feeling suddenly sick with dread.

To save his life, he couldn't have stopped himself from reading on now, because he recognised the writing. The letter his father had kept and this diary were written by the same hand. His hands shook so much he could hardly turn the pages.

Towards the end of the diary, the entries became scrappy. Allison was obviously too busy socialising with Phillip to have the time to do anything but scrawl a few quick lines.

After a gap of several weeks in the dates, he read the few lines that caused his stomach muscles to clench even more tightly than before. He now felt as if he had been jammed between two crushing lead weights. Nausea rose up into his throat. He doubled over in agony. Horror shook him to the core.

"Phillip Ashfield forced himself on me. I tried to fight him, but he wouldn't stop."

Bile rose up in his throat. Allison Clarke was his mother. He had been conceived as the result of rape. If that wasn't terrible enough, it meant Daphne was his sister. He staggered outside and vomited until his stomach was empty. Even then, he couldn't stop retching. Incest. He had slept with his sister.

He clung to a tree, trying to keep upright. He shivered, yet his hands were clammy. *I've got to get out of here before they come back*, he thought frantically. Though he felt dead inside, his brain kept functioning. He couldn't bear to face any of them now. The only grain of comfort he could cling to was the fact he took precautions to ensure Daphne would not get pregnant. What if a child had resulted? The very thought

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caused him to retch again.

He stumbled into the house and stuffed his belongings in his case. Feeling absolutely devastated, he penned a brief, cruel note to Daphne, so she would not attempt to follow him.

Does Frank know about me? he wondered, as he slid the note into an envelope and scrawled her name across it. Was he even Daphne's real father? The old man at the store mentioned that Allison had a girl baby. Where the hell did Tom fit into the picture? The others certainly wouldn't know about Allison's past. It was one of those deep, dark family secrets that would never see the light of day. Could Sir Phillip have impregnated Allison a second time? Oh God, surely not? This would have to be the worst day in his whole life. Shock built upon shock. If he were not so desperate to get away, he would be on the ground in a screaming heap.

He left the Clarke residence immediately, and once on the highway, he planted his foot and sped away without a backward glance.



When Daphne arrived home, she was surprised to find the car gone.

"I wonder where Paul is?" she queried.

"Probably dropping Tom off somewhere. Church wasn't so bad now, Frank, was it?" Allison teased.

"I suppose not."

"You enjoyed it, Dad, I heard you singing," Daphne said.

"All right, I did," Frank grudgingly admitted. "I just hope the plum pudding hasn't boiled dry."

"It won't have, but I'll check it, and the roast. Thanks for coming to church with me, Frank."

Daphne went ahead of them. She took off her hat and gloves and rested them on the dressing table with her bag. *III*

put them away later she thought, Paul will be back soon. She glanced once more at the watch. It was the most exquisite thing she ever owned.

"Daphne." Allison met her at the door of the kitchen. "There's a letter here for you."

The thick ivory coloured envelope just had her name printed across the front. It was from Paul. Fortunately, she sat down to read it, otherwise she would have fallen to the floor. It only contained a few lines, cruel in their brevity.

Daphne, I have taken the coward's way out and left while you were away. It wouldn't work between us; you and your family are just too working class for me. Keep the things I gave you by way of payment. You earned them. Paul.

She couldn't cry. The hurt and betrayal went too deep.

"Daphne. What is it?"

The letter fluttered to the floor and Allison picked it up. Never had she read anything so cruel or contemptible.

"What can I say, darling?"

Daphne didn't answer, she was incapable of doing anything except let her mother help her to the bedroom. It was midsummer, yet she felt cold as death. She wanted to cry and scream, but nothing would come out. A little part of her died just then.

"Don't show Dad or the boys the letter will you? Just tell them Paul left. I couldn't bear it if they knew what I'd done."

"It's all right, darling. Frank. Frank."

"What is it, Allison? God. What's wrong? Daphne, are you all right?" The colour bleached from his face.

"Get some water quickly. Paul up and left, thinks we're not good enough for him," Allison explained.

When Frank got back, Daphne sat propped up against the pillow with Allison holding her hand.

"Here's the water. I put something in it to help you sleep,

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Princess.” His childhood endearment brought tears to her eyes. “He wasn’t good enough for you. No man is.”

“Frank, keep an eye on lunch, will you. There’s something Daphne and I need to discuss.”

When he left, Allison made Daphne drink the water, then she clasped the ice cold hands between her own. “There are no words of comfort I can offer, except time will heal and you’ll meet someone else.”

“Paul is the only man I’ll ever love. I’ll never forget him.”

“The hurt gets easier to bear after a time. I, that is, I mean...” Allison swallowed several times. “I read the letter. There wouldn’t be, what I mean - is there a chance you might get pregnant?” The last few words came out in a rush.

“No, Paul, he, he made sure nothing like that would happen. I loved him, Mum. We were going to get married.” Tears streamed down her cheeks.

“They all promise marriage to get what they want from a girl.”

Chapter Nine

When England declared war on Germany in September 1939, once more Australia pledged its support to the Empire. Tom, who had wanted to enlist immediately, had broken his collarbone, and by the time he was fit enough it was May 1940. He was put into the Artillery and posted to the 2/2nd Medium Regiment.

His letters were few and brief, but Allison knew he was enjoying himself. If only he would settle down with one of the many nice, local girls who adored him. This restless young man was all she had left of her first husband, Tommy Calvert. *Please, God, don't let him end up the same way*, she prayed desperately, thinking of the young soldier who lay buried in a pretty French cemetery on the Somme.

"It isn't fair, Mum. I want to join up. I'm eighteen." Arguments regularly broke out between herself and Robbie.

"I'll never give my consent for you to go."

"Please, Mum, half the boys I went to school with have already enlisted, I could have joined up with Tom."

Frank was bitterly disappointed when the army rejected

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him as being over age. He had to be content with organising an Air Raid Precautions group.

“For God’s sake, I’ve fought in two wars as a front line officer. Surely I could be of some use. I don’t need some snotty-nosed little corporal at the recruiting depot telling me to go home and weed the garden, Pops.”

Allison laughed. “I’m glad, we’re doing our part. Tom’s gone. If every family gave just one son to the A.I.F, there would be more than enough to appease the generals.”



One morning, Allison went to rouse Robbie for work and found his bed empty. A note propped up on the dressing table caught her eye. She knew, even before reading the neatly penned lines, he had run away.

Dear Mum and Dad, I've cleared off to join up. Don't try getting me out, because I'll only do it again. I'm a man and I want to fight for my country.”

He wasn’t a man. Her hands shook. He was barely eighteen, her baby.

“Frank. Frank,” she screamed.

“What is it?”

“Robbie’s run away to join up. Get him out, you know who to go to.”

“No.”

“But, Frank.”

“If he wants to go that badly, let him.”

“They’ll kill him like they did with Tommy and Jim. He’s your only son. Don’t you care? You’ve encouraged him. All this talk of helping the empire, defending one’s country.” She started crying.

“Dearest, don’t take on so.” He rocked her gently. “You should be proud he wants to serve his country, there are plenty of other young loafers who don’t.



In November 1940, Allison, Frank and Daphne saw Tom embark on the *R.M.S. Stratheden*, which was joining a convoy of three other ships with *H.M.A.S. Perth* as their escort.

“Darling, you will take care, won’t you?”

“Of course I will, Mum,” he promised. How handsome he looked, Daphne thought. The khaki uniform really suited his blonde good looks.

“Good luck, son, take care, won’t you?”

They kissed and hugged each other. With tears in their eyes, Allison and Daphne watched him stride off wearing his slouch hat at a rakish angle. In single file, the soldiers went up the gangplank. When he reached the top, Tom turned to wave his hat, and the sun coming out from behind a cloud turned his hair silver. Suddenly he was gone, just another figure in a sea of khaki.

“He’ll be fine, Mum.” Daphne linked arms with her mother.

“Of course he will, dear.” *Please God*, Frank prayed desperately. *Don’t let these boys be doomed like their fathers to become cannon fodder.*



As soon as her nursing training finished, Daphne went to enlist for overseas service in the Australian Army Nursing Service.

“Too young? I’m a qualified nurse, I want to do my bit for the war effort.”

“I’m sorry,” the elderly colonel at the medical corps office said. “Not only are you not over twenty-five, my dear, but you don’t have the required years of nursing experience that we expect our recruits to have.”

“Isn’t there something you can do? I’ve got two brothers in the army, I want to do my bit as well.”

“I’m sorry, there’s nothing I can do. I don’t make the rules, I

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just carry them out.”

It would be a fruitless exercise to argue with him. No point in getting into a screaming match with the silly old goat. Could she do as Robbie had done and put her age up? Go interstate to enlist? Change her name? Of course she couldn't, they would want her nursing records. It wasn't fair.

She caught the train home to Wangaratta. There was simply nothing else left to do. Her job at the local hospital would have to suffice for the time being. She closed her eyes and the motion of the train gently lulled her to sleep.

“How did it go, Daphne?” her mother greeted her when she arrived home.

“No good. Apart from having to be over twenty-five, you have to have several years nursing experience.”

“I'm sorry, darling, your father tried to warn you.”

“I know, but wouldn't you think they could bend the rules a little, offer me service in Australia? I would have taken that.”

“Come on we'll have a cup of tea. Oh, by the way, there's a letter here from your doctor friend, Molly Grattan in Singapore.” Allison withdrew it from her apron pocket.

Daphne opened the letter eagerly and read the few lines written in Molly's untidy, almost illegible scrawl.

Molly wanted her to come over to Singapore and help in the practise because her father had recently passed away and she was having trouble finding a suitable nurse.

“Mum, read this, it could be the answer to my prayers.”

“You can't go there, it could be dangerous. What about the war?”

“Honestly, I'll be fine, I'm not going to the Middle East. Singapore is a British fortress. It's as safe as being here.”

Daphne didn't like to go against her parent's wishes, but she couldn't stay in Wangaratta, either. She had to make a break, try something new. Something so vastly different, that it

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would stop her dwelling on Paul's cruel betrayal. Even after three years of trying to forget him, the memories were excruciating. She would wake up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat.

She hadn't told anyone the full story, she couldn't. Her parents probably guessed that Paul had sought solace in the arms of another woman. What they couldn't possibly know was that he had taken Kitty into the very bed she had shared with him. It was too awful to put into words. That mad dash down to Ian's house after she realized he thought they were brother and sister. It sickened her every time she thought about it.

The picture of Paul and Kitty in bed together would haunt her for a lifetime. Paul's guilty shock, Kitty's gloating triumph. For him to take that woman into the same bed they had shared was filthy, depraved, but she still couldn't stop loving him.



In 1941 an envelope arrived at Wangaratta. There was no stamp affixed, just the words "Passed free of Postage, H.M. Transport. It contained a card with a few words scrawled across it.

I am well, and I hope you both are too. Rob.

Daphne's letters came regularly from Singapore. They were cheerful, yet there were undertones of sadness. She made no mention of Paul, but Allison knew the hurt remained, a nagging, raw wound that would not heal.

Daphne had tried to pretend she was recovering from Paul's betrayal for her father's sake. She was their foster daughter, but they couldn't have loved her more if she had been their own flesh and blood. To think her son, Paul, could be capable of inflicting such terrible hurt, Allison thought bitterly. He had obviously inherited Phillip Ashfield's cruel genes.



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Daphne couldn't believe the apathy of the local European population in Singapore when she first arrived. Now, after only a few weeks amongst them, she utterly despised them and all they stood for. Typical upper class snobs, selfish, arrogant and immoral, just like Paul.

In most cases, they had no interest in the war at all. At Raffles and all the other favourite nightspots, there were always fashionable women in the latest evening gowns and officers in mess dress. No one seemed to care that the Japanese were speedily advancing through Siam, heading for Malaya.

She could have left, but decided against it, not being the type to cut and run when the going got a little hard. She felt obligated to help Molly, who struggled on alone, trying to continue her father's work amongst the poor Malays and Indians.

Her motives, of course, weren't completely altruistic. She was honest enough to admit that helping these unfortunate people eased the pain of Paul's dreadful betrayal, and gave her something to focus her life on. There would never be any other man for her, she thought sadly. He was her one true love, her soul mate, unworthy though he was.

Molly continually went to British Headquarters to report her suspicions that many so-called Malay labourers were in fact Japanese in disguise. Daphne knew she gave the authorities information on Japanese who owned plantations directly facing major highways so they could monitor troop movements. The answers were always the same. 'Singapore is the bastion of the British Empire, the Gibraltar of the Far East, and as such, impregnable.'

Time and again, Molly's hot temper got the best of her and she clashed with the British hierarchy, both civilian and military. Daphne knew they all poked fun at her friend, hating the fact that she mixed with Malay or Tamil Indians. She was not diplomatic and had a caustic tongue, which she wasn't

afraid to use.

"There's going to be trouble, Daph, I know there is. Those Japs are infiltrating everywhere, I don't care what those bloody snobs at British HQ say. It's true, the locals know. One old Jap who knew Father as good as told me to get out while I could. There are Jap-owned fishing vessels based in Singapore, roaming up and down the peninsula, gathering information, and those idiots in the Government think I'm paranoid," she raged.

Daphne said nothing, just kept preparing a tray containing a pipette for instilling drops, aural forceps and two aural specula ready for Molly to use on a small Indian boy who had pushed a bead into his ear. It had lodged in the meatus, and she was hoping to syringe it out.

"I'll be all right now, Daph, see to the mother. She's just about screaming the place down."

Daphne went outside to reassure the mother as best she could, with her limited knowledge of the language, that her small son would be safe, but the woman was almost inconsolable. There were just too many different languages to learn including Tamil, Chinese and Malay. Fortunately, most people seemed to have some knowledge of English.

After the woman departed and Molly left for a house call, Daphne sat down in the surgery and let her mind drift. Molly never went out at night, preferring to stay in the small bungalow they shared.

Daphne sometimes accepted invitations from young plantation owners or even an Australian officer, but never an English one. She was off Englishmen for life. There were tennis parties, bridge afternoons, nightclubs, but none of these activities particularly interested her. *I'm becoming a hermit*, she thought with a grimace.

Molly had introduced her to Helen Sawyer, an Australian army nurse working at the 110th Australian General Hospital

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in Singapore, who also trained at the Queen Victoria Hospital. They immediately struck up a friendship. Dark-haired Helen was attractive and vivacious. Sometimes Daphne would make up a foursome with her.

She finally met up with Robbie in Singapore when he got leave. He was well over six foot tall now, still slim, but starting to fill out. The khaki summer weight uniform suited his boyish good looks.

He missed their parents badly. He wouldn't admit it, but she sensed he regretted his decision to run away and join up. The one letter she received from Tom was full of cheer. He was enjoying himself in the Middle East, taking advantage of the numerous attractions. Not Robbie; women and high times were not for him. *Not for me, either*, she thought wryly. Some British children and women had already left Malaya and Singapore, but for most it was business as usual.



One evening, she made up a foursome for dinner with Helen and two young lieutenants, Bill and Roy from the 2/30th Battalion. Roy, her partner, was a fair, thickset young man sporting a zippy moustache; Bill, a nondescript looking man who had a caustic wit.

Daphne felt pleased with her outfit, a white frock with a matching bolero top embroidered with green beads. There were numerous potted plants set out around the hotel, she idly noticed, as a Chinese waiter showed them to a cane table with matching chairs. She heard loud female laughter coming from a long table set against the far wall.

"Bloody pommy snobs," Bill hissed. "They won't have anything to do with us Aussies. Hardly ever invite us into their homes. Who the hell do they think they are, anyway?"

"We should worry, mate, we've got the two prettiest girls in Singapore." Roy glanced at both girls, but his gaze rested

longest on Daphne.

"Well, what do you say to that, old man? Cut the ground from under your feet, what?" Helen's over-exaggerated, upper crust English accent made them laugh.

"We'll have champagne," Bill suddenly decided.

"Just a lemonade will do, thanks," Daphne said.

"No, champagne for a beautiful flower." Roy spoke softly so only she could hear him.

"Roy." She briefly touched his hand. "Don't get to like me too much, will you?"

"You're the loveliest girl I've ever met. I could easily fall in love with you."

"I can only offer you friendship, nothing more, and you're too nice to be hurt."

"Is there someone else, Daphne?"

A smiling Chinese waiter brought over champagne in a silver, iced-filled bucket, and proceeded to pour for them.

"Not really."

"Daph gave her heart to some callous playboy who broke it. She's living in the past," Helen put in with a sympathetic grimace.

"I wish I could forget, but there won't ever be any other man for me." Her heart felt heavy with the regret of what might have been. If Paul's love had been genuine, they would have been married by now. Just thinking of the babies she would probably have had was excruciatingly painful, sharp as a sabre thrust. *You're a fool*, she castigated herself as she often did. *He wasn't worthy of you. Find yourself a nice, trustworthy Aussie man to love.* Oh, God, if only she could.

The orchestra played softly in the background. When Roy asked her to dance, she accepted. As long as he didn't want to get serious, things could be quite pleasant because, even on such a short acquaintance, she liked him.

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There was a mixture of dress, the ladies, of course, in the most up-to-date creations that could be invented by skilled Chinese seamstresses. Men wore dress suits and one or two were in lounge suites, the rest in uniform.

As the evening progressed the place filled up even more. Not actually crowded. That would just never do. Too crass. What a farce, she thought. Men were dying by the thousands in Europe. England was being bombed into the ground, the Japanese were hammering on the very doorstep, while the European population wine and danced their evenings away, as if they didn't have a care in the world.

"Sorry," Roy apologised for bumping into someone.

"So you should be," the woman snapped in a high pitched, very affected voice. "These Australians are so boorish, darling."

This arrogant woman was dark-haired and so stunningly beautiful Daphne did not notice her partner at first.

Shock caused the blood to pound in her ears like an artillery barrage. The stabbing pain in her chest felt so excruciating, it squeezed the air from her lungs and made it hard to breathe. "Paul." His name came out in a husky, tortured whisper, yet he heard.

"Daphne. Good Lord, what are you doing here?"

For some unexplained reason the orchestra stopped playing for a few moments, and a voice announced that there would be a five-minute break. Daphne couldn't move. Her limbs were suddenly paralysed.

"I...I'm working here," she stuttered. No need to ask what he was doing. He wore an army uniform with a Major's crown on his epaulettes.

"You know each other, Paul, darling?"

"Yes." His lips twisted into a cynical sneer. "Amelia, I'd like you to meet Daphne Clarke." He paused for a moment. "My little sister, well only half, but even that's too much." He gave

a vicious, mirthless laugh.

"Hello, Amelia. Paul, this is Roy Jorgensen a dear friend of mine." Daphne linked arms with the young lieutenant who opened his mouth in surprise before hastily closing it again. "Come along, Roy, where's that drink you promised me?"

They started moving away and Daphne turned her head ever so slightly. "I'm not your sister, Paul."

The music started up again and his arm snaked out and grabbed her. "Dance?" He almost shoved Amelia at the lieutenant.

"Let me go. I'll scream if you don't."

He practically dragged Daphne into the middle of a moving throng.

"What the hell do you mean? I saw the photos and read the diary. Allison Clarke is my mother."

"She's not mine. Dad, I mean Frank and Allison Clarke are not my parents, natural or otherwise. They brought me up as theirs. I look upon them as my parents, but I still carry my own father's name. He was called Harry Clarke."

She felt Paul stiffen, clearly heard his shocked intake of breath.

"You're missing your step, Major, but don't worry." Her laugh sounded high-pitched, brittle. "I'm still not good enough for Sir Phillip Ashfield's exalted son."

They were standing still now, not even pretending to dance. "Harry and Mabel Clarke were poor farmers. My mother died a few weeks after my birth. My father, badly crippled in the war, couldn't live without her, so he shot himself."

She twisted free and walked across the dance floor, a dainty little figure, with her head held proudly and her eyes full of tears.

Had she looked back, she would have seen Major Paul Ashfield standing in exactly the same spot, oblivious to the

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curious looks and murmurs of other dancers.

"Well!" Helen greeted her before she even reached the table. "What did you do to Sir Paul?"

"Sir Paul? Has he been knighted like daddy?" Daphne wondered how she could even speak. She literally grabbed the glass Helen thrust in her hand, downing the contents in a couple of desperate gulps.

"Major Paul Ashfield hasn't been knighted, but he's so unobtainable, a lot of women out here call him that. There would hardly be a female in Singapore who wouldn't jump at the chance of letting him put his shoes under their bed."

"Really? I bet they don't know what a despicable bastard he is," Daphne retorted bitterly, shocked at the hateful words spilling out of her mouth.

"Hey, she's exaggerating." Bill pushed another glass towards her. "Drink this, you look like you need it."

"I do."

"Daphne. What is it? Are you ill?" Helen stopped her banter.

"No."

Roy came back just then. "My God, what happened out there, Daphne? Say, are you all right? You look awful. What did the Major mean about you being his..."

"Please," she interrupted him. "Just forget it."

Daphne forced some of the cold meat and salad down her throat, even though she felt like gagging on every mouthful. Her hand reached out for the champagne glass often. No one in the whole hotel could have laughed or danced more than Daphne Clarke did.

Paul was one of those at the long table. Why hadn't she noticed him before? He made no attempt to come over. Often his face was up close to the beautiful Amelia's, yet instinctively, Daphne knew he watched every move she made.

Margaret Tanner

The unaccustomed champagne made her light-headed and reckless. She wanted to make sure he knew she was completely over him. When Roy pulled her close so they were almost moulded together, she let him. He had been drinking steadily also. His speech was slightly slurred now as he whispered endearments in her ear.

"Beautiful Daphne, let's go outside, huh?"

"I don't think so."

"Come on, just a few kisses." He leered. "Maybe a little more."

You're an idiot, Daphne Clarke. It was her fault the nice young lieutenant had turned into a lecher. She had encouraged his advances by acting like a common tart.

"Let's get back to the others," she suggested, feeling suddenly way out of her depth.

"No, out here." Double glass doors led to an enclosed conservatory, lavishly festooned with purple bougainvillea. The numerous potted plants gave it an outdoor garden effect.

"No, Roy, stop it."

"Yes." Even in his drunken state he was strong. She tried pulling away as he edged them off the dance floor. His fingers biting into the flesh of her arms hurt.

"Please, don't spoil things."

"Daphne, beautiful flower." His hands loosened their hold so he could kiss her. She pushed him as hard as she could, sending him sprawling into a huge, leafy fern.

"Well done." Paul's derisive tones caused her to swing around. "If you hadn't, I would have."

"Excuse me, I'd like to go inside," she said coldly.

"Don't put on that ladylike act with me. Not when you've been acting like a common little slut all night," Paul snarled.

"You, you, bastard." She raised her hand to strike his handsome, sneering face.

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It was a mistake. His arms snaked out and he crushed her against him. His mouth captured hers in a brutal, punishing kiss. As he went to pull back, so he might push her away, her low, almost agonised cry seared through his anger.

“Paul. Oh Paul.”

He didn’t let her go. Just held her close as she sobbed in such a terrible, heartbroken fashion he feared she might become ill.

“Don’t cry, Daphne, please.” Still the weeping continued. She was frail, almost wraithlike in his arms and he didn’t know what to say to ease her pain. He just held her close. The perfume haunting his dreams for so long filled his nostrils, and he could feel her soft, shiny hair gently brushing against his face.

She was completely spent by the time the sobbing subsided and he used a hand at the back of her head to keep her face pressed against his chest. How good it felt to hold her close after so long apart.

“Where’s Roy?” she gulped finally.

“The lieutenant?”

She nodded. Dear God, after all he had done, the way he betrayed her, she didn’t want to move away from him. *Fool, fool*, her heart cried out in anguish. *Escape...escape*, screamed the voice of reason.

“He’s gone back to your friends. We need to talk, but not here.”

“It’s no use, Paul. I can’t forgive you for what you did to me.”

“For God’s sake, Daphne. I had to get out. What do you think it did to me to find out that the girl I loved was my sister? We’d slept together. I’d committed incest. Hell. What was I supposed to do? As if that wasn’t bad enough...”

“I could forgive you for that,” she cut him off. “It must have been a dreadful shock. If only you hadn’t dashed off, we could

have sorted it all out.”

“I couldn’t face you or your family, especially after finding out about...”

“I dashed down to Melbourne to tell you, after we realised what had happened.”

“About Kitty. I shouldn’t have rushed into her arms like I did, but my dreams were destroyed. I thought Kitty and drink would help ease my loss.”

“I could even forgive you for rushing into the arms of another woman within hours of leaving me, but you took her to the very bed we shared. That was the vilest act of all.”

“Daphne.”

She twisted free of him and walked away, leaving him just standing there. By the time he arrived back at his own table, Daphne and her friends were leaving.

“I’m sorry about rushing you all off like this, just drop me off at home, I, I don’t feel well,” Daphne said in a wobbly, pain-filled voice.

“We could have coffee somewhere,” Helen suggested, dying to find out what happened on the terrace. Roy had come back very chastened, saying the English Major was talking with Daphne. Half an hour later, she came back looking like death warmed up.

“I’d like to apologise for my disgraceful behaviour before, Daphne, I don’t know what came over me.”

“Don’t worry about it, Roy, I acted stupidly, too.”

If he asked her out again, she made up her mind to refuse him. It was better that way. They lapsed into silence. Even Helen, sitting next to them in the back, seemed disinclined to talk. Only Bill kept up a stream of frivolous chatter none of them were interested in.

Chapter Ten

On Sunday afternoon Daphne and Molly were sitting on the lawn sipping cool drinks when a car pulled up and Paul stepped out. He wore civilian clothes; smart, lightweight grey slacks and an open-necked white silk shirt.

“Good afternoon, ladies.”

“Hello. Am I supposed to know you?”

“Dr Grattan, isn’t it?” Paul gripped the large, almost mannish hand that was thrust at him.

“Yes.”

“I’m Paul Ashfield, Daphne would have mentioned me.”

“Afraid not. Khoo, another drink, please,” Molly instructed the young houseboy.

“A stengah thanks.” Paul sat down in a cane chair. “How are you, Daphne?”

“All right.” The words belied this. She looked pale, her skin almost transparent, and her eyes burned fever bright.

“She’s been crying half the night.”

“Molly, you’re exaggerating,” Daphne protested.

“No, I’m not, my girl. You’re the one who broke her heart

before, aren't you?"

Paul felt his cheeks burn. This big, raw-boned woman made him feel like a naughty schoolboy. "Yes."

"She's already carrying deep scars from you. Don't inflict any more will you? I'm off inside."

"You don't have to go, Molly," Daphne told her friend.

"It's time to clear the air once and for all. If you need me, Daph, just holler." Molly stood up.

Paul caught the look the doctor cast Daphne's way, and he was shocked by the sheer hunger of it. *My God*, he thought, *this woman fancies her*.

"You're too good to me, Molly."

"Rot." Molly vanished through the door.

"What do you want, Paul?"

"You." He saw pain flare in her eyes. "Don't look at me like that. My behaviour was despicable, but I was shocked out of my mind. Not only did I think you were my sister, but I also discovered I was conceived as a result of rape."

"What!" Daphne suddenly felt faint. If she hadn't been sitting down, she would have collapsed in a screaming heap on the ground.

"It's true. Allison's diary said Phillip Ashfield forced himself on her."

"My God." Shock shuddered all the way through her. "My God, Paul." She wrung her hands in anguish. Her lips trembled and her eyes stung with tears. What torture her mother must have endured all those years ago. "I always felt there was some terrible secret in Mum's past," she finally whispered. "When she realised you'd read the diary, she burned it before the rest of us could even look at it."

Paul left his chair so he could squat down beside her. "I'd cut my right arm off if it would undo the pain I inflicted on you. Please, can't we start again? Let me take you somewhere

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tonight. I know of a good club.”

“I don’t think so, thanks. You don’t need me, half the girls in Singapore are lusting after you.”

“Damn it.” He slapped his forehead with an open palm. “That’s just scurrilous gossip.”

“I think you better go.”

He played his ace, the only one he had. “Tomorrow I’m going up to Kahang in Central Johore. The Australian 29th Battalion is near by.”

“Robbie?”

“Yes, I could arrange for you to see him.”

“How did you know about him?” she asked, wide-eyed.

“I made enquiries about you, and one of the nurses at the 110th A.G.H proved most helpful.”

“Helen?”

“Yes. Robert Clarke, “A” Company, 29th Australian Infantry Battalion.” He nodded his thanks to the boy for the drink, took a quick sip and put it on the table. “Where’s Tom?”

“The Middle East somewhere. He’s in the Artillery. How long have you been here?”

“Since the end of July. Before that,” he grimaced, “deskbound in England.”

“Oh.”

“Yes, my father tried to keep me there. I volunteered to come here finally, couldn’t stomach a desk job when so many other chaps were getting killed. I went to Singapore after I left you, and worked here for a while. I couldn’t go back to England and face the old man, not so soon after what I’d found out. Anyway, I’ve got local knowledge the army can use, so when I found out a school chum of mine was a colonel out here, it was easy. He pulled strings and my father couldn’t do a damn thing to stop it. So here I am.”

“Did you tell your father what you’d found out about

Mum?"

"Look, Daphne. I wasn't ever going to speak to him again, but he had a heart attack. They thought he might die and sent for me. What could I do? I did ask him. You know what he said?"

"Tried to lie his way out of it I suppose?"

"No, he didn't. He said he loved her. No woman had ever spurned his advances before, so in the heat of the moment he lost control. He was sorry afterwards, regretted it bitterly ever since."

"What a weak excuse. How Mum must have suffered. Yet she's not bitter."

"Will you come with me tomorrow, Daphne?"

"Yes, you know I will, unless Molly needs me."

"She spends most Mondays on hospital visits."

"You have been checking up."

"And tonight, you'll come out with me? We could just go for a quiet meal, if you prefer. You're the religious one. Forgiveness is scattered right through the Bible, if I remember correctly."

"Helen says the nurses call you Sir Paul. You don't go out with anyone below the rank of captain. I'm not even in the army, not English either, so how would I rate?"

"You're being bloody stupid. For God's sake, you want me to shave my head and don sackcloth. Is that it?"

"No, but I don't want to be hurt again."

"I won't hurt you, Daphne, I love you."

"How many women have you told that too?"

"None."

Her laughter was high pitched, bordering on hysterical. "Don't lie to me, Paul, I couldn't stand it. I wouldn't be able to survive if you betrayed me again."

Her face turned white with distress, her lips were trembling and vulnerable, and in that simple pink cotton dress she

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looked about fifteen.

"Listen to me." He grasped her hands and held them tightly. "There have been other women, quite a number. Beautiful, too. I liked them, but I never mentioned the word love to any of them."

"You slept with them?"

"Yes, I did with some. I'm a single, healthy man with the usual male urges, and I've never claimed to be a monk. How are things at home?"

"Mum and Dad were terribly upset when Robbie ran away to join up. We didn't hear anything from him for over a year."

"Stupid young devil."

"I think he's beginning to wish he hadn't been so rash. He's not like Tom, who was always restless and craving excitement, Robbie felt he should do his bit for our country."

"You know something, Daphne. I felt terrible when I found out Allison Clarke was my mother, because of you, but if it hadn't been for that, I couldn't have chosen anyone nicer myself. I really believe, as much as my father could love a woman, he did love her. Isobel is neurotic, was from the very start of their marriage apparently. He's certainly rued the day he met and married her."

"Perhaps that's his punishment for what he did. It's strange, you know what hurt Mum most about the whole affair?"

"No."

"Your father deprived her of having Tommy Calvert's baby. He was her one true love. For years, she thought there was nothing of him left. That's why there's a special bond between her and Tom. In normal circumstances, a woman being confronted with her husband's illegitimate offspring would be devastated. She was glad."

"What are you saying? Tom's not her son?"

"No. Tommy Calvert and Mum had argued. He had a fling

the night before he left for the 1st World War and Tom's the result of that. Tom's mother died and Mum ended up with him. She always loved Tommy. They were soul mates. She showed me all of his letters once. They were really poignant. They were only married ten days before he went overseas and never came back. Her brother got killed too, and she was left to struggle on all alone."

"Your father, um, Frank?"

"She loves Dad, I know it, he does too, but not in the same way as Tommy. With his dying breath, he tried to make things easier for his Allison, but only made them worse. Do you know how your father got you away from Dixon's Siding?"

"No. I read the letter he must have taken from young Calvert. It was covered in blood. It contained a photo too, but I never saw it, that's why I came to Australia originally. I traced Allison Calvert to Dixon's Siding and to a dead end. I met you a few days later and gave up the search. At the time, I couldn't understand why she let my father take me away, but after finding out how I was conceived, well..."

"No, you mustn't think like that, Paul, Mum loved you. She really did. Your father virtually kidnapped you. He couldn't marry Mum, so he wanted to set her up as his mistress."

"What!"

"It's true. Mum told me she was prepared to go even on those terms rather than lose you, but I came on the scene to complicate matters further. Your father gave her an ultimatum, leave me or he'd go to England without her. My real mother and Allison were close friends, and she had promised to look after me. She would have taken me to England, too, only your father just took off without us."

"Why didn't she go to the police?" His mouth twisted slightly.

"When Tommy Calvert lay dying on the battlefield, he

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confessed to Phillip about killing Allison's drunken father. Phillip threatened to have Mum implicated."

Paul's face blanched. "I knew the old man could be ruthless, but I never thought even he was capable of stooping to something so diabolical."

They sat without speaking for a time, each with their own thoughts. Paul finally broke the silence between them.

"Will you come out with me tonight? I know of a nice little place called the Tanglin Club that stays open until four in the morning. There are lots of places to see here. I could take you to the theatre, anywhere you like." He sounded quite boyish in his endeavour to please.

"I'll go to dinner with you, but somewhere quiet, please."

"Pick you up about eight?"

"Yes, that will be nice." Daphne sat watching until he drove away, then slowly went inside.

"You're going out with him?"

"Yes. Common sense tells me not to, Molly, but my heart won't listen. I think I'll have a lie down, I feel absolutely drained."

Molly stared after this pretty, frail-looking girl. Ever since they first met at the Queen Victoria Hospital, she had worshipped Daphne.

Men had never interested her. Self-centred bastards, all of them. At thirty she had not been entirely without male lovers. It was necessary for her colleagues to believe she was like them, but she adored Daphne. Secretly, she placed a peephole between their rooms, so she could worship Daphne's slim, white body when she undressed for bed.

People thought her an oddity, but she didn't care. Her caustic tongue, mannish hairstyle and manner would never endear her to the British populace. No one guessed her secret, though. Daphne and her native patients were the panacea for

all the snubs and slights she endured. No, Paul Ashfield would not add Daphne to his list of conquests in the Far East.

Daphne hadn't gone into much detail about his previous betrayal, but it didn't take a genius to guess what happened. *I won't let that bloody snob get away with doing it again*, she vowed fiercely. *No matter what I have to do.*



Right on eight o'clock, Paul arrived, wearing a dark lounge suite. Daphne wore a plain oatmeal-coloured crepe dress, with a little governess jacket of jade taffeta over it.

"You look beautiful." His appreciative male eyes appraised her. "Ready?" He put out his arm and she took it. As they left, Paul stared straight into Molly's face.

Snobbish bastard, she thought, *he's guessed*. "Have a nice evening," she said.

"Thanks, I won't be too late," Daphne promised.

As soon as they drove off, Molly picked up the phone. Given time and the right circumstances, Daphne might one day return her affections. Major Paul Ashfield wasn't going to have her. *Not while there's breath left in my body*, she vowed.

The small, intimate club overlooked the sea. Daphne, who had never been here before, looked around with interest. There was a softly lit garden courtyard with several large palm trees and tropical plants.

"It's lovely, Paul."

A Japanese waiter in a spotless white uniform greeted them on arrival.

"Major Paul Ashfield."

"This way, Sir." He spoke deferentially, but Daphne, looking up as he held the chair out, caught something akin to hatred burning in his eyes. What had Molly said? Japanese were infiltrating legitimate businesses to spy on government and military officials. She gave an apprehensive shiver.

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“Will you let me order for you?” Paul’s fingers gently stroked her knuckles.

“Yes, please.”

“Grapefruit first, followed by soup.”

Daphne ate hungrily. Her appetite had been wretched since her arrival in Singapore. She always blamed it on the climate, but everything tasted different tonight because Paul was here.

An orchestra played softly and they got up to dance. It was a dream come true to be back in his strong arms once more. She rested her cheek against his chest and closed her eyes tightly so as to savour his nearness, inhale his special male scent and feel the heat emanating from his body. *Please, God, don't let him hurt me again, I couldn't survive it a second time.*

His breath gently stirred her short hair, when he whispered. “The music has stopped, Sunshine.”

He took her hand as they made their way back to their table. He briefly acknowledged the greetings of several couples he obviously knew, but made no attempt to join them.

“This place is wonderful.” She paused in eating a delicious asparagus roll.

“I’m glad you’re enjoying it.”

Her mouth was curved into a soft, sweet smile and her hand touched his often, as she ate with enjoyment. He groaned inwardly as he fought to suppress the tumultuous feelings she aroused in him. God he wanted her - desperately.

“Coffee and liqueur?”

“Just coffee thanks, Paul.”

He ordered two coffees and a brandy for himself also. He was desperate to take her somewhere so they might make love for the rest of the night, but dared not suggest it.

How could he blame her for being suspicious of him, under the circumstances? She had every reason to distrust him. It was for this reason he decided not to tell her about Caroline

Bowater. Why the hell did he ever let himself be manoeuvred into getting engaged to her? Nevertheless, he would have to do the decent thing and write to Caroline, asking to be released from the arrangement.

He kissed Daphne briefly when they returned to the doctor's house that evening. The feel of her soft, tremulous lips nearly drove him insane, but he resisted the desperate urge to crush them beneath his own, to take all her sweetness and keep it for himself.



The next morning, Paul called for Daphne in a staff car. She wore a bright floral dress, and on her bright curls perched a white straw picture hat.

Paul wore uniform, as did the private who drove the car. The day was steamy and hot, he already felt sweaty although he had recently bathed. Not Daphne, she looked cool, delightfully elegant.

It was a long drive, as they detoured several times, until at last they came to a native village. The huts were thatched and army vehicles were parked there, otherwise she would never have known it was a military establishment.

"I radioed through to Rob's Company Commander, he'll be meeting us here. I'll be with you in a moment, Private."

"Yes, Sir." He was young and he grinned good-naturedly at Daphne, but spoke only when addressed directly.

There was a slight arrogance about Paul. She had noticed it with the waiter last night. When he spoke to the private, his tones were clipped, authoritative. The soldiers they encountered on their walk to the H.Q. building were more than a little interested and she smiled warmly at them. How tanned and fit they looked in khaki shorts and shirts and slouch hats.

"Where are you from, beautiful?"

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She laughed out loud at the question from a swarthy-skinned young soldier.

"Australia."

"You're one of us?" Several others edged in closer now.

"Yes," she told them laughing.

Paul's lips drew into a thin, angry line. "Insolent young devils."

"Why?"

"The Australians are notorious for their insubordination to officers. It's intolerable."

"Why should they snap to attention just because some English major walks by? They're not on a parade ground."

"It shows lack of discipline."

Their arrival at the hut stopped any further discussion. The young captain introduced himself as Steven Albright, but Daphne scarcely noticed him.

"Robbie!" She was engulfed in a bear hug.

"Daffy, what are you doing here?" Suddenly he noticed Paul. "Ashfield."

"How are you, Rob?"

"All right, Sir."

He wasn't all right, Daphne noticed immediately. Beneath his tan there was a strained, anxious look about him, and he kept nervously rubbing his palms along the sides of his shorts.

"It's a real coincidence, Robbie, I met up with Paul in Singapore."

"Did you?"

"We sorted out our differences, didn't we, Daphne?"

"More or less."

"Could I have my orderly bring you something, Major?" The captain spoke. "Tea, perhaps?"

"I'd like some tea, thanks." Daphne smiled.

"Not for me, thank you, Captain." Paul stood up. "Can you

guide me to the airfield?"

"Certainly can, Major Ashfield."

"I'll be back in a couple of hours. We'll have to leave straight away."

"Bye, Paul."

She watched him stride out of the hut with the captain.

"He's an arrogant devil," Robbie said caustically.

"I suppose he is, but I love him, even after what happened."

"You're an idiot, Daph. If he hurts you again, I'll kill him."

"You sound just like Tom," she teased.

"Yeah, well he's having a better time of it than me. This is an awful place. I hate it, jungle, swamps and swarms of mosquitoes. There are scorpions here the size of crayfish, only black. One of the blokes killed a five foot cobra near our lines the other day."

"Uh." She grimaced. "Don't tell me any more. Have you heard from home?"

"Yeah, a couple of days ago. Tom's in Tobruk. No matter what Rommel does, he can't dislodge them. I read it in a paper."

"Aren't you well, Robbie?"

"I got a dose of fever a couple of weeks ago, still get the shivers now and again."

"Malaria?"

"Probably. They gave me a couple of days rest in bed, followed by light duties for a week."

"Let's go for a walk," she suggested.

"We can't, we have to stay here, Daffy. You shouldn't even be here. Could have knocked me down with a feather when the captain said you were coming. When they hauled me up here, I thought I must have done something wrong, instead they told me you would be visiting with an officer from British H.Q. I couldn't believe it."

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A corporal brought some tea and a stew type affair for both of them.

“Lunch.” Robbie grinned. “What I wouldn’t give for a fat, juicy steak. I’m sick of this gruel all the time.”

“I thought you lived on bully beef and hard tack,” she teased.

“Get plenty of that, too.”

“When do you think you’ll get to Singapore? We could do a few Chinese temples, light up a couple of joss sticks,” she laughingly suggested.

“I don’t know. We’ve been into Kuala Lumpur a couple of times. Went to some club in Malacca, did a bit of shopping too. I got Mum a moonstone necklace cheap and a wallet for Dad. I’m saving most of my money to buy a car when I get home. A Buick, I think, or maybe a Ford. I’ve got a mate here from Albury, whose old man owns a bicycle shop, sells motorbikes, too. The old boy wants to retire, so Gordon and I are going into partnership. We might go in for cars as well. Fixing them up, I mean. He likes tinkering around with engines too.”

“Sounds good, Albury won’t be too far from Mum and Dad.”

“What are you going to do about Ashfield?”

“How do you mean?” she asked.

“Well, after what he did.”

“I’ve more or less forgiven him. I love him so much I don’t think I can do anything else.”

“You’re crazy.”

“Maybe I am. I’ll write to Mum and Dad tonight and tell them their runaway son is well.”

“Yeah, I’ll write and tell them what an idiot their daughter is.” He grinned suddenly. “He must have pulled strings.”

“Paul?”

“Yeah.”

“He’s a major.”

Margaret Tanner

"That doesn't mean much out here in the A.I.F. Have you ever heard of an officer bringing someone's sister into a garrison force like this for a visit?"

"No, I hadn't thought about it. He went to school with some colonel who's out here, but really it's his father, Sir Phillip. Has friends in high places, lots of pull and not above using it."

It's more than that, Rob thought, but didn't say so in case he frightened her. Why in the hell would Captain Albright personally escort Paul to where he was going? Why were they travelling in a jeep that he himself had seen furtively loaded up with supplies and camouflage equipment? Were they planning to hide a cache of stores somewhere? He hurriedly switched his thoughts away from Paul's clandestine dealings. When he was younger, he always believed Daphne could read his mind. He schooled his features, inwardly telling himself not to be such an idiot.

There was a knock and a young private stuck his head around the door. "Like some tea, Miss?"

"I've just had some, thanks."

"You're a lucky devil, Rob, how about introducing us?"

"Gordon, this is Daphne, my sister."

"Rob often talks about you." Gordon came in and lounged against the wall.

"You're going to be business partners, I understand," she said.

"Yeah, we'll make a fortune."

He was a thin, wiry youth, with teeth that flashed starkly white in his tanned face.

Another knock, another young soldier came in, followed by three more in quick succession. They were all young, fit, tanned and lonely.

"We'll end up with the whole of 'A' Company here soon," Rob said with a grin.

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It was pleasant talking to the boys and finding out where they came from. Most were Victorians, a handful were from New South Wales. They were hungry for news of home, but she didn't have much to pass on.

Plied with so many cups of tea, she felt absolutely awash with it by the time Captain Albright returned with Paul.

"Good God, boys. What's this, a union meeting?" the captain asked with a chuckle.

"No, Sir."

Paul's eyes narrowed slightly. God, they were insolent, and young Albright encouraged it.

"They're Robbie's friends." Daphne watched annoyance tighten Paul's face. "We were having a lovely time reminiscing about home."

"It's time we were leaving."

"Sure we couldn't offer you something, Major Ashfield?" Captain Albright asked.

"No thanks, I've just had tea with the C.O."

"Okay men, best be getting about your business." They left, laughing and jostling each other as they did so.

"Rob, might like a few minutes to farewell his sister," Paul said.

"Nah. See you, Daffy. Thanks for bringing her out here, Sir."

Paul all but ground his teeth. Cheeky young devil. "That's all right, hopefully we'll see you in Singapore when you get leave. We could dine out together."

"Goodbye, Robbie." Daphne gave him a hug.

"Write to Mum about how fit looking I am, won't you, Daph? She worries about me."

"Of course I will. Take care of yourself. Make sure you look me up when you get leave in Singapore."

They left straight away. Daphne waved to Rob until they turned a bend and the jungle swallowed him up. "He didn't

look well, Paul.”

“No.”

“He said he’s been suffering from malaria. They should admit him to hospital if he’s sick.”

“Probably only got a mild dose. Still, it leaves a person weak. I had a bout of it myself not long after I got here. It’s debilitating in this climate, takes a while to pick up afterwards. You’re a nurse, you should know that.”

“There was something else worrying him, but I’m not sure what.”

It was dark by the time they arrived back at the bungalow. Paul wanted to take her out to dinner somewhere, but she felt too physically and emotionally drained.

They ate at Molly’s, and instinctively Daphne knew neither Paul nor Molly liked each other. Nothing was actually said, although the doctor’s tone appeared more caustic than usual, her wit rapier sharp. Paul, on the other hand, remained cold and aloof, so the meal was not a social success.

Daphne saw Paul out, and in the shelter of the tall shrubs in the front garden, she eagerly went into his arms. He held her close, his mouth warm and firm against her trembling lips, just as she remembered.

“When can I see my lovely girl again?” he asked, nuzzling the soft, smooth skin of her throat.

“I’m not sure.” *Don’t fall into his hand like a ripe plum*, she scolded herself. *Let him suffer a little. You wouldn’t survive if he betrayed you again.*

“I’m busy tomorrow, I’ll be tied up with my colonel all day. What about Wednesday evening? I’ve been invited to a dinner party, come with me,” he said, sensing the inward battle she was having with herself. “It’s in a private home, please come.”

Still she hesitated, fighting the urge to say, *Yes, a hundred times yes, I’d go to the ends of the earth for you.*

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"There's a war on, Daphne. We mightn't have much time, every minute is precious."

"All right."

He gave a sudden groan and pulled her back into his arms. This time his lips were passionate and demanding. "Open your mouth," he instructed huskily. His tongue explored the sweetness within, thrusting, probing, tasting, taking all she was prepared to give but still wanting more. His hands moved restlessly across her back before drifting to her buttocks so he could arch her body into his, letting her feel the strength of his arousal, the heat of his need. Suddenly she was free.

"Until Wednesday. I'll pick you up about eight." He disappeared into the darkness.

Daphne returned to the house. She didn't know it, but her mouth was still soft and tremulous from Paul's fierce kisses, her eyes brimming with love. Molly, seeing this, felt the excruciating pain of hopeless, unrequited love. This sweet girl was too good for the likes of him. Jealousy clawed through her, tinged with desperation. She clenched her hands behind her back to stop herself from reaching out and stroking Daphne's flushed cheeks.

"You look exhausted, dear. Why don't you trot off to bed?"

"I'm fine, really."

"Doctor's orders, hmm."

"Thanks, you're awfully good to me." She kissed Molly's cheek, and Molly forced herself not to drag Daphne into her arms and ravish her mouth, just as Paul Ashfield had so recently done. Patience, she told herself, and one day soon Daphne would be hers, to cosset and treasure for the rest of their lives.

After Daphne retired, Molly paced the floor for a time. Lighting a cigarette, she took a couple of nervous puffs, stubbed it out and lit another. *I'm doing this for you, my angel.*

Margaret Tanner

He isn't worthy of you, no man is. They wouldn't cherish you as I would. I want to give, while him and his kind, only know how to take.

How opportune that Amelia had called around on the pretext of having her blood pressure taken. They both knew it was only an excuse to find out about Daphne and Paul. She regaled Amelia with all she knew, playing the role of concerned employer to the hilt. Whether the other woman guessed the true reason, Molly neither knew nor really cared. Amelia promised to play her part in a charade tomorrow that would have Daphne finishing with Paul Ashfield once and for all.

Amelia was a spiteful, vindictive bitch. They had always detested each other, even when they were at school, but because she did not want her relationship with Paul severed, she could be trusted. Almost too easy. The cleverest plans were always the simplest, Molly thought.

Chapter Eleven

When Amelia arrived at the surgery next morning, Molly ushered her in first. “Daphne, dear, get Mrs.Hildebrandt’s chest x-rays will you? I left them in the filing cabinet, bottom drawer, I think. Or maybe it could have been the top one.”

“How are you feeling today, Mrs.Hildebrandt?”

“I still have the pain in my chest, doctor. Since Nigel died it’s been worse.”

Their voices floated out to Daphne in the next room.

“You should take it easy, no worry, complete rest, doctor’s orders.”

Where on earth did Molly put the x-ray? She was always so careless with the films. They weren’t in the bottom drawer. She started on the next one. The mention of Paul’s name brought her head up and her hand froze on the drawer.

“It’s quite scandalous, the way he carries on with women.” Amelia had an over-exaggerated accent. “I know what he’s like. We’re two of a kind, just out for a good time, no strings attached. But that poor girl, I mean to say she’s really in love with him. Bet he didn’t mention his fiancée?”

"Is he engaged? Molly's voice rose. "Anyone I know?"

"No." Amelia's laugh tinkled like broken glass. "Caroline Bowater in England. They would have been married by now if he hadn't been shipped out here."

The room spun, Daphne clung to the desk and tears sprang to her eyes. *Paul, how could you hurt me like this, again?* She forced herself to look through a different drawer until she finally found the missing x-rays. Scrubbing her wet cheeks with trembling fingers, she extracted the films for Molly.

"Sorry it took so long, they were incorrectly filed."

"That's all right, dear. Aren't you well? You're a trifle pale."

"I do feel a bit queasy, Molly."

"Go home, I can cope here."

She was too sick at heart to see the triumphant look flashing between the other two women, or witness their victorious smiles.

"If you're sure, maybe I will," Daphne said wearily, feeling about a hundred years old and so sad, she would never be happy again.

Back at the bungalow, she rang British H.Q. and asked for Paul. *I won't cry, I won't.* She gritted her teeth. *You fool, you've already shed too many tears over him.* She knew the way he operated, how little respect he had for women. *Who would know better than me?* she thought bitterly, wondering how she could have been so gullible as to fall for his lies again. He was a cheating, immoral playboy.

"Major Ashfield speaking."

"It's Daphne."

"How are you, darling?"

"All right." She forced herself to speak calmly, instead of going into hysterics, throwing herself on the floor kicking and screaming, breaking something. Anything to ease the pain of his betrayal. Caroline Bowater was welcome to him. "I won't

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be able to come out with you tomorrow.”

“Why not?”

“It’s best if we don’t see each other again, Paul.”

“What is it? What’s happened?”

“Nothing,” she said flatly. “It just isn’t decent going out with a man who’s already engaged.” Slowly she put the receiver down, congratulating herself for keeping her voice steady and not letting him know her devastation. A carefree laugh would have added a nice touch, but she was physically beyond it. It would be a miracle if she ever laughed again.



God Almighty, how the hell did Daphne find out about Caroline? That bitch Amelia, probably. Paul raked his fingers through his hair. He couldn’t leave now. The General was giving an important briefing in a few minutes and it could go on for hours.



When Paul rang that evening, Daphne refused to come to the phone, because just hearing his voice would increase her agony. She was already suffering enough, just how much more could a person endure before completely cracking up?

He came over, and she refused to see him. He pushed past Molly and strode into the sitting room.

Daphne, looking as white as death yet still beautiful, stood next to an open window. “We need to talk, I can explain about Caroline.”

“You promised, Paul. You hurt me once and swore it wouldn’t happen again.”

“I love you, Daphne, I swear it.”

“You’re not engaged to Caroline?” Her eyes were bright with unshed tears, her voice husky with emotion. “On your word of honour. Are you and Caroline engaged?”

“Yes, but...”

She turned away and stared out the window. "I'd like you to leave, it's best if we don't see each other again." Pain throbbed in her voice, and the dejected way she stood tore his heart to shreds.

"You heard her, Ashfield. Get out."

"Daphne, please."

"I don't want to see you anymore, Paul. If you have any feeling for me at all, you won't pester me again."

"Pester! If that's what you call it." He suddenly took offence. "Very well," his voice became clipped. "I wouldn't want to be accused of pestering any woman. Goodbye." With a rigid back, he strode out of the house.



In the middle of the night, a few days after Daphne last saw Paul, they were awakened by a frenzied hammering on the door and a wild-eyed Malay woman gabbling about some accident at a nearby village.

Molly grabbed her medical bag. "I don't know when I'll be back, should be right for afternoon clinic, though."

By mid-morning, Daphne started feeling anxious. The houseboy had not put in an appearance, and the old Japanese who did the garden seemed to have vanished off the face of the earth. She ate a solitary meal, after which she paced the floor, wondering what on earth had held Molly up.

When she failed to arrive for afternoon clinic, Daphne reluctantly sent the patients away. By the time she got back to the bungalow, she felt really worried. Should she call the police? What if Molly had broken down somewhere? She would be frightfully upset at any undue fuss.

Daphne was almost glad when it got dark enough to go to bed. *If Molly doesn't show up by morning, regardless of the consequences, I'm going to the police*, she vowed.

About midnight, a rattling and banging at the door woke

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Daphne, and her heart rose up into her mouth. Obeying Molly's instructions that whenever she was alone at night to lock the place securely, she had done so. Sliding out of bed, she went into Molly's room without turning on the lights. The hair at the back of her neck rose when she heard rustling noises outside in the bushes. Were there voices? *Of course not, stop imagining things, you idiot.*

In the top left-hand drawer of the dressing table, she fumbled around until her fingers felt the cold steel of the loaded pistol Molly always kept there for emergencies. Through a crack in the window, she saw the moon, then for an instant it disappeared. Fear almost choked her. Someone had passed by the house and blocked off the moon's rays.

There was a moaning noise, a dragging sound, followed by a deathly silence more frightening than anything she had ever encountered. Her hands felt clammy, her chest so tight with fear it was agony to even breathe. She went to the telephone. With shaking fingers, she dialed the first number popping into her head.

It rang and rang, just when she reached the point of hanging up, an irate male voice snarled, "Major Ashfield."

"Paul, it's Daphne."

"We don't have anything worth saying to each other." His voice sounded harsh, devoid of any warmth.

"Don't hang up, please, I'm frightened." Silence. "Something terrible has happened." Her fear must have pierced his anger. She started crying and talking at the one time, babbling about Molly who hadn't returned and the strange noises in the garden.

"Stay in the house," he ordered. "Don't let anyone in. Anyone at all, you understand, until I get there."

"Hurry please, I'm so frightened."

"Is there a gun?"

"Yes, I've got it."

"Use it if you have to." They were suddenly cut off. The line went absolutely dead.

Should she put the light on and frighten any intruder away? No. Better to sit quietly in the dark so whoever was out there would assume the place was empty. What if it was a robber? He would welcome an empty house. She almost switched the light on. If it was a rapist or murderer, better for him to think no one was home. Oh God, what a dilemma.

Perspiration broke out on her skin. She could feel it running in rivulets between her breasts. One minute she felt hot, the next freezing. She waited, huddled on the floor, fingering the cold steel of the gun. Would she have the guts to fire it? After what seemed like hours, the sound of a car roaring up the drive came to her.

"Paul!" She got up and dashed towards the door, then stopped. What if it wasn't him?

"Daphne! Daphne are you there? It's me." His voice was a soothing litany in her ears and she collapsed in a heap on the floor. "Daphne, for God's sake. Answer me."

"Paul, Paul," she sobbed his name, over and over.

"Open up."

She tried to stand up but couldn't, so on her hands and knees she crawled to the door and dragged herself upright.

"Daphne, for God's sake."

She fumbled with the bolt. There was a rush of air, then she was in Paul's arms and sobbing wildly.

"It's all right, my darling, it's all right." The light blazed so suddenly its glare blinded her.

"There was someone out there, Paul."

Two soldiers accompanied him.

"Search outside, will you?"

"Yes, Sir."

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"Did you have a nightmare?"

"No, I heard something outside. Awful moaning and thuds, it was horrible."

"Jesus Christ." The loud exclamation had Paul releasing her and sprinting towards the back. On legs that felt like jelly, she made to follow.

"Stay inside." His barked command stopped her in her tracks.

"My God, Sir, look at this."

When Paul returned, his face was ashen. "I want you to stay in the house. Don't come out, I'm going to call the police."

"What's wrong? What's happened?"

He swallowed quickly. "Molly's dead."

"Dead?" She stared at him in disbelief.

"It must have been her trying to get into the house, someone attacked her."

"Oh, God, I didn't let her in."

"It wouldn't have made any difference. She's got shocking head injuries, must have been an exceptionally strong woman, to make it back here. I doubt if most men could have done it."

Daphne just stood there with tears streaming down her face. "She probably ran off the road, that old car of hers is a death trap."

"I'm sorry. She was murdered."

When Daphne regained consciousness, she lay on her bed with Paul massaging her hands.

"Murdered, did you say?"

"I'm afraid so. The police are here now, I'll have to see them. Just lie quietly I'll be back soon."

"Paul."

"Yes." He turned around and her eyes were shimmering with tears. "Thank you for coming."

Daphne slowly manoeuvred herself off the bed after he left

the room. By hanging onto the furniture, she made it out into the hallway, then wished she hadn't.

"It's a miracle she made it back here, her head is staved in," an unfamiliar voice said.

Darkness engulfed her once more. When her eyes focused again, Paul's anxious face hovered near hers.

"You should have stayed in the bedroom." He scooped her up. "Forget anything you heard out there."

"Was she awfully beaten?"

"I'm afraid so, Sunshine. Whoever murdered her must have been in a frenzy."

"Anything else?" She couldn't bear to actually utter the words.

"The police don't think so, they'll know for sure after the doctor has been."

"Poor Molly."

"There's nothing for us to do here now. I'll throw a few things in a case for you."

"I've got nowhere to go, Paul."

Dear God, how pathetic those few words sounded, he thought.

"I'll take you to a hotel."

"I want to stay with you, please. I haven't got much money."

"It doesn't matter, I'll be responsible for all your expenses."

He used his thumb to push back the tumbled hair from her forehead.

"I don't even have a job now," she whispered.

"Don't worry, I'll look after you."

"Let me stay with you. I'll go mad if I'm left alone in some strange place. Except for Helen Sawyer, I don't really know anyone here. Molly and I didn't socialise much."

She looked so little and defenceless it smote his heart. Her

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eyes, wide with shock and grief, were almost green, standing out like beacons in her ghostly face.

"All right." At this very moment, he could refuse her nothing. "I'll grab up a few things for you."

She clutched at his arm, whimpering piteously. "Don't leave me."

"Darling, I won't."

Daphne remembered little of the drive to Paul's bungalow. He kept her close to him with an arm about her shoulder.

"My boy will have gone to bed by now, but I'll get him up if there's anything you need. There are only two bedrooms, the master bedroom is mine, there's a smaller one for guests. Would you like some tea?"

"No thanks," she said, her voice scarcely above a whisper.

He showed her the bathroom that separated the two bedrooms and asked, "Is there anything you want?"

She shook her head. If only she wouldn't keep staring at him like that. God, she looked so tragically beautiful, he felt ashamed of the carnal desire she aroused in him.

"Here we are, if you want anything, just yell out."

He put the case down in one corner. "I have to be at H.Q. early tomorrow, so I'll see you when I get back. Probably best if you don't leave here, there could be a few reporters sniffing around."

After he left, Daphne pulled the bedclothes back and crawled between the sheets. She adjusted the mosquito nets and closed her eyes tightly to blot out the horror. She wanted to cry and scream at the awfulness of it all. Poor Molly. Who could have done such a fiendish thing? Her eyes were burning and sore from weeping and it felt as if a platoon of drummers were banging inside her head.

She lay in the darkness, listening for God alone knew what. When Paul's light went out, it was suddenly pitch black. Sheer

exhaustion allowed her to drift off, but her sleep was peppered with nightmares. She jack-knifed into a sitting position and sat there, trembling. It was impossible to stay alone for even a moment longer. She wanted Paul. He was her lifeline to sanity.

She slid out of bed. Feeling her way to the main bedroom, she finally found the mosquito netting and pushed it aside. Paul slept soundly, his breathing regular and even.

“Paul.”

He muttered something. She heard the sheet rustling as he moved. She was shivering, yet her nightgown was damp with perspiration. Putting out a trembling hand, she touched his bare shoulder.

“What’s the matter?” he asked groggily.

“Let me stay here with you.”

“Daphne, what are you doing?”

“I keep having nightmares about Molly. I can’t stay on my own, anymore, I just can’t.”

“For God’s sake. What are you trying to do to me?” Even as he spoke, he moved aside for her. He wore cotton pyjama pants, she vaguely noticed, and his bare chest was damp.

“I’m not afraid with you, Paul.”

She went to him so trustingly, he felt humbled. He drew her close and it felt good having her soft, sweet body next to his once more. How many times had he dreamed of holding his Sunshine like this?

Almost immediately Daphne drifted into an exhausted sleep. He lay there savouring her nearness, inhaling the sweet perfume of her skin. He slid one hand along the full length of her body, inwardly despising himself for the sudden surge of passion this evoked.

When Daphne awoke next morning, she was alone in the large double bed. Had she dreamed last night’s shocking

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events? Of course not. She shuddered. Molly, who had been such a staunch friend, was dead, it was unbelievable.

After bathing and dressing, she wandered into the dining section of a large sitting room. The furniture was of white painted cane, with brightly coloured cushions and rugs, serviceable and functional, befitting a man living on his own.

From the small, functional kitchen, a back door led to a covered in trellis, where exotic vines grew profusely.

She saw an elderly Chinaman using a hoe energetically. He did not speak, just bowed slightly as she passed by. Back inside the house, a grinning youth, immaculate in white trousers and shirt greeted her. "I am Sam, Major Ashfield's houseboy." He spoke excellent English, with just the faintest trace of an accent.

"Hello, I'm Daphne Clarke, do you think I might have some tea, please?"

"My wife will be happy to make it for you."

"Do you live here, Sam?"

"Our quarters are down there." He waved his hand to indicate a small, whitewashed house half-hidden behind a huge tree. His wife was little more than a child, about sixteen or so. She was much lighter skinned than him, almost certainly a half-caste, yet she spoke no English.

As if seeing Daphne's puzzlement, Sam grinned cheerfully. "We are newly married, Su Su comes from one of the inland villages."

"Oh."

"Her name is really," he gabbled something Daphne had no hope of understanding. "You could not pronounce it, the Major has trouble too." He grinned while the girl merely bowed her head.

The day dragged, Daphne alternatively paced the floor, read or drank cups of tea supplied by the silent Su Su. She

shuddered on reading the report of Molly being murdered. The police were continuing their investigations, the papers went on to say.

There were a number of calls from reporters. Somehow they must have tracked her down. They became so persistent, her only recourse was to leave the phone off the hook and refuse to see anyone who came around.



Paul came home in the middle of the afternoon, hot, worried and irritable.

“Had a bad day?” She met him in the sitting room.

“Bloody terrible.” What an understatement! He flung himself into a chair. “See about getting me a cold drink, will you, please?” He raked his fingers through his hair. A garbled message from one of his Coast Watchers had been cut off mid-sentence. Coupled with the furore over Molly’s death, the day had been a real bloody shocker. Daphne got his usual stengah, which was half whisky and soda.

“Thanks, where are the servants?”

“Around.”

“They’re damn slack. God, this place is getting to me.” He undid the top button on his shirt. “Seen the afternoon papers?”

“No, the morning edition sickened me.”

“We’ve made the front page. I warned you not to talk to any reporters.”

“I didn’t.”

“Well, how the hell do they know you spent the night here with me?”

“I don’t know. What did they say?”

“Read it. They shouldn’t be allowed to print such scurrilous filth. I even had the Brigadier breathing down my neck, wanting to know what was going on.”

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Under the headlines, '**Local Doctor Slain**', was the story of how Dr Grattan's assistant had spent the night in the quarters of Major Paul Ashfield. Daphne felt sickened, especially when they went on to state that there were rumours of Major Ashfield and Miss Clarke having had an intimate relationship in Australia in 1938.

"They shouldn't be allowed to print such things, it isn't fair. They make me sound like some common tart just waiting for a chance to jump into bed with you."

"Forget them." Paul knew it was foolish letting Daphne stay with him. She cried so piteously when he suggested going to a hotel in town, against his better judgement he gave in to her.

Rumours were rife about the murder. There were those in some Government circles who were certain it had been the work of Japanese infiltrators. They kept this information from the populace to avoid panic. Instead, robbery was put out as the motive.

Molly Grattan's sexual peculiarities were exposed when an unidentified former female lover came forward to tell about her relationship being broken off by the arrival in Singapore of Daphne Clarke. How dare they vilify Molly when she wasn't able to defend herself? Daphne fumed. It was disgraceful, she felt tempted to contact the paper and tell them exactly what she thought about such contemptible, erroneous reporting.

Paul went white with rage when someone at H.Q. showed him the latest newspaper report. The very thought any part of it might be true sickened him. He had copped a lot of flack over the last few days because of Daphne, but this. It could not be true, yet he had seen with his own eyes the carnal way Molly Grattan stared at her.

A white-faced Daphne met him at the front door. "Did you read the afternoon paper?"

"Yes." He all but pushed past her.

"You don't believe them?"

He shook her restraining hand off his arm and strode indoors.

"Paul, Paul," his name came out in a desperate plea that spun him around. "You don't think it's true, surely?"

"What am I supposed to believe? You lived in the house with her, just the two of you, I saw her lusting after you."

He watched pain darkening her eyes to green. "It isn't true, I liked her, nothing more."

Daphne stood there quiet and dignified with not a vestige of colour left in her face. She looked so little and fragile he wanted to comfort her, but some of the poison had infiltrated his system.

"I'll pack my things and leave. I can't pay you for my board and lodging yet, but when I get a job I will. Maybe Robbie might be able to loan me some money."

"It isn't necessary." He stood silently watching as she slowly walked towards the guest bedroom with her head lowered, her shoulders hunched dispiritedly.

"Daphne."

"Yes."

"Were you and Molly lovers?"

She stared him straight in the face. "I've only ever had one lover, Paul."

The words were softly spoken, yet he heard them as clearly as if she had shouted them from the rooftops.

"Don't go." In three strides he caught up to her. "I love you, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have taken any notice of those filthy lies."

"There can't be love without trust."

"I was crazy with jealousy. Let's get married."

"Once I would have been the proudest girl in the world to have accepted..." she trailed off.

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“Daphne, please, I’ve been a bastard. Can’t you forgive me?”

“I don’t know. If you thought I took a man lover that would have been bad enough, but another woman, it’s revolting.”

“I thought, well maybe she’d taken advantage of you, I—” He swallowed quickly. “I don’t think I could live without you now, Daphne. You can’t know how I’ve looked forward to coming home these last few days. To see you waiting at the door, bringing me a drink, just being there. Not asking questions when I didn’t want to talk. The flowers in the rooms. You made this bungalow a home, something I’ve never really had before, that’s why it nearly killed me to think you might have lavished such affection on someone else,” he went on passionately. “I want to be the only person in your life. I don’t want to share you with anyone else. I want you all to myself.”

“Oh, Paul.” She ran into his arms. “I don’t think I could survive if we were separated again.”

“You’ll marry me?”

“Yes.”



They were married a week later. Paul insisted on a traditional wedding. Daphne chose an old-world gown of pearl-tinted satin, featuring a full skirt and long, tight sleeves. A beaded Juliet cap held the limerick lace veil in place.

Helen was their only bridesmaid. She wore a frock of hyacinth blue jersey crepe with a topknot of primroses in her hair. Major George Duncan from British H.Q. was best man. General Percival couldn’t attend, but of the fifty invited guests, many were high-ranking military personnel.

Paul arranged leave for Robbie so he might give the bride away, and as they stood beneath an archway of white and pink flowers in the grounds of a prestigious hotel, Daphne blinked back tears of happiness.

The men wore their dress uniforms, and Daphne thought Paul was the handsomest man she had ever seen. He slipped a simple gold wedding band on her finger. Inscribed on the inside with both their names, was the date 15.11.1941. Paul made his vows clearly before the Army Chaplain, Daphne's voice was so low and tremulous only those at the front could hear it.

They held their reception at a hotel in a private room, and the colourful tropical plants, set out at various intervals, gave the place the look of an exotic garden. The sit-down meal consisted of several courses. Seafood, followed by consommé, then huge platters of cold meat and poultry with roasted or salad vegetables as an accompaniment.

"This is really something, Daph." A grinning Robbie tried everything. He was the only non-commissioned officer; Helen, Robbie and herself, the only Australians.

"It's quite disgusting, the way you eat," she teased. "You should be as fat as a pig." Laughter lit up her eyes, and she couldn't stop smiling.

She tapped Paul's arm to draw his attention to something, and he clenched his hands under the table to stop himself from touching her. She was so lovely, he was impatient to leave so they could be alone together. Their first night would be spent here at the hotel. After that, they would have a week in the Malayan Highlands at Fraser's Hill.

After the first two dances, Paul found himself having to watch as several of his officer friends, who were without female escorts, monopolised her. He circulated amongst their guests, undertaking duty dances with a forced smile. He wanted Daphne in his arms, not some fat, corseted colonel's wife.

"She looks beautiful, doesn't she?" Rob remarked, coming up to stand beside him.

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Paul, looking into his eyes, suddenly thought this boy should be home with his parents, not over here fighting in a war.

“Enjoying yourself, Rob?” Paul grinned. “I saw you dancing with the bridesmaid.”

“Did you?”

Not just dancing either, Paul thought, having seen the pair of them sneaking off outside.

“Look after Daphne for me, won’t you?”

“I intend to. Besides, you’ll be around to keep an eye on her yourself.”

“Paul.” The hand touching his sleeve trembled. “Do you think some things are pre-ordained?”

The laughter had faded and Rob’s eyes burned with a strange, intensity.

“I don’t know, really.”

“You’ll always look after Daphne, won’t you? After my mother, she’s the nicest person I’ve ever known. She feels things deeply.”

“Of course I’ll look after her. I love your sister to distraction. Besides, you’ll be around to ensure I do.”

“Will I?”

Paul felt suddenly chilled to the bone. He opened his mouth but no words came out, he could only stare into Rob’s intense young face. His skin suddenly turned pale, and the wavy swathe of dark hair falling across the boy’s forehead was damp with perspiration.

Daphne coming back, laughing happily on the arm of a young captain, interrupted them.

“I’ve delivered her back to you safely, Sir.”

“Thank you, Mark.”

“How about a dance with me, Daph?” Rob asked.

“Well,” she hesitated, looking at Paul.

“Yes, dance with your brother, darling. It’s after midnight, I want to leave soon.”

Paul lit a cigarette and smoked it thoughtfully. As he watched them waltzing together, the creamy bridal gown billowed out, giving her an almost ethereal look. Why was it he suddenly felt icy cold? God, this had to stop, he was becoming maudlin.

He had been under a hell of a strain lately. Daphne didn’t know it, but had they not married, she would have been absolutely ostracised by the European population of Singapore. The scandal attached to Molly Grattan’s murder certainly hastened his proposal.

It took another hour before they could extricate themselves from their guests. Rob, who was staying at the O.Rs Club, would return to Johore early next morning.

“Goodbye, Rob. I’ll see you soon.” Daphne wanted to break down and cry when it was time for them to part, but she forced herself not to. Rob wouldn’t want his sister weeping all over him, no young soldier would.



For her first night as Paul’s wife she wore a pale blue, crepe georgette nightgown with a lace insert in the bodice and skirt. He wore nothing under his cherry coloured silk dressing gown. She went into his arms eagerly. His kisses were gentle at first, but soon erupted into a demanding, white-hot passion when he felt her response.

“Touch me, Sunshine,” he groaned, and shyly she did as he asked. His lovemaking was not hurried at first, because he wanted to savour every delightful part of her. Taste all the sweetness she so eagerly offered. Her breasts were so soft and creamy, her nipples ripening in his mouth. It had been so long since they made love, he fought to keep his now rampaging passion under control so she would be truly ready for him.

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When he could deny himself no longer, he slipped between her thighs and she received him eagerly. He wanted to lose himself in the lush, moist warmth of her feminine recess. Wanted to be joined to her forever, and though he knew he ran the risk of getting her pregnant, no power on earth could make him withdraw or use those hated French letters again. He wanted to feel her heated flesh laving his heated flesh, wanted them to be so sensitive to each other the slightest touch would send them plummeting over the edge of sanity.

He raised her hips slightly so she would take him more deeply into her garden of pleasure, that perfect, beautiful place that had known no man but him. He held back, God alone knew how, building up her need, stoking her passion until she trembled and gasped.

Daphne felt as if she had self-combusted. No mere mortal could endure such searing heat, she thought, frantically clawing at his back. She didn't want him to stop. Never wanted him to stop. Their bodies were attuned to each other, throbbing together, quivering and moving in perfect unison. Giving, taking, always desperate for more. This magic moment between a bride and her new husband would never come again. She closed her eyes to blot out the glare from a million stars swirling around inside her head.

"Daphne. My love," he cried out as he exploded deep within her convulsing centre. Several more frantic thrusts and he came a second time and they collapsed, utterly and completely satiated and exhausted.



The next morning, Paul woke up first. He propped himself up on one elbow, and stared down at this lovely girl who was now truly, in every sense of the word, his wife. Her hair fell into bright waves on the white pillow, her cheeks, slightly grazed from the roughness of his beard last night, were rosy

red against her alabaster skin. Her eyelashes were thick, light brown but tipped with gold. She looked young and vulnerable. He gently traced the outline of her jaw with one finger before running it across her pink, slightly puckered lips.

He wanted to wake her up so they might make mad passionate love again, but forced himself not to. Last night in his desperation and greed, he had demanded too much. Before he succumbed to the temptation of his rampaging carnal desire, he swung his legs out of bed and stood up. Without even bothering to put on a robe, he headed for the bathroom.

Daphne woke up to find herself alone in the large double bed. The door connecting with the bathroom swung open and Paul strode through with just a towel draped carelessly around his hips.

“Good morning, Mrs.Ashfield.” It delighted him to see delicate colour fire her cheeks.

“Hello, Paul.”

“The bathroom is free if you want it.” Taking pity on her embarrassment, he turned his back to collect fresh clothing, giving her time to slip on her nightgown.

They spent a night in Penang. A ferry took them to a luxury hotel, and the next morning they went sightseeing and were caught in a tropical downpour. An inch of rain fell in only a few minutes, followed by the sun coming out again. They passed bamboo thickets and mangrove swamps, and further inland large rubber plantations, until eventually arriving at Fraser’s Hill.

It was much cooler up here. That night as they lay satiated after a long, passionate session of lovemaking, Daphne pulled an extra blanket over them.

“Happy, sweetheart?” he asked.

“Yes, Paul, I love you so much.”

After a week away, they returned to Paul’s bungalow and

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things settled into a routine. During the day she had little to do except read or go for walks. Sam always drove her to the markets or into the city. She started sharing coffee with Valda, the wife of a colonel who lived in the next bungalow to them.

Valda Beaumont, a cheerful woman in her mid-forties, had lived in the Far East for years. Her twelve-year-old twin boys were at an English boarding school. She was slightly patronising, but nevertheless friendly, and did a lot to have Daphne accepted by the other wives.

Valda took her to the Officers Mess for the 'Happy Hour,' a get together for army wives each week. What an eye opener. The bitchiness, petulance and sheer malice of some women was unbelievable. The way they denigrated each other's husbands shocked Daphne.

Paul wanted her to become one of them? Never. The tennis parties and bridge afternoons were bearable, but after only the first couple of sessions of the Happy Hour, she refused to attend any more.

What was wrong with these women? The Japanese were advancing. Refugees poured in with only the clothes they stood up in, telling stories of terrible hardship, yet their main worry was when to start Christmas shopping.

At night there were cocktail parties and dinner dances. There was something on all the time. Paul didn't mean to be selfish, but just once she would have liked to be consulted before he made social arrangements for them.

"It's getting to me, sitting around doing nothing all day," she complained to Valda. "I'm a nursing sister. I should be at the hospital doing my job, not gallivanting around in an endless circle of useless parties. Most of the women can't stand me. If it wasn't for Paul, they'd snub me completely."

"They're bitches, most of them."

"Valda!"

“Well, they are. I’ve had twenty-five years of being an army officer’s wife, and believe me this crowd is typical. Did you hear Louise carrying on about the morals of the enlisted men? My dear, that woman has gone through more lovers than I’ve had cups of tea.”

Daphne laughed.

“Probably miffed because the troops have more taste than to take what she so blatantly offers.”

“It’s disgusting, really.” Daphne grimaced. “Still, she’s married to such an old man.”

“My dear, the colonel is the only son of an English Lord who is about ninety-seven. Not only does he have pots of money, she wants to end up a Lady.” They both laughed. “Actually, Daphne, you’re not looking as a happy as a new wife should.”

“I love Paul desperately, but I’d like to help out at one of the hospitals, only he refuses point blank to allow me to work. I’m not used to doing nothing, I’ve always held a job.”

“After a while he might relent, give him time. Major Ashfield is rather possessive when it comes to his new wife, doesn’t want to share her around.”

“I know, and I love him for it, it’s just, well, oh I don’t know, then there’s Robbie.”

“Your brother?”

“Yes, I’m worried about him.”

“He’ll be fine, a strapping young chap like that can look after himself.”

“He’s only nineteen. He’s changed. I know the climate can get you down, but he’s, well, sort of fatalistic or something.”

“My, you have got the blues. Not pregnant are you?”

“I don’t think so. We’ve only been married a few weeks.”

“I fell in on my wedding night. So let me tell you, if anyone says you can’t get pregnant the first time, they’re talking through their hats.”

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“I thought your boys were only twelve, what I mean is...”

“I miscarried my first baby at seven months. It took me years to get pregnant again.”

Daphne liked Valda’s frankness. She was not two-faced. If there was something about you she disapproved of, she said so.

Chapter Twelve

On the night of the 7th December 1941, the Japanese bombed Singapore. The whole place had been lit up like a Christmas tree and the military was furious about it. On the 8th December 'Z' force were leaving Singapore.

Daphne caught a taxi down to the wharf, and lined up with dozens of others to watch the convoy leave. What an awe-inspiring sight watching the *Repulse* and the *Prince of Wales* with their four destroyer escorts, putting out to sea.

A few days later, like the rest of Singapore, she was absolutely shocked when she heard that both the *Repulse* and the *Prince of Wales* had been sunk.

This was the catalyst for her to act, without consulting Paul. She couldn't sit idly by and do nothing. She rang Helen at the 113th Australian General hospital.

"Helen, its Daphne, would there be any work for me at the hospital? I'm sick of sitting around doing nothing productive.

"Good to hear your voice, Daph. I've already spoke to Matron about you. Once I heard about the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse*, I knew you'd want to help out, no matter

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what Paul says. You're welcome to come any time you like, the sooner the better."

Paul was furious when he came home and she told him what she had done. They had the first real argument of their marriage. "I will not have my wife working," he stated emphatically.

"I have to do my part for the war effort. They need help and I'm going to give it to them."

"I forbid you, Daphne, absolutely forbid it. Do you hear?"

"I don't care. I'm not in the army. You can't give me orders. I've already promised to start tomorrow, Helen arranged it with Matron."

Backwards and forwards they raged at each other.

"For God's sake, do you have to be so working class all the time?"

"Better than being a bloody snob like you."

He raised his hand, then dropped it again. Without a word, he turned on his heel and stalked out the door, banging it so hard the whole house shook.

When he didn't return by eleven o'clock, Daphne decided to go to bed. If he wanted to throw a tantrum like some spoilt brat, she wasn't going to wait up for him. She woke up some time later when the door banged, followed by an angry oath from Paul. Burying her face in the pillow, she pretended to be asleep.

He switched the bedside lamp on and she heard him fumbling with his clothes. "You awake?" he slurred as he slid into bed.

Ignoring him, she kept her back turned. He pushed down the straps on her nightie and fumbled for her breast. She lay there, trying not to respond to his kneading fingers or his lips nibbling at the nape of her neck.

"You're not asleep, so stop pretending."

"You've been drinking." She used the only weapon she had against him-anger.

"A little." He tugged impatiently at her nightgown.

"Leave me alone, I don't like being mauled by a drunk."

His hands on her thighs were rough with impatience. Only when her clenched fist caught him in the face did his angry exploration stop.

"Bitch," he snarled. "Bloody well sleep on your own." He wrenched the sheet off the bed and stalked out of the room.



When Paul awoke next morning in the spare room, he felt like death. God, what had happened last night? He couldn't really remember. Had he forced himself on Daphne? Nausea rose up in his throat. Did he do as his father once did. Rape the woman he loved?

Would she leave him after the way he acted? Who would blame her if she did? His hands shook so much, he nicked himself shaving. "You ought to cut your bloody throat," he muttered.

Daphne left Paul sleeping off his drunkenness and got Sam to drive her to the hospital. Helen's pronouncement that she looked like death was not a revelation. Her own mirror attested to this. She was shocked to find Paul's impatient fingers had left faint bruises on her breasts and thighs. These were nothing compared to the hurt he inflicted on her heart. What would have happened if she hadn't hit him? She died a little every time she thought about it.

They sent her to help the quartermaster. Some of her duties were to record and care for personal gear owned by the patients. She would have preferred general nursing duties, but this at least was something. The identification tags soldiers wore around their necks at all times were called a 'Dead Meat Ticket.' It was such a revolting, if apt name, it gave her the

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shudders.

A lieutenant colonel was the Commanding Officer, while captains controlled X-ray, Pathology and similar sections. Captain Bill Foster was the QM, a wiry, grey-haired man of some forty years. He liked this pretty young woman who was to be his assistant, although he secretly thought it an utter waste having a trained sister doing the work any soldier could do.

"There's always a chain of command before they get to us." He stood poker-faced and recited. "The Army Medical Corps line of evacuation starts with the troops in the field, Regimental Aid Post, Field Ambulance units, Main Dressing Station, Advanced Dressing Station, Casualty Clearing Station."

Daphne burst out laughing. "You sound like a school teacher reciting something off the blackboard." He grinned and she knew she was accepted. The other staff members were all friendly. As long as she didn't think of Paul and his behaviour last night, she felt happy being back in a medical environment.

"Are you sure you're all right, Daph?" Helen asked as they sat in the Officers' Mess eating a salad lunch.

"Yes, no, I'm not really. Paul and I had a frightful row yesterday, about my coming here."

"He still doesn't want you working."

"No."

"He's bloody selfish. You need something to do and God knows we need the help. Hey, heard from Rob lately?"

"A letter last week. He's hoping to get leave for Christmas."

"I know. Your little brother has been writing to me."

"Has he?"

"Yes, he's a good kid, I'm fond of him."

At four o'clock, Bill told her to go home, but dreading the prospect of facing Paul and another row, she dawdled around for a time. Would she go straight to the bungalow? Maybe go

to the theatre, or wander through the department stores in Raffles Place? Helen wouldn't be off until six, so she could hardly hang around the hospital until then.



Paul waited impatiently just near the main entrance of the hospital for Daphne. Four o'clock she was supposed to finish. He glanced at his watch once more, nearly five. Then he saw her, a slight figure in a grey nurse's dress, trailing forlornly out of the hospital.

She looked to be dragging her feet. No wonder, he thought bitterly. Why would she want to hurry home after what happened last night?

"Daphne." He stepped up to her and something died in him when she cringed away. "I, I thought I'd pick you up."

"You shouldn't have bothered." Her voice was flat, dead sounding. Her eyes were wounded, like those of a trapped animal.

"I'm sorry about last night. I was drunk, I don't know what came over me."

"Don't you?"

"Let's go for a drink somewhere. We could eat out, too."

"Yes." She accepted so readily he felt shattered. *Anything to keep from being alone with me*, he thought, feeling sick to his stomach.

"Raffles, driver."

They didn't speak until the car pulled up outside the imposing white building. The driver opened the door for Paul, who got out and turned to help Daphne, but she clambered out by herself.

He didn't touch her in case she rebuffed him, so they walked side by side with a foot or more separating them. Daphne ordered a long, cool fruit drink, Paul his usual stengah.

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"Will we order now?" he finally asked.

"I'm not very hungry, really."

"I'll chose something for both of us, shall I?"

She just sat there, twisting the only jewellery she wore, his plain gold wedding band.

"Did you enjoy your day at the hospital?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry about last night, honestly, I acted like a bastard. Can you forgive me?"

"I don't know."

He groaned. "Please, I'm sorry. If I could undo the hurt, I would, I'll make it up to you, promise."

"Buy me some new clothes?"

"If you like, jewellery, anything."

"I don't want your money, Paul, I never did. Your love is all I want."

"You've got it, you know you have. I swear there wasn't another woman last night. If you were thinking there..."

"I don't want to talk about it anymore," she interrupted him.

"We have to."

"Why? Frightened I might withhold my sexual favours."

He spluttered into his drink.

"Don't worry, I'm your wife. If I don't give you your marital rights, you can just take them."

"Like I tried to do last night," he said bitterly. "You're hurt and upset and you have every right to be, but I love you. You can't stop loving me because of one stupid thing I did. I'm sorry, I really am. I didn't mean to hurt you. I swear it. You made me angry when you fought me and I lost my temper. You certainly pack a wallop." He rubbed his cheek.

"Listen to me." He clasped one of her hands between his own. "This voluntary evacuation isn't working. Ships coming

in with supplies and reinforcements are sailing off half-empty because people won't leave. There will be compulsory evacuation for European women soon. You'd have to go. We mightn't see each other for years."

"I'm a nurse."

"It won't matter. You don't imagine the British Government would allow any of our women to be left here if the Japs come."

"What about you?"

"I'm an army officer, I'll be staying."

Fear that something might happen to him overrode everything else. "I wouldn't leave, not unless you did, Paul."

"You're too good for me, Sunshine, far too good." He traced the line of her lips with his finger. It hurt him like a physical blow when he found them to be slightly swollen.

"Would you care to dance?"

"No, I want to go home."

"We've only had our first course and you didn't eat much of yours."

"I ate a big lunch at the hospital."

When they arrived back at the bungalow, they shared a jug of iced tea. They sat in the sitting room for a time without speaking. Paul kept smoking one cigarette after the other.

"I might go to bed, I have to be at the hospital before eight."

"I'll drop you off on my way to work." He stood up when she did, but made no attempt to follow. "Daphne."

"Yes." She swung around to face him.

"Would you." He swallowed a couple of times. "Would you prefer me to sleep in the spare room again?"

"Not unless you want to."

He watched her leave the room. Going over to the liquor cabinet, he poured himself a whisky, which he gulped down. About to refill his glass, he thought better of it, and put it back

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on the tray. He heard the bath water running and waited for the sounds of water gurgling down the plughole. After another few minutes, he went into the bedroom, shrugged out of his uniform and put on a dressing gown. The door to the bathroom was slightly opened so he pushed it. A horrified breath caught in his throat.

Daphne stood there naked. She grabbed for the towel, but wasn't quick enough to hide the purple imprints of his fingers, flawing the smooth white skin of her breasts and thighs.

"My God, Daphne, I loathe myself."

"It doesn't matter."

It did. Deep down, they both knew it did.

She was already in bed with the sheet pulled up to her chin when he came in. "I wouldn't blame you if you wanted me to sleep in the spare room."

"It doesn't matter," she told him wearily. "Do what you like, you always do anyway."

He slid in beside her, lying quietly instead of reaching for her as he normally did.

"Would you like to go home for Christmas?" he asked when the silence between them stretched unbearably.

"Home?"

"Yes, to Wangaratta, I could arrange it."

"Would you come too?"

"No."

"Robbie?"

"I don't think so."

"I'll stay here. Paul." She touched his arm. "I thought you were going to force yourself on me last night, that's why I hit you."

He felt her shudder.

"But I still love you," she said with a catch in her voice, "I'll always love you, no matter what."

"You're too good for me, Sunshine. I don't think I would have, well, even if you hadn't slapped me, but I loathe myself because I'll never be a hundred percent certain."



Christmas came and went. They put on a small dinner party for Valda and Joe Beaumont, Helen and Rob. They served a traditional Christmas meal. Roast turkey and vegetables, and even though it was so hot, plum pudding in a flaming brandy sauce, just like at home.

They sang Christmas carols together without musical accompaniment, thought of loved ones at home, but enjoyed themselves, just the same. Even though Kuala Lumpur aerodrome had been bombed three days previously, it did not dampen their spirits. Rob had three days leave, which he spent with them, playing golf, tennis and swimming.



There were dances and numerous other functions that Paul and Daphne attended, but underneath the frivolity were undertones of anxiety now. She continued working at the hospital. Trains from up north brought in hundreds of military casualties, and because they were so busy, she often found herself on nursing duties.

Daphne entered the orthopaedic ward and waved to her favourite patient, a young sailor from the *Repulse*.

"How are you feeling today, Eddie?" she asked with a smile. Even though both his legs were in traction, he kept making jokes and she admired him for it.

"Much better now I've seen you, Sister. I wish you weren't married." He gave her a cheeky grin.

"Well I am married, and if you don't stop flirting with me, I'll hit you on the head with this bed pan," she threatened, trying to sound severe, but spoilt it all by laughing. "How's our sergeant doing?"

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“Not real good,” Eddie said. “He had a bad night, they upped his dose of morphine.”

Daphne went over to the young English sergeant’s bed and picked up his hand. “Eddie said you had a rough night?”

“It wasn’t too good, Sister, but I’m feeling all right now,” he whispered.

He had sustained shocking burns to his face and hands in one of the bombing raids. Lying encased in bandages, he must have been in agony, yet he never complained. Comparing his behaviour to that of some European women who whined because they missed their imported foods, and greedily bought things on the black market, made her shudder with disgust. If they had even an ounce of decency, they’d be down here trying to help out.

“Have you had any word on your brother?” Eddie asked.

“No, but there are heaps of rumours flying around about fierce fighting and bombing in Malaya. My husband is a Major and even he can’t find out anything much. Don’t you worry about Robbie, he’ll be fine.” She tried to sound reassuring, when in actual fact she felt sick with anxiety. Eddie had enough problems of his own without worrying about her.”

Refugees pouring in from Malaya were being billeted in some of the larger homes or in public halls, and the harrowing stories they told about escaping with not much more than the clothes on their back did nothing to allay her fear. She forced herself to push aside her own worries and smile as she went around the ward, checking on the comfort of each patient. A drink of cool water, a sympathetic ear, rearranging pillows, it wasn’t much when she could have been helping the surgeons in the operating theatre. She wanted to do more, but this at least was something.

Daphne wiped her hand wearily across her forehead. The climate was so debilitating out here. She wanted to run away

and hide somewhere, have a really good cry, but couldn't afford the luxury. *Once I start I wouldn't be able to stop*, she thought, and what about her patients if she cracked up? *Pull yourself together Daphne Ashfield. Show a bit of spunk.*



Following his usual routine, Paul waited for Daphne outside the hospital. She often looked so tired, scarcely able to drag one foot after the other. She had lost weight. Her cheekbones were quite prominent now in a face made pale by fatigue and anxiety.

He argued and pleaded with her to lessen the workload at the hospital, all to no avail, because the pain of her patients was Daphne's pain. He could see it in her eyes. The way she spoke about 'our boys,' he felt powerless to do anything about it. She gave everything of herself and this very generosity sapped her strength. Of course, he asked too much of her as well, he shouldn't be so demanding.

He had been brought up to think only of himself and what he wanted, and it was hard to change, especially in their present environment. *You selfish bastard*, he castigated himself. *Make yourself change. Surely you can do that much for Daphne.*

She despised the way some of the officer's wives carried on. He rather despised them himself, but could understand it. Having lived a pampered life himself, he took for granted and as his right, things Daphne would not, and these women were exactly the same. He glanced at his watch, twenty minutes late. Some soldier had probably wanted her to read him a letter from home at the last minute, and she would never refuse such a request.

At last he saw her, trudging wearily towards the car, and a shaft of pain stabbed him in the heart because she looked so sad and worried.

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The dinner party at the colonel's house was a crashing bore, as always. Paul watched Daphne, as she stood there pale and ethereal looking, listening to Major Galbraith sprout off in his usual pompous manner. Making a move so he might rescue her from his clutches, he got waylaid by a slightly tipsy Amelia.

"How are you, darling?"

He shrugged off the red-painted fingers and stepped back a pace before answering. "Fine thanks, Amelia."

"What about a drink, for old time's sake?"

"Another time, perhaps?" He started moving away.

"You're a bastard, Paul Ashfield."

He kept going.

"Sweetheart, are you all right?" He elbowed Major Galbraith out of the way, but already Daphne was sliding to the floor. "Daphne." He sank to his knees and picked up her small, cold hand. She looked so white, even her lips were bloodless.

"What's going on here?" The Medical Officer pushed his way through the milling crowd.

"I must have fainted, how silly of me." Colour started returning to her pale cheeks. "I'm all right, Paul, don't look so fraught."

"I'd better take a look at you, Mrs. Ashfield."

Paul swung her up in his arms and he and the doctor followed the colonel's wife to a guest bedroom.

"There's nothing much wrong with me, but I have felt vaguely off colour for a couple of weeks." She patted Paul's cheek to alleviate his worry.

"You should have told me."

"Why? It's nothing, maybe I have been working too hard."

"Wait outside, Paul, while I check your wife over. She should see her own doctor tomorrow. Now, my dear, you're a nurse. What do you think is wrong?"

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"Just run down, I guess. We go out a fair bit and it's been frantically busy at the hospital."

"How long have you been married?"

"Eight weeks."

A couple more questions, that brought red to her cheeks, and she knew exactly what he was getting at.

"You think I'm pregnant?"

"Ninety-nine percent sure, my dear."

"Heavens, the symptoms. Ooh, I've had them all, even the nausea in the mornings. I can't believe I didn't suspect something."

He patted her hand. "Lie still for a few minutes, I'll have a chat with your husband. You'll have to take things easier now."

"How is she?" Paul rushed at the doctor. "Did you find anything wrong?"

"Do you have any cigars, Paul?"

"Cigars? Not here. For God's sake. What is it?"

"Congratulations, old man. In less than eight months time you'll be a father."

"A father! You mean Daphne's pregnant?" Paul felt as if a ton weight had just been dragged off his back. "I thought there was something seriously wrong."

"Pay to have her checked over by your own doctor. Then, if I were you, I'd have her evacuated."

"God yes, I have been toying with the idea, anyway. May I see her now?"

"Certainly. Wait ten minutes or so before taking her home. You're a lucky man, see you take good care of her."

Daphne was standing up, patting her hair back into place when he came in. "Hello, Paul." She smiled shyly. "Did the doctor tell you?"

He grinned. "Yes."

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"Are you pleased?"

"Yes, it's just a bit sudden. Shouldn't you still be lying down?"

"I'm not an invalid. I'm an idiot, though, for not realising sooner."

He pulled her into his arms. "I'm glad, but you know what this means - home."

"Yes."

"As soon as I can arrange it." He nuzzled at her creamy white throat. "I'm going to miss you like hell."

"I could stay a while longer."

"No, I'm having you sent out immediately."

"Not until I've seen Robbie, he's getting leave next week."

"There isn't time."

"I have to see him. Just once more, then I'll go, I promise."

He capitulated against his better judgement, but how could he deny her this, when she had given him so much? "A week, not a minute longer."



Air raids were now an almost common occurrence and civilian casualties quickly mounted. The hospitals were full to overflowing with mutilated and traumatised patients.

Bodies of victims were buried quickly to stop them putrefying and spreading disease. Even then, some were ripped to pieces by packs of marauding dogs before they could be collected and decently disposed of. Shop windows were smashed, roads blocked by fallen lampposts, broken down cars and all manner of other debris. At Raffles, however, it remained business as usual.

Chapter Thirteen

On January 15th 1942, the battle for Muar Road began. 'A' Company of the 2/29th Battalion were in position in the early hours of the morning and they stayed there until the 2/19th Battalion began to arrive at Bakri to relieve them. 'A' Company was then despatched to try and fight its way back to the rest of the unit.

Rob helped Gordon, who had been shot in the leg. The Japanese advanced with speed and ferocity. First the tanks, followed by infantry using machine guns. Strangely, he felt no fear because he was with his mates.

Four of them walked together, just a little in front of the others. None of them heard the shouted warnings from their comrades, or saw the machine gunner who mowed them down like wheat in a field. Rob only felt his feet lift from the ground and a red-hot pain searing through his lower body.



Paul swore savagely as the continual ringing of the phone woke him. Who the hell would want him now? Automatically his eyes went to the clock. It was four in the morning. He slid out of bed, grabbed up his dressing gown and rushed out to

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still the noise in case it woke Daphne.

“Major Ashfield,” he snarled into the receiver.

“Sir, it’s L...Lieutenant Baker,” the young male voice stuttered slightly. “From the 113th A.G.H. Is Sister Ashfield there?” It sounded strange hearing Daphne referred to in such a way.

“She’s in bed, it’s bloody well four in the morning. Where the hell do you think she’d be?”

“Her brother’s been brought in.”

“What!”

“There’s been heavy fighting on the Muar Road, heaps of casualties. Private Clarke is badly wounded.”

“Why didn’t you say so before? How bad?”

“I don’t know. The senior sister asked me to contact you, said you should get to the hospital quickly.”

“We’ll be there in a few minutes.” Dear God please, not Rob. He was only a boy.

“Paul. What is it?” Daphne called out.

He went back to the bedroom. “The hospital rang, they’ve got young Rob there.”

“Robbie.” It was too dark for him to see her face, but fear made her voice shrill.

“They want you.” He switched on the bedside lamp.

“Is he seriously hurt? Of course he is, otherwise why send for me?”

“Don’t get upset, he’ll be all right. Probably only rang because you work there.” He started dressing. “I’ll drive you over.”

What a nightmare journey. Paul drove as fast as he could on a road littered with bomb craters and debris. Even now they could hear the low whine of aircraft and the distant sounds of artillery.

When he helped Daphne into the hospital, Paul was shocked to see soldiers, still bloodied and dirty, being off-

loaded from trucks in the compound.

Rob lay in the corner bed of a long ward, a screen setting him apart from the other patients. "Sorry, we didn't have a spare room to give him, Daphne," the orderly apologised. "We've been inundated with casualties. There's been bitter fighting in Malaya, we're getting wounded direct now."

"It's all right, thanks, Phil. May I see him?"

"Yes."

As soon as they stepped inside the screen Daphne rushed over to the bed. Paul had no medical training, but somehow he knew, just by looking at Rob's face, that he was mortally wounded. A film of perspiration covered his shoulders and his chest where it wasn't bandaged.

"Daffy." His voice sounded the same, yet somehow different. The aura of death felt so strong, Paul shivered.

"I'm here, Robbie, so is Paul."

"Gordon's dead. We were together. I didn't let my mates down."

"Of course you didn't," Daphne soothed.

"Tell Mum I'm sorry," he whispered.

"You'll be seeing her yourself soon."

"Will I?"

"Of course." Daphne's voice was steady, and Paul marvelled at the quiet strength of her. Being a nurse, she must know there was no hope for him. "You're going to be an uncle in about seven months' time."

"That's good, it will give Mum something to look forward to. I'm badly wounded, aren't I?"

"Yes, but you'll get better," she reassured.

"I can't feel anything from my waist down."

Paul watched Daphne's face blanch. "I put my hand down, but I couldn't feel my legs."

"Of course you wouldn't, silly, they've given you an

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anaesthetic. You won't feel anything for ages."

"It's cold, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Rub my hands, Daffy. Like you did when we were kids on those frosty Wangaratta mornings. You were always able to warm me up."

Paul left them for a moment so he might speak to the Ward Sister.

"How bad is he?"

She picked up a patient's chart before answering. "He was machine gunned. Practically cut him in two, he hasn't got long, I'm afraid."

Nausea rose up in Paul's throat and he swallowed it back. "Thanks, Sister." He stumbled back the way he had come. The copper head was up close to the dark one now.

"Look after Mum for me. Dad's an old soldier, he knows the score."

"You'll be seeing them yourself soon, Robbie."

"No, I won't."

"You will. You will."

Her eyes filled with tears, and Paul had to stand helplessly by, watching as her heart broke.

"I'm not frightened, Daffy, always thought I would be. Strange, isn't it? I'll be meeting up with Gordon and the others sooner than I expected. Tell Mum not to be sad for too long. I've fought the good fight and kept the faith. Tell her that. Get the Padre for me now." He spoke in a harsh whisper, yet the words were so clear he might well have shouted them.

"I'll go," Paul volunteered.

The Chaplain was middle-aged. Paul didn't even bother finding out what denomination he represented. "Hurry, Padre, there isn't much time."

"Sadly, there never is for these boys."

Daphne sat on the bed, holding Rob's hand. If it was possible, he looked even worse because his eyes were closed.

"You wanted to see me, er—" the Chaplain paused, and Paul mouthed the name. "Robert?"

"Yes. I've nothing to confess, just read something, the 23rd Psalm will do. It's Mum's favourite."

Private R.T. Clarke did not die straight away. He just slipped into unconsciousness and lay in that void between the faintest flicker of life, and death. Daphne sat with him all day until the rays of the setting sun bore yet another young warrior away.



The bombing continued. Casualties mounted. Drains were blocked, sewers had burst and there was no one left to fix them. The sky over Singapore was blackened with smoke from burning oil. The air was so full of oil smuts, they rained down like black snow, covering everything in an oily black film.

The Malay Peninsular was all but over-run, and the troops could do little but stall the Japanese invaders. And those British guns, those mighty fifteen-inch naval guns were embedded in concrete and pointing uselessly out to sea. It was unthinkable. Singapore, the largest British base in the Far East, teetered on the brink of invasion.

On the 29th January, the government imposed a curfew from 9pm to 5am in an endeavour to stop looting. On the 30th January, they proclaimed martial law.

Paul heard about a plane leaving that afternoon, and he used every ounce of influence he could to get Daphne on it. She had been very quiet since Rob's death and her grief nearly broke his heart. She steadfastly refused to leave him and he had weakened and let her stay. Now they were under martial law, she was going, even if he had to physically drag her on to

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the plane.

"You'll be safe in Wangaratta. I'll join you when I can."

"I want to stay here with you, we can leave together."

"For God's sake, Daphne, you have to think of our baby. Singapore won't hold out for much longer, you could end up being trapped here. It will be survival of the fittest. We can't take the risk."

She finally agreed. She couldn't endanger their baby, even if it meant separation from Paul.

Her lips were softly tremulous against his as he kissed her goodbye once more. He would have given up everything he owned if he could have prevented them from being torn apart.

They drove to the aerodrome where the plane waited. Paul watched as an Air Force sergeant escorted Daphne across a runway pitted with craters and pieces of twisted metal. She turned and waved on reaching the aircraft. He lifted his hand, then wearily made his way back to the car. He could not bear to watch her flying out of his life, probably forever.

He could have pulled strings and perhaps got out of Singapore himself. Others were doing so, he knew. He was scared as hell, but couldn't leave his men behind, to turn tail and run, no matter how much he wanted to. They were risking their lives on lonely islands and hideaways, relaying vital information on enemy troop and shipping movements, and he had to collect and collate all the data. Sir Phillip thought he was here working as a bloody clerk. If things weren't so serious, it would be laughable.



It was not a large plane, Daphne realised, as the airman helped her up. Some of the seats had been pushed together to accommodate more people. It was crowded with women, some nursing children, and there was not one vacant seat. She glanced around with a feeling close to desperation while the

sergeant read from his list.

"Mrs. Broderick."

"Yes." A pretty Eurasian girl raised her hand.

"I'm afraid you'll have to be off-loaded. Mrs. Ashfield has priority."

"Just a moment," Daphne said. "Why do I have priority, if she got here first?"

"She's Eurasian, you're English," a middle-aged matron sniffed.

"I'm Australian. What's that got to do with it?"

"Preference must be given to Europeans."

Daphne just stared as the girl stood up. She could not be more than eighteen. She held a child of ten or so months in her arms and was obviously pregnant again.

"I'm used to this kind of discrimination. My father was an English officer, my husband is an English sergeant, but I'm of mixed blood."

"I can't take your seat. It isn't fair."

"Could you take my baby with you? I'll give you my husband's parent's address in England. They'll look after him."

"Go back to your seat. I'd rather face the Japs than deprive you, it's disgusting."

"Mrs. Ashfield, we have to get this plane off the ground now. If you don't get this flight, I doubt there'll be anymore."

"I'll take my chances. Go without me."

Daphne watched as the plane took off. It started to gain height. Suddenly, it plummeted to the ground in a fireball. At that very moment, Japanese bombs landed on the aerodrome. Diving to the ground, she felt a sharp pain in her head, then nothing.



Paul, sitting in his jeep, watched horrified as the plane with Daphne on board burst into flames. He dived out of the jeep

and started running along the road. His driver brought him to the ground with a flying tackle as several bombs lobbed right near them.

When Paul finally struggled to his feet, yelling at his driver to do the same, the man did not move. He dropped to his knees and saw that the soldier had been hit. Disregarding his own orders to get out of here as quickly as they could, he lifted the wounded soldier on to his shoulders and staggered off.



Heat radiating from fires burning all around her brought Daphne back to consciousness. She pushed several wooden packing cases away before staggering to her feet. Bodies were strewn everywhere. There were gaping holes in the ground and twisted, smouldering wreckage. She had no idea how long she had lain there, but her head ached so badly she cradled it between her hands so it wouldn't split open. *I must find Paul. He'll think I've gone down with the plane.* God, it must have been fate that spared her. Those poor people, including the Eurasian girl and her baby, were all gone. There could not have been any survivors as the plane virtually disintegrated into a burning fireball in the sky. *I can't even cry*, she thought, *I'm devoid of tears. I shed them all for Robbie.*

Daphne stumbled along. It was imperative for her to find Paul quickly. There were a number of people helping with the injured, others tried to stop water from pouring out of burst mains, but they were all too busy to worry about her. Paul mentioned he was working from the colonel's office, she suddenly remembered.

Soldiers ran around everywhere. The cries of trapped people echoed in her ears, but she took no notice. The colonel's office, in fact the whole building, had been completely destroyed. There was just a huge crater surrounded by smouldering rubble. No man could have got out of there alive.

She started running. She knew not where. Something forced her legs into motion, and like a panic-stricken animal she kept on going. Soldiers patrolled some of the bomb-ravished shops to keep looters at bay, and the sickening stench of burning flesh stuck to her nostrils.

The landscape wouldn't stop seesawing when Daphne finally opened her eyes. She tried to move, but something heavy pressed down on her legs. Closing her eyes for a few moments, she gingerly opened them again. Her surroundings had stopped swaying now. Through a haze of smoke and dust, she found herself in a bombed out building with rubble covering her from the thighs down.

Her head throbbed. Gingerly she touched her forehead and felt the warm stickiness of blood. How long had she been buried here? She could just about kill for a drink of water.

Horror suddenly returned with a vengeance. Paul was gone. If she closed her eyes and let herself drift, she would be reunited with him in death, Robbie also. No more sadness, no more struggling for survival on her own. It was so easy. She gave into the temptation to be free of pain and closed her eyes.

"Help. Is anyone there?" The desperate plea permeated her fogged-up brain.

"I'm over here. Where are you?" she answered instinctively.

"I'm jammed up against the back wall, there's shrapnel pinning me by the arm."

Daphne gingerly sat up and started pulling the rubble off her legs. It was mainly chunks of plaster, so it didn't take long to claw her way out. She could only stand up because the building's roof had been blown off.

"Call out again so I can find you." She started coughing and choking from dust, her eyes burned and stung from the smoke, and the humidity was so bad it was like forcing her way through a wet blanket.

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A young man lay slumped against the furthestmost side of the building, his arm impaled on a piece of steel pipe sticking out from the wall.

"I'm Daphne Ashfield," she introduced herself as she checked him for other injuries.

"Marty Bennett, merchant navy."

"Except for your arm, you seem fine. Do you hurt anywhere else?" What a stupid question, he was probably in agony.

"No, it's just my arm."

"What happened?"

"I was on my way back to the ship when I heard the Zero's overhead. Next thing I knew I was here, trapped like a rat in a trap. Can you get me out, my ship's in dock at Keppel Harbour?"

"I don't know, Marty." Daphne bit her lip. "If I had a hacksaw I could cut through the pipe and get you to hospital, I'm a nurse."

"Why don't you just pull it out?"

"No, we better not." Even if she could pull it out, he might bleed to death. It was impossible to know how much internal damage had been done to the arm.

"Looks like I've been shot by a piece of plumbing, beautiful," he joked.

"Yes." She forced a little chuckle. "A bathroom fitting I should think."

This young sailor, impaled on a piece of iron in a bombed out building, and obviously in pain, joked and flirted with her, while army wives at the Happy Hour bitched about being deprived of their imported luxuries. Any wonder she despised them?

"I'll have to get you back to the ship, pipe and all. It's attached to a wooden wall, we'll smash it away somehow."

Daphne felt sick. Her head throbbed, every bone in her

body ached, and Paul was dead, but she banged away with a brick with all the strength she could muster. Marty wanted to help, but couldn't twist around without tearing his arm.

"I'll do it, you just rest."

"Are you wounded, Daphne?" he asked suddenly.

"Just a scratch on the forehead, I think."

His pale cheeks suddenly reddened beneath the grime caked to his face. "I noticed when you stood up, there's blood running down your legs."

Daphne looked down, then wished she hadn't. The cramping stomach pains, the ache in her back, she hadn't realised it before, but she was losing Paul's baby.

"I think I'm having a miscarriage." Tears poured down her cheeks, but she kept on pounding the wall. *God, why are you doing this to me?* She wanted to scream at the injustice of it all.

"Maybe if you rested, it might stop," Marty suggested.

"It's too late," she cried brokenly. "This is the worst day of my life. My husband has just been killed and I've lost our baby. Don't tell me there are worse things than dying, Marty, because I won't believe you."

She took her anguish out on the wall, bashing and banging until the wood splintered and she could pull the pipe free. She helped Marty stand up, and with a chunk of wall still attached to the pipe, he wrapped his good arm around her neck and they staggered outside.

It was late afternoon, she could tell by the position of the sun.

"We've got to get to the ship, it's sailing at dusk," Marty rasped. His face looked ashen beneath the grime that, mingled with perspiration, turned to mud.

"I'll help you get there, don't worry. There's a short cut we can take," she panted. "If it's not blocked off."

Daphne felt so sick and weak she didn't care whether she

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lived or died. She couldn't let this brave young sailor miss his ship, though. He would never be able to make it back on his own.

They eventually came to the wharf area and she was shocked. Hundreds of civilians, women and children as well as military personnel jostled each other, pleading to be evacuated. There were only a small number of ships and harassed government officials tried to check travel documents amidst the chaos.

"Look at them, bloody officialdom gone mad," Marty said as they pushed their way forward.

"Marty."

"Hey, Steve," he yelled at a sailor who frantically tried to pull up the gangplank on a rusty looking steamer. "Give us a hand will you?"

"You'll never make it through the crowd," Steve called back, waving and gesticulating with his hands.

"Can you swim, Daphne?" Marty asked.

"Yes."

"There's an oil landing bay up a bit from the main wharf, we'll have to jump into the water and swim. Steve will launch a boat on the blind side of the ship, so we aren't seen. There would be a bloody riot otherwise."

Daphne didn't argue she was beyond it. She hadn't expected to escape from Singapore, only wanted to help Marty. *Go with the flow*, she told herself, *it's easier that way*. Helping her probably gave him the strength to rise above the pain and exhaustion he must be suffering.

They held hands and jumped into the warm, oil streaked water. Marty rolled on to his side and dog paddled with his good arm, Daphne started swimming. They had gone less than a hundred yards when a boat pulled up and they were dragged on board.

Margaret Tanner

“What the hell have you been up to, Marty?” a grinning sailor asked. “Found yourself a woman too, eh.”

“She’s a nurse.”

“Hello,” was the only word Daphne felt capable of saying without going into screaming hysterics. Closing her eyes, she huddled in the boat, too exhausted to do anything but listen to Marty telling his mates what had happened.

Once on board the decrepit-looking steamer, she was shocked out of her stupor. It was packed with women, children and a few men.

“We’re designed to carry forty, there’s about six hundred on board,” one of the sailors complained. “The captain has refused point blank to take anyone else. It’s only four days sailing to Sumatra, but with this load it will take us a bloody week. Stay here, we’ll come back for you.”

Marty, barely conscious now, was helped away and Daphne slumped behind a pile of rope on the deck and closed her eyes. *I could sleep for a week*, she thought wearily. Her baby was gone. Paul and Robbie were dead. She wouldn’t care if she never woke up.

Marty’s friend, Steve, came back for her. “Sorry,” he said, “Marty told us about...”

“Thanks, is he all right?”

“Yeah, think so. There’s a civilian doctor on board, said he’ll be able to remove the pipe, it missed the bone luckily. I’ll take you down to the sick bay, it isn’t much, but better than up here where it’s practically standing room only. They’re firing up the boilers now, we’re weighing anchor.”

The sick bay proved to be about the size of a large closet, but it did have four bunks with white sheets on them. Daphne checked herself and by the amount of blood on her clothing, realised the baby was gone. She fixed herself up as best she could and crawled into one of the bottom bunks.

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When she finally surfaced, she glanced across at the other bottom bunk and saw Marty lying on it, his arm encased in bandages. He looked white and sickly and there were several cuts on his face. She closed her eyes once more because it was just too hard fighting to keep them open. By the rolling of the ship, she realised they were out at sea.

Chapter Fourteen

It would take a few days to get to Sumatra, Daphne surmised, then on to Australia and home to Wangaratta. *I'll never leave there again*, she vowed. Nothing ever hurt her in Wangaratta, it was the outside world that proved to be dangerous and cruel. Maybe she could get a job at the local hospital again. She needed to support herself, because her parents couldn't be expected to keep her indefinitely.

They had suffered too, lost their son and their grandchild. She almost wished she hadn't written to tell them about the baby. There would be no grandchildren now, unless Tom married and produced some, she thought sadly. Her womb would never know the joy of nurturing a child again. It would probably wither and die, because no man would ever replace Paul.

You have to stop this, she told herself, *otherwise you'll end up a bitter, twisted woman*. She had enjoyed a few months of happiness; some people didn't even achieve that. Luckily, she had sent most of her wedding photographs home or she would

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never be able to gaze at Paul's handsome face again. *I've lost everything*, she thought. *All I've got left are the clothes on my back and my wedding ring.*

"Are you awake, my dear?" A man's voice intruded on her misery. "I'm the doctor, just popped in to see how you were."

"All right, I think. How's Marty?"

"A lucky young man. Good thing you didn't try taking the pipe out. He haemorrhaged when I removed it, but he's fine now, should make a complete recovery. Rest is all he needs. How about you?"

He examined her briefly, but she knew even before he confirmed it, her baby was gone. "I'm sorry, my dear, there's nothing I could have done."

"I knew I had lost it in that bombed out building. Singapore took my brother, my husband and now my baby." *If he tells me I'll find someone else one day, I'll scream*, she thought bitterly.

"I know what you're going through, my dear. I lost my wife and three little girls in Malaya when our house took a direct hit. If I hadn't been on duty at the hospital, I would have been killed too. Strange thing, fate." He patted her hand before wandering off, muttering to himself.

Daphne was woken up by one of Marty's friends vigorously shaking her. "You have to get out of here, Jap planes have been sighted. We could be under attack any minute now."

She heard sudden gunfire and felt the ship shudder.

"Here's a life jacket." He helped her into it. "Look after Marty for me, I have to get back to my post." He shoved another lifejacket at her and dashed away.

"What's happening?" Marty asked groggily.

"We're under attack, I think." There was an almighty explosion, followed by a loud hissing noise.

"Jesus." Marty struggled into a sitting position. "Sounds like

the engine room has been hit.”

The ship started bucking like a crazed horse and Daphne could smell smoke.

“Get out. Get out,” Marty screamed. “Leave me and save yourself.”

She dragged him off his bunk. “We’ll both go on deck,” she panted. They struggled out of the cabin, and if Daphne lived to be a hundred, she would never know how they made it up on deck.

Absolute pandemonium reigned. People were screaming, pushing and shoving as the crew tried to lower the lifeboats. Bodies were strewn everywhere, the deck awash with oil and blood. Never had she witnessed such carnage. It was a scene from hell. The Zeros came over again, strafing the deck and the people who had already jumped or fallen into the water. Daphne hit the deck, pulling Marty down with her as the planes pounded the doomed ship.

“Abandon ship, abandon ship,” someone screamed frantically. A lone gunner kept firing at the attacking planes. He scored a hit, a Zero, trailing plumes of smoke, suddenly burst into flames, nose-diving into the sea with a tremendous roar. Spray shot up into the air like an erupting volcano

The ship was on fire now. Daphne would never forget the smell of burning flesh and the desperate screams of those trapped in a fiery inferno below decks.

They climbed over bodies and smouldering debris. It was almost beyond comprehension how quickly everything had happened.

Marty wrapped his good arm around her waist and she did the same to him. They leapt into the water side-by-side, and sank into the murky depths.

Daphne felt the weight of the water pressing her down and there was pain in her ears and chest. Suddenly she noticed

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daylight far above her head. Frantically, she clawed her way upwards until her head and shoulders popped out of the water and she could breathe again.

Marty was right beside her “We have to get away from the ship,” he gasped. “When she sinks, we could be sucked under.”

They struck out towards the nearest lifeboat and were dragged on board. She turned her head, just in time to see the ship explode in a fireball and slowly, almost gracefully, slide into the sea.

Several lifeboats were crammed with women, children and wounded, while sailors and other men held on to the sides. Many people clung to pieces of wood, forty-four gallon drums or anything that would keep them afloat. Others just drifted in their life jackets, too shocked or injured to even try saving themselves.

Darkness fell so suddenly it caught everyone by surprise. People kept calling out to each other, but as the night wore on the cries became fainter, until finally there were none at all.

They couldn’t make much headway, as the lifeboat was too crowded. If the sea became rough, they would be swamped because they sat so low in the water. Even with her limited knowledge, Daphne realised this.

“There are too many of us in this boat,” a young officer finally said. “I’m calling for volunteers from any man not wounded, to vacate the boat and take their chances in the water holding onto the sides.” Three sailors and the officer immediately climbed out of the boat. None of the others moved. “For God’s sake, none of us will make it if we don’t lighten the load,” the officer pleaded from the water. “The first big wave will swamp us.”

“All right, count us in,” two other men grudgingly volunteered.

“Me too,” Marty said.

"You can't, you've only got one arm," Daphne protested. "I'll go in your place when I've done what I can for the wounded."

"Right, life jackets are for those who go in the water. We'll take turns, an hour in the water, then an hour in the boat," the officer ordered.

Over the next few hours Daphne witnessed acts of extreme heroism, but also some unimaginable selfishness. Several people in the boat, not prepared to take a turn in the water, also refused to give up their life jackets. It was appalling.

She did what she could for the wounded, splinting a couple of broken limbs by using pieces of wood bound with strips of material ripped from her dress. The burnt survivors suffered most, because there was little anyone could do except offer words of encouragement.

As dawn finally spread its pink tentacles over the sky, Daphne watched with a strange detachment, as three of the wounded, having succumbed to their injuries during the night, were consigned to the sea, enabling three others to scramble into the boat.

The water felt warm but her legs were cramping up, and she was becoming delirious. Looking around for the young officer who organised them last night, she was shocked to find he had disappeared. She was desperate for water; it surrounded them, yet they couldn't drink any of it.

Marty still clung to the boat, his one good arm hitched to a rope. Daphne made her way around to him.

"Good morning," she croaked. He didn't answer. "Marty." She touched his arm and it felt stiff. Death had silently claimed him during the night.

Someone rigged up a sail, she idly noticed, wondering how long it would take to die if she let go and drifted away. She couldn't even cry when someone undid the rope wrapped around Marty's hand, and he disappeared beneath the

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churning waves.

When the sun came out, her thirst intensified. A few sips of water per person, a quarter of a biscuit, and one slice from a can of peaches was all they were allowed from the emergency rations. One of the sailors guarded their precious supplies with a gun.

"Civilians should be entitled to larger portions," complained a woman sheltering under a floral parasol. "My husband is a high ranking officer in the government, I demand..."

"Listen, lady," one of the sailors snarled. "We don't give a rat's arse who your husband is. Shut your bloody mouth or you'll get nothing."

"Bravo," another woman said. "You always were selfish, Moira."

On the third night it rained, and they filled up anything that would hold water, including Moira's parasol.

"By my reckoning, we're not too far from land," a man who had been a planter in Malaya said. He elected himself navigator because he had a pocket compass. "We've drifted a fair bit, but we're out of the main shipping lanes now, probably why the Japs haven't sent us to the bottom."

When day broke, the planter was proven right. Far in the distance they could see land. Using pieces of wood for oars, two of the sailors started rowing towards it. There were only ten of them left on the boat now.

Mid-morning, they made it to a sandy shore, fringed with lush palms and undergrowth. There were piles of debris littering the beach, two forty four gallon drums, pieces of timber and an empty life jacket, but no sign of any other survivors.

They debated about whether to light a beacon fire or not. Should they risk drawing the Japs to them, but perhaps attracting the attention of some passing allied ship, or was it

better to huddle around praying for rescue?

"We'll take a vote," the planter said. "Those for lighting a fire raise your hands." Moira was the only one whose hand remained down.

"I don't think we should risk it," she whined. "You sailors should row to Sumatra and bring help back for the rest of us."

"We would, if we bloody knew where it was," one of the sailors retorted angrily.

"Shut up," the planter said. "We've had a gutful of your bitching. Go and collect some firewood."

Daphne grinned even though her lips were cracked. What a horrible, selfish woman Moira was. They had a few extra sips of water to celebrate discovering land and shared a whole tin of peaches.

After they got their fire going, Daphne went off with the planter and one of the sailors to find water. In less than ten minutes they found a stream of cool crystal clear water. *Paradise*, she thought, drinking her fill. *I'll never take water for granted again as long as I live.*

In what appeared to be an old garden, they found yams and sweet potatoes. "We'll eat well tonight," the planter said. "Might even be able to catch some fish."

They went back to camp with their booty and another surprise awaited them. A coast watcher on the island made himself known to them. He had already radioed for help and a ship was coming to rescue them. He also informed them that the Australian navy had picked up three lifeboats in one of the shipping lanes. Two boats had also made it to Sumatra. Out of about six hundred people who were on board the ship, all but a couple of hundred perished.

I can't even cry, Daphne thought. *I can't even cry.*



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When Daphne finally woke up and blinked her eyes, she was in a small room painted in pastel blues. Where were Paul and Robbie?

"She's waking up," a young female voice said, and Daphne tried to focus her eyes. A very young nurse was checking her chart.

"Am I dead?" Strange, she couldn't remember dying.

"No, you're safe in England."

"England? What am I doing in England?"

Daphne felt cool fingers caressing her hot, aching, forehead. Her eyes closed again, no matter how hard she fought to keep them open.

When she next surfaced, a different young nurse sat by the bedside. "You're finally awake. Your brother will be glad, he's just nipped down to the canteen for a cup of tea."

"Where am I?"

"You're in a military hospital in Kent."

"Kent?" Daphne tried to grapple with this, but couldn't. There was something wrong somewhere. "Isn't this Singapore? Of course it isn't. We were making for Sumatra."

The nurse turned away. "Oh, here's your brother."

"Tom, what are you doing here?" Daphne looked at the patch covering her brother's eye and the tears started to fall. "Mum wrote about your eye, I'm so sorry."

"I'm getting used to it. How are you, Daffy?"

"Terrible. What am I doing here?" She tried to sit up, but felt too weak.

"You're in Kent, in the same hospital as I was in." He gave a strained grin. "Julie, my fiancée, and I have been hovering over you ever since they told us you were here."

"You're engaged?" Daphne knew she was missing something, but there were giant gaps in her memory. "Robbie's dead, Tom."

"I know."

"Paul's dead too, isn't he?"

"I think so, Daffy. If he's not, he's a prisoner of war."

"I'm starting to remember," she said huskily, fighting against tears. She would be dehydrated if she kept crying like this. "He's dead. I went back for him and there was nothing left of the building, just a crater full of burning rubble. Have I been here long?"

"It's April."

"No, February."

"You've been here for weeks, went off your head for a while." Tom gave a strained grin. "I always said you were a nutcase."

She tried to smile back because he looked so worried. Tom, who was always teasing and laughing, looked sombre. Obviously she had been seriously ill. "Mum and Dad?"

"I sent them a cable, the army did too. They're just thankful you're safe. God knows how you ended up in England, though."

"They bombed the ship. They must have known there were women and children on board, but they didn't care, even strafed us in the water," she said with a shudder.

"Oh, Daffy." He took her hand and held it tightly. "You'll be coming with me to Julie's place when they discharge you. Her parents insisted you stay there. You'll like them, her father takes a bit of getting used to, though." He chuckled before getting serious again. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"It was terrible."

He heard it all, her miscarriage, Robbie, Paul, the smell of burning bodies, Marty dying as he clung to the lifeboat. When the story finally ended, Tom was horrified, Daphne absolutely spent.

Two days later she learned that Singapore had capitulated to

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the Japanese on the 15th February 1942, and what was left of the eighty-five thousand English, Indian and Australian troops were now prisoners of war. Helen Sawyer, like thousands of others, was now listed as missing, believed P.O.W.



“We should have announced our wedding in the Times,” a grinning Tom said to Julie as he picked up a discarded newspaper.

“Let’s see, Tom. There are always Lords and Ladies in it, General’s sons and the like. Oh, here’s one. *The engagement is announced of Caroline Louise, daughter of Lord and Lady Bowater.*”

“Ah, who is the illustrious titled young man she’s betrothed to then, Julie?”

“You’re an idiot.” Julie hit Tom on the head with the paper.

“Well who? I can hardly wait to know.”

“Paul, that’s his name. He’s not titled, but Daddy is. *Only son of Sir Phillip and Lady Ashfield.*”

“What!” Tom snatched the paper out of her hand. “There’s a mistake. Paul Ashfield is Daphne’s husband.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I am, dirty bastard.”

“But Tom, his wife was killed, there was a huge write-up in the papers. He got out of Singapore by the skin of his teeth. He was so badly wounded, his father got special permission to bring him straight here from Colombo or wherever they evacuated him to. I remember thinking at the time how sad it was. His wife got killed in a plane crash. He actually watched it plummet to the ground in flames. There were no survivors.”

“I don’t know what happened, but he married Daphne. Mum’s got photographs of the wedding. Pretty slap up affair, too. He must think she’s dead, like Daphne thinks he is. God, what a mess.”

Margaret Tanner

"You've got to do something, Tom, I mean to stop the marriage."

"Perhaps he doesn't want to stop it. We're only working class people. He might have got married out there to Daphne, then conveniently fell in love with someone more suitable once he got back home."

"What if he didn't, Tom? How frightful for the other girl, too. We have to do something."

"You're right, we will."

"Sir Phillip Ashfield has a place in Mayfair, perhaps we could see him," Julie suggested. "Sort it all out before we tell Daphne, no use upsetting her if there's been some ghastly mistake."

"Yes, I'd like to see Sir Phillip." *Like to smash his face in, too*, Tom thought savagely. "We'd better ring first."

They went to a telephone box and found the number. A male voice finally answered.

"Is Paul Ashfield there, please?" Tom asked.

"No, this is Sir Phillip Ashfield's residence."

"Is he there? It's important I speak with him."

"Your name please," the voice said.

"Tom Bancroft, but he won't know it. Tell him it concerns Allison Waverley. He'll remember that name."

"Ashfield." The voice sounded clipped, upper class English.

"You're Paul's father?"

"Yes, what's this all about?"

"You don't know me, Ashfield." Tom heard a snort of annoyance.

"What do you know about Allison Waverley?"

"She's my mother." Silence. "Are you still there," Tom asked, half expecting to have the phone slammed down in his ear.

"Yes. What exactly do you want? I'm a busy man."

"I've some information that might interest you, or rather

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your son.”

“Oh yes?”

Ashfield was a cool bastard all right.

“Paul’s wife is alive.”

“What?”

That made you sit up, Tom thought with satisfaction. “She wasn’t killed in Singapore. Daphne’s my sister and very much alive.”

“Alive! She can’t be. My son watched her plane come down in a fireball.”

“Daphne got off the plane at the last minute.”

“Exactly who are you?” Sir Phillip growled.

“I’ve already told you, Tom Bancroft.”

“Ah, Tommy Calvert’s boy. Paul told me about you.”

“Daphne was the baby Allison was minding, the one you wanted dumped in an orphanage.”

Sir Phillip felt as if he had just been pole axed. It wasn’t possible. It couldn’t be. This would ruin all his plans. “It might be best if we meet. Do you know London, Bancroft?”

“Not very well.”

“The Savoy Hotel, the Grill room at six, they know me there. I’ll be at my usual table.” The line went dead.

“What did he say?” Julie asked.

“Pompous bastard. Wants to meet me at the Savoy, the Grill room, whatever that is.”

“Heavens, Tom, film stars and politicians go there.”

“Do you know where it is?”

“Everyone does.”

“I don’t.” He grinned. “When we sort all this out, I’ll tell Daphne, she’ll be so happy.”

“I know, it won’t bring her baby back, but at least she’ll have her husband.”

Tom hugged her close. Julie was like Daphne, a sweet,

beautiful girl who had never thought or done a mean deed in her whole life.

"We were going to see my parents, I rang them," she said anxiously. "If we don't show up, they'll be terribly worried. We could get a taxi from the station to the Savoy if we're running late."

They caught a train and after alighting at Julie's village, a friendly farmer gave them a lift the rest of the way.

Tom took hold of Julie's trembling hand. When he stayed with the Whiteheads before, he had met Geoff who was in the RAF, but not Brian who was away with the navy, and he hoped neither of them would be home on leave at this precise moment.

The vicar would be mortified because his daughter had a rushed registry office wedding ceremony.

"You're frowning, Tom."

"Am I, darling? I was thinking about what to say to your father."

They found the vicar out in the front garden tending his roses.

"Oh, there you both are, Mother's in the house somewhere." He waved one hand around vaguely.

"Tom's got something to tell you, Daddy."

"Has he?" Very blue, short-sighted eyes peeped out from behind gold-rimmed spectacles.

"It's important, Daddy."

"Feeling all right now, my boy?" the vicar asked chattily.

Tom certainly felt far from all right, and anyone but the vague vicar would have noticed immediately.

In the comfortable sitting room, Mrs.Whitehead insisted they have tea first.

"Now, what was so important it took me from my roses?" the vicar finally asked.

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Tom cleared his throat. "Julie and I got married this morning."

"Married?" The vicar dropped his scone. "How? Where?"

"At the registry office, Sir."

"But it was always planned," Mrs.Whitehead wailed. "Your father was going to marry you and you would wear my wedding gown like Susan did."

"We had to get married quickly." Tom stood up and went over to Julie, whose lips trembled. He picked up her hand and cradled it between his own. "We love each other very much and I was frightened to wait in case I suddenly got shipped home. As my wife she would be able to accompany me, but otherwise...."

"I'm most disappointed in you, Julie," the vicar interrupted, pursing his lips. "You know how much a church wedding meant to your mother."

"Shhh, don't cry, darling. It wasn't her fault, I insisted." Tom put his arms protectively around his new wife.

Mrs. Whitehead looked at this young, fair soldier who had so quickly stolen her daughter's heart, and gulped back tears. "As long as you're happy," she managed to say in a wavering voice.

"I am. Oh, Mummy, I'm so sorry, I know you were looking forward to a church wedding." A few more tears all round, another cup of tea, and Tom breathed a sigh of relief. Everything would be all right now.

"You'll be staying for a few days?" Mrs.Whitehead asked.

"We can't, thanks all the same," Tom regretfully declined.

"We have to go to the Grill room at the Savoy later."

"The Grill room? The Savoy?" exclaimed the vicar. "That's very extravagant of you."

Julie went on to explain about meeting Sir Phillip Ashfield. The family already knew about Daphne and Rob.

Margaret Tanner

“Watch Ashfield, ruthless as hell.” The vicar looked quite ferocious.

“Daniel.”

“It’s true, my dear. He’s wanted this match for years. Lord Bowater has, too, it will unite two powerful families.”

“There’s nothing they can do, Daphne’s married to Paul.”

“A ruthless man like Ashfield might insinuate the marriage wasn’t legal. There’s no one from Singapore to confirm it. What’s Paul Ashfield like?” the vicar asked.

“A bit of a snob, but not a bad bloke, I suppose.”

“Well, unless he’s prepared to admit the legality of the marriage, and you can convince him your sister is still alive, I don’t like your chances, my boy.”

Chapter Fifteen

Sir Phillip Ashfield, dressed in a charcoal grey suit, sat at his usual table, discreetly eyeing everyone who came in. He would buy the young chap off. A few hundred pounds should do it. He was halfway through his second whisky when he heard a slight commotion near the door.

He glanced up, and his hand literally froze on the glass. It wasn't possible. A young, fair-headed soldier with a patch over one eye and wearing an Australian army uniform, was following the waiter. It was like looking at a ghost. Dear God, he was the living image of Tommy Calvert.

Ever since 1916, a boy with thick, almost white hair and blue eyes glazed with approaching death had haunted his dreams. This boy appeared older, but he possessed the same jaunty walk and reckless assurance. A quick appraisal of the girl with him showed a rather pretty, apprehensive little thing.

"I'm Tom Bancroft. This is my wife, Julie."

So, this was Phillip Ashfield, arrogance in every line of him. A superbly tailored Saville Row suit and white silk shirt covered a slim, fit looking body. Lines were etched deeply

about his mouth, giving him an almost cruel look. Hair combed back severely, was pitch black with just a touch of silver at the temples.

Sir Phillip stood up. "Good evening."

He didn't shake hands, but Tom didn't expect him to. "Would you care to join me for a meal?"

"No thanks."

"A drink?" Dark eyebrows peaked in enquiry.

Tom shook his head.

"How's Allison?"

"She's all right, under the circumstances."

"I was sorry to hear about your brother, make sure you tell your mother that, won't you?"

"Yes, I'll pass on your condolences."

"Do you mind if I have another whisky?" Sir Phillip clipped out.

"Go ahead."

"Another of the same, Sir?" a hovering waiter asked deferentially.

"Yes." Sir Phillip waited until the waiter left before continuing. "I've been thinking about what you told me on the phone, er, Tom."

"And?"

"It's important to me for my son to marry Caroline Bowater."

"Too bad, because he happens to be married to my sister."

"Paul believes she's dead."

"Yes, she thought he was, too."

"What would it take to make you forget you ever knew Paul got back from Singapore alive?"

"What?" Tom stared at Ashfield in disbelief. Not one flicker of emotion showed on the dark man's haughty face. He might have been a statue carved from stone.

"I want my son to marry Caroline. I'll stop at nothing to

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achieve that end. You understand? Nothing.”

“Are you threatening me?” Bastard. Who did he think he was, Tom thought furiously, tempted to punch him on the nose.

“No, just take it as a warning.”

“Even if I was prepared,” Tom gulped, “to forget.” He clenched his hand under the table. “Paul would be committing bigamy.”

“I’ll discreetly arrange to have his first marriage annulled.”

“What about my sister?”

“I’m prepared to financially reimburse her for, um, her loss.”

Julie turned so pale, Tom feared she would faint completely away. He wanted to get up and flatten this bastard. He had wrought terrible heartache on their family, just because he decided to sow a few wild oats out in the colonies, before taking a suitable bride. So much pain and anguish caused by a rich young man’s lust. Months of warfare had trained Tom not to alert the enemy as to what he was thinking, and this man was the enemy, he didn’t doubt it for a moment. He fought to keep himself under control even as rage surged through him.

“What if Paul ever found out?” he asked.

“He wouldn’t.” Hard and implacable the tones were now. “Paul isn’t the man he was before Singapore.”

“I heard he nearly lost his leg.” Tom desperately played for time to give himself a chance to digest what Sir Phillip was saying.

“Yes.” Momentarily, something flickered in the stony brown eyes. “Physically he’s recovered, mentally, well...” Sir Phillip lit a cigar and carefully blew out a circle of smoke. “What’s your price?”

“Well.” Tom ignored the shocked gasp from Julie. “A thousand pounds.”

“A thousand pounds?” Sir Phillip echoed.

“Yes, Ashfield, that’s my price. Five hundred for me and five hundred for Daphne.”

Margaret Tanner

"Tom, no," Julie wailed.

"Why not? We could do with some extra money. It would give us a good start."

"And Daphne?" she asked.

Tom inwardly cringed at the look of revulsion on Julie's face as she edged away from him. "Five hundred pounds would be handy for her, too. Later on she'll meet up with someone else."

"But you said she..."

"Julie, be quiet. Well, Ashfield?"

"You drive a hard bargain."

"I want cash."

"Cash?" Sir Phillip snapped.

"Yes, can you get it?"

"Of course, but not today," Sir Phillip said haughtily.

He obviously felt insulted that they should think he couldn't raise a measly thousand pounds at short notice. Tom didn't know how he stopped himself from attacking the arrogant bastard.

"We could meet here again. Tomorrow at the same time, Sir Phillip?"

"Agreed."

Tom stood up. He went to take Julie's hand and she snatched it away.

Out in the street, she looked at him with tear-drenched eyes. "How could you do such a contemptible thing? Sell your sister's happiness for money."

"Darling, I don't want his dirty money, I was stalling for time."

"You didn't mean it?"

"Of course not, silly." He put his arms around her.

Julie collapsed against him with relief. "You sounded so convincing."

"Did I?" He hugged her tight. "Rob always said I should

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have been on the stage. What a cold fish Ashfield is. Did you see his face?"

"Hard as granite. That man frightens me," she said, trying to suppress a shiver.

"We've got to find Paul. Wonder what he meant by physically recovered, but not mentally?"

"I don't know, Tom, perhaps he had a nervous breakdown."

"Sounds like it."

They went see Gwen, a friend of Julie's who lived in London and had invited them to stay with her. Numerous phone calls drew a blank. It was as if Paul Ashfield had suddenly dropped off the face of the earth. Even the minister performing the marriage ceremony didn't know his current whereabouts. They tried Bowater's, and if anyone knew anything there, they weren't saying.

Tom used the line of being an old army mate in London on leave so often he nearly believed it.

"What are you going to do now, Tom?" Julie asked as they lay side by side in the spare room at Gwen's. "Poor Daphne."

"I don't know what we'll do tomorrow, my darling, but right now, Daphne would forgive us for thinking of ourselves, and there's something I want to do very much." He drew her into his arms.



A plump tabby cat lay on a mat near the front step, watching a butterfly fussing around a window box full of colourful flowers. The door was of heavy, aged blackened oak. Daphne banged the brass knocker and nervously waited.

A young girl answered. Her hair was the colour of toffee, her eyes sparkling.

"Hello, Julie."

"Daphne, you finally made it." She was engulfed in a spontaneous hug. "Come in and meet everyone."

"Where's Tom?"

"Out the back. Here, give me your case, we've prepared a room, but weren't sure when you would arrive."

"Thanks. So, you and Tom are married now."

"Yes." Julie blushed prettily. "Come inside and meet my mother. Daddy has gone off to a parish meeting. Tom, Tom."

The sitting room was full of good quality dark furniture, but colourful paintings on the walls lifted the dullness. "My brother's the artist," Julie explained.

"They're lovely." Daphne was almost swaying with fatigue, when Mrs. Whitehead bustled in.

"Oh, my dear, you do look worn out. Sit down and I'll get some tea."

"Thanks, I am rather tired."

"Daffy, you finally made it."

"Tom!" Her tiredness and despair were temporarily forgotten as he engulfed her in a bear hug and swung off her feet.

"You didn't put much weight on in the hospital, and you're still as white as a sheet. You're a wreck," he said with brotherly candour, as he held her at arm's length.

"Have you been able to contact Paul?"

"No. Bloody Sir Phillip knows we're trying to contact him, I'd stake my life on it."

"Maybe Paul wants to marry Caroline." Daphne's lips trembled as she forced back the tears. She felt as if she had done nothing except cry lately. *I have the right to shed buckets of tears*, she thought bitterly, *after all I've lost*, but for Tom's sake she tried to pull herself together. He had suffered too. Losing his eye must have been catastrophic, but at least he had found Julie through it.



Tom hated seeing his pretty, laughing sister so sad. "It's strange. No one has seen Paul since he got back from

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Singapore. We've asked around, trekked up to Yorkshire even, but the servants wouldn't tell us anything. Down at the local pub they've got plenty to say, though. He's supposed to be a recluse. None of them have set eyes on him, appears he doesn't care one way or the other what happens to him."

Daphne's hopes lifted. "You can't know how desperately I love him."

Their tea arrived, accompanied by little iced cakes. Daphne forced herself to eat because they all looked so anxious. "What about you, Tom? Mum will be very hurt that you didn't tell her before you got married."

"It happened quickly. I sent her a long letter the other day, giving her all the details."

"I'm really glad everything has worked out so well for you."

Tom watched a shadow pass fleetingly over his sister's face as she generously offered her good wishes.

Julie went over to her. "I'm sorry, Daphne. If everything had gone well, you would have your baby by now. What a wicked thing war is."

"Let me look at you again, Tom. Mum was worried you'd be hideously scarred for life."

There were numerous pink scars about his forehead, but Daphne saw that they had faded even more since she last saw him at the hospital. A patch still covered the eye he had lost, though.

"I'll be getting my new one soon, tailor made."

"The army won't want you back?"

"I don't think so. Well, I'll never be a front line soldier again. Militia maybe. With my luck I'll end up pushing a pen in some office."

Daphne liked the vague vicar. In fact, all the Whitehead family were nice. It didn't take long for the photo album to come out. There were two handsome boys in uniform, a beautiful girl

in a bridal gown, and this same girl nursing two children.

They asked no questions, these understanding people, but Daphne found herself telling them about Singapore, Paul and Robbie, the ship being sunk, and somehow it seemed to ease her despair.

"It must have been awful for you, Daffy. Poor Rob, I couldn't believe it when I first heard, he was such a good kid."



Today was Thursday, and the wedding ceremony had been scheduled to take place on Saturday. Their numerous phone calls brought no result. Even Sir Phillip himself was unavailable now. How could a man be so, well, evil? That was the appropriate word for a father who would let his son marry another woman, knowing full well his wife was alive. It was criminal, Daphne thought.

"I still think we ought to contact the police," she said.

"Listen to me, Daphne, you didn't see Sir Phillip so you couldn't possibly imagine what the man's like. He's rich, ruthless, and wields such power the police are probably on his payroll. He wants this marriage to take place so desperately, he'll do anything to stop us," Tom warned.

It was terrible just waiting for time to pass before they fronted up to the church and accused Paul of committing bigamy, Daphne thought frantically. Would Sir Phillip actually go so far as to harm them?



Tom, Julie and Daphne caught a train up to Leeds. They stayed the night in a small, comfortable pub. Just after lunch on Saturday, they hired a taxi to take them to their destination. It was a large church, built of dark stone, with a huge bell tower. It stood on a slight rise overlooking a quaint little village.

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They were late. Daphne looked at the Rolls Royces, of which there were several, and trembled.

"You'll be right, Daffy. Damn it, we're late."

Inside, the church was filled to capacity. Her eyes were drawn immediately to a beautiful rose window just above the altar. Choirboys were singing 'O Perfect Love.' She faltered, would have fallen had it not been for Tom's supporting arm. They slipped into the only vacant pew, the second last one, and Daphne tried to still her shaking hands and stop the butterflies churning up her stomach.

Paul had his back to them, his carriage as erect as ever, yet somehow different. They weren't in time. Maybe he was already married, she thought frantically.

"You'll have to get up and say something, Daphne."

"I don't think I can, Tom, not in front of all those people."

"If you love him, you will. If you don't, we'll leave right now. You've come all this way, surely you're not going to turn tail and run at the last minute."

"Go with her, Tom," Julie whispered. "Say something now, the minister's getting ready to start."

The choir had finished and the usual murmur of expectation went through the congregation. "Dearly beloved..."

"Excuse me." Tom's voice sounded overloud in the stillness of the church. "Paul Ashfield is married to my sister."

There was an audible buzz. Every eye in the church turned towards Tom. The groom turned around, and Daphne hardly recognised Paul. An ugly, raw scar was gouged into his cheek.

"Daphne's dead." Just the two anguished words, hopeless in their finality had her standing up.

"I wasn't on that plane, Paul."

There was absolute uproar now, and she was aware of nothing, except a white, drawn face, slashed by a vivid red scar.

"Sunshine?" His voice, full of such anguish and pain,

brought tears to her eyes. She knew for certain now, Paul had never stopped loving her. When he called her by her pet name, she knew he hadn't forgotten what they shared.

The bride, a beautiful blonde girl, caught Daphne's eye as she darted towards the altar. She did not see the look of sheer poison cast her way by Sir Phillip Ashfield, but Tom did.

Paul took two unsteady paces towards her, and it wrenched her heart because he dragged his leg so badly. They engulfed each other, oblivious to the commotion around them.

He kissed her desperately. "I thought I'd lost you, Sunshine." His tears fell on to her face, hers on to his.

"I thought you'd been killed too, Paul."

"Our baby?"

"I had a miscarriage," she whispered sadly.

Somehow the minister got them all into the vestry, where explanations were hurriedly given by Tom.

"What about me?" Caroline shrieked. "You promised. You promised to marry me."

Paul's pale cheeks turned even paler. "I'm terribly sorry. God, what a mess."

"It's your fault." The blonde turned on Sir Phillip, and the face that had seemed so pretty only seconds ago, now turned ugly. "You said Paul would never know she was alive. What's going to happen now? Are you going to tell them or will I?"

"Be quiet, Caroline, we can still sort this out."

"It was your idea. You wanted me to marry your sop of a son, so no-one would know about us."

"I'm warning you," Sir Phillip snarled.

Daphne looked at this ruthless man and shivered.

"Thought you were so clever, didn't you, Phillip?"

"Caroline, my dear."

"Oh yes, Daddy, you were as bad. Do you know why Sir Phillip was in such a hurry to marry me off to his son?"

Forbidden Love

"Caroline. Be quiet."

"He got me pregnant." The bride's mother completely fainted away. "I wanted to get rid of it, but no, he said I should marry Paul and let him think it was his."

The next few minutes were not pretty. Daphne had never seen such ugliness before in her whole life.

"Let's get out of here before I end up killing someone." Paul's voice shook with emotion.

"Good idea," Tom agreed.

Paul took one of Daphne's arms, her brother the other, and with Julie clinging to Tom's hand, they left by the back entrance.

"God, I can hardly believe my father would do such an evil thing to me. He's ruthless, but this, I'll never forgive him."

"Have you got a car, Paul? In years to come we'll probably laugh over this," Tom said with a grin.

"We'll take the old man's Rolls and to hell with him," Paul declared.

"Now that everything is fixed up, you must have heaps to say to each other. Drop Julie and me off at Leeds, we'll get the train back," Tom suggested. "We can catch up with each other in a few days. Looks like you copped it pretty bad."

"I nearly lost my leg, always have a limp, too, and this." He fingered his jagged scar. "Do you mind, Daphne?"

"How could you ask? If you were legless it wouldn't make any difference to me, even when I thought you were dead, I never stopped loving you."

"I never forgot you, either. I only agreed to marry Caroline because my father always wanted it. She didn't love me, didn't even like me after I'd written her that letter breaking off our engagement. I didn't care what happened to me. I was a living, breathing, empty shell."

They stood beneath a huge oak. "Daphne, I didn't want to

Margaret Tanner

live when I thought you were dead.”

Their lips were desperate with hunger as they kissed each other fiercely, oblivious to the thrushes fluttering around them. There was so much lost time and heartache to make up for, but a lifetime together in which to do it.