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**The Brannigans**

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# 1912

## *July*

The killing storm took the village by surprise. Moving in from the northwest, it surfaced as a warning finger of cloud behind the mountains curling into the Atlantic Ocean, wrapping itself hungrily round the coastline, pushing aggressively up the mountain slopes to spill down its sides as it rushed towards the village and the open waters of the bay.

The boats from the fishing hamlet of Brannigan Bay were little more than frail white dots on the still unsuspecting ocean, far from the harbour and safety. Those on shore who sensed the threat looked anxiously to sea and were relieved to see the dots in motion, for it meant their crews had sensed the danger too.

The rain struck just as the first villagers reached the harbour. It was a tiny enclave, tucked into the shelter of towering cliffs on one side, protected by the rugged, curving coastline on the other. The little jetty angled out towards the cliffs, narrowing the entrance yet helping to keep out the breakers surging in across the broad bay.

Those fishermen who had not gone out to sea that day waited anxiously on the harbour shelf. They prepared the slipway, readying the logs to carry each boat from the water to safety up the slope, a pole stuck through each of the iron rungs secured to the bow and stern, four or five men on either side to lift it. Speed was crucial when the boats rushed through the narrow harbour entrance.

Two men stood on the side of the cliffs to study the pattern of surging water against the rocks and shout instructions to the boats when they finally rounded the cliff base to wait for the right swell on which to ride to safety.

Darkness moved in, the wind driving the dense rain before it. Everyone knew that those at sea were shipping water now, demanding a pair of hands on the pump and one less on the oars. The fishermen in the harbour worked fast and silently, determined to be ready when the first boat arrived, for they knew what it was like to run from the storm, how weary their comrades would be. The weight of the waterlogged boats would be just too much for them to contend with once they reached the harbour.

One of the men shouted from the cliff top, the wind whipping away his cry. The tense group gathered below looked up and heard the muffled shout again. This time they understood. Mist. They saw it pushing through the rain, spreading its dark tentacles across the breadth of the bay. Rain, wind, violent waters – now mist as well. The elements were joining forces against frightened men in small boats.

The first of the women and children arrived in the harbour now, their faces drawn as they stared into the churning greyness. A mother knelt and drew a crying child to her. Someone had lit fires on top of the cliffs, using the stacks of wood always kept in readiness there.

On the harbour shelf, Jay Brannigan, whose grandfather had founded the hamlet and given it his name, stared blankly at the heaving sea. Somewhere out there on

the waters, in *Farer*, his boat, was his father, Fraser.

Jay had turned seventeen just the day before, a tall, powerfully built boy with thick, wavy brown hair that matched his dark complexion. He was not handsome but there was something about him that attracted people. It was the eyes, they said, a startling blue that seemed to change shade with his emotions.

He turned to the petite girl standing behind him, for he understood the fear on her face; her father was out there, too. Almost everyone had fathers or brothers on the boats.

'It'll be all right,' he tried to reassure her, rain trickling down his neck when he ran his hand across his wet hair. His khaki shirt was already soaked.

The wind plucked at the girl's auburn hair hanging in heavy tresses to her slender shoulders. She brushed it back when it spilled across her face, its thickness made denser by the rain. Magda de Vries was a year younger than Jay, the daughter of his father's closest friend, the giant Bull de Vries. She was a girl of unusual beauty, loved by all.

Jay loved her more than most. Perhaps one day, when he was a man and skipper of his own boat, he and Magda ... No, they were both too young to think of such things.

Thrusting thoughts of Magda from him, he scanned the mist again. Panic rose within him as the storm pushed at his shoulders. He had been far from the harbour when he had spotted it coming and run there at full speed. It was where he wanted to be and the waiting would be long and agonising. The harbour was where things began and ended, the heart of Brannigan Bay.

Whenever Jay studied the inlet, he marvelled at how his grandfather, Grant Brannigan, had noticed the tiny enclave along the bay's lengthy coastline, nestling between the sea and a gentle mountain range. The fisherman had been running from a storm, so the story went, and had already been at sea out of Cape Town for two days. He took shelter there for three days while he walked the land where no man had yet settled. He made it his bay and his town. Even now, fifty-three years later, although other men tended the affairs of the village, Grant Brannigan's descendants were treated with respect.

Jay noticed his mother in the growing crowd on the harbour shelf and nodded to her reassuringly.

Frances Brannigan was a tall, severe-looking woman. She hated the sea; she had lost her first husband to it after only six months of marriage. Knowing this, Jay often wondered why she had married his father, another fisherman. The previous night, Jay's birthday, Fraser Brannigan had said, 'You're a man now. Soon you'll be ready to take over the boat.' Jay had beamed but Frances Brannigan had other ideas for her son.

'He'll be finishing his schooling before he does anything of the sort,' she had said firmly, her tone conveying her old argument about a better life for Jay. 'We should go farming,' she often told his father. 'Get a small place in the Overberg, grow some wheat. When the debts are paid we could buy more land. It'd be a better life for Jay than going out on that damn sea day after day, with his wife and children never knowing whether he'd return.'

'A man can die on a farm as well,' Fraser Brannigan had replied evenly. 'Jay will make his own choice some day.'

Now, Jay caught his mother's glance again, noticed her chewing anxiously at her

knuckles. He wanted to go to her but Magda moved closer to him, her body lightly touching his. He instinctively placed his arm about her shoulders.

She wore oilskins several sizes too large for her, which made her seem even more fragile and vulnerable. 'It's getting so dark,' she said. 'I'm, scared, Jay. Will they see the fires?'

'I'm sure they will. They'll be here soon.' Water streamed across his face when he lowered his head to hers. 'Our dads are the best skippers, don't forget. They'll come in together – they always do!' He hoped his voice concealed the fear pulsing in his gut.

Magda clung tightly to him, unashamed of the embrace. Those of their peers who saw them would tease them the next day, but Jay could silence them with a warning snarl – or his fists. He had done so before.

Just as Jay said, 'I must go to my mother,' there came a cry from the cliff top. 'They're coming! They're coming!'

'There!' cried Jay a moment later as the first boat appeared through the mist. 'They risked staying close inshore,' he added, seeing how near the craft was to the base of the cliffs.

The two men clinging to the cliff face were shouting instructions to the crew. 'Aim for the jetty! Watch the swells – they're breaking far out! Hold the oars ready! Row now! Row!'

The boat lingered on the swells, its sails furled, waiting for the right wave on which to surf towards the harbour. The crew had their oars raised, but at the shouted commands from the cliff they lowered them and rowed with all their remaining strength when a mighty swell drove in on the harbour. The skipper hauled on the helm, steering for the jetty wall.

It appeared as if the boat would crash onto the jetty but then the current caught it, sweeping it through the narrow harbour entrance. For a moment it seemed the vessel would be pushed onto the rocks, then the skipper pulled frantically on the helm and it sped to safety. Jay saw it was the Norwegian, Org Nielsen, and his crew of eight. Org would have news of his father.

Rushing forward as the boat surged closer, Jay jumped into the icy water with the other helpers. The poles to lift the boats were already being placed into position as the exhausted fishermen jumped from their craft, their eyes red from fear, yet rapidly filling with relief as they glanced quickly towards the anxious crowd, trying to spot their families among them.

'*Farer?*' shouted Jay at the Norwegian skipper. 'What news of *Farer?*'

He felt a stab of alarm when Nielsen glanced quickly at him before looking away. but managed to restrain himself till the boat was secure. Only then did he rush to the skipper, grabbing hold of his arm before the Norwegian's wife could embrace him. 'What is it, Org?' he demanded. 'Tell me!'

The Norwegian's face was grim as he gripped Jay's wrists. 'All I know is that her anchor got stuck and she got away late. The mist ... I could not see more.' His voice trailed off as he pushed past Jay with a pat on his shoulder.

One of the crew said, 'Bull de Vries was waiting for him, Jay. They'll be fine.'

He scanned the crowd, searching for Frances, relieved to see her in the care of Magda's mother, Sarah.

The boats came in one after the other until seven lay on the slipway. There were only two to come: *Farer* and Bull de Vries's *Urchin*. Jay glanced at Magda and saw

how pale she had gone.

'I think I saw them as I cleared Blake's point,' a fisherman was saying. 'Can't be sure, though, it's a bloody mess out there.' He smiled at Jay but could not hide the concern in his eyes.

'Jay?' Magda was beside him again. 'Jay, I don't want him to die ... I want my pa!'

'Be strong, Magda.' His words sounded empty, so corrosive was his own terror, now risen beyond his control. His father couldn't die – not yet! Jay wasn't ready to take over from him. Setting his jaw he stared, eyes aching, into the mist. Was there something? Yes, over there – almost against the cliffs!

The shouts from the men on their rocky perch confirmed it. A boat – no, two – fought the swirling water at the foot of the rocks. Frantic voices rang down from the cliff face. Swing! Go! Row now!

Magda clung tightly to him. 'They're safe, Jay! Oh, they're safe!' She was crying tears of relief.

Jay pulled free and raced for the water, eager to help. Bull de Vries stood in the stern of the lead boat, his oilskin cap washed off his head, his mop of unruly hair plastered wetly across his broad forehead.

Jay waved at him and swung his gaze towards *Farer*, now tucked in behind *Urchin*. As he turned, he glimpsed the slow shake of Bull's head. Fear exploded icy cold within him. He could not take his eyes from those of his father's friend.

*Farer* was there, wasn't she? But he knew the answer: *Farer* had come in without her skipper.

The boats passed by on either side of him. Bull's gaze was fixed on Jay but he was watching his father's boat.

Jay remained in the icy water when the boats ground to a halt and the men jumped out. Fraser Brannigan and one other man were missing. Jay's brain was too numb to conclude the identity of the second man; all he'd seen was the wrong person at the helm and only six men at the oars.

He felt the weight of a hand on his shoulder turning him. Bull stood there, anguish in his eyes, his massive shoulders slumped. 'I'm sorry, my boy. 'Just the other side of Blake's Point – it was a huge wave, Jay. It swept back from the rocks and caught *Farer* as she turned from the shore.'

'She didn't go over though?' The boat showed no sign of damage.

'No, but Moses was standing at the time, hauling in a loose line. He was washed overboard.'

Moses. The coloured fisherman who had served his father the longest. Were his wife and children at the harbour, too? Jay was unable to lift his gaze to where he could hear his mother wailing. All his attention was focused on Bull. The man had been there when it happened; he was the last link.

'Fraser went in after him.' Bull's voice cracked and Jay saw he was crying. 'He had to try, though he must have known there was no chance for either of them. That was Fraser's way.'

'I know, Uncle Bull. The crew was his responsibility. That's what he always said.' Jay wondered where his strength was coming from. It's because it's over now, he told himself, surprised to find he'd laid his hand in a comforting gesture on de Vries's shoulder. The big man lowered his chin, the roughness of the day's growth of beard touching the back of Jay's hand. Bull's tears blended with the rain streaking across his skin.

'I tried ... both boats did, but ...'

Jay studied the big man, his huge frame now slumped in defeat. The great Bull de Vries cried like a baby for the friend he had loved and now lost. 'I know you tried, Uncle Bull. So does Dad, I'm sure.'

He let his hand fall from the skipper's shoulder. 'I have to go to my ma,' he said softly.

Frances Brannigan lay in a crumpled heap on the wet ground. A crowd of women, their brief moment of selfish relief over, tried to comfort her. At first Jay thought she had fainted, then he heard her wail pitifully. He stood a few paces away, not knowing what to do or say, and decided he would talk to her later when she was over the worst.

Magda was there too, helping her mother lift Frances to her feet. Her eyes said it all when she turned to him; there was no need for words. Their roles could so easily have been reversed.

Jay stared numbly at the mist-shrouded sea, at the angry waves that over the years had taken so many of the town's sons.

Today they had taken Brannigan Bay's finest.

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The storm continued into the next day, preventing the citizens of Brannigan Bay from paying their respects to Fraser Brannigan. Instead of an armada of fishing boats rowing to the spot where Fraser and one of his crew had fallen into the sea, the townspeople gathered at the water's edge, said prayers and tossed flowers onto the rolling waters. They were swept out on the tide and scattered across the waters of the bay.

Jay remained in the harbour long after the last of the mourners had returned to the warmth of their homes. Unable to share the deep rawness of his mourning with others, he needed to be alone. The rain slanted in, beating against him where he sat shivering at the foot of the cliffs. His clothes, already soaked by the sea spray sweeping off the crashing waves, clung to his sturdy body. Pulling his knees up against his chest, he clasped his arms about his trembling legs.

Not far from where he sat, a lone fisherman checked that all was secure in the harbour. The boats had been pulled up as high as possible but, as Jay watched, waves rolled up the slipway to surge round their keels. Water crashed against the embankment protecting the steep path leading to the market square above the harbour. It was a fitting storm in which to have died and, somehow, it made the loss of his father more bearable.

He stood up slowly, flexing his legs. The rain continued to sear down as he left the protection of the cliffs and he had to wait a few moments for the surf to subside before he could dash from the rocks to the slipway.

The fisherman tending the boats frowned when he saw him. 'I was wondering what fool was sitting up there without oilskins,' he said. 'Why aren't you home with your ma, lad? She'll be needing you with her in this difficult time.'

Jay nodded. 'I'm going now.' He turned towards *Farer*, which lay at an angle on its keel.

The fisherman caught the glance and said, 'She's yours now, lad. Will you be taking her out?'

Jay stared at his father's boat, at the red gunwale worn smooth in places by hands working at oars, scarred in others by the marks of fishing lines. He had thought he was not yet ready – but perhaps it was not his decision to make. Like his grandfather and father he was a child of the sea; now it was his turn to be called. Yet he did not answer the fisherman, starting instead for the pathway leading to the top of the harbour.

Along the way he passed by the row of stone huts where the fish were cleaned and displayed for sale. Gravel, washed loose by the rain, slid down the slope and rippled over his brown boots when he stopped beside the furthest hut. It was the one his father used. *Had* used.

He slipped and fell once before he reached the top of the path, so that mud now caked the legs of his sodden trousers. Leaning his hands on the rock wall spanning the cliff face, he gazed down at the harbour.

He did not know how long he stood there, remembering the past and pondering the future, before he became aware of someone beside him. 'Magda! You shouldn't be out in this weather!' She wore her oversized oilskins, and her hat slipped across her face when he pulled her towards him. He pushed it back and wiped the water gently from her face.

'I was looking for you,' she replied. 'We're at your house and your ma's worried about you, Jay. I knew I'd find you here.'

He smiled at her. She was tiny with large brown eyes and though her hair was tucked inside the hat, stray curls plastered wetly to the pale skin of her cheeks. Pulling the collar of her jacket higher, he said, 'Come. I was on my way home.'

It was only as they crossed the empty market square and approached the first row of whitewashed cottages that Jay said, 'I'm taking *Farer*. As skipper.'

Magda stopped and pulled away from him. 'But – your ma? What about school?'

He placed his hands on her shoulders, drawing her face close to his. Rain spilled from his hair and streaked across his cheeks; he blew it off before he spoke. 'How else can she survive, Magda? With *Farer* I can make enough money to keep us alive.'

'You could sell the boat, Jay. You know your ma wants you to farm.'

His laugh was bitter. 'Would it please you, Magda? If I were to farm? Somewhere in the Overberg where we might see each other once a year?'

She shook her head briskly, causing the rainwater to cascade from her hat onto her jacket. 'You must do what *you* want, Jay.'

'I want the sea.' And you, he almost added. He slipped his arm round her and began to walk again. 'I want to be a fisherman, like my dad and Grandpa Brannigan. We belong out there on those waves.'

'My pa said you would take her out. He knew.'

Jay smiled. Yes, Bull would understand and could be depended on for help. But how would the crew feel about serving under one so young?

It was as if Magda read his mind for she said, 'If you decide to take *Farer*, Pa said he'd call the men together when the storm has passed. He said your dad's crew would have you – he's sure of it.'

Jay squeezed her shoulder. It was right that he took over his father's role. Magda believed in him, as did Bull de Vries. But he could not quell his nervousness at how his mother would respond. There had always been a distance between him and Frances, an emotional chasm neither of them had attempted to bridge. All that



bound them together had been Jay's father.

He realised there would be no sense in delaying his announcement to take over *Farer*; he would not know how to break the news any less gently at another time.

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<http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00EX2PE7A>

# 1913

*Monday, 14th December*

The swell was gentle where the boat rocked on the ocean surface only a mile from the rugged Cape coastline; its skipper and crew could hear the breakers pound the rocks and rush into the many coves with their small, white beaches. A few yards away, sea gulls cackled over the feast of fish entrails drifting on the clear blue water.

There were three other boats besides *Farer* in the area where the men had spotted the run of fish earlier that day. Their craft rose and fell in sequence, as if in a lilting orchestration of the sea that flexed its power sparingly, gently, against the coast. The speck of world containing the three boats, the men, the sea and the shore, was in harmony this day.

Jay Brannigan squinted into the sun to watch the tree-studded coast. He reached forward when one of the crew drew in another wriggling fish, jerked it off the hook and threw it onto the boat's floorboard. By the time Jay had his long-bladed knife inside the fish, the hook had been baited again and the line flung into the sparkling water.

Jay was just eighteen, four years younger than the youngest of his crew, but fully accepted by them all, both as a man and as their skipper. As physically strong as any of them, he had already proved he had inherited his father's ability to sense the places where fish would be found. Since he had been skipper, *Farer* constantly returned to the harbour with the richest catch of the fleet.

It had still been raining that morning seventeen months ago when Bull de Vries accompanied him to the harbour where all the skippers and crews were gathered to judge the weather. Four days had elapsed since the storm and the men were in need of their regular catch.

They all walked with Jay to *Farer*. His crew went into their practised routine of readying the boat for the water; lines and bait were loaded, with many willing hands to help ease *Farer* into the cold sea. Then everyone stepped back and watched the new skipper launch his vessel through the harbour entrance. Only when it was past the cliffs and had mounted the first large swell did the next boat follow. The craft that had tested and survived the elements was the first to challenge it again, as it had done so often before.

Jay remembered, too, the absence of his mother on that special day. If anything, his announcement that he was becoming a fisherman had widened the gulf between them. 'The sea!' she had shrieked when he broke the news, 'The damn, damn sea! What is it with you men?' Jay had been glad of the presence of Magda and her parents in the house. Bull's quiet expression of approval had helped him stand firm in the face of his mother's wrath.

'Skipper!'

Jay jerked from his reverie. 'What?'

The man who had called out pointed across Jay's shoulder. 'Whale,' he said.

The rest of the men had seen it too. Jay cursed silently because he, as skipper, should have been the first to spot the danger.

'Three of them,' someone said.

'Is there a calf with them?' asked Jay.

The man shook his head. 'Don't think so,' he replied, studying the huge grey bodies of the Southern Right whales drifting a hundred yards from the group of boats.

Jay turned to the other boats, cupped his hands over his mouth, and called out. His voice carried clearly across the water. He pointed at the mammals, feeling somewhat redeemed when he realised none of the other crews had been aware of their presence.

'They're pulling in their lines,' a fisherman said. 'Skipper, they're pulling in their lines!' he repeated when Jay did not respond. A note of alarm rang in his voice and Jay recalled his father's tales of harrowing experiences with Southern Right whales that came too close to a boat. The potential danger was not new to him – but the physical exposure was.

'Don't panic,' he responded curtly, 'Let's first see which way they're going.' He was reluctant to give up on the solid bank of fish running beneath his boat. A good few hours remained before they would have to return to the harbour and he doubted whether *Farer* had yet taken a bigger catch than the other boats.

'Skipper,' the man tried again, 'those damn things are dangerous. You should see what they do to a boat with one lash of a tail!'

'I know! I know!' retorted Jay, angry with the man for highlighting the danger yet more annoyed with himself for delaying his decision. The fish – or the safety of his men? He didn't want to be the first boat to flee but neither did he want to be seen as waiting to follow their lead.

The whales were closer now, moving in with alarming speed. If they carried on in their present direction, they would pass between *Farer* and the other boats.

The other skippers were giving the order to leave. Oars flashed in the sun and plucked at the water.

'Skipper!'

'Shut up, damn you!' Jay spun round and glared at the man. The rest of the crew were watching the whales anxiously now. 'They're well away from us,' Jay told them, 'so let's get on with our jobs.'

One of his men, a German named Gottlieb Kessler, rose to his feet. 'You're being a hard-headed bastard, Jay,' he said in his broken English, 'It's all right if they move between us and shore, but—'

Even as he spoke the whales veered suddenly, seeming to move directly at *Farer*. Someone screamed, 'Jesus!' and jerked his line from the water. He paid no heed to the bright silver fish squirming at the end of it.

There was no need for Jay to give any orders. The crew scrambled for their oars – there was no time to raise the sail. Frantically hauling up the anchor, Jay glanced over his shoulder at the whales which were now frighteningly close.

The men's panic slowed their progress and *Farer* milled indecisively on the swell. 'Calm down!' yelled Jay, though his heart beat loudly in his chest and the helm felt slow and cumbersome in his hand. 'Find your rhythm!'

Ahead, at what seemed a long, lonely distance, the other two boats were racing away. Jay could see the men watching *Farer*. 'Row, damn you!' he shouted.

The three whales lay close together. They drifted on the tide, carried along almost lazily by the water pushing towards the shore. The threat inherent in their

size made it seem as though they were moving determinedly and rapidly towards the boat. The water swirled when they dived beneath the surface, then exploded in a burst of spray and foam as they breached, rising up from the sea's grasp before falling back with a resounding crash, sending adrenaline squirting into the veins of *Farer's* crew.

'Row for the shore,' Jay ordered when he saw they could not outrun the whales. If *Farer* continued on its course, following the other boats, it would sail between the first and second whales. Just one careless flick of a tail could end its flight.

Jay jerked the helm and *Farer* responded sluggishly, turning on the rise of a swell to point its nose at the shore. Ahead lay a stretch of calm water, but Jay knew that a solid bank of bamboo awaited them only a few hundred yards from where the surf broke and surged far out from the coastline. It would be all right, though, if only they could outdistance the whales then steer away from the shore again.

Fear stabbed at him when he glanced back and saw how close they were. As he watched, one burst from the sea and seemed to hang motionless for a brief moment before plunging with a crash into the water again.

Turning away, Jay saw the fear on the faces of his men and hoped his own was well concealed. Their bodies moved back and forth as they pulled at their oars, but *Farer* was making little headway. 'Row!' he shouted and heard the panic in his voice.

When he looked back, he knew it was too late for rowing or shouting. They were hemmed into a small space separating the giant bodies so completely in control of their environment.

'Skipper! Skipper!'

When Jay swung back, he saw the first whale disappear beneath the sea's surface. The crew were ashen-faced, frozen into position on the hard wood thwarts, oars still, waiting.

Another whale blew out a fountain of water. The noise was frightening. The sound of the distant breakers seemed close and threatening.

'God ... there!'

It was the last sound Jay heard before he was flung from *Farer* into the air. He plunged into the cold water. There were different sounds then, muffled sounds, the hissing surge of rushing sea. A powerful force spun him round – spun and tugged and pushed – threatening to rip him apart.

A sudden calm followed, seemed almost false, and he did not move towards the surface which he saw as a shiny film of light beckoning to him. He felt pressure on his ears and lungs, was sure his body was broken, so let his battered remains drift slowly upwards.

The worst pain was the harsh light that stabbed at his eyes – that, and the raw burning in his throat. He knew he was alive and his legs and arms moved of their own accord while his numbed brain tried to grasp his situation.

'Jay! There he is! Jesus God, there he is!' Jay recognised Henry's voice and remembered how often he had rebuked him for blasphemy. Now his 'Jesus God' were such welcome, reassuring words.

He saw that *Farer* was still afloat but taking in water where the stern had been ripped away, and realised that the whale's tail had struck almost exactly where he

had been sitting. The other boats were racing closer now, the men calling out reassurances.

When Jay reached *Farer's* side, hands reached for him, pulling him from the water and causing the damaged boat to lurch dangerously. 'Leave me,' he called out, 'You'll capsize her! I can cling to the side till the others get here.' He glanced at the stern, his mind in command again. *Farer* was holding up well. She would stay afloat if they could transfer the crew to the other boats and tow her to harbour. Only then did he search for the whales and saw that they were nearer the shore and had veered off to the north.

The other boats moved in. Someone threw a line and *Farer* was pulled slowly closer. Jay refused to be taken aboard the other boats. 'We can keep two men on her,' he told them, hauling himself carefully aboard the stricken vessel once most of his men had been transferred. 'Gottlieb, will you join me?'

The German seated himself beside Jay. 'There's the helm,' he said, pointing at the piece of wreckage floating a few yards away.

Jay nodded and fastened the tow rope to *Farer's* bow. He gave the signal and the men in the two overcrowded boats strained at the oars. It would be a long journey back to the safety of Brannigan Bay.

After a while, Gottlieb smirked and said, 'You make dumb mistake, huh? Too damn proud to run first.' His heavy frame jerked with laughter.

Jay felt a flash of anger that quickly disappeared when he glanced at his sodden clothes. 'Enjoy yourself, Kraut! It won't happen again.' His own laughter mingled with the German's.

'Ja, at least the Kraut is dry!' Gottlieb put his arm around Jay, adding, 'Not to worry, skipper, we all make mistakes when still children. That's how we learn!'

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The exhilaration of the encounter with the whales was still upon Jay as he made his way from the harbour to the whitewashed cottage he now shared with his mother, the place his grandfather had built and in which Jay had been born. It lay at the end of a cluster of houses, almost at the start of the few shops comprising the village centre.

The cottage overlooked the ocean but shielded its occupants from the worst of the sea wind that howled in over the top of the cliffs. It was a simple home, yet warm and secure and Jay loved it. From his room he could hear the sound of the surf pounding the rocks below, could feel and smell the wind on his face when he opened the front door in the mornings.

'You could have been killed, Jay Brannigan.' Magda was waiting for him at the front gate, for news of the episode had travelled fast.

'It would have served me right,' he muttered, then laughed as he recalled Gottlieb's little lecture. 'I was bloody stupid.'

'You talk like a real fisherman these days,' Magda reprimanded him, but smiled when he placed his arm about her and led her into the kitchen. 'It's bloody this and bloody that all the time.'

'And you're bloody beautiful,' he said, squeezing her tightly. She was just seventeen, but her figure had filled out and ripened, driving Jay mad with desire.

'Jay! Stop it! Your ma ...'

'She's out visiting,' he replied, nipping the smooth skin of her neck with his teeth. He felt her shiver. 'Oh Magda, you're so soft and nice and—'

'Jay! Stop it, please – Jay!' She pulled his hand from her breast and spun away from him. Her hair hung across her face, giving it a slightly wanton air as she stood there, chest heaving. 'We've got to stop this, Jay. We'll go too far one day.'

'We'll get married one day,' he replied, his face flushed with his need of her. 'Come here.'

'No!'

'Magda, it'll only be another year or so.'

'Then we'll wait.'

'I can't! Magda, I can't!' Sometimes he became erect from just watching her, when he saw the way her hips swayed as she walked, how her dress strained under the weight of her full breasts. Oh God, he was going to explode!

Magda had moved against the wall, her hands clutched defensively across her breasts. 'We must wait, Jay,' she whispered.

'It's as bad for you, too, isn't it? Do you ache as well down here?' He touched the bulge in his trousers.

She shut her eyes and nodded. 'You know I do.'

'Then come to me!'

She shook her head and seemed to squeeze more tightly against the wall. 'I must go,' she whispered, starting for the door.

Jay barred the way, gripping her shoulders roughly. Forcing her face to his, he crushed his lips to hers, ignoring her whimpered struggles as he pushed her against the wall. His hands fell to her buttocks and gripped them hard, raising her to him, pushing at her as if he could enter her body through the material of her dress.

Her cry of pain and fright made him realise what he was doing and he let her down gently to her feet and stepped back.

Her lips were bloody from the fierceness of his caress, and her eyes held a mixture of fear and anger. But the retort he expected did not come; instead, she stared at him in silent outrage.

All he said was, 'I'm sorry,' for he could not find the words to explain the enormity of his desire for her. It so often ended this way, with his lust overcoming the tender protectiveness he felt towards her. Every time it happened he told himself he was a fool for treating her like some of the village girls who were prepared to go with almost any of the younger men. Magda was not like that; there would be no other man for her – but only when she was ready ... when they were married. Oh, the agony of having to wait!

He watched her wipe the trace of blood from her lips with the back of her hand before starting for the door. 'Magda ... don't go. Not like this, not when—'

She turned at the touch of his hand on her arm. The flash of anger he'd seen in her eyes was gone now but the disillusionment that showed in its place made him feel even more ashamed.

'It's all right, Jay.' Her voice sounded shaky. 'It's my fault for letting you touch me like that. I shouldn't come here when you're alone.'

'No, I'm to blame. It's just that I want you so much. I can't control myself.'

Though she watched him intently, he could not decipher what he saw in her eyes. 'You'll be leaving tomorrow,' he said lamely, resting his back against the

wall.

'Yes.' The word was spoken quietly, without emotion. Magda and her mother were bound for Cape Town to visit Magda's brother, Nick, who had broken his leg badly when a boat slipped from its keel, forcing him into hospital to have the limb set. With the two days it took for the journey either way, Magda would be away for a week – a long time, Jay realised, for a couple to be parted when things were not right between them.

'I'll come to your place tonight, then. To say goodbye.'

'Yes.' This time he did not move into her path when she went out the door.

Jay remained against the wall, finding the cool of the surface blending with the damp of his shirt a relief against the heat that had earlier conquered him. Then he turned and stared through the open doorway.

Magda was closing the garden gate behind her before she stepped into the quiet street. He watched her walk the short distance to her home, the natural swing of her hips a taunting reminder of the stimulus that had created the strain between them.

When she disappeared inside, he sighed and went to his bedroom. Did Magda suspect there were others from time to time? Girls he went with because he could not have her, girls who writhed and cried and thrust hard against him?

He forced thoughts of her body from his mind and concentrated instead on how they would both react to their week apart.

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Sarah de Vries looked up when Magda entered the kitchen. The resemblance to her daughter was strong, although Sarah had lost the slimness of youth. Her hair, once dark auburn like Magda's, was streaked with grey. Her eyes and jaw, though, spelled out a strength instilled by years of being a fisherman's wife. Sarah had lived through some hard times, and they had left their indelible mark upon her.

Magda smiled at her mother, but the older woman glared disapprovingly at her and pushed back a wayward lock of hair that had fallen across her forehead.

'You were at Jay's?' she asked as she busied herself with her baking again. With her and Magda and being away for a week, there was much to be done to ensure Bulls's comfort during their absence.

'Yes, Ma. His boat was smashed by a whale.'

'I know, child. Your pa already told me. You two shouldn't be alone in the house. People will talk.'

'It was only for a few minutes.'

'That's all it takes to get tongues wagging.'

Magda sighed resignedly; although both her parents approved of her relationship with Jay, Sarah seemed to think that young men and women had only one thing on their minds. At least, thought Magda miserably, she was right this time. 'Need any help, Ma?' she asked, shaking off the memory of Jay's behaviour.

Sarah sniffed. 'Most of it's done. You should have offered this morning, instead of ...' She sniffed again, the sound one of self-pity. Sarah had no need to

complete the sentence; her daughter knew how she resented her regular excursions from the house to draw when she should have been helping with the housework. Drawing was something for the idle rich – not for a young woman who should pay more attention to what would one day be required of her as a housewife. Magda whispered an apology as habitual as Sarah's reproach and started for her bedroom at the end of the dark passage.

The quiet of the room was a welcome relief, both from her mother's stifling disapproval and her encounter with Jay. What did she feel for him? she wondered. She had loved him from an early age, in some ways more than she loved Nick. To Magda, Jay had always been a hero, a symbol of the kind of man Brannigan Bay depended on. He had been her protector, her friend, but they were different now. Or were they? Had Jay really changed that much? The ruggedness of youth, which she'd found so attractive, was still there but now it was displayed in more adult ways – like that afternoon. She wanted tenderness, needed gentle romance, not the harsh sexual demands that seemed to have become Jay's way.

There were still many things about him she loved, but was he *right* for her? She had asked herself that question repeatedly, yet still lacked an answer. The best she had done was to admit that in some ways he was.

There was within Magda a restlessness that intensified as she grew older. Though she realised maturity would make it easier to control, she knew, too, that until she had identified its source it would continue to plague her. So she watched her friends and tried to determine how she was different.

Most of the girls her age performed the traditional role of helping their mothers, to acquire the skills needed for the day they would start their own families. And it would be families here in Brannigan Bay, the husband a fisherman, their children marked at birth for the continuation of that tradition. Though Magda helped her mother about the house, she had to escape regularly to draw. She had done well over the past year, with three of her sketches sold to visitors from Cape Town. At times she thought it might be the urge to draw that made her different. Perhaps she needed other places, scenes and people to broaden her scope. Perhaps it was that which raised doubts about Jay's suitability.

She sighed, knowing that now she had finished her schooling, Jay would soon ask her to marry him. The only period of grace she would have, was his determination first to ensure financial security for himself and his mother. Another year at the most, and then she would have to give her answer.

\* \*

### *Friday*

It was a bright, cloudless day when Preston Whitehead left Cape Town. Despite the summer heat he kept on his heavy white dust coat and the motoring veil that stretched down across his face. The small stretch of flesh left unprotected between the veil and his driving goggles was smeared with grime and a coating of dust clung to the fine blonde hair sticking out below the rim of his cap.

The car he drove was only a year old, a 1912 Ford his father had given him for



his nineteenth birthday. It was the first time Preston had ever taken the noisy vehicle so far beyond the borders of the city.

When he motored through Sir Lowry's Village, nestling at the foot of the pass of the same name, coloured children ran alongside the car, laughing and shouting. Preston slowed to throw a handful of coins towards them. One of the rascals jumped on to the back of the Ford, holding on for dear life as the car bucked and bounced over the rutted track. Reaching for the handbrake, Preston brought it to a stop.

'Get off!' he shouted, but the street urchin had already made his getaway, not without relief. The young boy stood a few yards away, enjoying the admiration his bravado had earned him in the eyes of his friends.

Preston smiled and pulled down the veil. He did not mind the children's attentions but was concerned that one of them might fall under the wheels of the car. A dirty youngster in ragged clothing pointed at him and said something to his friends. They laughed, making Preston realise he was an amusing sight in his bulky clothing, cap and goggles. Few cars were around, and the sight of one added to the unusual garb of the motorists caused a stir of excitement in smaller villages.

The children ran after the Ford as it lurched down the dirt road, following Preston until he was well out the village and had started the first gradient of the pass winding its way up the Hottentots Holland mountains.

Preston glanced uneasily at the bulk of the mountain lying ahead. Would the Ford make it up the steep Sir Lowry's Pass? The ascent was seldom achieved without some mishap. Overheating was the biggest problem, and the first cars to cross the pass were forced to do so in reverse gear as the fuel supply – a gravity-fed system from the tank beneath the front seat – was often cut off when the vehicle was in a nose-up position.

Though the Ford behaved itself, Preston made regular stops to let the engine cool while he smoked a cigarette and enjoyed the view over False Bay. A brisk wind swept up from the sea and brushed the mountain, so he unbuttoned his dust coat.

Finally he arrived at the top of the pass, stopping one last time before starting the more gradual descent on the other side. He wondered what it was like to undertake the journey by wagon. With the luxury of motorised vehicles available only to the wealthy, most people took the train to Sir Lowry's Village, then boarded wagons drawn by mules.

He hauled out his pocket watch. Four o'clock already; he must soon find a suitable spot to spend the night.

A little over an hour later he drove into the small town of Grabouw, nestling in the shoulders of the Houw Hoek Mountains. He quickly found the single garage he'd been told about before leaving Cape Town.

'Good afternoon,' he called out to the figure in dark blue overalls who appeared from inside at the sound of the car.

The garage proprietor, a burly man in his late forties, gave a curt nod, implying disapproval of someone as young as Preston having charge of such expensive machinery. 'You come over the pass?' he growled.

'Yes, I took my time about it, though.' Preston stepped down and stripped off his dust coat, pushing back his cap and raising his goggles on to his head. He

gave the bonnet of the Ford an affectionate pat. 'She behaved herself well – no signs of overheating.'

The man did not seem impressed. He spat into the dust and said, 'Where'd you get it?'

'The car? It's—' Preston stopped, knowing it would make matters worse if he explained the Ford was a present from his Kevin Whitehead. 'It's my father's,' he said instead.

He turned away, pretending to fiddle with the leather straps securing the spare wheel, angry with himself for feeling ill at ease because he was rich. It was always like this when he came into contact with those less privileged than himself. He had earned the car for he was already active in Whitehead Enterprises, his father's fishing concern operating from Cape Town. Apart from the Ford, Kevin Whitehead had also granted his only son a ten percent share in the business.

Preston told himself it would be easier when he owned it all one day; then no one could accuse him of being a spoilt brat. He would take what his father had started and build it into a huge fishing empire. Preston Whitehead was determined not to become known as someone who lived off his inheritance; he would make it live for him.

'The tank needs filling,' he said, irritation in his voice, making him sound sharp and cool.

The garage proprietor narrowed his eyes but went about the laborious task of filling the Ford's fuel tank from his supply of four-gallon tins. When he was done, he walked slowly round the car, kicking each tyre in turn. The impact sent up little clouds of dust. 'Only one spare?' he asked when he stepped back, as if satisfied with his inspection.

'Yes. What's so strange about that?'

'I'll tell you what's strange,' the other man replied with a snort, 'What's strange is that someone coming over the pass should carry only one spare wheel. This your first trip?'

'Yes. The road wasn't that bad.'

'Your journey isn't over yet. Going fishing?'

Preston followed the man's gaze to the rod and wicker basket stacked in the back of the Ford. 'Yes, at Brannigan Bay.'

'The easy part of your journey is over. The rest is little more than a dirt track, with rocky streams to cross along the way. I'd be carrying another spare if I were you.'

'And I suppose you just happen to have one in stock?' replied Preston, stripping off his leather driving gloves.

'Might have,' came the unruffled reply.

'I'll take it.'

The man disappeared into the back of the garage, sauntered out a few moments later with a tyre, and dropped it unceremoniously into the back of the Ford, knocking the fishing rod aside. Preston bit back an angry response.

When he had paid for the tyre and petrol, he asked about a place to stay for the night. 'This isn't Cape Town,' came the retort, 'There're no fancy hotels here. The best you can do is join the mule wagon at the end of town. They always camp in a clearing there.'

Preston nodded curtly, climbed back into his driving gear, then heaved himself into the driver's seat. Reaching beneath the steering-wheel he set the spark and throttle levers. He jumped out again, stepped quickly to the front of the car and pulled out the wire loop of the choke. The garage man watched with an amused smile as he ran back to switch on the ignition, then returned to crank the handle at the front below the radiator. It took a few attempts before the engine spluttered into life.

He spotted the mule wagon heading for Brannigan Bay shortly after he left the garage, beneath a clump of trees a mile outside town. Beyond the trees was a large clearing sloping down to a swiftly flowing stream. The muleteer, who was busy with his animals when the Ford drew to a noisy halt beside the wagon, shook his head as Preston stepped down. 'That thing farts louder than my mules,' he said laconically.

Preston smiled. Once he had switched off the Ford's engine a group of male passengers strolled over from the wagon to inspect the vehicle. Turning to the muleteer, he asked, 'Mind if I set up camp with you for the night?'

'The land's open to all, son,' the older man replied. 'Can't offer you a meal though – that's part of the fare.'

'I've got something, thanks.' He stepped back as the muleteer joined the passengers in their inspection of the Ford. Preston slipped out of his dust coat, removed his cap and brushed the worst dust from his hair with his hand. He glanced longingly at the stream; a decent wash would be welcome.

Two of the passengers started talking about the car. 'If you're going to Brannigan Bay,' said one, 'you'd be well advised to cover up those brass headlamps.'

Preston gave him a quizzical look. 'Cover them?'

'Yes. With cloth or canvas, else the sea air will tarnish them in no time. I'm sure the wife will have something for you.' He returned a few moments later with two cotton bags he helped tie round the lamps.

'I never thought of that,' said Preston after thanking him. 'All I had in mind was the fishing,' he added with a laugh.

'Well,' the muleteer piped up, 'Brannigan Bay's the best for that. You fish a lot?'

'Almost every weekend. I work for a fishing concern,' he added, relieved no one had so far asked who the car belonged to. 'I was due for a holiday and thought I'd see what Brannigan Bay had to offer.'

'Well, you won't find much else but fish there.' The man's glance and unspoken words spelled out that he, like so many others, judged Preston to be someone who needed more than just nature to keep him entertained.

Preston felt a twinge of sadness. Spoilt and bored – that was always the impression he gave others. He had often wondered about that, and had studied himself intently in his bedroom mirror, seeking some telltale sign of what others seemed to find in him. He had thought it might be the slightly amused expression – or was it sardonic, arrogant even? – which reflected from the dark green eyes below the long blonde fringe of his hair. Or the mouth – it could be the too-full lips that hinted at a desire for the sensual. Yet no one seemed aware that he enjoyed solitude, was happy sitting on a lonely rock overlooking the sea, planning his future. No one seemed to understand the kinship he felt with the restless

ocean, how he knew with complete certainty that it was intertwined with his destiny. The sea had made his father rich; it would make *him* wealthy and powerful.

'... just the occasional dance,' the muleteer, who had sparked off his reverie, was saying.

'I'm only interested in the fishing,' Preston muttered softly.

He listened with half-concentration to the men while they discussed the merits of the car versus the horse. After a while he excused himself and made his way to the stream. Stripping down to the waist, he took a bar of soap from his toilet bag and stepped into the river.

The water was cold yet refreshing. He quickly built up a lather and proceeded to wash his hair and torso. Soap suds spilled into his eyes, making them burn, so that he cursed softly and dunked his head under the water. When he broke the surface again, Preston saw the girl.

She seemed unaware of him and was strolling slowly along the bank of the stream, stopping now and then to dangle her hand in the clear water. The sun setting over the hill cast a halo effect around the mass of her dark auburn hair. He wondered why he hadn't noticed her among the passengers. Or was she not one of them?

She suddenly saw him standing half-naked in the middle of the stream and glanced quickly away, her face filled with confusion.

'I'm sorry,' he called out, 'I didn't mean to startle you.'

Her smile was timid, reinforcing the impression of daintiness she had conveyed as Preston had watched her progress. Slight build, yet womanly. She's not beautiful, he thought as he smiled back at her, but there was something about her that would grab any man's attention – a combination of girlish chastity and blossoming womanhood.

'Are you from the wagon?' he asked quickly when she lowered her gaze, turning to go back up the bank.

She did not reply at first, taking a quick over her shoulder as if checking whether someone was watching. 'Yes,' she replied softly.

'Then, my dear lady, I was foolish to have undertaken the journey by car. I had only the scenery to observe when I could have enjoyed so much more.' The flattery sprang routinely to his lips, and he realised with bitterness how much he sounded just like the shallow person so many assumed him to be.

Her gaze rested on his bare chest, causing something to tug within his stomach. She jerked her head up as if suddenly aware of how she was staring, then smoothed down her dress as if she did not know what to do with her hands. The gesture made her figure more alluring.

'I must help my ma with supper,' she said quickly and glanced towards the wagon again. 'I have to go.'

'What's your name?'

She swung her gaze in his direction. Again Preston felt an urgent tug within him. Those eyes, so big and innocent, yet offering so much.

'Magda.' Her voice was so soft he barely heard her.

'Magda,' he repeated, trying her name on his tongue. 'Magda.' He smiled but before he could say more she scurried off, providing him a brief flash of slim brown calves.

The water swirling round his legs was icy cold now and the shadows following in the wake of the departing sun made him shiver. He forced himself back under the water and finished washing.

Later, as he sat close to the tiny fire he had built to cook his meal, he caught sight of Magda as she moved among the passengers, serving some of the children and older folk. He hoped someone would invite him to join them beside their much larger fire.

When they eventually did, it was to share a bottle of brandy. But the company Preston sought had already retired with her mother.

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He saw Magda again the next morning before he left. It was still dark when he awoke for the sun was hidden behind a layer of low grey cloud and a light drizzle, unusual for December. It trickled almost noiselessly down the side of the small canvas lean-to Preston had erected alongside the Ford.

He heard the muleteer muttering at his team of eight as he prepared for the next stage of the journey and, in his mind, the soft echo of her name that had teased his thoughts all night long. Magda, Magda, Magda. It was gentler than the pitter-patter of the rain, warmer than the flames he could see beside the wagon where a fire heated coffee for the travellers.

He shook his head, his eyes already searching for her among the shadowy shapes moving about in the dim light. He told himself he was being silly; he did not usually bother with peasant girls unless it was for a short spell of fun. It did not help; the girl entered his mind before sleep came, had lingered all night long and now still haunted him.

He spotted her bending over a coffee pot, a thick cloth wrapped around her hand and covering her slim wrist. As she lifted the pot, her hair fell forward and she had to brush it back with her free hand. The sight brought Preston from his shelter.

'Magda,' he said and smiled. 'Good morning.'

The dim firelight cast a shadow across her eyes, but Preston saw her lips flicker into a small smile as she replied, 'Good morning ...'

He stepped round the fire, the smell of freshly boiled coffee filling the air with its rich aroma. 'You didn't give me a chance to introduce myself yesterday,' he said. 'My name's Preston Whitehead.'

Her sudden laugh took him by surprise. 'Whitehead? How very fitting!'

Preston frowned, then realised she was referring to the colour of his hair. 'I suppose it is,' he said, laughing with her and thinking how childlike an observation it had been. Her response reminded him he was dealing with a simple country girl but the next moment he was taken aback when she raised her face and looked him steadily in the eyes. He thought, A girl one moment, a woman the next. Yet she was not acting the part of either, but slipping naturally from one role to the other.

'Would you like some coffee, Mr Whitehead?' she asked, then stepped away from him as someone approached the fire. An older woman moved into the firelight, glancing warily at him before joining Magda.

'Mr Whitehead,' said Magda, 'may I introduce you to my mother, Mrs de Vries?'

When the woman nodded stiffly, Magda quickly added, 'I was just offering Mr Whitehead some coffee before he starts his journey.'

'Yes,' said Preston, sensing the protectiveness of the older woman, 'I really didn't prepare very well for the trip. No coffee at all, I'm afraid.'

Sarah de Vries studied him for a moment, then said, 'Give the gentleman his coffee, child ... then come help with the packing.'

Magda filled a mug and held it out to Preston. 'I'll collect it from you when you're finished,' she said when it became obvious her mother was not going to leave her alone with him.

'He can leave it by the fire,' said Sarah firmly. 'I'm sure he'll be on his way before the wagon goes. His contraption is faster and it'll scare the mules when he passes.'

Preston held back a chuckle. 'You're probably right, Mrs de Vries. I'll drink up and be on my way.'

'Good day to you, sir.'

'And to you, madam,' he replied, but his gaze settled on Magda. Her smile was fleeting and apologetic before she started away from the fire with Sarah de Vries a short, herding step behind her.

Preston watched them join the other passengers loading their bedding and utensils onto the wagon. The sun was making headway now although a light rain continued to fall. He turned at the sound of the muleteer's voice.

'You think you'll find the way?'

'Yes, I'm just about to leave. I'm told my car will scare your mules if I should come past them.'

The man laughed. 'Not likely,' he said, 'They're too damn arrogant to be scared by anything – even a mechanical horse! Still, it's best if you go first. That way, we can lend a hand if things go wrong.'

'Let's hope it doesn't come to that, but thanks anyway. And for the company.' He threw the remaining coffee grounds onto the fire and glanced once more towards the wagon, but Magda was not in sight. 'Tell Miss de Vries I said thanks for the coffee,' he asked the muleteer before heading for the Ford.

He was packed in a few minutes with plenty of willing hands to help him get the Ford started. 'Watch out for the drifts,' someone warned. 'They're deeper than they seem and pretty rocky.'

'Avoid the sand,' another man added, 'It'll be pretty loose this time of year.'

Preston waved and eased the car forward. As it rolled slowly down the slope he looked back in the hope of seeing Magda. All he glimpsed were the women standing in a group beside the wagon. He could not tell which was her but he was not concerned; he would see her again in Brannigan Bay.

The splutter of the Ford could still be heard when Sarah de Vries took her daughter to one side. 'Shame on you, child!' she said. 'To be so brazen with a strange man! What would your pa say if he knew?'

'But—'

'And Jay? He would lose all his respect for you!'

'Ma ... I didn't—'

'You're no longer a young girl, Magda. Strange men are not to be trusted, do you hear? And that one, with his fancy machine and city ways, he's not the kind you should be talking to.'

'Yes, Ma.' It was easier to agree.

'And don't walk alone in the village while he's there, you hear me?'

'Yes, Ma.'

Satisfied with the response to her lecture, Sarah returned to the wagon.

'Come, child,' she called over her shoulder.

Magda ignored her and stayed where she was a while longer, staring at the bend in the road where Preston Whitehead had disappeared from sight. Perhaps her mother was right: Preston Whitehead might not be a decent sort. Yet she felt drawn to him, to his worldliness and the confident manner in which he dealt with her. He was so different from the young men of Brannigan Bay ... from Jay.

'Magda, come along.' At the sound of her mother's voice Magda turned towards the wagon. As she was helped aboard, she wondered again whether Preston might be no more than a fancy man with odd ways. It was the novelty that had attracted her, just as she sometimes daydreamed about what it would be like to be rich and sophisticated.

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### *Monday*

Jay stepped back from *Farer* to admire his handiwork where he had laboriously painted the boat's name in black letters on the newly constructed white stern. He had been relieved to learn that the damage inflicted by the whale was slight, with local craftsmen able to effect repairs.

Seagulls screeched in a tight circle overhead. 'Leave your mess elsewhere,' he grumbled, casting round for something to lay across the gunwale for protection against the gull droppings. He found a plank near the water's edge and balanced it carefully into place.

Glaring up at the birds he sat on the slipway, his hands placed palms down behind him on the concrete. While he studied the boat's name he thought of Magda. She should have painted it; she was very artistic. The walls of many homes in Brannigan Bay displayed her work. Flowers, the mountains, seascapes, even people – she sketched them all with skill. She had seemed hesitant when he had asked her to help with *Farer's* name so Jay had undertaken the task himself.

Magda worried him. Ever since that afternoon when he'd come close to forcing himself on her, she had been different. Aloof, almost. Things were awkward between them and Jay didn't know how to make amends.

Since she had returned from Cape Town, he had visited her home regularly, but had spent more time talking with Bull than Magda. She always seemed to find some excuse to help her ma in the kitchen.

Jay pushed himself to his feet and carefully tested the paint with his fingernail. Still wet. He didn't want to leave the harbour till it was dry.

He sighed and stared out to sea. The boats would be coming in soon. Some of his crew had taken up temporary positions on them, and that upset him. His men, his responsibility, had been forced to work with others to feed their families. It had taken a full week to repair *Farer*.

The movement on the rocks to his left caught his eye. So, the stranger was still trying his luck. Jay had seen him venture onto the rocks well before lunch, a

fancy wicker basket in his hand. A city boy – no doubt about that. Over the past three years news of Brannigan Bay's healthy climate and good fishing had spread far and wide, attracting more and more visitors. They were mainly older men, seasoned rock anglers. This one was quite young though, only a year or two older than Jay.

Giving the circling seagulls a last warning glance he started to scramble across the rocks, thinking he could give the stranger a few tips to help him bag at least one fish.

When he reached the young man he was surprised to see a pile of fish stacked in the basket. He had been too preoccupied with painting to notice the other's success. 'See you've had some luck, then,' he said, studying the fisherman's slender build.

The stranger turned without moving the rod in his hand. 'A little,' he replied, 'though I'd like to think there was *some* skill involved,' he added.

Jay smiled and knelt beside him, glancing quickly at the bait stacked in a small compartment in the side of the basket. 'You're going about it the right way,' he said, nodding his approval, 'so I reckon you're entitled to think that.'

They gazed out to sea, as if trying to spot the fish around the end of the line. Then the stranger shifted the rod to his left hand, held out his right and said, 'I'm Preston Whitehead.'

'Jay Brannigan.'

'As in Brannigan Bay?'

'The original ... or rather, the grandson of the original. He founded the town.'

Preston seemed to have lost interest in his fishing. 'You must feel pretty proud,' he said, 'It's a beautiful place.'

Jay acknowledged the compliment with a nod. 'This your first visit?'

'Yes, but not the last. Not if the fishing holds up like it did today.'

'Did you come with Saturday's wagon? The one from Cape Town?'

'No, I came by ... I came with my father's car.'

Jay's face filled with excitement. 'A car? You drove here in a car? Where is it?'

'In the market square.'

'Will you show it to me?'

'Yes, if you want.'

'A car,' whispered Jay in awe. 'Very few come here.'

'I'll take you for a ride, if you like.'

A smile spread across Jay's face. 'Mister,' he said, 'you take me for a ride in your car and I'll take *you* in my boat. Out there in the bay where the fish run thick and fast. You'll catch more than you ever dreamed possible!'

Preston returned his smile. 'It's a deal,' he said. They shook hands again.

'You ever been to sea?' asked Jay.

'Yes, but not very far. I—'

'Do you fish often? In Cape Town? That *is* where you're from, isn't it?'

'Yes. My father owns a fishing enterprise,' Preston said slowly. 'I don't go out in the boats though,' he added, 'except on the odd weekend. And then it's not far from shore.'

Jay felt uneasy. 'A fishing company,' he said and shook his head. 'And here I was trading a ride in my boat for one in your car. Not much excitement in it for you, is there?'



'I told you, I haven't been out far. I think we've agreed on a fair trade.'

Jay rubbed the side of his sunburned face. 'How many boats?'

'What?'

'Boats. How many does your dad run?'

'I ... quite a few. About twenty, I'd say.'

'Twenty? Small ones like that?' Jay pointed towards where *Farer* lay.

Preston spoke so softly Jay had to lean forward to hear. 'They're mainly deep sea boats,' he said, 'with engines. There are some smaller ones, though, for catching crayfish.'

'Twenty boats,' Jay repeated, almost to himself. 'With engines.' He stared at the bay as though the big boats were cruising in over the horizon. His voice was tinged with resentment when he said, 'Perhaps it's a good thing they fish in deep waters.'

'Why?'

'If boats like that came into Brannigan Bay, there'd be precious few fish left for us ordinary fishermen to catch. And without fish there'd be no reason for this village to exist.'

'My father's boats are manned by fishermen,' Preston responded softly.

'Ordinary fisherman.'

'But they no longer work for themselves. Their boats are not their own, where and when they fish is no longer their choice. They work for other men, making them rich so they can buy more boats and fancy cars.'

'That bothers you? My car?'

'No, I traded a ride in it for one in my boat, didn't I?'

'It seems you regret it now.'

Jay's quick smile broke the tension. He placed a huge hand on Preston's shoulder and said, 'No, I've no regrets. The sea has touched us both with its power. It's made your family rich and mine content. That's not enough reason for regrets or ill feelings.' He laughed and added, 'Anyhow, what would I do with a car? Brannigan Bay's too small!'

Preston laughed with him. 'In that case, let's get on with our trade. I've caught enough fish for one day.'

An hour later, after they'd driven from one side of the village to the other, Jay felt he'd found a firm friend in Preston Whitehead. 'Just wait till I tell my girl,' the young fisherman said proudly when Preston dropped him off near the harbour. 'And speaking of girls, there's a dance Wednesday night, on Christmas Eve. Will you come?'

'I – I don't know.'

'You must! It's great fun, and,' he added with a wink, 'there'll be plenty of girls to spare!'

'All right,' replied Preston with a chuckle, 'I'll come.'

As Preston drove back to his hotel he hoped he wouldn't have to rely on the women Jay had referred to. There was only one girl in Brannigan Bay in whom he was interested and he was determined to find her before then.

\* \*

The sudden tightness in Magda's chest was almost painful. She studied her

hands, her fingers toying with a chipped nail as she listened to her father talk of seeing Jay drive off in a car.

'I called to him to help unload the boat,' Bull was saying, 'but he was so busy talking to the stranger he didn't even hear me.' The big fisherman shook his head. 'Next thing there's an almighty clatter, and Jay and this fellow are bouncing off in a Ford motor car.'

'A car?' asked Magda, feeling her heart thumping in her chest. 'Whose – I mean, what car?'

'Some rich boy from Cape Town,' replied Bull. 'He and Jay were in the harbour when we came in. Tall fellow. Rather pale.'

Sarah lips tightened and she glanced warningly at Magda. 'An instrument of the devil,' she said quietly. They were seated round the kitchen table. There was still a faint glimmer of sun outside, though it was almost eight o'clock in the evening.

Magda concentrated on her fingernail again. So he *was* in the village! Twice she had offered to fetch items Sarah needed from the general dealer and felt sure her mother had viewed this with some suspicion. Each time, Magda had lingered among the little group of shops as long as she could, hoping Preston might pass in his car. She kept telling herself she was being silly, that one chance meeting with a charming, handsome stranger was no reason to keep thinking of him and hoping they would see each other again. Anyway, he was too old for her, too self-assured and worldly.

Still, she'd been unable to quell her disappointment when he did not appear in the main street, obliging her to head for home. Her second trip to the village centre had been the previous afternoon, and since then she had tried to force thoughts of him from her mind.

Jay arrived at the house an hour later, his face flushed with excitement as he related his thrilling experience. Magda tried to appear interested in what he was saying but Preston's face danced before her eyes. Sarah, who listened to Jay with an expression of disapproval on her face, glanced at her now and then.

'We went all the way to the start of the beach,' Jay was saying excitedly as Bull lit his pipe.

'On that rough track?' Bull shook his head and blew out a dense cloud of smoke. 'Amazed that clattering thing could do it. Did *you* drive?'

'No. He offered to let me try but I thought I'd better not. I held the steering wheel for a little way, though.'

'Bloody foul-smelling contraption as far as I'm concerned.'

'Bull de Vries!' Sarah glared at her husband. 'The only foul thing here is your language. And your pipe.'

Bull grunted an apology before turning to Magda. 'What do you think of Jay's adventure?'

She glanced up quickly. 'It must have been very exciting,' she replied softly, glad it was dark in the kitchen.

Sarah said, 'Jay, it's not my place to talk to you like a mother, but take care with these city people. They have different ways, devious ways, and they tempt decent people like you with what they've got and what they know. Take care.'

Jay smiled at her. 'I will, Aunt Sarah. But he seems like a decent fellow. Full of money but friendly enough.'

'The devil has many ways that appear charming.' She looked directly at Magda as she spoke.

Bull puffed at his pipe, turned to Jay and said, 'It's hot tonight. When I was your age, I'd be out walking along the sea. Nowadays you youngsters are content just to sit about with the old folk.'

'Come Magda,' Jay responded, 'let's show your pa it's not true.' He moved round the table, stood behind her and rested his hands lightly on her shoulders.

'Don't stay out late,' called Sarah as they started for the gate.

'We won't, Aunt Sarah,' said Jay, and Magda knew he was pleased she had not refused to join him; it was their first opportunity to be alone since her return from Cape Town.

'Remember what I said about the devil and his ways,' add Sarah as they reached the street.

It was only when they were some distance from the house that Jay said, 'Your ma seems very concerned about the visitor.'

Magda shrugged, wondering whether she should tell Jay about having already met Preston. Better not, she decided. If Preston happened to raise it with him, she would pretend to remember it as though the occasion had little meaning for her. She said instead, 'Ma clings to the old ways. All outsiders are a threat to her. She would like Brannigan Bay to stay the way it's always been.'

'It hasn't changed.'

'Yes it has – even I've seen that. More shops, another hotel, more homes. Did you know there are over a hundred children in school now?'

'The town has grown, that's all.'

They walked in silence until they reached the edge of the market square overlooking the harbour. It was low tide, the sea lapping gently at the base of the cliffs. 'One day,' Magda said, 'they'll want a bigger, safer harbour. Have you thought of that?'

Jay shook his head. 'We won't allow that,' he said firmly. 'It would be an invitation to the big boats to come in and take all our fish. That would mean the end of Brannigan Bay.'

'Perhaps not,' she said gently, understanding his anxiety. 'Perhaps the town will have other reasons for surviving. It might not always be because of the fish.'

She was pleased to hear him chuckle; at least she hadn't upset him. His arm slipped around her and he pulled her close. 'No, Magda. Fishing is what gave the place its reason for being. It's what must keep it alive. Always.'

'A fisherman, body and soul,' she said and laughed. 'Yes, Jay Brannigan, if it's up to you Brannigan Bay will stay just as it is.'

'This Preston Whitehead, his pa owns a fishing company. At least twenty boats, Magda. Twenty! With engines.'

'What's he like?' she asked nervously, turning her head aside so that Jay could not see her eyes.

He seems all right,' he replied. 'You'll meet him ... I told him to come to the Christmas Eve dance.'

Magda's heart thumped so loudly she was sure Jay must be able to hear it. She moved a little away from him. 'Do you think that's a good idea? I mean, he doesn't know anyone. He may feel out of place.' The thought of seeing Preston again made her feel dizzy with excitement.

'He seemed keen to come and finding him a partner should be easy. He's charming and has a car. Most of the girls in town would give anything to ride in it,' he added.

Anything? Yes, thought Magda, there were those who would.

'I thought I might arrange for him to meet Christine. She's been to Cape Town a few times.'

The thought of Christine brought forth a fresh set of emotions, erasing for a moment her feelings about Preston. Christine had a bad reputation when it came to men. Had Jay gone to her after their last argument? Damn Christine for her loose ways, for her voluptuousness, for her – damn her for being a mature woman with whom Magda could not compete! No, that was not right; she was simply not willing to compete with her. When Magda married Jay she would be pure, his wife and his woman at the same time. *If* she married Jay. God, was this what one chance meeting with another man had done to her? She was no better than Christine.

'What's wrong?' Jay asked suddenly.

'Nothing! Why?'

'You were frowning. Do you feel the same way as your ma, that this stranger is the tool of the devil?' The tone of his voice was teasing.

'He's of no concern to me,' she said quickly.

'What made you so angry, then?'

'Nothing. When will *Farer* be ready to take out?' she asked, changing the subject.

'I'll give her a final check tomorrow morning. I want to take Preston out in her.'

'Where's he staying?' She wished Jay would stop referring to the visitor, yet was angry with herself for responding.

'At the Crystal Lodge.'

Of course. No other place but the new hotel would be suitable for a rich young man. She wondered what it was like inside. Perhaps Christine would get to see it when ...

'You're frowning again,' said Jay, turning her towards him so that he could raise her face with his fingers. An evening breeze lifted from the sea and swept up along the cliffs to ruffle his hair. 'Magda,' he whispered, 'things are not right between us. Is it because of ... that afternoon?'

'*That* afternoon, Jay, was just a week ago.'

'Are you saying things changed *before* then?'

'Are you sure things *have* changed?'

'Yes. I feel it.' His grip on her eased a little. 'I can understand your being upset by how I behaved,' he started, 'It was wrong of me, but ...' He gave a quick shrug as if abandoning his search for words to explain himself.

She sighed. 'If things seem wrong, it's because *you've* changed, Jay.'

He stared at her. 'I'm a man now,' he said at last.

'Yes. And I'm not yet a woman. Not the kind you want me to be.'

'Magda! That's not true! You're everything I want.'

'Not everything, Jay. That's why you still have to go with the others ... You do, don't you?'

'No! I—'

'Don't lie to me, Jay. In a way I even understand it.'

'You're the only one I want, Magda. I'll marry you tomorrow if you'll agree!'

She laughed despite herself. 'Oh Jay, you can hardly support yourself and your ma right now, let alone a wife!'

An angry look flashed across his face. 'That'll change soon,' he said in a low voice. 'Just two more seasons and things will be better. I won't be rich or have a car but things will be better.'

'I know, Jay, I know.'

'Then let's get married.'

She shook her head. 'It's not the money, Jay, it's just ... I don't feel ready yet. Perhaps we'll both feel differently by the end of the two seasons you spoke of.'

'No! I'll want you as much then as I do now. I'll prove it you, Magda, just watch me!'

She stood on her toes and kissed his cheek. 'We'll wait and see.'

His face beamed when she kissed him again, on the mouth this time. 'Now,' he said, 'what about the dance? Are you going with me?'

Magda lowered her eyes and thought of the past, of how he always asked as if there was the remotest chance she might go with someone else. It was still the same, but this time Preston would be there. Now that she and Jay had talked, their relationship might stabilise again. Seeing Preston could change that.

'You're taking a long time making up your mind,' Jay whispered into her hair.

She gazed into his earnest eyes, smiled and said, 'A bit of uncertainty won't do you any harm.' She relented when she saw his worried expression, and added, 'Of course I'll go with you.' Her breath almost left her as he hugged her tightly and laughed.

As Jay rocked her gently back and forth in his strong arms, she thought ahead to the dance, to how she would feel when she saw Preston Whitehead again.

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The favourite place for Brannigan Bay's dances was a warehouse where flowers, mainly everlastings, were pressed and packed for export. On the morning before the Christmas Eve dance, the floor was smeared with candle wax to provide a smooth, slippery surface for the night's event.

The village girls spent the afternoon making final adjustments to their best dresses, washing their hair and baking the bread and cakes that would provide much-needed refreshment as the night wore on.

Even the visitors, most of them farming families from neighbouring towns, displayed a keen anticipation of what was to come. Rock anglers left their favourite spots by lunchtime to head home to get ready. Those fishermen who had ventured out to sea made sure they were back in harbour by early afternoon.

It was Christmas Eve, no ordinary day, and by nightfall the village was buzzing with excitement.

Preston Whitehead took a final look at himself in the mirror of his hotel bedroom. 'Handsome devil,' he said aloud and straightened his tie. 'You're going to sweep the local girls off their feet.' Yet, despite his banter, the eyes staring back at him from the mirror were troubled.

Local girls – would Magda be there? Since he arrived in Brannigan Bay, he had been just about everywhere, into every shop, down every road. But he had not

seen her. He was sure he had come across every citizen, each visitor, cat and dog of the village. Everyone except Magda. He should have asked Jay when they had gone out to fish that morning, but he had not wanted to risk being teased. Perhaps he would see her tonight at the dance. Anticipation plucked deliciously at him as he turned away from the mirror.

His room overlooked the bay and he could tell it was going to be a perfect summer's night. As he watched, the mountains turned gold and then pink in the setting sun. Towards the southeast section of the bay the sea shimmered lazily in the fading light.

It's a special town, he thought as he pulled the curtains aside for a better view. He understood why Jay Brannigan felt protective towards it. Brannigan Bay had beauty, charm – and, above all, potential.

In the few days he had been there, he had driven as far along the coast as he could, then walked for miles along rugged stretches of rocks. He had inspected every inlet, each sheltered bay that could be transformed into a safe harbour and finally selected the spot at which he would favour building one.

It lay a few miles to the west of the village. At first glance it seemed little more than an outcrop of rock thrusting out from the curve of the shore, appearing to offer little protection from the wide sweep of water. But Preston had watched the flow of the currents and visualised the long jetty that would hold back the force of the Atlantic. On the rocks above was sufficient level ground to build factories. There was place, too, at the side of the inlet, for construction of an adequate slipway for boat repairs.

He had spent many hours at the spot, imagining the big boats the harbour would hold, the safe base it would provide for excursions into the rich waters of the south Atlantic. When he went out with Jay in *Farer*, Preston had a view of his chosen spot from the bay and knew that his decision was a wise one.

He had said nothing to Jay about his thoughts. He had been angry and Preston respected the rugged young man who was so passionate about his village. They regarded the bounty of the sea from different viewpoints and were destined to clash if their individual needs were expressed in action. And clash they would, for Preston knew without doubt he would return one day to Brannigan Bay to make his dreams a reality. One day, when his father's fishing enterprise became his, he would put his inheritance to work in Brannigan Bay. But, for the moment, he and Jay were just two young men with dreams and they could suppress their differences in mutual liking and respect.

Grabbing his jacket from the bed, he tugged at his tie one last time. It was too hot an outfit but Preston was not sure how formal such a small-town dance might be. The sleeves of his white shirt were rolled up to the elbows and he slung the jacket across his shoulder as he left the room.

No hint of wind disturbed the air as he started the Ford and made his way to the dance venue, enjoying the attention of the small crowd standing outside in the balmy evening air. Jay came running from the hall, a welcoming expression on his flushed face. 'You're late,' he admonished Preston before grabbing hold of his arm to tug him towards the entrance. 'You'll be meeting plenty of people as the night wears on,' he said, 'so I'll not confuse you with too many introductions right now. Do you do the barn dance?'

Preston nodded, allowing himself to be led towards the door. 'At least, I think

so!' he replied with a laugh.

'And the bon ton?'

'Oh yes!'

'The waltz? The Lancers?'

Preston laughed and slapped Jay's shoulder as they went through the door. An elderly man was squeezing some unknown tune out of a concertina, while a younger fellow tried his best to keep pace with a guitar. The pianist had given up and was watching his two fellow band members with a smirk that suggested his turn to impress the crowd would come.

'A grand evening,' Jay was saying above the noise of the concertina.

'It sure looks that way.'

Then Preston saw her.

She stood on the far side of the hall, her back to him as she and another girl put some finishing touches to the flowers. He knew straight away that it was Magda; there was no need for her to turn towards him. His gaze took in the swirl of thick auburn hair and her figure, slim yet full, moving lightly beneath the caressing folds of a light blue summer dress.

'Jay,' he started, fighting the tightness that gripped his chest, but his voice was drowned by the music.

Then he was pulled onward again, across the hall. Jay leaned close and shouted in his ear. 'I said there wouldn't be any introductions, but ...' His voice was lost as the pianist suddenly found his chance and joined in the *mêlée* with heavy hands that pounded wildly at the ivories.

'What?' Preston jerked his gaze from Magda to his friend. Jay was sweating slightly, his teeth white against his suntanned face.

'... the prettiest girl in the village,' he finished saying. He pointed at Magda.

Preston smiled and followed him across the room.

It was less noisy in the corner where Magda stood. Jay tapped her on her shoulder and she turned slowly, smiling, then saw Preston.

'I told you she was the prettiest girl in the village,' Jay was saying, 'but did I tell you she was *my* girl?'

Preston stared at her. He heard Jay's words as if they came from far away, saw him standing beside Magda, his arm proudly around her waist, pulling her tightly to him. *His* girl. Magda was Jay's girl.

He felt himself step back as if he wanted to run away. He studied them both, the slender young woman surrounded by the strong arm of the tall, handsome man. No, he wanted to say – she's mine. Your town, your woman: they will both be mine. But all he said was, 'It seems that Brannigan Bay has much more to offer than just good fishing.' He glanced at Jay as he spoke. 'You're a very lucky man,' he added softly before turning to Magda.

There was a strange expression in her eyes, one of ... fear? He heard Jay say his name, introducing him to her. Preston reached for her hand and raised it to his lips. Her skin, soft and dry despite the heat, held a light fragrance that teased his nostrils.

'Watch out,' Jay said, oblivious to the reaction between the two, 'The man's a charmer!' He laughed, removed his arm from around Magda, and said, 'Take her onto the floor, Preston. Find out just what we locals can do!' He smiled again before making his way into the swirling crowd where he plucked a plump woman

into his arms and spun her round on the dance floor.

Preston was suddenly aware he still held Magda's hand in his. He released it slowly, his eyes fixed on hers. 'So, Magda of the mule wagon, we meet again.'

'So we do, Mister Whitehead.'

He cleared his throat. 'Do we dance, as Jay suggested?'

She stepped forward and was in his arms. Her body felt light, almost weightless, as he moved a few steps back so that they could join the other dancers.

'Jay's woman,' he said, starting to move in rhythm with the music. 'He didn't talk of you. I would if you were mine. All the time. To everyone.' He saw her blush.

'You shouldn't say such things. It's not right.'

'Not right? Magda, *we* are right – you and me! Surely you feel it too?'

She stiffened in his arms and Preston cursed himself. He must take care – she was obviously not used to men speaking to her like that. 'I'm sorry,' he said, 'but it's the truth.'

'Is it?'

'It's what I feel, and I know you feel the same. I can see it in your eyes.'

'I think ... I think you see what you want to see. You also think it'll make a simple village girl's head spin. Isn't *that* the truth, Mr Whitehead?' She smiled as she spoke, removing the sting from the words. It made Preston feel ineffectual against her.

'Magda,' he said slowly, 'I have said many things to many women, and I'm guilty of using charm, shall we say, on many occasions. But not tonight, not with you. I meant what I said. Please believe me.'

She stared up at him and Preston was not sure what message lingered in her eyes. At last she said, 'It's Christmas Eve, so let's dance, then get back to our friends. It's what this night is for. Friends.'

Much later, as it drew close to midnight and the band slowed the pace of their music, Preston followed when a group of weary dancers, Jay and Magda among them, moved outside and walked to the cliffs above the harbour. The sea shifted idly under the glow of a bright, full moon.

He stood beside Christine, to whom Jay had introduced him earlier in the evening. He thought her very pretty, and she had made it obvious that her interest in him went beyond displaying homespun hospitality. For a while he had flirted with her, his words and smile mechanical, but now he had eyes only for Magda who stood in the circle of Jay's arms. 'It's midnight,' someone said as the music drifting from the warehouse faded into silence.

One of the men started singing the first bars of 'Silent Night'. The others joined in and Jay's powerful baritone could be clearly heard.

Preston felt his lips move, heard the familiar words flow softly from his mouth. But his thoughts lay with the girl who had affected him like no other before. He had wanted many, had lusted strongly for them, yet with Magda it was something else, some force against which he had no defence. She would become his, she must. No one else would satisfy him now. But not tonight;. Tonight she still belonged to Jay.

He became aware of Christine whispering in his ear. 'It'll be easier if we go to my place,' she was saying.



He smiled sadly, thinking how deeply Magda's influence had touched him. 'Perhaps next time I visit Brannigan Bay,' he said gently, not wanting to hurt her yet knowing he would anyway.

Christine pulled away. 'What's wrong with you?' she asked, frowning. 'I thought ...'

'I'm rather tired and I'm leaving early tomorrow.' When had he made that decision? It did not matter; it was the right thing to do. He could not spend another day in Brannigan Bay now that he had seen Magda again, not now that he knew she was Jay's. There was much to be done in Cape Town before he could return, the first task being to convince his father it made good business sense to build a harbour in Brannigan Bay to cater for their growing fishing fleet. He would offer to oversee the project himself, perhaps even live in Brannigan Bay while construction took place. The village would know who he was then, what he meant to their future. The village, Jay Brannigan – and Magda.

Beside him Christine said, 'You'll come back to visit sometime?' Her face still bore the sting of his rejection.

Preston smiled and patted her cheek gently. 'Yes,' he said, 'Yes, I have to.'

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<http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00EX2PE7A>

# 1915

*Tuesday, 11th May*

Jay felt his mother's eyes on him as he entered the kitchen with a bundle of freshly chopped wood in his arms, placing the load beside the black Dover wood-burning stove. It was a monstrous contraption – its handles polished daily with Brasso – that took up most of the wall space on one side of the kitchen.

Arranging the fresh pieces of wood beside the existing bundle, he said, 'Perhaps this year we can afford a coal-fed Aga, Ma.' The de Vries family had one and spoke highly of its advantages, although the task of cleaning it was unpopular. First it had to be thoroughly scrubbed, then coated with black lead dissolved in water and polished until it shone.

'Coal is messy,' muttered Frances Brannigan. 'Wood is better.'

'Coal is more efficient, Ma. More expensive but better.'

Frances shook her head. 'Wood costs us nothing. Coal gives the food a smell.' Jay sighed and straightened up. 'Yes, Ma,' he said to end the conversation. If it could be called that, he thought morosely.

His mother used it to touch on another matter, one that Jay knew lay close to her heart. 'I don't know where I'll get wood once you go,' she said, rocking slightly on her feet, a motion that had become a familiar sight to him over recent months. 'Who'll chop it for me?'

'I've told you I'm not going to war, Ma.' He helped himself to a cup of strong black coffee from the pot simmering constantly on one of the stove's plates.

Frances made a clucking noise with her tongue. 'All men go to war. It's what you all think you were born for – fighting the sea, fighting other men. You'll go, I know it.'

'No, it's not my war.'

'With all the other young men volunteering? You're only saying you'll stay to please me. You'll go.'

Jay wanted to shout at her but all he did was stare silently into his coffee. The war – how it tore at him! Many villagers were enlisting, caught up in the hysteria affecting young men, the call to duty that all felt had to be heeded. They discussed it in tight little groups, spreading the excitement and romance of battle among them. 'We'll show those Huns,' they would say, 'They've never come up against real fishermen! What chance do they have against men who've fought the southwester and chased the yellowtail?'

'I can't leave *Farer*,' said Jay at last.

'Don't lie to your mother, child. Half the men in town have already gone – including some of your crew. I'm the only thing holding you back. So go, Jay. It'll cause me suffering but there'll be those who'll look after me.'

Jay shut his eyes. It was true; his mother was one of the reasons he had not volunteered. Yet it was not solely that or her obvious self-pity that stopped him. *Farer* needed its skipper for there were still those who looked to the boat to provide their livelihood. Apart from that, Jay felt he had no real quarrel with the Germans, reasoning that they had to be ordinary people like Gottlieb Kessler and his wife. It distressed him when the couple were suddenly viewed with suspicion and something

close to scorn by many townspeople.

Then, too, there was Magda.

It was as if Frances could read his mind, for she said, 'If you and Magda were married ... if there was a child, there'd be no need for you to feel so guilty about not going.'

'I don't feel any guilt,' snapped Jay. 'Magda has nothing to do with my decision.'

'That's right – talk to your ma as if she were one of your oarsmen.' Frances sniffed. 'I'm nothing but a burden to you. But it won't be for ever, Jay Brannigan ... I feel God is calling me. I shan't be your millstone much longer,' she added with another loud sniff.

Jay could stand no more. Draining the remainder of his coffee he got up, scraping his chair on the worn linoleum floor. He made no excuse to his mother as he went outside into the fading light.

His fingers clamped round the few loose coins jangling in his trouser pocket as he pushed open the garden gate and headed down Main Street. Enough money for a beer. God, he needed it!

His mother was right in saying she had become a burden to him, yet it was not because he found it difficult to care for her or resented her. What racked his nerves was her constant self-pity. Perhaps he should use the excuse of war to escape it, he thought bitterly. Her needs would be seen to by others but in that lay the problem: Jay's pride would not allow generous people like Bull de Vries to go short because Jay felt he must get away from his mother. No, he would remain in Brannigan Bay – there were plenty of others to play at soldiers.

The lights were already on in the bar of the Grand. Dilapidated though the place was, it remained the fishermen's choice although once they had tried the much smaller facility at the newer Crystal Lodge. They had felt out of place there, no fighting was allowed, and returned to their former haunt.

Jay heard laughter as he approached the old building. There was much of it these days, as if war were a thing to raise the spirit. At times Jay felt as if he was the only young man of his age left in the village, which reinforced by the strange, almost accusing glances of some older folk. He suddenly wondered how Magda felt about it and realised they had never discussed it.

He hesitated before going inside, but the laughter and beer fumes mingling with tobacco smoke drifting through the open door beckoned to him.

The men turned to look when he entered. It was a natural movement, the kind anyone would make when someone walked into a crowded room, yet tonight it seemed to Jay as if they had been waiting for him, wanted answers from him. Shaking off the impression, he called out a greeting.

The men turned back to their drinks and conversations. Jacob Erasmus, a young man with whom Jay had been friendly for a long time, signalled him closer. 'Thought you weren't coming,' he said as Jay pulled up a chair. Nick de Vries limped closer, still not fully recovered from the accident in which he had broken his leg.

'The place is quiet tonight,' said Jay, ordering a beer.

Nick laughed. 'Shit, man, there's a war on!'

'Not for us,' retorted Jay. 'I'm beginning to think we're the only three left in town!'

The sudden silence was awkward, making Jay glance sharply at Jacob. 'You too?' he asked softly.

Jacob nodded slowly.

'When did you sign up?'

'This morning.'

Jay laughed uneasily. 'Don't look so apologetic about it.'

Before Jacob could reply, Nick said, 'I'm going too.'

Jay reached for his beer and drank in silence. After a while he asked, 'Does your pa know?' Limp and all, Nick was going to be a soldier.

'Yes ... I think he'd join up too if he were younger.'

Jay's voice sounded harsher than he intended. 'Who'd care for your family then?'

It was Jacob who answered, saying, 'It's different for you, Jay – your mother, I mean. At least I have two younger brothers to keep things going.'

'Don't make excuses for me, Jacob. I want no part of this war, that's all.'

The two men held each other's gaze for a moment, then turned to their drinks. Jacob said, 'We've been friends for too long to pass judgement on each other, Jay. We're each of us doing what we think is right.'

'I'm not passing judgement on anyone. I just don't want my decision defended. There's no need. If people think I'm a coward, then so be it.'

'Come on, Jay, that's not—'

'Not you, perhaps. But some others ... Jacob, I've seen the way they look at me.'

Jacob gave an understanding nod.

'When will you leave?' asked Jay.

'Next Monday.'

Nick had stayed out of their earlier confrontation, but now he said, 'I'm told that Brannigan Bay has one of the highest number of volunteers in the Empire. In relation to its population, of course.'

'That's fucking noble of us,' growled Jay before downing his beer. He immediately ordered another.

Nick had missed the sarcasm. 'A few more volunteers,' he went on, 'and we could be the highest. How about it Jay? One more man – a Brannigan, at that – could just do it.'

Jay wanted to shake him and shout that war was more than just setting records. He managed to curb his anger and said quietly, 'Brannigan Bay also needs volunteers of another kind, Nick, those who stay to care for the town. There'll be many who need support in time to come.'

'Jay's right,' agreed Jacob, 'and the war will still increase those numbers.'

Nick stared at them in turn. 'I hadn't thought of that.'

'Most people haven't,' said Jay. 'That's the pity of it.' He finished his beer and stood up, sickened by the spirit prevailing in the bar. Even old men, who should have known better, were expounding the virtues of war. Then, too, Jay was saddened at the thought of Jacob leaving. He would miss him.

'Walk with me,' he said. 'Nick will watch your beer.'

Once they were outside, Jay said, 'Take care wherever it is they send you. The town will need its young men when the war's over.'

Jacob Erasmus smiled. 'I'll miss you, Jay.'

'I'll miss you, too.'

They shook hands, although they would be seeing each other again before Jacob's departure. 'You'll look in on the family from time to time?' asked Jacob.

'Of course. They must speak up if they need anything.'

'I'll tell them. Thank you, Jay.'

They shuffled from foot to foot, wanting to say more but not knowing how. Then Jacob said, 'Well, I'd better be getting back inside before Nick drinks my beer.'

'I must pay a visit to Gottlieb. I don't think they've had an easy time lately. He hasn't been to the bar for weeks, and he didn't even come to the harbour today.'

'It's a shame,' replied Jacob, 'Gottlieb is a good man.'

Jay made no reply as he slapped Jacob's shoulder before turning away.

\* \*

The Kessler's cottage was on the western fringe of town overlooking the bay. A single lamp glowed dully in the kitchen as Jay approached the tiny house. He went to the back and knocked on the kitchen door, which was closed, the curtains drawn across the windows.

The silence inside the house was broken by the sound of a chair scraping back, followed by the shuffle of feet. 'Who is it?' Gertrude's voice.

'It's me. Jay.'

Again there was silence but Jay was sure he heard muffled voices. Gertrude called out again, her English, like Gottlieb's, still heavily broken despite their years in South Africa. 'Gottlieb is not well,' she said, 'He not want to see anyone, Jay.'

'Tell him it's me, Gertrude. I want to talk to him.' There was no response so Jay called, 'Gertrude, I need to talk. Open the door.'

He was about to knock again when the upper half creaked open. 'What's up with the loafer?' asked Jay with an apologetic smile, regretting having shouted at the woman. Then he noticed her distraught face and grabbed hold of the door in case she shut it on him. 'What is it, Gertrude? What's wrong?'

Without waiting for an answer, he pushed inside. The lamp on the kitchen table was set low, its light reflecting dully off Gottlieb's swollen face.

'Jesus Christ,' muttered Jay. 'What the hell happened?' He moved closer to the table at which Gottlieb sat. Both of Gottlieb's eyes were swollen shut and the skin across his brows was split. His left cheekbone was puffed up. Jay thought it might be broken. 'Jesus,' he muttered again.

Gertrude stood behind her husband. Placing her hands on his shoulders she said, 'For years he live here, but they beat him because he German. Why, Jay, why?'

Gottlieb reached up and laid his hand on hers. 'Enough, *Liebchen*.' When he spoke, Jay saw his mouth was badly broken. His lips were torn and some teeth were missing.

'Who did this, Gottlieb?' Jay's voice was tight with anger. 'What swine did this to you?'

The German shook his head slowly. 'No matter,' he said softly. 'Two ... three men. No matter.'

'When?'

'Last night. I was out walking. They jumped me from the bush. "Damn Hun," they shouted, They beat me with a pipe or something. "Hun! Hun! Hun!" they shout.'

Jay slumped into a chair. 'Who, Gottlieb? You must have seen something? Was it Svenson?' he asked, thinking of the Swedish fisherman who had publicly voiced his antagonism towards the Kesslers. Olaf Svenson was a tough, ruthless character with whom Jay had had more than one clash. The two men were evenly matched but, on the last occasion, the night after *Farer* had been smashed by the whale, Svenson

came off second best after taunting Jay by referring to him as Jonah. It had prompted the most brutal fight yet seen in the bar of the Grand.

Gottlieb was shaking his head. 'Don't know who, Jay,' he murmured.

'I'm sure it's Svenson, the bastard!' The Swede was cruel enough to do something like this to Gottlieb, and ever since their fight Jay had felt he was biding his time to take revenge. Perhaps beating Gottlieb, one of his crew, was more than just a matter of hooliganism. 'I'll wring the truth out of him,' he whispered and stood up.

'Leave it, Jay,' pleaded Gottlieb.

'No, my friend, I *can't* leave it – I'm your skipper, remember?'

Gottlieb tried to smile. 'No,' continued Jay, 'the town must know this kind of thing cannot be allowed to happen. Never again.' He nodded at Gertrude and left the house with its sadness and dismay tucked behind closed curtains and locked doors.

He shook with rage as he walked down the rocky path leading to the village. The sea was like his mood, angry and restless, hurling its frustration against the jagged coast, the pungent smell of its fury filling the night. If this were what war made of people then he was glad he had decided to have no part in it.

He had gone only twenty yards from the Kessler's cottage when he heard someone call his name. He stopped, not sure where the sound had come from.

'Brannigan!'

There – down on the rocks. Jay moved from the path and stared down. Nothing.

'Hun lover!'

His body stiffened. Wild anger flooded through him, along with a sense of delicious anticipation. They were there, had been watching the cottage while he visited Gottlieb. He had them now! He strained his eyes to see into the dark but detected no sign of anyone.

'Now we know why Brannigan won't go to war,' the voice called. 'He loves Huns, that's why!' A loud, crude bellow of laughter followed.

It was not the Swede; he would have recognised the man's voice. This was someone who spoke with an Afrikaans accent.

'Show yourselves, you bastards!' he shouted, already slithering down to the rocks. Two or three of them, Gottlieb had said, with a pipe or some other weapon. Jay told himself not to be reckless though the need to inflict punishment coursed wildly through him.

He saw movement on the rocks below. Although the moon was hidden behind a layer of low cloud, he recognised Svenson's bulky figure. But who were the two men with him?

They were coming towards him. 'Are you ready to go to war, Brannigan? Right now?' Jay suddenly knew who the second man was: Lucas somebody or other, the son of a farmer from Caledon. He often came to Brannigan Bay for weeks at a time and Jay had seen him hanging about with the Swede. He was a cocky, sadistic little man.

Searching frantically for something with which to arm himself, Jay tore a thin branch from a nearby tree and stripped it of its leaves. It was not the weapon he wanted – far too flimsy – but he could wield it like a sword if necessary. He waited, hoping for a glimpse of the third man before they were on him.

'Svenson,' he called out at the approaching shapes, 'I know it's you! Haven't you learnt your lesson yet?'

A scornful laugh floated up to him. 'Tonight's *my* turn, Brannigan.'

This was madness, Jay told himself, but he wanted the physical conflict, though he had little hope of escaping unhurt. 'Come!' he shouted, 'Come, damn you!'

He glanced down and saw they had stopped. They were talking among themselves, arguing even. Then one of them, the third man, moved off, making his way along the rocks towards the village. There was something familiar about the way he moved, but Jay could not quite grab hold of it. It was someone who knew him, that was for sure, someone who wasn't prepared to hurt him. Who would beat Gottlieb Kessler but not him?

When Jay sensed the indecision on the remaining two men, he saw his chance and scrambled madly down the rough slope. He was almost at the bottom before they were aware of his charge.

He was off balance when his feet hit the rocks but he gave an angry yell as he righted himself and rushed at the Swede.

Svenson stepped back to meet the attack, expecting a flurry of blows. Jay stopped short and jabbed him with the stick. It was a sharp, vicious blow to the stomach that sent the big man to his knees with a gasp of pain. The stick was still in Jay's hands and he swung it in a mighty arc, crashing it down across Svenson's face, using it like a whip. The Swede cried out, rolled on to his side and lay curled in agony.

Satisfied that he was no longer a threat, Jay turned his attention to the second man.

Lucas had stood there in awe, frozen by the swiftness of the violence. Now that he alone faced Jay and his anger, he turned and ran. Jay swung the stick and hit him harshly across the buttocks before the terrified youngster managed to escape.

Svenson was on his knees, holding his face in his hands, and Jay was satisfied to see a steady flow of blood pumping from the cut inflicted by the stick. He laid into the Swede again.

Svenson tried in vain to protect his head from the blows. Jay was suddenly glad the tree branch was not sturdier; the stinging cuts it made were a more intense punishment than a solid blow.

Svenson scrambled away but Jay followed, striking at the man's neck, his back and his buttocks. He laughed suddenly, wildly, thinking of his youth when teachers had meted out punishment to him. The big Swede was whimpering as he stumbled to his feet and began to run. Jay moved with him, swinging the stick and stopping only when Svenson had fled into the night.

He had let them off lightly but somehow the humiliation he had caused the Swede was more gratifying than the physical. Glancing at the Kessler cottage, he saw the single light had been doused. Should he go to them, tell them it was done? But was it? There was still the third man, the one who had refused to fight. Though winded by his clash with Svenson and Lucas, Jay started to run along the path, hoping he could still catch Gottlieb's third aggressor.

He was almost in the village when he realised who his quarry was – knew with complete certainty what had been familiar. The recognition both repelled and alarmed him as he made his way to the bar of the Grand. He had to know for sure.

The bar was crowded now but Jay paid no attention to the heads turning to see who had come in. It was only when he was inside that he became aware of the blood on his shirt.

Ignoring the curious glances, he studied the faces in the bar. The spot where Jacob Erasmus had been sitting was occupied by someone else now.

'Jay! Jay! Over here in the corner!'

Jay peered through the layer of tobacco smoke. It was Jacob; he sat at a table with an older man. Jay elbowed his way through the men and stood beside the table. Jacob glanced at the bloodstains. 'What the hell happened to you?'

'I stepped on two dung beetles, that's all. A third got away.'

Jacob frowned. 'What are you going on about? I thought you'd gone to the Kesslers.'

'I did. That's where—'

'Jay,' said Jacob, 'sit down, for Christ's sake. Talk sense! First Nick slinks off with some lame excuse, now you come in covered in blood. What the hell is—'

'Where's Nick?'

'I just told you, he - Jay! Where the hell are you off to now?'

But Jay had gone.

\* \*

The de Vries house was in complete darkness when Jay hammered on the door.

He knocked again, less violently this time, and the glow of a lamp appeared in a room at the side of the house.

Bull appeared at the door a moment later, his eyes thick with sleep, nightshirt hanging over hastily donned grey flannel trousers. 'Jay! I was wondering who ... What's happened, boy?' he finished as he saw the blood on Jay's shirt. 'You been in a fight?'

'I'm sorry to wake you, Uncle Bull, but I have to talk. Something bad has happened.'

Bull opened the door. 'Come inside.' He put down the lamp on the kitchen table and frowned. 'What is it?'

Jay started telling him what had happened to Gottlieb Kessler, and of the fight with Svenson and Lucas. He was half-way through when first Sarah, then Magda appeared in the kitchen. Magda's hand flew to her mouth when she spotted the blood on his shirt. 'Jay!' she said, 'You're hurt!'

'No, the blood's not mine.' He started to rise, wanting to go to her, to explain why he had to do what was to follow, but Bull's voice made him remain in his seat.

'Start from the beginning, Jay,' the older man said gruffly, glaring at the women for interrupting.

Jay repeated his tale. 'This is a terrible thing to have happened,' said Sarah, clutching her nightgown to her throat. 'The Kesslers are such good, kind people. Both of them.'

'Yes,' agreed Bull, 'but Jay has taken care of the swine. It won't happen again.' The look he gave the young man was one of pride.

'Uncle Bull,' he began, 'there - there were three men. The third didn't take part in the fight.'

'You know who he was?'

Jay moved his gaze from the fisherman and stared at Magda, his heart beating wildly in his chest. He was about to hurt her but what else could he do? Even if he handled it on his own and never told Bull, Magda would still hear of it. Perhaps it was better to speak to Bull himself. He turned back to him. 'Uncle Bull,' he said, 'I'm sorry ... It was Nick. I recognised his limp.'



The older man's eyes were cold and hard. 'You are sure of this, Jay?'

Jay nodded, his eyes on Magda. Her gaze was lowered, focused on something only she could see. 'I'm not saying he was with them during the attack on Gottlieb though there were three men then, too.'

The big fisherman stared intently at his calloused hands. 'He's been swept up by this damn war,' he whispered. 'And he's been keeping wrong company.'

'I'm sorry,' said Jay. 'I had to tell you.'

Bull nodded. He glanced at his wife, then back at Jay. 'Where will he be now? At the Swede's house?'

'I think so.'

'Then let's find out. Wait here while I dress.'

'Pa? Please don't' Magda moved in front of Bull, her hands reaching up to him. 'Nick is young. He probably regrets what happened. Let me talk to him. Please!'

'Hush, child,' said Bull gently, taking her hands in his. 'Nick was man enough to do what he did. He must be man enough to take his punishment.'

Sarah also laid a hand on her husband's shoulder. 'Let Jay handle it, Bull,' she pleaded. 'You'll kill Nick. Let Jay do it.'

Bull stood surrounded by his women. 'Nick is no longer a child,' he said stonily, 'and he is no longer my son.'

'Pa, no!' cried Magda. Jay's guts twisted at the agony in her voice and kept his gaze fixed on the floor.

Pushing free, Bull moved back to him. 'In one thing they are right,' he said softly, 'I would kill Nick. I'll go with you, Jay, for I must witness his punishment. But perhaps it's fitting that you, as Gottlieb's skipper, deliver it.' He turned and went down the dark passage.

Sarah said, 'Don't be too harsh, Jay. For my sake,' and followed her husband.

When Jay looked up, Magda's eyes were on him. 'I'm sorry,' he said, 'I had to tell them. They would have learned of it anyway.'

She gave a violent shake of her head. 'No – not if you'd come to me instead. I could have spoken to Nick about it. I'm sure he—'

'Magda, I couldn't just leave it – Gottlieb is one of my men!'

'Nick is my brother.'

'I – I wish there'd been some other way.'

'There was, Jay, but you chose to be "the skipper" instead. You saw it as just another responsibility towards your men. What about me, Jay? What about your responsibility towards me?' The calm manner in which she spoke unnerved him more than if she had shouted at him.

Jay sighed. 'I'm sorry, it's too late now.'

'Yes. Don't hurt him badly, Jay. Do whatever you men need to restore your honour, to claim revenge, but no more than that.'

He nodded and mumbled, 'I promise,' as Magda left the room.

\* \*

Bull smashed open the door to Svenson's cottage with his fist. He stepped inside with Jay behind him.

Lucas lay on a filthy cot. He covered his face with his hands when he saw who it was.

The Swede was in a chair, Nick on his knees beside him, a bloodstained cloth in his hands. He was busy rubbing it gently across the cuts on Svenson's face when he turned and saw his father. His expression made Jay wish he had been wrong.

Nick lowered his eyes as tears of shame sprang into them. 'I'm sorry,' he whispered hoarsely.

His father towered over him. 'Were you there?' he growled, his hands shaking at his sides. 'Were you there,' he asked again, his voice sounding almost gentle this time, 'The night Gottlieb was beaten?'

Nick did not answer. His hand, still holding the cloth, was poised in the air as though about to administer further aid to the Swede.

'Answer me, boy!' shouted Bull. He seemed ready to leap at his son. Jay stepped closer.

Nick nodded and moved to his feet. 'Yes, I was there,' he said, turning to face his father. 'And I am ashamed, even though I did not strike a single blow.'

'Just being there and not stopping it is guilt enough,' replied Bull.

The young man flinched.

'Do it, Jay,' said Bull de Vries. 'Do your duty as a skipper.'

Jay stared at Nick. He shook his head and said, 'I think he's been punished enough, Uncle Bull. Gottlieb wouldn't want more and neither do I.'

'Do it!' Jay heard the pain in his voice.

'No, Uncle Bull,' he said softly.

Bull stepped up to his son. He raised his hand and held it motionless above his shoulder. Both the Swede and Lucas watched him.

'Uncle Bull ...,' Jay pleaded, but made no move to stop him.

His hand came down slowly yet deliberately, a controlled force that seemed almost a caress as it struck his son's face. The sob that cracked from Bull melted with the sound of the impact. It was a slap, nothing more and nothing less, yet all the men knew it as a gesture of rejection. Bull de Vries had turned away his son. Jay felt rather than saw him rush out into the night.

'Go to your war, Nick,' said Jay, 'but don't come back to Brannigan Bay when it's over.' He glanced at Lucas and the Swede in turn. 'The same goes for you two,' he added.

'Jay ... Talk to him ... please! I was wrong and—'

'There's nothing I can tell him. There's nothing he wants to hear.' Jay shut the door quietly behind him as he went out into the night.

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<http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00EX2PE7A>

# 1916

*July*

At twenty, Magda was one of the few of her peers left unmarried. She knew that if not for the war and the accompanying shortage of men, she might have been the only one. Those who were still single baked, made clothes or helped their families. A few, like Christine, the girl who had partnered Preston Whitehead at that Christmas Eve dance, were occupied by soldiers and sailors sent to Brannigan Bay to recuperate from their war wounds. The women's services sometimes went beyond the medical.

Though Magda, too helped at the Red Cross centre, most of her spare time was spent drawing. She had sold fourteen to visitors over the past year. Her principal success had been a picture of a soldier resting in the shade of a tree in the French countryside. Although she had only seen a few photographs of France and its battlefields, usually in newspapers brought to the village from Cape Town, she had captured every nuance of mood of an exhausted soldier demoralised by war. The man in the sketch – his face, its faraway expression – was her brother.

She had received just two letters from Nick since he had left Brannigan Bay. Behind the words written in a childlike scrawl she could sense his pain, his loneliness and fear, and the disillusioning reality of war. It hurt her that the letters had to be addressed to one of her girlfriends instead of to his home, and that her mother, who knew of their correspondence, refused to read them out of respect for her husband's stand. She would betray Bull if she read Nick's letters, Sarah had said.

Remembering that, Magda curbed her frustration and walked back to the sand dune where she had left her paper and charcoal among the hardy scrubs.

It was a long trek from the village to the section of beach she had chosen and Magda had left her parents' cottage shortly after daybreak. The winter morning had been cool then but now the sun was stronger, making it comfortably warm on the beach. It was her second successive day there, and her picture was almost complete.

'There's something missing,' she said aloud, talking to herself as she often did when drawing. She studied what she had done. There were the sea, the sand, the surf curling gently onto the beach, forcing aside the early-morning mist clinging to the shore. The rugged grasses on the sand dunes had captured the movement of the morning breeze.

Staring at it she thought, It's empty. It reflected her emotions. She reminded herself that was how it should be – that years later, when one gazed at a picture it should hold the spontaneity of the moment of its creation. It should carry back the artist and observer to whatever emotion dominated its birth. Would she want to be reminded of that? she wondered.

Magda reached resolutely for her charcoal. Boats, she decided, visualising a set of white sails beneath the clouds on the horizon. 'Too obvious,' she muttered. She decided it needed people ... at a picnic. A chequered cloth spread on the sand, a basket of food, children playing in the shallows with a ball, their mother keeping a wary eye on them, a light breeze ruffling the edge of her dress.

Lowering her charcoal, she stared intently at the sketch again. 'It won't work,'

she sighed, 'What it needs is ...' She stopped, narrowing her eyes to focus on the lone figure strolling near the surf about three hundred yards away.

She saw it was a soldier – No, an airman, she decided as she noticed the blue uniform. He walked stiffly, and Magda guessed he had come to the village to recover from wounds. Perhaps it was someone she had met at the Red Cross station, though she couldn't recall seeing any airmen there.

He was too far away for her to identify, but she could see that he was staring out to sea. Perhaps, thought Magda, her romantic instincts aroused by the sight of the slim figure, he was thinking about his comrades engaged in battle while he rested. It was just what she wanted, she decided. 'Don't walk too fast,' she muttered, glancing back at the man.

Her charcoal moved rapidly as she tried to capture his exact position and stance before he moved on. 'Stay there, please stay there,' she pleaded as he moved closer.

Her gaze flicked from the paper to her subject. She already had him in position and she studied his uniform for detail. Not too much, though; she had to keep the intrigue, the air of mystery. And the face? Should she make up one or use the young man's? It wouldn't really matter; she had kept his original position in perspective, too far away for a clear view of his features.

He would soon be close enough for her to see. He had spotted her too and seemed to be coming straight for her. Magda lowered her charcoal – she had put down enough to finish later – and wondered how the young man would react when he saw it. Perhaps she should ask him what he had been thinking while he contemplated the sea.

She glanced back as she started to put away his things. His air corps cap was perched at a jaunty angle on his head and he removed his hands from his pockets as he made his way awkwardly up the dune.

'Hello,' he called out.

Recognition was instant when she faced him. Her heart leaped, then pounded furiously – painfully almost. She no longer had any need to be concerned about his face; she could draw Preston Whitehead with absolute clarity even if she never saw him again.

He had stopped a few paces away, his expression a mixture of surprise and joy. 'Magda, it's really you!' A smile spread slowly across his face as he slipped the cap from his head into his hand. He took a step closer and stopped again. She could hear the exertion of the climb in his heavy breathing.

'The subject of an artist,' he said with a gay laugh. 'I'd had another relationship in mind with you.'

His words made her blush and she turned away from him. She heard him move in behind her to study the sketch.

'It's beautiful,' he said after a moment. 'You have talent, Magda.'

'It – it's not finished. I've no real training ... Just some books and—'

'You don't need training,' he interrupted, 'This comes from the soul. One cannot train that.' His gaze had moved to her face and she could no longer avoid his eyes when she straightened.

'I've thought of you often,' he continued, his voice low, 'ever since that night I learned you were Jay's. Sometimes, when I'm frightened or tired of the fighting, I need to think of gentle, beautiful things. That's when—'

'Preston, please!'

'I can't help it, Magda. I can't help this feeling I've had for you ever since we met. I can't deny it – I don't want to!'

She stared back at him, trying to fight her confusion.

'Did you ever think of me?'

Had she? Yes, but she'd suppressed such thoughts whenever they arose. 'I think of all those I know, all those who went to war.'

'But you didn't know *I* had. Or did you?'

She had not – not for sure. Yet she had visualised him in uniform. 'No,' she said now, shaking her head, 'One just supposes ...'

His smile seemed smug and a triumphant note surfaced in his voice when he said, 'So, you thought of me anyway!'

He's so cocky, thought Magda. I shouldn't even like him, let alone ... What was it she felt towards him? She had never allowed herself to dwell on him for long so had never analysed the response he triggered in her whenever an image of him pierced the protective wall she raised against him. It was there, though, a warm, fluttering excitement that threatened and shamed her, for she knew its extent and power.

'You're an airman,' she said to change the subject, her voice suddenly nervous.

'Yes. A pilot in the Royal Flying Corps. In France.'

'France,' she echoed. To her the word was synonymous with war, with scared and dying young men. With Nick.

'I was wounded three months ago,' he was saying.

'Does that make you a hero?'

Preston threw back his head and laughed, momentarily lightening the tension between them.

'No, I'm no hero!' He laughed again before adding, 'In fact, I was trying to make it back to base, scared out of my wits, when this German came roaring out of the clouds and opened up on my Camel.'

'Your what?' She knew she was gaping at him like a little girl but she was caught up in a vision of Preston in his plane, trying to dodge a much larger, menacing machine, spurts of ugly orange flame flicking from its guns.

'My Sopwith Camel, the plane I fly.'

'What happened?'

He smiled, his eyes teasing her. 'You want all the gory details?'

'No! I just—'

'I was hit, here, here and here.' He pointed his finger at his ribs.

'Did you crash?'

His amusement still showed on his lips. 'No, I think the German ran out of ammunition because he scooted off and I was able to limp home. It was a bloody close thing, that I can tell you!

'What happened then? Did they rush you to hospital?'

'I went to hospital for a month.'

'Did it hurt?'

'Magda, it's starting to hurt right now from all these questions.' He lowered himself awkwardly to the sand.

'You'll ruin your tunic,' she said, sitting down opposite him. 'I'm curious – I've never met a shot-down airman before.' It was easier just to banter with him.

'It hurt,' he told her, twirling his cap in his hands. 'I wasn't fit to fly when I was

released from hospital and I was given three months leave of recovery back in South Africa. I rather think my father had a hand in that, though. He has connections with one of the ministries – can't say I'm not grateful. At least I've seen you again.'

His words made her lower her gaze. 'When did you get to Brannigan Bay?' she asked softly.

'Two days ago, with my father. We're staying at the Crystal Lodge.'

'When – till when are you staying?' He had been there two days already.

'We're leaving tomorrow. I'm catching a ship to England the next day. I'll be fit to fly when I get back.'

'You'll fly again? After what happened?' She failed to prevent a note of alarm from springing into her voice.

'Of course! I was one of the lucky ones, Magda. I've been feeling guilty about having a holiday while others carry on with the fight.'

'Was that what you were thinking about out there? While you were walking?'

'Yes.'

She felt a fleeting satisfaction at having been right. 'It's strange,' she said and smiled shyly, 'I had a feeling about that while I was sketching you.'

'That's because what's between us is special ... We sense things about each other.'

'What do you sense about me?' She realised she had not denied what he had just said.

'I sense you're pleased to see me but you're determined to hide it. Because it worries you.'

She flicked back her long hair with her hand. 'You're very sure of yourself, aren't you?'

'Only about you ... because we're special, remember?'

An awkward silence ensued between them for a few moments. Preston played with his cap while Magda strained sand through her fingers. She still did not look at him until his hand gripped hers and opened the palm so that the last grains of sand stuck to the sweat on her skin. 'Not married yet, I see,' he said, gently releasing her hand.

'No.'

'Is Jay away? In the army – no, it would be the navy for him, I'm sure!'

'Jay has stayed here. His mother, you see, there's no one else to care for her.'

'You needn't make excuses for him. Not everyone is dumb enough to want to go to war. I didn't go for any patriotic reason, merely for the adventure and what I thought would be glamour. I think Jay is more level-headed than that.'

'I wasn't defending him! I just—'

'That's what it sounded like.'

She stood and up and picked up her drawing equipment. Had she been defensive? She had never queried Jay's decision not to volunteer – in fact, she was bitterly opposed to the war as too many young men were being killed or wounded. Perhaps her response had been prompted by what had happened to Preston. She was wrong to compare the two men.

She heard the rustle of his tunic. Suddenly he was standing close behind her, his hands resting lightly on her shoulders. 'What will you do with your drawing?' he asked. The warmth of his breath on the bare flesh of her neck where she had

pushed aside her hair sent a shiver down her back.

'Sell it.' Her voice sounded thin.

'Don't,' he said. 'But if you have to, sell it to me. Not that I need a drawing to remind me of you.'

'Why should you want to remember a simple village girl?'

'I've already told you, I think of you when I'm frightened. No, that's not quite true ... I think of you often, at the strangest moments.'

'And that's why you've been in Brannigan Bay for two days already, yet we meet by chance?'

'Aha! So you *do* care!'

'No! I'm just trying to—'

'Magda, oh, Magda! I don't know what it is about you.' He slipped his arms around her, moving them down across her breasts to encircle her waist, pulling her in to him.

'No!'

'Yes! Stop fighting it! Stop running away from me, Magda!'

She tried to pull free but he held her to him tightly. His hand slid downwards and cupped her where it was hot. She felt him against her buttocks, hard and urgent.

'Preston, no!' It was a whisper this time, an appeal that melted in the rush of her breath.

He held her without force, not pushing at her, his lips moist and warm against her neck. Yet she did not pull free. Her legs, so near collapse a few moments ago, gave way and she leaned into his caress. Her entire being seemed one rush of heat. She thought, I am melting, melting.

He turned her in the circle of his arms. When he kissed her, it was with passion yet without abandon. It was gentle, and when his hands gripped her buttocks and pulled her into him, she responded with her own pressure and smothered cry of want.

Thoughts flashed through her reeling mind, trying to control her surrender. She wouldn't do this with Jay. She would have stopped it.

She felt sand beneath her knees. They were facing each other, their mouths locked together. His hands were on her thighs now, caressing her smooth skin as they moved upwards.

'Oh God, Magda, you're so beautiful.' His ragged breaths blended with her gasps. He began taking off his jacket.

'Preston, we—'

'I leave tomorrow, Magda. Don't let me go ... don't let me face the fear without the memory of this.'

A blurred image flickered through her mind as he pushed her back onto the jacket. Was it Jay? Or the fear that someone might come along the deserted beach and walk across that particular sand dune? Oh God, she had already accepted what was about to happen.

She felt the weight of her skirt move higher up her legs. Sun touched the skin of her thighs. She was being lifted, her pants sliding down her legs. Yet she could not stop him when he touched her. Whatever she had tried to say became a sharp intake of breath that changed into a broken sigh. Oh yes!

She opened her eyes to stare at him, then reached out, touched him, held him, instinctively knowing just how to guide him into her.

She took him inside her with only a short-lived moment of pain. Then her cries were like the contented mew of a kitten that twisted and turned under his stroking.

Beside them, the breeze whistled its own melody as it rustled the long coarse grass concealing the place where they lay.

\* \*

Sarah was irritable when Magda came in through the kitchen door, her easel and paints tucked under one arm. 'Where've you been all this time, child?'

'Out drawing. I told you I was going, Ma.' She busied herself with putting away her drawing things, certain that her mother could tell from the flush on her face what happened. Her body seemed to glow through her clothes. Everything glowed and throbbed deliciously – her body, her heart, her soul. If only she could feel shame or regret! Had one man, one half-hour, really made her so wicked? And she *was* wicked to feel so good, to want to laugh and sing. It was shameful to have lain with a man she hardly knew and was not sure she loved, to want more of him and anticipate the delight of the next time. It was immoral of her to long for the moment it would happen again and she could strip off her clothes and feel his flesh against hers.

'I know very well what you told me,' snapped her mother, 'but Pa walked down to the beach to search for you and you weren't there.'

Her father? They could have been discovered!

'I-I was resting on a dune,' she said. 'Why did Pa want me?'

'Jay needed you, that's why,' replied Sarah tartly.

'Jay? Is something wrong?'

'He's upset. He's had some bad news and he wanted to have you with him, that's all. I was ashamed to say we didn't know where you were. You young people don't think—'

'What news, Ma? What's happened?'

'Don't interrupt me, child!' Sarah sniffed before she continued, saying, 'Jacob Erasmus is dead. He was Jay's closest friend.'

'Jacob? Dead?'

'In the war. At some place called Dellville Wood.'

'I'll go to Jay now. Is he at home?'

'He's with the Erasmus family, comforting them. He's a good man – something you don't seem to appreciate.'

Though the Erasmus cottage was only a few hundred yards away, Magda walked slowly, sadness replacing her earlier ecstasy. Jacob ... She had liked him. He was funny, yet gentle. She could imagine Jay's grief. While he had needed her, she had been fornicating – no, fucking, she had heard it called – with a near-stranger on the dunes. Fucking like a cat on heat, thrashing and groaning on the sand, wet and hot and sticky, clawing at the source of her pleasure. She was no better than Christine.

Jay came out to meet her when she entered the small unkempt garden of the Erasmus place. His face was grave. 'You've heard?' he asked.

'Yes. Jay, I – I'm very sorry.'

As she spoke she wondered whether she was offering sympathy for what had happened to Jacob or apologising for the thing Jay did not know about.



\* \*

In the lounge of the Crystal Lodge, Kevin Whitehead glanced up from the book he was reading to stare at the tall shape of his son. 'You don't want to be overdoing your exercise now,' he said at the sight of Preston's flushed face. 'There'll be time for that before you get back.'

'It was just a short walk,' he replied lamely, seating himself beside his father.

'Still, those wounds of yours are a long way from healed.' He studied his son's face while the young man fiddled nervously with his cap. The war had caused him to lose his boyish looks, thought Kevin, but it suited him. When it was over Preston would be ready to take up his true role within Whitehead Enterprises. Perhaps his new maturity would bring with it the necessary patience; Preston's restlessness had always concerned him.

Kevin Whitehead remembered vividly their last bitter argument, just a few months before the outbreak of war when his son had returned from visiting Brannigan Bay with some wild idea of building a harbour there. Preston had been unwilling to accept his excuse of lack of capital or the knowledge that war was inevitable with an unpredictable effect on fish prices. Neither had Kevin been prepared to tell him the truth, which was that he regarded the idea as impractical and unnecessary. The atmosphere between father and son, which had never been relaxed or close, had been even more strained than usual for some time afterwards.

The outbreak of hostilities and Preston's announcement that he wished to volunteer had brought them closer again. Though concerned for his son's welfare, Kevin had not stood in his way, and had immediately contacted long-standing influential friends in England.

'Father?'

'What? Sorry, I was daydreaming.'

Preston chuckled and flung his cap onto a nearby table. 'You were staring at me as if you were seeing me for the first time.'

'Perhaps I was,' Kevin admitted. 'I was thinking, too, of what you plan to do once the war's over. You still interested in the business?'

Preston nodded. 'I've never wanted anything else,' he said softly. He seemed about to say more but grinned instead and patted his father's knee. 'Think I'll rest for a while.'

'Good idea. I'll call you at lunch-time.'

After watching Preston make his way awkwardly up the flight of stairs leading to his room, Kevin reached for his book again. But the words would not focus and his mind tried instead to gain a grasp on the future. How long did he have? The doctor had said if he took it slow, stopped smoking his beloved cigars and eased himself out of the business, there was no reason his heart should not last for many years. To hell with that, he thought with uncharacteristic anger; he would not give up the business. He had built it up himself and it was Preston's inheritance. Just a few more years, that was all, enough time to be sure Preston was ready.

He sighed and tried again to concentrate on his book, wishing the war would end.

\* \*

Preston sat on the bed in his room, the same one he had occupied on his first visit

to Brannigan Bay. He slowly unbuttoned his tunic while he stared at the drawing Magda had given him.

The events of the past hour seemed branded on his senses. The way his body tingled, the smell of her lingering on his lips, the fragrance of their lovemaking – every touch, look, sound – spun continuously through his reeling mind, as vivid as if they were only then taking place. Had it really happened?

Yet it *had*. It was as real as the emptiness of life that awaited him when he left Brannigan Bay the next day. All he had to carry him through the long days and nights, the fear and the longing, was the memory of what they had had. That – and the promise of what they might become.

He had not spoken to Magda of the future. The time had not been right; he had sensed her confusion when their love-making was over and had known he would spoil it with words. So he had let her leave him, knowing that the only thing which separated them was distance and time.

As he took off the rest of his clothes he promised himself that he would overcome both.

\* \*

### *September*

From her room, Magda could hear the sounds of her mother working in the kitchen. Never before had she identified the noises so clearly, each sound seeming to strike a visual chord in her mind: the each of the pot's lid as it was closed; the light scrape as her mother shifted it onto the Aga.

It was as if she had been away from home for a long time and now recalled with nostalgia those things a person taken for granted when life was secure. The sights and sounds that were just there, yet nevertheless registering at a particular moment when they needed to be recalled with either sadness or joy.

It was not nostalgia that filled Magda's mind today and neither was it a moment for recall. It was the disquieting cold knot lying in her stomach that heightened her senses. Her security had been cut from under her like wheat falling beneath a sharp scythe.

She shuddered as she stood up and moved towards the open door. She stopped and turned, as she had done twice already. Sinking onto the bed with her head in her hands, Magda bit back the tears that threatened. There had been enough tears, she told herself, thinking of the many nights she had pushed her face into her pillow, sobbing in silent, lonely despair. It was time for talking – but therein lay her biggest fear

It was wrong for a girl to fear her mother. Yet was it fear she felt for Sarah or a hesitancy to face her scorn when what Magda needed was support and understanding? Since she had become a woman, Magda had realised that she and her mother were two very different people with little in common.

She contemplated talking to her father instead; Bull would at least listen and try to understand. But that would only worsen things between her and her mother.

At last she pushed herself from the bed, knowing she would have to approach Sarah first. She hesitated again as she went through the bedroom door, then firmed her resolve and walked slowly down the passage. The kitchen sounds seemed

oppressive now.

Magda stood at the entrance and watched her mother for a few moments. 'Ma,' she said softly, but Sarah did not hear. She was bent over, poking at something in the oven.

'Ma,' she called again, louder this time. 'I need to talk to you.'

Her mother slowly raised her head. 'What have you been doing all morning? I've needed your help.' Sarah busied herself with the pots, her back to her daughter.

Magda fought down the urge to turn and run away. 'We must talk, Ma. It's important.' This time Sarah glanced at her before wiping her hands on a cloth hanging on a hook behind the door.

'What is it? You're very pale these days.' She reached out and laid her hand lightly against Magda's brow. 'Are you sick?'

'No Ma,' she replied, sitting down. 'Not sick. Can we have coffee?'

Sarah frowned but she poured two cups of black coffee, placing them on the table and pulling out a chair for herself. Neither woman took sugar, yet both stirred vigorously at the strong brew. The rattle of teaspoons filled the tiny kitchen.

Magda took a sip, then wiped her lips and stared at her mother. How to start ... how to explain ...

'Ma, I'm expecting a baby,' she blurted out, heart hammering. She had an urge to laugh hysterically at the bluntness of the announcement and the memory of how she had rehearsed what she would say.

Her mother's mouth hardened a little before she said, 'Jay's?'

Magda shook her head slowly, the cup clattering in its saucer. She pulled back her hand and held it on her lap.

'Whose?' Her mother's voice sounded dispassionate. Magda had expected rage, shame, scorn, anything but the quiet response of the woman sitting across from her, as if this were something awkward and unwanted that unfortunately happened now and then.

'Ma, it doesn't matter who the father is. I can't marry him, that's all.'

Sarah was silent for a moment. Then she said, 'It's that young one from Cape Town. You've seen him again, haven't you? I knew he had the devil in him!'

'Ma, I am as much to blame for this.'

'Did he force you?'

Magda shook her head.

Her mother's sigh was long and heavy. 'We must all bear the blame,' she said, rubbing a hand across her face. 'One thinks one knows one's children but ...' She sighed again, said, 'First Nick, now you. How could you do this to Jay? He loves you, respects you – but now?'

'He doesn't know yet.'

'And the father – that rich boy?'

'No! He must *never* learn of it!'

'We can force him to marry you, Magda. At least it will save us all shame.'

'No, Ma, I can't. He's not even here, he's somewhere in France, a pilot.'

'Oh, this war,' Sarah said bitterly. 'It brings out the worst in people.'

'What will I do, Ma? Must I leave Brannigan Bay?' The fear in Magda's voice added to her sudden panic and a tear rolled down each cheek.

The unexpected grip on her hand was strong. She stared down at her mother's hand and curled her fingers round flesh hardened by a lifetime of washing and

housework and returned the pressure. It was the first time in years that they had touched like that.

'We'll see,' said Sarah. 'We'll talk to your pa – he'll know what to do.'

\* \*

Bull de Vries sucked his pipe and thought of his daughter waiting in her room.

He wished Jay was the father; it would have ended Magda's senseless dilly-dallying about marrying him. If she had done so when Jay had last asked her none of this would have happened. Tucking the pipe into his shirt pocket, he went into the cottage.

Bull was glad he had brought in his boat – piled high with a good catch – early that afternoon. Sarah glanced at him as he passed through the kitchen but made no comment.

The door to Magda's room was closed when he stopped outside. He knocked once. The voice that answered sounded small and childlike.

She sat on the edge of the bed gazing miserably out the window, but turned when he entered and shut the door softly behind him. The bed creaked under his great weight when he sat down beside her.

He smiled, touched her hair and said, 'So, your ma tells me you're determined to make grandparents of us.' He chuckled, but it did not sound right to his ears; it was more like a crackle of sadness.

'Oh Pa, I'm sorry.' She moved into his arms.

They sat side by side, Bull staring out the window, watching the last flush of Namaqualand daisies swaying in the September wind. He did not know what to say to comfort her so he let the strength of his arms do it for him.

At last she raised her head and said, 'Have I shamed you, Pa?'

Bull smiled at her again. 'No, my love, that you cannot do.' He hugged her to him.

After a while he said, 'What they call shame is a strange thing. Sometimes what we think is shame is often something else. Bruised pride, for instance, or hurt. When someone shows that, others might see it as shame or scorn. It's easy to confuse the two.'

Magda pulled gently away from him. 'What are you trying to say, Pa?'

'A young man, one who loves you, is bound to feel pain that will burst from him in rage. You might feel he's ashamed of you. It will hurt you, as you have hurt him, but you must try to understand.'

'Jay?'

'Yes. You're the one who must tell him.'

'How do I explain my betrayal?'

'Betrayal?' Bull gave her a sidelong glance. 'If you have betrayed anyone, Magda, then it's yourself. Don't feel guilt as well – you'll have enough of a burden in time to come.'

'The child – what must I do?'

Bull stood up and moved to the open window. The wind is wet, he thought as he sniffed the air; it will bring rain. Seating himself beside her again, he said, 'The father ...'

Magda shook her head. 'Did Ma tell you he's at war?'

'Yes.'

'He must never know, Pa. Promise me that if he ever returns to Brannigan Bay you won't—'

'I won't lay a hand on him, Magda. I promise.'

She gazed at him with bewildered eyes. 'Must I go away, Pa?'

Bull stared at the daisies and thought deeply. He had already lost one child; he could not bear to lose Magda as well. 'No,' he said at last, 'You'll stay here with us – whatever you decide to do about the child.'

'Everyone in the village will know.'

'They'll know anyway – they always do when a girl leaves the village and returns some months later. But together we can face that.'

Magda moved into his arms again.

'Do you want to keep the baby?' asked Bull.

'Would it be wrong to give it up?'

'I don't know, child. Let's think on it awhile.' He curled a lock of her hair between his fingers and said, 'Go to Jay now and tell him. And remember what I told you about hurt pride.' He saw the apprehension in her eyes and added, 'Yes, it won't be easy.'

She was wiping away her tears when he stood up and left the room.

\* \*

Jay stared at his hands. A thumbnail had cracked. Where had that happened? Probably on the boat.

Magda's voice sounded as though she was speaking from behind a mask, as if her words were being muffled to soften the harsh messages they contained.

He felt no pain when he squeezed the cracked nail. It was numb, just like the rest of him. Frighteningly numb. The calm before the storm, the false flat of the sea before the north-westerly came screaming in.

He heard her talking but could make no sense of what she was saying.

'Jay? Are you listening to me?'

His head jerked up, his eyes straining to focus on her red eyes, her tearstained face, the turmoil etched there. It was all on her face, the face he had loved, which another had kissed and caressed and ... *no!*

He pushed himself from the harbour wall and moved a few paces away. The saltiness of the wind blowing up from the sea stung his eyes.

'Say something, Jay! Say you hate and despise me – anything! Just say *something!*'

The numbness was threatened now by a ball of rage moving rapidly through him. 'Go,' he said thickly. 'Go away from me.'

'Jay, I—'

'Go!' Sudden feeling coursed through him, torment and revulsion blending in a dangerous cradle of molten anger. 'Take your bastard child, you dune whore,' he spat out, his voice so thick with rage the words sounded slurred, 'Take it and go!'

She was a frail figure, shoulders slumped, a lost child with auburn hair moving in the wind. Jay had never seen her look so beautiful. He was caught between striking out at her, ruining the beauty that had trapped him and another man, and rushing to her to pull her tightly to him. He wanted to protect her, to keep her safe from the force to which she had succumbed.

'Go,' he said again. It sounded like a plea as he pushed past her, controlling the urge to run towards the harbour path.

The harbour was still busy, though it was more than an hour since the last boat had come in. People milled about, buying fish that had not been sold to the trucks heading for markets in Cape Town and surrounding villages. Fishermen packed their gear into the huts lining the restraining wall of the harbour, boys helped their fathers clean out boats. There was conversation and laughter, the everyday sounds of people going about their lives. Someone called out to him. He walked on.

Three small dinghies were lying in the corner of the harbour, community property for use by anyone who wanted to row out and fish close inshore. Jay grabbed the nearest and pulled it single-handedly into the water. The late afternoon wind had whipped up the swells, rolling them into the harbour so that the dinghy took in water before Jay had his oars in position. He steadied the small craft, planted his feet wide apart and leaned into his task.

Rowing furiously for the harbour entrance, he kept his head turned to watch the swells. Once, when he glanced back, he saw Magda standing at the wall high above the harbour, watching him.

He kept up his pace even when he was beyond the cliffs, rowing in a harsh rhythm that strained his back and arm muscles. It helped, counterbalancing the pain that throbbed in his heart.

It was only later, when he was some distance out into the bay and could look back at the harbour where people had turned into unidentifiable shapes, that he allowed the pain inside to escape. It burst from him in a roar of anguish, was plucked away and smothered by the wind. The sobs that followed were harsh and dry, jerking him the way the sea tossed the dinghy about in the grip of its own rising anger.

When the exorcism was over, Jay saw it for the self-pity it was. He took control of the dinghy, turned it, and began to row back to the harbour. To Magda.

He would go to her now, tell her how sorry he was that he had added to her pain. He would tell her that she could depend on him, that he would help in whatever way he could, expecting nothing in return.

Rain started to fall in a light drizzle from the north-west as he neared the cliffs. His muscles ached, for nothing remained inside him to counter the physical pain.

Only one person stood in the harbour as Jay steadied the dinghy across a swell, waiting for the right one to carry him in. Even then, concentrating on the run of the sea, he recognised Bull's bulky form. He stood at the bottom of the shelf near the water's edge.

Jay heard him yell, 'Now!', just as he saw the swell curving round the edge of the cliffs. He leaned forward, dipped his oars and rowed. The dinghy sped in on the surf.

He jumped out when the craft hit the shallows, knowing it had neither the weight nor strength of build to stand being washed up onto the harbour shelf. Bull stood ready to help him.

The big man gripped the bow as Jay pushed at the stern, trying to lift it from the water. He remembered how easily he had handled the boat in the grip of his anger.

Together they hauled the dinghy to its resting place. Jay was out of breath when he stepped back and said, 'Thanks, Uncle Bull.'

Magda's father grunted, pushed his hands deep inside the pockets of his

corduroys, then strolled towards the drying racks on the rocks near the sea. Rain sparkled in his thick bush of hair.

Jay followed, knowing the older man wanted to talk to him. He stopped beside him and said, 'Magda has told me. I'm sorry, Uncle Bull, I feel I'm somehow partly to blame. If only I'd insisted she marry me the last time, this—'

'As much as I love you,' interjected Bull, his gaze glued on the sea, 'I'll kill you if you call my daughter a whore again. Never use that word on Magda. Don't even think it in your private thoughts.'

Jay lowered his eyes although the older man was not facing him. 'She told you,' he said lamely.

'Yes. I tried to warn her how you'd feel.'

'I wanted to kill myself for it a while ago, when I was out there.' He pointed with his chin towards the sea. 'I'll make my peace with her and pray she can forgive me.'

They stood side by side, two men bruised by their love for the same woman, each loving in his own way. After a while Jay said, 'What can I do to help?'

Bull wiped the rain from his face. 'Do you still love her, Jay? Despite what has happened?'

'Yes,' came the soft reply.

'Then come with me.'

\* \*

Bull and Sarah waited patiently in the kitchen. 'More coffee, please,' Bull said, eyeing the old clock ticking loudly on the oak sideboard. 'How long does it take for two people to apologise?' he muttered.

Sarah placed a full cup of coffee in front of him just as Jay and Magda entered the room. Both wore sheepish expressions.

'Sit,' grunted Bull.

He waited until everyone was seated, took a gulp of coffee, leaned his forearms on the table and said, 'There are a few options open to us. The first concerns the child. If Magda decides to keep it, she must face all the consequences that go with it. If she gives it up, she can start again. Our second choice,' he added and turned towards Jay, 'is that she marries you right away.'

He watched the Jay and Magda glance at each other and then at him. Magda said, 'I can't expect Jay to marry me now'

Bull jutted out his jaw. 'He's said he still loves you. Do you love him?'

Magda hesitated, glanced at Jay. 'In some ways, yes, but—'

'Then you will learn the rest with time.'

'Jay can't be expected to accept another man's child.!'

Bull scratched his ear; the suggestion he had in mind was not an easy one to make. 'You'll go to Caledon or even Cape Town to have the child. You'll give it up for adoption, and we'll say it died at birth.'

'Bull!' It was the first time Sarah spoke.

Bull nodded. 'Yes,' he said, 'it's not right, but it will just be a lie.'

It was Magda who broke the lengthy silence that followed Bull's proposal. 'If I give up the child, Pa, there must be a further condition – one of *my* making.'

'What?' Bull felt exhausted; he was unaccustomed to playing with the futures of others. 'What?' he asked again.

'The child must be given to someone here in Brannigan Bay.'

'Here? Where you'll watch it grow, where it'll be a constant reminder to you?'

'It'd mean so much to me, just knowing where the child is and how it's doing. If it's happy, then it will help me to be happy with Jay.'

Her words made Jay jerk in his chair. 'Everyone would know!' he argued. 'The whole village would point at the child and say, "There goes Magda's little bastard." Have you thought of that? Whoever took the child would have to know the truth!'

There was a determined gleam in Magda's eyes when she turned to him. 'Pa's already suggested I go away to have the baby and that we say it died. I can stay away for a few weeks, supposedly recuperating from the loss. And yes,' she added, 'the parents will know the truth. But the people I have in mind can be trusted to keep our secret.'

Bull leaned forward. 'Who?'

'Gottlieb and Gertrude Kessler.'

Jay looked up in surprise.

'They're desperate for a baby, and they're good people. The child will have a fine home with them.'

'Magda is right,' said Bull, 'The Kesslers are a wise choice.' He saw his chance to finalise the matter. 'And you, Jay,' he asked, 'will you be married to Magda and accept that?'

Jay tapped the table top with his finger. He looked at Magda and said, 'Yes.'

Bull leaned back, folding his arms across his chest in a satisfied gesture. 'I'll talk to Gottlieb,' he said. 'This thing is my responsibility.' He saw the expression on Jay's face, smiled and added, 'This goes beyond you and one of your crew, my boy.' He was relieved when Jay returned his smile.

'Right!' continued Bull, slapping his open palm gently on the table. 'There's much to be considered before I visit Gottlieb. Why don't the two of you go outside and talk? Come back when you've made a final decision.'

He waited until Magda and Jay had closed the kitchen door behind them before he turned to Sarah. 'Wife,' he said with a long sigh, 'another cup of coffee, please – and make it a strong.'

He slumped across the table. 'Answer me truthfully, Sarah. Did I do right?'

Sarah smiled. 'I think you did well, Bull de Vries, but time will tell.'

\* \* \* \*

<http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00EX2PE7A>



# 1917

*May*

The child, a boy, was born on 28 April, the same day that three more young men from Brannigan Bay died on the battlefield. Magda heard about the deaths two hours after they had taken away the baby and given it to the Kesslers. She cried – for the dead and for her baby.

She spent nearly a month at the simple cottage of an aunt in Hout Bay near Cape Town. She had not seen the woman for years and disapproval showed constantly on her stern face. Magda knew it had not been easy for her father to ask the favour. She reminded herself, too, of the lie she would have to live, for already her parents would have spread the word that her child had died.

She was relieved when Jay came to fetch her; she wanted to get back to Brannigan Bay and had missed him. He is a good man, she thought, watching his strong hands on the reins of the buggy he had borrowed to collect her. She knew he must love her deeply to have married her and swore she would never again betray that love. Her silent oath reminded her of their love-making before her pregnancy had become too advanced for it. They had been nervous with each other, tense, the spectre of the other man hovering between them. Magda vowed that that, too, would improve. With time they would make it so.

Jay was cheerful along the journey, purposely so, Magda thought, yet she found herself laughing with him, enjoying the rugged strength that would be her protection in future. It helped too, to take her mind off Preston Whitehead. She was determined she would somehow force him from her consciousness. She would never forget him – that was too much to expect – but she could not allow him again to come between her and Jay.

It was only when they approached the outskirts of Brannigan Bay, after spending the night at the Houw Hoek Inn, that Magda thought of the lie that would pervade her life from now on. She could visualise the women in the village, the compassion in their eyes, the murmured sympathies.

'There will be other children,' she would answer them. That would be the best response and would, at least, be the truth. She and Jay would have children of their own. Soon.

Yet as they rode into the village, she could not stop herself from asking, 'What have they named him?'

Jay glanced at her, then returned his gaze to the horses. 'Wilhelm,' he said softly.

'It's a lovely name,' she said.

'It's also a German name,' replied Jay with a laugh. 'You should see Gottlieb – he's a useless fisherman now – can't wait to get home in the afternoons!' He laughed again, and the sound so pleased Magda that she joined in.

Shifting closer to him, she placed her head on his shoulder and said, 'It's good to be back, Jay. It's good to be back with you.'

He smiled, flicked the whip, and the buggy clattered down the rocky

main street of Brannigan Bay.

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<http://www.amazon.com/dp/B00EX2PE7A>

# 1918

The news, when it came, flashed through the country as though it was something unexpected. The past few months of speculation were forgotten as relief exploded into enthusiastic jubilation in every city, town and village.

It was 12 November 1918: the armistice had been signed and the Great War was over.

In the cities, thousands upon thousands of people flooded into the streets, giving full vent to their joy as they greeted and hugged complete strangers. Fireworks exploded overhead, trams blew their whistles, people sang, waved hastily made banners and cluttered the streets with piles of streamers and assorted bunting. They were happy, thankful, content – yet many lamented its coming too late to spare loved ones.

In Brannigan Bay the postmaster, who had two sons fighting in Europe, was the first to receive the news. He was a short, slight man with feet out of proportion to the rest of his body. He came hurtling out into Main Street, his number eleven shoes slapping up dust as he ran first in one direction, skidded to a halt, spun round hysterically, then started off in another.

The first people who came to investigate the cause of the shouting saw only shoes and dust, yet they understood his screams of delight.

'It's over! It's over! It's over!' the little man shouted at the top of his high-pitched voice. By the time the first person reached him, he had tripped over his feet and lay sprawled on the gravel. His waistcoat was covered in dust, and his white shirt had torn, revealing a pale elbow. He squirmed, kicked, yelled and laughed and a passer-by, thinking the poor man was suffering a fit, ran to summon Aunt Agnes, well known for her herbal remedies.

The postmaster had himself almost under control and was weeping soundlessly by the time most of the town's population had gathered in the street. They milled about in delirious confusion, kissed, laughed and cried. One fisherman was not so overjoyed by the news to miss seeing another kiss his wife more than once, using the opportunity to grasp her firmly by the buttocks. A vicious brawl ensued but was quickly brought under control.

A boy was despatched to call the fishermen who had already returned to harbour. He tore down the street, building up a good sweat in the afternoon heat. It took a while before the men could get some sense out of him but when they did they abandoned their catches and headed for town.

Magda spotted Jay as she came out of their cottage to investigate the commotion. 'What's going on?' she asked, 'Why all the shouting?' Sarah, who had been visiting her, pushed past them, unable to contain her curiosity.

Jay gripped Magda's shoulders and glanced at her swollen abdomen. 'The war's over, Magda. Our child will be born in a time of peace! Peace, Magda, peace!' He pulled her into his arms and held her tight.

She was crying when he released her, soft, quiet tears that rolled down her cheeks. 'It's really over?' she asked incredulously. 'Oh, Jay!' Moving back against his chest, she flung her arms about his neck. 'Thank God,' she whispered. 'Nick will be safe now.'

'They should all be home in a few months' time. Come,' said Jay, placing his arm

round her waist, 'let me help my fat woman make her way to the excitement.'

Magda was eight months pregnant, yet the clumsiness she had recently felt lifted from her as her soul filled with euphoria. She walked fast, pulling away from Jay. 'Hold on there!' he shouted.

She laughed with him, gaily, dizzily, tasting the salty tears on her lips. Oh, Nick, Nick! It had been six months since she had last received a letter from him.

They found Bull and Sarah clinging to each other at the fringe of the crowd. Someone began singing, with other voices rapidly joining in. Bull pulled away from his wife to embrace Jay and Magda. 'It's a glorious day,' he said, his voice shaky.

Magda saw the mistiness in his eyes as he turned away. She latched onto his shirt. 'Pa?' she started, forcing him to face her again. 'He'll be coming home soon ... to Brannigan Bay. There's no other place for him. Can this other war not end today as well? Please?' she begged, using her words, hands, eyes and the fresh tears that fell freely now.

For a moment it seemed as if Bull would draw her to him, as if he was about to say the words she longed to hear. All he did was take her hands in his to kiss them, then went back to Sarah without replying.

Magda turned to Jay but he was talking to with a man standing beside him. All the elation she had felt just moments ago drained from her and she stood at the edge of the excited crowd like an outsider observing the joy of others.

Clanging bells sounded from the nearby Anglican church, the joyful peal adding to the clamour and feverish babble in the street, growing dominant as excited voices slowly subsided. People, first in ones and twos, then groups, drifted closer in response to the call. Anglican, Dutch Reformed, Catholic – all poured through the church's open doors, past the clergyman standing with a wide smile of welcome on his face.

'Where's your ma?' asked Magda when Jay took her arm to lead her towards the church. 'She'll want to be here.'

He scanned the remaining crowd but was sure Frances Brannigan was not there. 'I'll fetch her,' he said, kissing Magda's cheek. 'You go ahead and join your folks.'

The impromptu thanksgiving service was simple and poignant. Men and women wept openly for the living and the dead, for what had been and the future to come.

Magda walked beside her mother when they left the church. Bull lagged behind, talking animatedly with a group of men. Magda glanced back over her shoulder and said, 'I think today was the first time I saw Pa cry.'

Sarah smiled and linked her arm through her daughter's. 'Don't pester him, child, I feel that today has turned his thoughts about Nick. Let him make up his mind ... hopefully before Nick returns.'

'I'll leave him in peace,' she promised.

'I'll go with you to your house,' said Sarah when they neared the side street where both cottages stood. She laughed and added, 'It's strange. Even after all this time I find it hard to think of Jay's house as yours too. To me your home will always be with me and your pa.'

'Then I'm lucky – I have two homes!' Unlike Nick, she thought suddenly; he had none.

'It's a pity Jay and Frances missed the service,' Sarah was saying. 'I wonder what kept them.'

Jay was sitting on the kitchen steps when they reached the cottage, staring at the

garden as if unaware of their approach. 'Jay?' called Magda, 'Is something wrong?'  
'She's dead,' he whispered.

'What?'

'She's dead,' he repeated as Sarah moved quickly into the house. 'My mother is dead. She's dead in her chair. That's where I found her.'

'Oh Jay!' Magda knelt and took his face in her hands.

He placed his hands on top of hers and smiled. 'It sounds a terrible thing to say,' he began, 'but in a way I'm almost relieved for her. She was never happy and even less so since my pa died.'

'Jay.' She did not know what else to say.

'At least,' he said, moving to his feet and helping Magda up at the same time, 'today's peace has touched my mother as well.'

It had touched others besides Frances Brannigan; on that same day, on a faraway front of the dying war where confusion still reigned, men died in conflict. One was from Brannigan Bay.

When Jay laid his mother to rest in the town's cemetery, much expanded since the outbreak of war, news came of the death of Nick de Vries. Two grave diggers standing near the mourners turned away from the anguish that burst from Magda, away from the sight of Bull de Vries crumpling to his knees, and focused instead on the vacant spot where they would soon toil.

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