

C.FONSECA

*tracing*  
INVISIBLE  
THREADS



# Chapter 1

## *East wind*

*Waterloo Television Studios, London.*

ELEANOR DRUMMED HER FINGERS ON her thigh. She glanced at her watch for the umpteenth time, looking up with a start as the program assistant stuck her head around the open door. “Ms Heysen,” she said, elongating her name with a thick Scottish accent. “Two minutes, and we’ll move you behind the set.”

“Here we go.” Eleanor jumped to her feet and spun around, her black leather sneakers making a squeaky sound on the polished tiled floor. Something sharp dug into her back, so she reached behind her and lifted the lightweight suit jacket, where the techie had tucked the battery pack into her matching heather-grey trousers. She adjusted the pack, rolled her head from side to side and followed the assistant who set off at a cracking pace.

Through the gap between the drop curtains, she spied the host, Ian Sinclair, with his well-coiffed hair, flashy silver suit, and burgundy bow tie. He was charming the audience with his signature pre-show banter. Eleanor placed a shaking hand over her racing heart.

To calm herself and give her courage, Eleanor twirled the emerald-green bead bracelet around her left wrist. It was a gift from Aunt Helen after Eleanor had landed her first paid job with a small Fleet Street publication. The beads were pale, semi-transparent, and shimmered with hues of green and yellow. She hadn’t wanted to accept such a generous gift, but Helen had wrapped her in a warm hug and told her she’d bought it in a backstreet

market on her first photographic assignment in Beijing. Recalling Helen's earthy, hearty laugh and sparkling blue eyes as she had clasped it around Eleanor's wrist, Eleanor felt a sad smile tug at the corner of her mouth.

The audience erupted with a round of applause, and the assistant nudged Eleanor forward. She squared her shoulders, stepped between the curtains and on to the stage.

She blinked a few times. *God*, the lights were bright. When her eyes refocussed, Eleanor was comforted to find the set was way smaller and less intimidating in real life than on the TV. She clenched her fists to stop them from trembling, remembered the assistant's detailed instructions and strode to the sofa, where the chat show host greeted her with a toothy grin and a firm handshake.

"Sit yourself down, Eleanor Heysen." Ian gestured with a flamboyant arm wave. She carefully perched on the edge of the canary yellow sofa—that resembled a relic from the 1970s—while Ian took a seat behind his desk. In his trademark smooth drawl, he said, "To be honest, we don't need an excuse to highlight exceptional female talent, but since it's International Women's Day, we will make sure to. Eleanor, thank you for joining me today." He paused as the audience cheered and clapped. "We are here to honour and celebrate women and their achievements and you are my lucky, lucky, lucky first guest."

*Lucky, lucky, lucky.* Well, that's what Renate, her publisher had told her and of course she was right. Eleanor took a deep breath. Even though she'd dug in her heels at first, refusing Renate's suggestion, here she was. The show was a perfect opportunity to promote her book.

"You have gone from newspapers and magazines, to major photojournalism projects, to capturing the human condition in ways that are compassionate and at times jaw-dropping." Ian clapped his hands in the air, and his audience joined in. "In recent years, you've travelled widely, doing a lot of humanitarian work covering inequality, cultural diversity, and gender imbalance. Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to be with us today."

"Thank you for inviting me." Eleanor smiled, shifting her gaze away from the large screen at the back of the set that showed her iconic 2008 photograph of Nelson Mandela chatting with England's newest princess. It had been taken in Hyde Park at a concert celebrating his ninetieth birthday.

“Oh, it’s a pleasure.” Ian picked up a remote control device from his desk. “Of course, you are recognised for your individual style of photography and not your gender, but in this industry...well, all things are not equal.” He regarded her directly. “How do you feel about being labelled a *female* documentary photographer?”

“I’m sure my colleagues would agree it will be progress when we are simply known as photographers.” Eleanor quickly scanned the audience. “But I am a woman, and I am a photographer.”

“Too true,” Ian said, bobbing his head up and down. “Very true.”

Eleanor reached for her water glass and took a large gulp. She’d half expected that question.

“Let’s look at some of your career highlights, shall we?” He swivelled around to face the screen and pushed a button to start the slide show.

While random images flashed across the display, Ian rattled on about her accomplishments, asking her questions, sometimes waiting until the audience quietened. Eleanor wriggled back on the sofa and placed her hands on her knees. She was chuffed at Ian’s generously flattering remarks. It was pleasing to discover that he had a genuine interest in her work.

“One last picture. I hope you don’t mind, but it shows that being a photographer with a social conscience is damned hard, and sometimes harrowing.” He pushed a button on the remote, freezing a large black and white photograph of Eleanor on the screen. *Hell*. Her stomach churned as she recalled the time and place. Unsurprisingly she looked a wreck. It was a photograph she hadn’t seen before and never wanted to see again.

“Whoever turned the camera on you at that moment certainly captured a maelstrom of emotions.” He rubbed his goatee beard between his thumb and forefinger, clearly waiting for Eleanor’s response.

Eleanor winced. With no small effort, she kept her voice calm and her hands steady. “Yes, they did.”

Pictures of her had surfaced before, especially in the good old days when the paparazzi would snap shots of Eleanor with her celebrity girlfriend. Why would anyone bother taking a photograph of her now? She no longer had the celebrity girlfriend, and she was just a photographer doing her job.

“Where were you at the time, Eleanor?”

“São Paulo, Brazil.”

Eleanor pulled at her shirt collar, as though the intense heat had drifted all the way from that tiny airless shanty into the air-conditioned Waterloo Studio. The enormous image showed her insect-bitten, blotchy face, the sweat dripping off her forehead nearly blinding her. She looked totally haggard, almost dwarfed by the camera she had her hands wrapped around.

“What was going on?” Ian asked.

She lowered her eyes away from the screen, swallowing the lump rising in her throat. “It was the funeral of a fourteen-year-old girl who’d died during childbirth in the favela slums. Fernanda,” Eleanor whispered, almost reverently. “Her name was Fernanda. I was on assignment covering the government’s campaign to reduce teenage pregnancy. It was actually backfiring and the situation was only getting worse. I spent two weeks in the favela, photographing young pregnant girls in the community. Fernanda went into premature labour and died as a result of multiple complications.”

“Horrorific circumstances. It’s not surprising you look so distraught in the photo,” he said, his voice laced with concern.

Eleanor forced herself to look back at the huge projected image again. Someone had obviously sold it to the press. Eleanor appeared fragile, bedraggled, and distressed. It truly captured her state of mind then, and now. Raw and exposed.

“You’re thirty-six years old, Eleanor. You’ve been covering traumatic events for over ten years. How have you been affected by this?” Ian asked.

Eleanor shrugged. *Anyone could see. It was pretty obvious in that photo.* “It’s my job. I’m a storyteller and documentarian, and sometimes the stories I cover take me into heart-breaking situations.” She lowered her eyes, staring down at her hands. When she looked up again, thankfully the image had gone, and the spotlight had shifted back to the host. “It’s not always like that. Sometimes the occasion is joyful.”

“Thank God for that,” Ian said, walking around his desk and picking up a copy of her brand-new, hardback, publication. “If anyone was born to be a photographer, Eleanor Heysen was. I promise you; her poetic images will trigger a tingling feeling, proving beauty can be found in the most unexpected places, and this extraordinary book of Eleanor’s photographs, *Treading Lightly*, can be bought at all the best bookshops right now.” He waved the book in the air. “*All* the money will go to organisations around the globe whose main focus is to save lives and improve the quality of life for women and girls.”

“It’s a cause that is close to my heart. I hope the sales will make a difference.” Eleanor smiled. She was proud of the book. It was dedicated to Aunt Helen. A small step towards forgiving herself for letting Helen down.

Off camera, a man, probably the producer made a wind-up gesture with his hand signalling the segment was coming to an end.

Ian wrapped up, strode across to Eleanor, and shook her hand firmly. “Good luck on your journeys. Come back and visit us sometime.” Covering his microphone, he whispered, “I’ve received two in-ear prompts that someone has been calling, urgently trying to get hold of you.” He gestured to a stagehand, hovering nearby. “Tom, take Eleanor back to the dressing room, now.”

Eleanor followed Tom backstage. Who was trying to get hold of her so urgently? A weight seemed to press on her chest as she thought of the possible reasons behind the calls.

“Tom, do you know who rang?” Eleanor called out.

He stopped and turned around. “Someone from Melbourne, Australia.”

She gulped. Had something terrible happened back home?

At the end of the corridor, Tom pulled out a set of keys and unlocked the dressing room door. He pointed to the black antique telephone hanging on the wall. “Go ahead and use that if you want. They’ll put a call through. I hope everything is okay.”

After Tom left, shutting the door behind him, Eleanor grabbed her rucksack and pulled out her phone—which she’d flicked to silent. A list of notifications dropped down. Three missed calls and a message from her brother. *Oh, God.* It had to be something serious.

What on earth could be wrong? She scrolled through the call log. The one from her mother was just over an hour ago. The other two from Leo were more recent—so was the text:

*Eleanor call me ASAP. Dad’s in hospital.*

Her heart began to pound in her chest. All manner of horrifying scenarios flashed through Eleanor’s mind. Had he been in an accident? He did love driving fast and pushing the boundaries of his classic old sports car on the open road. *Please. Please, let him be okay.*

Eleanor’s fingers trembled as she called her brother.

## Chapter 2

### *High stakes*

*Five days later. Melbourne, Australia.*

ELEANOR APPROACHED THE ROOM AT the end of a long hospital corridor and read the name plate—Harold Heysen. Even though Leo had told her what to expect and had assured her their father was making good progress, as she stepped inside his brightly lit room, Eleanor had to lean against the doorframe to steady herself.

Her strong, dependable dad lay propped up on a raft of pillows. His body barely made an impression under the starched white sheets covering him, and his face was gaunt and pale. It was the first time in her life she'd witnessed her father looking so frail and her heart ached for him.

Reassured by the soft continuous beep-beep-beep of his heart-rate monitor and the steady rise and fall of his chest, Eleanor moved quietly into the spacious, boutique-hotel styled room to stand beside his bed. Tears welled up, and she sighed deeply, reaching for his hand.

He grabbed her fingers. "Well, that was a huge sigh," her father croaked. "It must be jet lag."

Eleanor smiled. *He knows it's me.* The fear and foreboding that had followed her all the way from London gave way to an enormous sense of relief.

"I thought I was dreaming that there was an angel beside my bed." He squeezed her hand again and gave her a sleepy half-smile. "And here you are. My angel. I didn't mean to scare you, Nell."

A tear slipped down Eleanor's cheek, and she wiped it away with her free hand. "Daddy," she whispered.

"My God, you're more beautiful than any angel I could imagine." He winked. "You look like Sarah when she was your age, apart from your short snazzy hairstyle."

Eleanor leaned forward to kiss his forehead. "Thank you, Dad."

It wasn't the first time he'd mentioned she resembled her mother. She supposed they did share some physical similarities, like their light-olive skin tone and dark brown eyes. However, he knew as well as Eleanor that their temperaments were very different.

Her father cleared his throat. "Apart from obviously needing a good rest, you're still my little Nell."

She pulled back, just far enough to gaze into his soft blue eyes. "I'm so glad to see you at last. We sat in the plane for two hours in Singapore sweltering in the heat." Her voice cracked, and a few more tears escaped, landing on her father's chest. "I'm so sorry..." She'd been worried sick from the moment she'd spoken to Leo five days ago. It seemed as if weeks had passed since she'd first received his text. Her exhaustion from fear and lack of sleep was catching up with her—it was not like Eleanor to cry openly in front of her father.

"All that matters is that you're safely here now." He tightened his grip on her hand and gave a strained chuckle. "And I'm here. More importantly, the doc tells me, in due course, I will be just fine." He let go of her hand and patted the bed cover. "Sit up here."

"I don't think the scary nurse who glared at me from the desk in the corridor would approve." Eleanor dragged a heavy upholstered chair close to the state-of-the-art hospital bed and sat down.

"She's a softie. Alice is an extremely competent and compassionate nurse. Everyone here knows I've been waiting for you to arrive." He craned his neck to peer at the wires and monitoring equipment behind the bed. "Don't let all this paraphernalia frighten you. It'll be gone in a couple more days."

Eleanor leaned over to brush her hand lightly across her father's broad shoulder. "That's good to know," she said. "I would have come straight from the airport, but Leo, not so tactfully, suggested it would be better if I



showered and changed first. He said something about socks and armpits.” Imitating what Leo had done, she pinched her nose.

Her father grinned. “Good idea. They are very particular here about clean socks and the liberal use of deodorant.”

Eleanor laughed. “Good thing I took Leo’s advice.” She lowered her eyes, wondering if it would be all right to ask her father about his heart attack. She looked up, and he gazed at her questioningly.

“What is it, Nell?”

“Tell me what happened, please. When did you realise something was seriously wrong? Had you been feeling unwell? Leo said you told Mum it was indigestion when she asked why you were rubbing your chest after dinner that night.”

“Hmm. Up ’till then, I hadn’t noticed any symptoms. It did seem a bit like indigestion. You know that feeling after you’ve eaten a big roast, followed by pavlova?”

Eleanor shook her head. “Actually, no. It’s years since I’ve had a Sunday roast. As for pavlova, now you *are* making me drool. I doubt Mum has time to bake these days like she did when Leo and I were kids.” It had been a long time since Eleanor had tucked into a wedge of her mother’s crispy pavlova with its gooey marshmallow-like centre.

He scratched his forehead. “If your mother has her way, I’ll never eat pav again. From now on, I’ve got to limit red meat, cream, butter, and salt. All the good stuff. And then once I’ve recovered from the surgery, there’s cardio rehab twice a week to rebuild my fitness.”

Eleanor squeezed her misty eyes shut. While working across the world, she’d suffered nightmares about being unable to get home if anything happened to her family. She opened her eyes and looked at her father. Thankfully the nightmares had not turned into reality. Eleanor was home and her father was alive. “I’m here to help with things like that. I’ll be able to take you to rehab.”

“Thanks, love. That will take some pressure off your mother.” He sighed. “I’ll be happy when I can get behind the wheel again and drive myself around, that’s for sure.”

“Of course, you will.” Eleanor smiled encouragingly, although Leo had mentioned their father would not be able to zoom around in his classic sports car for at least a couple of months.

Her father got a faraway look in his eyes. “I’ve never experienced anything like it before. As if some monstrous beast was sitting on my chest.” He squeezed his eyes closed. “Then I heard this strange voice saying something like, “Just relax, Harold. You’re having a heart attack.”

Eleanor squeezed his hand. “I’m so sorry, Dad. That must have been terrifying. The main thing is that the surgery was successful and you’ll be home soon. Then I can fuss over you, take you to rehab, and feed you poached fish on a bed of lettuce.”

He scowled. “That will be stretching your culinary skills to the max, sweetheart.”

Eleanor giggled and lowered her head in agreement. “I’m afraid my cooking hasn’t improved—probably because I don’t spend much time in the kitchen.”

A beaming smile lit up her father’s face. “I just remembered about your TV show. Leo downloaded the footage from your television debut, but I haven’t seen it yet. We can watch it together when I get home.” Pride glowed in his eyes.

“Jeez. The Ian Sinclair Show seems as if it was months ago. I haven’t even had a chance to see the recording myself,” Eleanor said. “It’ll be fun to watch it with you at home.”

*Home.* Eleanor hadn’t realised how good that could sound. She’d return home at least once a year to catch up with family and recharge, but there was never enough time, and the pressure of getting back to work usually sat heavily on her shoulders. Eleanor sighed. Jet lag and exhaustion was a bummer—she was on the verge of tears again. How long could she stay in Melbourne this time, before she had to head back overseas?

“Are you all right, Nell?”

“Yes, I am, Dad.” She shook the thoughts away. There’d be time enough to worry about that later.

He squinted at the bedside clock. “Sarah had to pick up some papers at the office, but she’ll be back soon. Your mother has been so excited about having you home, too. Have you spoken to her yet?”

“Not since the plane landed.”

“Sarah wouldn’t have told you about Helen’s trunk then,” he said.

“What trunk?”

“Would you believe the Chinese government returned Helen’s personal effects?”

Eleanor leaned forward in her chair. “Finally. I made that special trip to Beijing two years ago after the promised ten-year anniversary release date, but the government refused to hand over her things. They were *still* questioning Helen’s motives for going to Chengdu at the time of the earthquake.”

He shook his head. “Bloody red tape. Accusing Helen of being a spy.”

“Totally ludicrous.” Eleanor had been powerless, unable to slice through the excessive bureaucracy and gain possession of her aunt’s belongings. “I don’t suppose anyone’s had an opportunity to look in the trunk?” Eleanor smiled eagerly. She couldn’t believe she was finally going to get the chance to see what Helen was working on when she died.

The sound of the heart-rate monitor changed, and her father’s fingers tightened around her forearm.

Eleanor looked up hurriedly to see his strained face. “Are you okay, Dad?” She took his hand, her eyes darting towards the door. “Should I get someone?”

He squeezed her fingers and shook his head. “I’m okay, Nell. Once I’m home, we can go through the trunk together.”

Eleanor caught her lower lip between her teeth. “Don’t worry. I can sort through Aunt Helen’s belongings—”

“It is wonderful that you are home, Ms Heysen, but it’s time for me to check your father,” Alice said, wheeling a medicine trolley to the end of the bed. Eleanor hadn’t even noticed her come in. “Mr Heysen has been eagerly awaiting your arrival. We’ve heard so much about you. Welcome back.” She skirted the bed, leaned over, and pressed the monitor screen.

“Thank you, Alice.” Eleanor let go of her father’s hand and jumped to her feet. “I’d better go and let you take a nap before Mum gets back.” She stifled a yawn behind her hand. “Love you, Dad.”

“Love you, too, Nell,” he said softly and laid his head back against the pillows.

“Seems like the both of you need a rest.” Alice gave Eleanor a wry smile. “See you again, Ms Heysen.”

Eleanor rubbed her eyes. Now that she’d finally seen her father and knew he was doing okay, the idea of stretching out on a bed sounded like heaven. She knew she’d bounce back after a few hours of sleep, but now, her body ached and keeping her eyelids open was near impossible. She wanted nothing more than to climb into bed. That was if she could stop herself from opening Helen’s trunk first.

## Chapter 3

### *Winds and dragons*

THE TRAM CAME TO A shuddering halt at the crowded La Trobe Street stop, and Eleanor braced herself against a metal pole before being caught in the slipstream as everyone headed for the exit, only to be slowed down by the crowd of people trying to get on. The CBD was simply mad at peak hour. She breathed a sigh of relief when she jumped out of the tram and caught sight of the State Library Victoria, with its sturdy portico supported by eight lofty Corinthian columns.

Eleanor glimpsed a flash of bright blue enamel through the top of her partly open canvas rucksack and hurriedly re-tightened the drawstring. She lifted the rucksack onto her shoulders and readjusted its leather straps. It was heavy, but not any more weighty than usual. The burden of the box's contents and honouring Helen's memory far exceeded its actual weight.

It was almost two weeks since Eleanor had found out about Aunt Helen's trunk. She'd spent nearly all of her time with her father since she'd got home to Melbourne. Her dad insisted that no one fussed over him, but of course she did, and they'd fallen into a comfortable routine. Apart from driving him to various medical appointments around town, they'd spend the morning together discussing politics or world events, teasing each other about their differing taste in music, and just hanging out. It warmed her heart to be able to spend so much time with her father again.

This was her first foray into the city. Inside her jacket pocket was the map of the library her father had insisted on printing for her. She took it out and quickly looked over it to check her bearings before glancing at her

watch. Ten minutes was more than enough time to find her way around the building, into the Russell Street Welcome Zone, and to the gallery foyer.

She was pleased with herself. Eleanor had timed it perfectly for her appointment with Katherine Kent, her mother's friend and the manager of collections.

The library was in the final phase of major renovations, and as she strode past the temporarily closed main entrance, Eleanor gazed nostalgically across the expansive forecourt lawn. She'd spent many stolen moments sprawled on the lush grass daydreaming or perched on one of the well-worn stone steps far away from the pompous, stuffy Law Library in the Supreme Court Building—where, as a law student she was supposed to be.

It was here that she'd explored the world through stories, atlases and maps, exhibitions, photographs, and travel journals that had piqued her curiosity for faraway people and places.

She reached inside her jacket to tug on the strap of the Leica camera that hung from her shoulder. She patted it lovingly. After her meeting, she hoped to have time to take a few shots before racing home again. Her camera of choice today was fitted with a crisp 50mm Summilux lens. Perfect for shooting in the low-light conditions of the domed nineteenth-century building.

Checking out her reflection in the sliding glass doors at the library entrance, Eleanor pulled at her short hair and straightened her collar. "You'll do."

She entered the East Wing directly into a bright white-walled foyer. Tantalizing aromas from the ultra-modern coffee bar tickled her nose. "Hmm...Melbourne coffee."

There was no smell of musty old library books here. The lounge space was filled with a sprawl of people in armchairs, while others sat at long work desks and stared at their screens. One wall was flanked by a larger than life mural depicting giant pages of books, where colourful illustrations appeared to leap off the pages. *Brilliant.*

Eleanor growled, instinctively reaching for her rucksack, clutching it to her side as a dozen or so schoolgirls barrelled past, almost knocking her off her feet. The worn canvas bag essentially carried her life's necessities when she traversed the globe, and it had suffered a lot of abuse over the years. She pulled it against her chest, took a deep breath, and sighed as

the children—giggling and whispering—and their minder moved down the stairs and out into the sunlit street.

On her last assignment in West Africa, Eleanor had witnessed first-hand how some rural communities placed little value on educating girls. It incensed her that many females had hardly any opportunity for even basic schooling and the tiniest possible chance in the world of learning to read and write. She glanced at the people around her. *Most of us here take our privileges for granted, not realising how lucky we are.*

With her rucksack hoisted safely on her shoulder, Eleanor strode past the security guard, along the corridor, and towards the designated meeting place. If she didn't get a move on, she'd be late for her appointment, and she hated tardiness, especially in herself.

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Alexa pushed up the bridge of her thick-framed glasses and held the leather-encased, velvet-lined image at eye level. The precious daguerreotype measured a mere two and three quarter by three and a quarter inches, and its imperfections and quirks hinted at its history. The portrait, a silver-plated copper image, portrayed a woman holding a tiny infant and was dated 1854, making it very rare. The delicate plate couldn't be used to make copies. It was too fragile and easy to damage. A one-off.

It was crazy to think that using her smartphone, Alexa could in mere seconds, capture and manipulate an image and beam it to the world across social media.

Alexa lifted the daguerreotype into a cotton-lined box, carefully closed the lid, and held the box in the palm of her hand. "Creating you was a lot more complex." She caressed it with her blue-gloved finger. "So, where will you be in a hundred years?" Alexa mused, then scowled. "Tucked away on a tiny piece of the library's eleven kilometres of shelving. But *I* won't forget you."

"Are you talking to the objects again?" Jac Dupont walked into the lab, pointed at the box, and rested her hand on Alexa's shoulder. "Those images can't talk back. They've been dead a long time."

"Phew. I'm actually relieved to put it away safely," Alexa said with a sigh and placed her chin on her friend's wrist. "Hi, Jac. You're right about the

dead not speaking. It's one of the post-mortem portraits. You can hardly tell the baby's dead in the mother's arms."

"Creepy. One of the shadier sides of Victorian photography." Jac squeezed Alexa's shoulder, then removed her hand. "My teams had a hell of a time preparing the two hundred drawings and paintings for this installation. Good reason for us to get out of here tonight and celebrate." She twirled around on the tips of her patent-leather flats. "The gang's heading for cocktails and nibbles in an hour or so. Can I count you in?"

Alexa pursed her lips. "I'd like to join you, but I have to return this to storage and then keep an appointment." She checked the wall clock. "Oh damn..." She placed the archival box onto a trolley, threw her coat and bag over her shoulder, and tucked the folder Katherine had left on her desk under her arm. "I have to get this all the way to storage then sprint to the Cowan Gallery to greet my visitor." She swore under her breath.

Jac wrinkled her nose. "Meet us afterwards then. Come on. It's Friday," she said. "Isn't it a strange time for a meeting?"

"It wasn't arranged by me. Katherine was summoned to an emergency meeting with the Chief. She couldn't contact the woman, who's the daughter of her old school friend or something. I'm just the fill-in meet and greet."

"What's it about?" Jac asked. "Maybe a new acquisition?"

"Hopefully. Katherine promised we'd help with identification." Alexa retrieved the folder from under her arm and read the label on the front cover. "The historical slides are part of the estate of Eleanor Heysen's aunt. She's the one I'm meeting today. Eleanor, I mean. They may relate to Chinese/Australian migration."

"Well, that could be fascinating." Jac crossed her arms matter-of-factly. "Who was her aunt?"

"There is a tragic side to the story. She was a journalist who went missing after the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan."

Jac rubbed her temples. "The one that killed nearly seventy thousand people. The Great Sichuan Earthquake?"

"Uh-huh...and where thousands more were unaccounted for." Alexa shuddered and stared down at her hands, unable to comprehend the scale of such a devastating tragedy.

"My brother and I were travelling in Tibet at the time." Jac shook her head. "There was a lot of political unrest, and then the earthquake happened

in China. I remember an Australian National Press photojournalist based in London disappeared somewhere near Chengdu.”

“Hmm...interesting. I wonder if the journalist’s disappearance was linked to the political turmoil.” Alexa checked the wall clock again. “Oh no, the story of my life. I’m running late.” She glanced at the large two-tiered trolley with the tiny box containing the daguerreotype sitting on the top shelf. She rolled it towards the exit. There was no way she’d run with the precious cargo. “Be a darling and lock up here for me. I may see you later.”

Jac called out after her, “Hey, I think the photojournalist’s name was Helen.”

“Oh, really?” Alexa raised her voice just a little as she manoeuvred the trolley towards the hallway. “I’ll let you know how it goes with Eleanor.”

The trolley’s wheels vibrated and echoed through the subterranean maze of corridors and passageways as Alexa walked as fast as she could.

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Eleanor shifted her weight restlessly from one leg to the other. Katherine Kent was nearly fifteen minutes late. Either that, or Eleanor had gotten the time wrong. It had been years since she’d met her mother’s friend, but she couldn’t recall Katherine as someone who would be late.

Walking over to a wooden bench close to the librarian’s desk, Eleanor removed the rucksack from her shoulders, figuring she might as well sit down if she was going to have a long wait. She dropped heavily onto the bench, drew up her legs, sat cross-legged, and pulled the rucksack with Aunt Helen’s precious contents into her lap.

At this end of the gallery, she was well positioned to observe the library patrons getting on with their business, without being too noticeable. What were those two men doing, with their arms folded, heads down on a desk? Were they asleep or praying? Or the young mother with her toddler balanced on the edge of her knee who typed on her keyboard with her free hand?

Eleanor reached inside her jacket. With the camera’s silent shutter, she could blend into the scene, focus, and shoot. It was slim and compact enough that she could remain inconspicuous even in a busy public space. She’d learnt many invaluable photographic techniques from her aunt, but



most importantly, Helen had taught her how to view her subjects with an artist's eye.

Eleanor discreetly drew the Leica onto the rucksack, her thumb perfectly positioned to press the button. Sometimes photographing perfectly mundane, everyday moments could bring unexpected joy.

"I am *so* sorry I'm late."

At the sound of a woman's deep and melodious voice, Eleanor turned. "Katherine," she said, smoothly tucking the camera back into her jacket. Their gazes met, and she smiled sheepishly. This was, unquestionably, not her mother's old school friend.

"I do apologise, Ms Heysen." The woman held out her hand. "I'm Alexa Bellamy. Katherine Kent was called away at the last moment. An emergency meeting." Her gaze swept back and forth across the foyer, glossy deep brown hair swinging over her shoulders, brushing the surface of her crisp, black-as-midnight shirt. "You're probably aware the library has been undergoing a major refurbishment."

A faint flush heated Eleanor's skin, working its way from her neck to her cheeks. Alexa Bellamy. There she stood, her tall and graceful figure quirkily fitted out in a collared, wide-cuffed shirt and flared houndstooth-weave trousers, as if she was ready for a photo shoot. *Alexa*. Sounded like elixir, a magical potion.

"Ms. *Heysen*?"

Eleanor inclined her head to meet intense hazel eyes. "Hello, Alexa." She reached out and grasped Alexa's hand in a brief, firm handshake before tucking her own hand into her jacket pocket. "Please, call me Eleanor."

"I am really sorry to have kept you waiting, Eleanor."

Alexa's lush brows curved above eyes that twinkled under the suspended gallery lighting. A starburst of hazel-green and grey-blue hues. Eleanor found it hard to look away.

"Katherine sends her apologies." Alexa's lips turned up in a slight smile.

Eleanor traced her finger over the outline of her phone that sat snugly in the back pocket of her jeans. She hadn't received a message from her mother's friend. "You're definitely not Katherine."

Alexa cleared her throat. "No." Those same perfect brows slanted in a frown, and she folded her hands primly in front of her. "I work in Pictorial

Collections. I'm a historian, photo archivist, and librarian. Katherine asked me to assist you in her absence."

Eleanor swallowed. "My turn to apologise. I was taken by surprise."

"Really? Oh, I'm sorry I'm not who you were expecting."

The tone of her voice and her languid yet striking posture exuded confidence. Let's face it, Alexa Bellamy did not fit the stereotype of the demure, introverted librarian often portrayed in pop culture. Not at all. In fact, she smashed it. "I'm not sorry," Eleanor muttered, giving Alexa a wide grin to prove just how not sorry she was.

She lowered her gaze to the polished floorboards, giving herself a moment before finally looking up to meet Alexa's alluring gaze again. "It's been a long time since I was here. I didn't expect to like the changes, but I do. It's awesome." She was relieved to see Alexa's gentle smile. "I can't believe there are students sitting in the entrance welcome zone loudly discussing assignments. And people playing computer games. Actually, there isn't a book in sight." Eleanor didn't usually ramble. She stopped herself, hoping Alexa hadn't noticed.

"That's because it's not a lending library. You'll have noticed all the guards. You can't borrow our books to take them out, but they can be read and researched in one of the study spaces and reading rooms."

"Oh, of course. I knew that." Eleanor rubbed the back of her neck. *Why am I acting like a fool?* Reaching around for her rucksack, she said, "I have Aunt Helen's slides with me. Do you want to see them now?"

"Well, that is why you're here, Eleanor," Alexa said with a twinkle in her eyes. "I have a viewing room booked for us in the South-East Wing. Follow me."

Alexa set off at a brisk walking pace, and Eleanor hurried after her. They weaved in between and around people, out of the gallery foyer, and through a vast room with curved architraves and a high glass-panelled roof. Eleanor was happy that the skirting mezzanine balcony was still lined with wooden shelving and rows upon rows of books, just as it had been when she was a student.

At the far end of the room, they stopped at a barely noticeable doorway tucked behind a neatly stacked bookshelf. Eleanor didn't know what caused the fluttering in her stomach, but when Alexa had to lean across her to swipe the magnetic card that hung from a lanyard around her neck across a

small metal pad, she held her breath. The metal door slid open with a soft *whoosh*, revealing an unexpectedly light-filled hallway flanked on both sides by wooden doors, all firmly closed. Talk about a rabbit warren. It would be easy to get lost here.

“It’s all very mysterious,” Eleanor whispered as Alexa stopped outside one of the doors and turned the handle. The lofty room with sand-coloured walls contained an oversized timber desk, two upholstered chairs, and a grey metal locker.

Alexa arched one perfect eyebrow. “Come inside.”

Eleanor passed through the narrow entrance close enough that her arm brushed lightly against Alexa’s. She inhaled deeply. Alexa’s scent was reminiscent of a Marrakesh garden. Warm and subtly sensuous. Eleanor felt the sudden urge to run away right now, except that she’d never find her way out of the library.

Almost as if Alexa could read Eleanor’s mind, she shut the door behind her with a soft clunk. She placed the folder that had been tucked under her arm onto the desk and set her leather satchel down beside it. “I think the mystery has only just begun.” She gestured to the rucksack in Eleanor’s hands. “Should we get right to it then?”

“Yes.” Eleanor nodded. The slides were a precious link to Helen and even though she was excited at the prospect of learning more about them, a small part of her was reluctant to hand them over to a stranger. “Yes,” she repeated, more firmly. “This is what my aunt wanted.”

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