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Whisper My Name

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PROLOGUE

1881

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Meriel decided to place her deckchair as far as she could from Mrs Fitzgerald's, but still within earshot. She wanted everyone to know that it wasn't *her* choice to be with that lady. Ignoring the little children playing deck-games and the clusters of adults sitting or strolling about, she chose a spot at the very edge of the awning. It was as close to the ship's rail as she could get, though there wasn't much chance of a breeze. She settled down, making sure her carpet bag was by her side.

From this position, if she looked up, she would see the smudge that was India thinning on the horizon. But she would not look up. Instead she kept her eyes on her book, her beloved battered copy of Shakespeare's plays, holding it like a shield to stop anyone coming to speak to her. She was only pretending to read. Really, she was trying to hear what they were saying, Mrs Fitzgerald and the other ladies.

'Burra memsahibs' Mamma would have called them, laughing with Papa, meaning that they thought themselves superior to everyone else.

Her chin trembled, despite herself. She clenched her jaw and listened hard.

'What a pity about her hair.'

Were they talking about *her*? The back of her neck prickled where her hair had been cut short.

'I always think red is such an unfortunate colour.'

They *were* talking about her.

'How old?' enquired one of the ladies.

'Twelve.'

'I thought she looked old to be going Home.'

'Going Home'. That's what everyone called it, even when they'd hardly spent any

time in England.

A languid voice said, ‘No wonder she’s so pale. Stayed out too long.’

The other ladies clucked in agreement.

‘What was her mother thinking of? Back of the verandah schooling, I suppose?’

‘And that dress . . .’ The speaker tutted.

Meriel gripped her book, murder in her heart. She was admittedly far too hot in her dress. Hastily cut down from an old mourning gown of Mamma’s, it made Meriel’s skin itch and was too short in the sleeves. Her mother who loved beautiful fabrics and was always eager to hear news of the latest fashion from England, would never have let her wear such an ill-designed, ugly thing. But it had been Mamma’s once and Meriel stroked it protectively as she listened.

Although Mrs Fitzgerald had dropped her voice, Meriel still heard snatches of what she was saying. ‘Artist . . . portraits . . .’ She was obviously talking about Papa, and now she was saying something about Indians, Meriel couldn’t hear what, but the ladies were making little sounds of disapproval and out of the corner of her eye she could see them fluttering their hands and leaning forward greedy to hear more.

She knew that look – she’d seen it on the faces of the ladies at The Club, where everyone went to hear the latest news and pass the time in pleasant conversation. But it wasn’t pleasant to be stared at, to see people whispering behind their hands as they had started to do some time ago when she and Mamma went in. She’d asked Mamma about it and Mamma had said, ‘Take no notice; it’s just some silly people with silly ideas in their heads,’ but Meriel was glad when, after braving it a few times, they gave up going to the club.

Now, straining her ears, she heard ‘. . . lost her mother . . . .rabies.’ At that there was a satisfyingly sharp intake of breath from all the listeners.

Sensing that they were looking at her with renewed interest, she sat up straighter. Though she was as miserable as it was possible to be, in some ways it was gratifying to be the focus of attention, to be connected with such a drama.

She hated Mrs Fitzgerald. She’d made out that she was doing Papa a great favour by

agreeing to look after Meriel on the voyage and see that she was safely delivered to her destination. Really, from the moment they came on board, she couldn't wait to pump her charge, asking nosey questions about Mamma and Papa. Of course Meriel wouldn't tell her anything so now, she guessed, Mrs Fitzgerald must be passing on gossip she'd picked up at The Club.

She pricked up her ears again when she heard Mrs Fitzgerald say, 'Sir Osbert Swann'. The other ladies made impressed noises, but to Meriel's frustration no one said anything useful and soon they moved on to other topics.

Meriel was desperate to find out more about Sir Osbert, who was Mamma's Papa and hence her grandfather. All she knew was that he was an important scientist, famous for research into areas that had scarcely been investigated before. He lived in London, alone since her grandmother died, which happened shortly before she, Meriel, was born.

Now she thought about it, it was strange that her parents never talked about him, at least not in her presence. Not even when every year, on her birthday, he sent a letter asking all sorts of questions about her. She could tell her parents thought the questions were odd, but they said it was good of him to take an interest in her. And he'd made it clear he was hoping to see her one day. Mamma would write a reply and afterwards she always seemed sad for a while. But nothing more was said about him until the terrible day Papa had announced that Meriel was going to live with her grandfather.

'Why do I have to leave? Why can't I stay here with you?' Over and over again she had asked her father the same question, hoping to wear him down.

And over and over again Papa had explained patiently that she couldn't stay in India without Mamma to look after her.

'Anila will take care of me.'

It seemed that suddenly she was too old for an ayah, a nursemaid, and besides, he said, Anila wouldn't be able to teach her as Mamma had done.

'I could go to one of the hill schools. And come back in the holidays.'

Papa shook his head and said it wouldn't do. She should be glad she was going to

have an English education.

Meriel tried everything she could think of – shouting and stamping her feet, sobbing and pleading with him, but it was no use.

In the end she turned on him and said, ‘Mamma would never have sent me away. You want to get rid of me, don’t you?’

Papa’s face crumpled then. Clasping her to his chest, he said, ‘Oh, my Meriel. I don’t want you to go.’

‘Then don’t make me.’

‘I must. It’s for your sake, my darling. I don’t want to lose you, too.’ His voice cracked, and she knew he was thinking of Mamma.

She nearly weakened then, but over his arm she caught sight of her bags packed and waiting to go. She would never forgive him. And she would not cry.

Nor did she. Not when they boarded the ship in Bombay and Papa, in tears himself, said goodbye in the neat white cabin. Not when, still hoping that he might change his mind, she hurried to the side of the boat and watched him walk away from her, down the gangplank. Despite the huge number of people on the quayside, she could see him distinctly. He never stopped waving as the ship drew away and the strip of water between them widened, until finally she couldn’t see him anymore. Even then she didn’t cry.

Thinking of this now, Meriel clutched at her locket, twisting it on its chain, and slumped down in her chair.

The horrible, tight feeling in her chest shifted a little, but she refused to give in to tears. Blinking fiercely, she turned to the back of her book and found the picture of Ellen Terry Mamma had cut out of a magazine. Dressed as Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, the actress seemed to look at her with a clear, kindly gaze, rather like Mamma’s own. To think that before she came to live in India, Mamma had actually seen Miss Terry, who she said was the best actress in the world, perform on the stage in a London theatre.

Meriel smoothed the picture with her fingers. Then she turned the pages and read:

Viola: What country, friends, is this?

Captain: This is Illyria, lady.

Viola: And what should I do in Illyria?

With a sigh, Meriel turned her head and stared out at the ocean. There might be dolphins or flying fish, people said. But just now all that lay in front of her was a great expanse of water heaving up and down, empty as far as the eye could see.

What should I do in England? she thought.

Mamma had gone and she would never see her again, never again feel the soft touch of her hand, or hear her voice, or talk with her about Ellen Terry or anything else. Meriel's father didn't want her and now she was on her way to a strange country, to live with a stranger, an old man she didn't know.

Everyone else might be going Home, but she no longer had a home to go to.