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Women of a Dangerous Age

Written by Fanny Blake

Published by Blue Door

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FANNY BLAKE

Women of a
Dangerous Age



blue door

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Blue Door
An imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

A Paperback Original 2012

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A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-00-735913-4

Set in Minion by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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To Robin, Matt, Nick and Spike

1

‘You’re going to India?’ Fiona had sounded as if Lou was about to enter a dark labyrinth: fraught with danger and quite unsuitable.

‘Yes, I am.’ As she spoke, Lou had realised that was exactly what she was going to do. Going away would absolve her from all the problems of Christmas at home. She would escape from Hooker, their three children and her match-making friends who seemed to pursue their goal with an untimely and unwelcome fervour. Instead, she would separate the last thirty years of her life from the next thirty by getting out of the country – on her own.

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Lou was enjoying for as long as possible the anticipation of the moment when she’d enter the Taj Mahal. Joining the scrum of tourists, she put the cloth overshoes provided for visitors over her functional but deeply unflattering walking sandals and climbed the steps towards the main entrance. Despite people crowding by her as she photographed the intricate

inlaid marble-work, the interior was every bit as impressive as she had hoped. She skirted the tourists throwing coins down the steps to the tombs and followed the perimeter of the wall, admiring the detailed workmanship up close, looking up towards the solar motif in the dome. The noise made by schoolchildren experimenting with the echo was deafening. Twenty minutes later she emerged, squinting against the brightness and wishing for the umpteenth time that she hadn't left her wide-brimmed sun hat and sunglasses in their last hotel, in Jaipur.

The clear blue sky was only interrupted by the winged silhouettes of kites soaring high above the white dome. Lou walked behind the mausoleum to stare across the dried-up Yamuna river bed, imagining Shah Jahan, imprisoned by his own son in the Agra Fort not far along the bank with only a view of the Taj to console him. When Mumtaz, his favourite wife, died giving birth to their fourteenth child, he had embarked on the task of creating this exquisite memorial to her. Twenty-two years and twenty thousand workmen and specialists later . . . Lou tried to imagine what it must be like to feel that strongly about someone after so many years of marriage. Some of the shine must surely have worn off with all those children. Three had proved quite enough for her and Hooker.

She found a quiet spot in the ornamental garden where she could sit on the grass. After a moment, she delved into her string bag for a bottle of water and the guidebook that smelled of the suntan lotion that had leaked onto it the day before. She peeled apart the couple of pages devoted to the Taj, then shut them. She could read later. The thing

was to experience the place to its full in the short time she had.

Feeling a little less frazzled now she was in the shade of a tree, she watched the chipmunks race through the bushes. The sound of tourist chatter was broken by screeches from electric green parrots that swooped over her head. A group of Indian students asked in broken English if they could have their photo taken with her. She smiled into their camera, conscious of how different she must look to them, her lime green linen outfit and red scarf standing out against their drab trousers and white shirts, her fair skin and wild reddish hair providing such a contrast to their dark complexions.

Once they'd finished asking her about London, she went to hunt for her travelling companions. The sun beat down on the queue of tourists jostling to be snapped on 'Diana's bench', with the Taj framed behind them. Demure Indian women in coloured saris rubbed shoulders with scruffy backpackers, neatly turned out schoolchildren and well-heeled Europeans and Americans on luxury tours. Lou was in two minds whether or not to join them. In exchange for a short wait, she'd have an ironically apt memento of her visit. Like Diana, alone in life. She was amused by the comparison, but only for a second. Come on, woman. Get over yourself. After all, whose choice is it that you're on your own? Certainly not Hooker's.

'I'll take yours,' said a voice behind her, 'if you'll take mine.'

Lou turned to find one of the other two single women on the trip standing behind her. She knew her name was Ali but that was about it. During the previous ten days, as they'd journeyed from Udaipur to Jodhpur and Jaipur,

Ali had kept herself at a discreet distance from her fellow travellers. Not that she had been unpleasant, joining in with whatever was going on, but, when the opportunity arose, she'd bury herself in a book or separate herself from the group, going off to explore on her own. Wandering around a gallery of exquisite Indian miniatures, exploring the Amber or Merenghar Forts, the piled-high fabric emporiums or cluttered jewellery shops, Ali was always the last to tear herself away, as if not wanting to miss the slightest detail, sometimes sketching in her notebook or taking a final photograph. After dinner, she almost immediately retired to bed. Lou, on the other hand, had thrown herself into the group, keen to find out more about the people she was travelling with, wanting to share and compare everything new she was experiencing. She had nicknamed Ali 'the cat who walked alone', yet couldn't help but be intrigued by her, the one person on the trip she'd failed to get to know. Ali was taller than Lou, younger, trimmer (not hard) and more elegant than her too. Not of course that any of these things could be held against her. Her oval face was framed by bobbed dark hair whose neat shiny finish gave away a small fortune spent on hairdressers and products. At that moment, she was looking at Lou, waiting for her answer.

Lou made up her mind. 'Yes. Why not?'

Together, they walked towards the Lotus Pool.

'Isn't this place incredible?' asked Ali. 'Beats every photo I've ever seen of it.'

They both gazed at the Taj.

'Those screens and the inlay-work in there are amazing, quite beautiful.'

‘Bloody noisy though,’ said Lou, and laughed.

So, as they began to talk about their reactions to the Taj, to the contrasting chaos of Agra and about the highlights of their trip, their friendship took its first steps.

By the time it was their turn to sit on the marble bench, Lou could feel the sweat running down her spine. Anxious about dropping Ali’s professional-looking camera, she wiped her hands on her linen trousers. When she’d packed them in London, she’d imagined herself looking cool, stylish even, amid the heat and dust of India. Instead, they looked as if they’d been scrunched into a ball and put on without sight of an iron. She was aware of the sweat marks spreading under the arms of her not-quite-loose-enough, short-sleeved top as she waited for Ali to pose.

Wiping her brow, Ali took up Princess Diana’s exact position: hands on her knees, clasped around her sunglasses, legs at a slight angle, head lowered to one side. She looked up coyly through her fringe. Afterwards, she laughed. ‘That’ll confuse my boyfriend. He’s bound to wonder if there’s a hidden message. Something about my wanting to be alone. As if.’

Lou returned Ali’s camera, then fumbled in her bag for her modest compact bought especially for the holiday. As she passed it over, it slipped from her grip. Her attempt to catch it was about as successful as any she’d made on the rounders pitch at school. The camera bounced out of her hands and clattered to the ground. She could feel the crowd behind them growing mutinous at the delay so she snatched it up, saying tightly, ‘I’m sure it’ll be fine.’ But when she pressed the On button, nothing happened.

‘Let’s use mine,’ offered Ali. ‘I can at least email you the picture.’

Lou took her place, annoyed by her clumsiness, and pushed her hair back, hoping her touch would tame the wayward frizz (much worse in the heat) into something as effortlessly chic as Ali’s bob, and mustered a smile. As soon as the camera clicked, an American couple were already edging her off the seat, wanting their turn.

‘What do you think?’ Ali asked, tilting the camera so Lou could see.

In the sun, Lou’s hair had transformed into a hectic halo that framed her face. Off the forehead was never a good look on her, but especially not when she was squinting and her forehead and nose were shiny with sweat. Her irritation with herself showed in her face. The way she had half turned from the camera made her look as if she had put on about a stone in weight. Not of course that she cared. Not really. But it was a look she’d rather wasn’t captured for posterity. In the background, the Taj gleamed in the sunlight. She grimaced. ‘Not exactly Princess Di, is it?’

Ali studied the image again. ‘Mmm. But you’re not exactly working with Mario Testino either.’

Laughing and, in Lou’s case, resigned, both women stepped away from the bench and joined the crowds thronging the gardens.

‘If you don’t mind, I really want to have a last walk round alone,’ said Ali, slinging her camera over her shoulder. ‘Just to take it all in. I’ll see you back at the gate.’

Lou nodded, happy at the chance of having a final wander herself. As the trip drew to an end, she was conscious of

trying to drain every last sensation from the few days she had left. She wanted to be able to relive the holiday in detail during the winter months that lay ahead back home.

She thought back to that conversation with Fiona three months earlier, when she'd had no plans to go away over the Christmas break. Then, just as she thought she would explode if anyone else asked her how she was, or what she would be doing at Christmas now that she was single again, inspiration had come from nowhere. In reply to her close friend's invitation to her and her husband Charlie's remote Devon farmhouse bought only for its vast unrealised potential that, two years later, had still to be realised, Lou blurted, 'Actually, I've made plans. I'm going to India.'

The words were out before she'd even thought them. She still wasn't sure which of them had been more surprised by her answer.

To everyone's surprise, her own included, she had booked herself the last place on a 'Highlights of Rajasthan' tour. She had been told to expect the poverty and squalor, the streets teeming with people, the colours, the smells but nothing had prepared her for what she had experienced. Never had she been exposed to so many dizzying extremes at once. As exciting, after years of holidaying as a family or alone with Hooker, was the discovery that she enjoyed meeting new people, having responsibility for no one but herself. The holiday had done just what she'd hoped and drawn a thick line between her past and her future. When she returned home, everything would have changed. She would no longer be living with Hooker in their family home. She would be an independent woman with a life, a

new business and a home of her own. She was resolved not to mess up this second chance.

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As Ali walked away from Lou, she thought about their conversation. ‘My boyfriend’. That’s what she had called Ian. A word she had never used to describe him before, but it had emerged all by itself when they were waiting their turn for the photograph. She liked the description, the unexpected way the two words made her feel: secure, loved, part of a unit even though she and Ian had seen so little of one another since the evening he made his surprise announcement. He wanted ‘to put the relationship on a more permanent footing’, to have her not as a mistress but as a partner. That’s what he had said. There was a lot to work out, not least of all his breaking the news to his wife, which he wouldn’t do until after Christmas. ‘It wouldn’t be fair otherwise.’ Even though his marriage had been over in all but name for years, he still had the decency to treat his wife with consideration and respect. That was just another aspect to his character that she loved and admired. Until he told his wife, Ali had to hug her secret to herself, enjoy its promise, and wait.

For the last couple of months before she came to India, work had taken them both in different directions. The lead-up to Christmas was always the busiest time of her year when people wanted to splurge their money on bespoke jewellery, so she had been busy designing and making to commission, as well as selling from her latest collection. At

the same time, Ian had been called abroad to discuss some potential corporate merger. She hadn't taken in the details. They had at last managed to find time for each other the evening before she left. To her disappointment, he had to go home before midnight. He didn't go into details and she hadn't pressed him. She didn't want to know how he was spending Christmas with his wife while she was away. Next year, it would just be the two of them. Knowing that had been enough.

As Ali browsed through the rooms of the tiny museum, she thought how much Ian would have enjoyed being here with her. Well, as this was the last holiday she'd be taking on her own, she had decided to make the most of it. When she'd joined the group in Delhi, she'd been disappointed to find her travelling companions were a more sober bunch than she'd holidayed with in the past. Three smug couples, a middle-aged mother and her son, a widowed doctor and a man travelling alone since his wife had a fear of flying, and another slightly older woman she now knew to be Lou, whose idiosyncratic dress sense and wild hair made her look as if she at least might be fun. Ali had watched Lou with the others. At first Lou had been tentative, as if exploring her ability to make new friends but, as the days passed, she had become more confident. Soon her laugh was one of the things that marked her out, a loud earthy giggle, often at the centre of whatever was going on. Unlike her, Ali preferred to hold herself back so no one could make any demands on her, nor she on them.

She glanced over the architectural drawings, then stepped outside for a final look at the Taj, magnificent symbol for

eternal love. With Ian in the forefront of her thoughts again, she crossed the garden to join the others near the huge arched main gateway, where she found Lou engaged in a vigorous discussion with Bharat, their guide.

‘But I’d rather walk to the car park,’ Lou was saying, quite unaffected by the way those in the group already there were glaring at her, no doubt impatient to reach their hotel, a good wash and a gin and tonic.

‘No, no, madam,’ insisted Bharat. ‘You must take bus.’

‘But Bharat, it can’t be more than half a kilometre at the most. I won’t hold you up if I start now and I’ll meet you there.’ She was being quite calm, controlled but determined.

Ali walked over to the two of them. ‘I’d like to walk too, Bharat. Nothing’ll happen to us, if that’s what you’re worried about. There are too many people around.’

Surprised by her intervention, Lou smiled, clearly glad of the support. She flicked her scarf over her right shoulder.

Apart from the anxiety about deviating from the schedule by letting two of his charges out of his sight, Bharat seemed bemused that any right-minded visitor would want to walk when there was perfectly good transport. But he folded in the face of their joint determination. ‘OK, madam. You go together. We’ll meet you in the car park.’

Once beyond the gateway, past the entry queues – one for nationals, one for foreigners – waiting to get through security, they found themselves outside the sandstone walls. Immediately, they were besieged by postcard and souvenir sellers, mostly young children, who swarmed around them, thrusting their wares under their noses, shouting prices and persuasion alongside would-be guides.

‘Where you from, madam? England? Very nice place. London, Manchester, Birmingham, Leicester . . . You want tour guide for Red Fort? Very important see everything.’

Dejected-looking horses and camels decorated with tinsel, their skin stretched tight over protruding bones, were hitched to carriages at the side of the road. Tuk-tuk and rickshaw drivers were touting for business too. ‘You want rickshaw. Good price. Baby Taj then Agra Fort. Show you my magical India. Two hundred rupees.’

The two women had been in India long enough to know that the only way through was to say little, and keep on walking. Eventually, to their relief, everyone’s attention switched to a large group of Americans emerging from the complex behind them and they were left alone.

‘Thank God for that,’ said Lou. ‘I don’t want to get Bharat into trouble but we spend so much time cooped up in the minibus. I had to experience some of this for myself.’ As they waited in a herd of goats for the stragglers to climb onto the scrubby verge, a pair of ragged dark-eyed children approached them, hands out, begging, ‘Dollar, dollar.’ A man selling sugar cane juice turned his blue mangle and shouted something from the other side of the road. Lou shook her head and carried on walking, Ali running to catch up, the ragamuffins running behind her. The smells of horseshit, bad drains, woodsmoke and cooking drifted through the dusty air. They stood to one side as an electric bus whirred past. Ali took a couple of snaps of a moth-eaten camel pulling a cart, then another of the children who giggled when she showed them the image on her camera.

‘I just wanted to escape the group for a bit longer. Not that there’s anything wrong with them,’ she hurried to add. For some reason, she didn’t want Lou to think badly of her.

‘They’re not that bad.’ Lou smiled. ‘You just haven’t got to know them.’

‘I know, I haven’t made much effort.’ She sounded suddenly anxious.

‘Don’t worry,’ Lou reassured her. ‘You’re down as a free spirit. I think everyone rather envies your independence.’

‘Well, it’s my last holiday alone, so I’ve been making the most of it.’

‘Seems to me that travelling alone but in the company of strangers is about a million times less fraught and tantrum-filled than travelling with family – especially my husband.’ Lou laughed at the thought. ‘Show him an airport and I’ll show you a man on the point of a coronary. And that’s before we’ve even left the country.’

‘You’re married?’ Ali noticed Lou wore no rings.

‘Not any more.’ Her face assumed a guarded expression. ‘I guess you’re not either?’

‘No, but I’m moving in with my boyfriend when I get back.’ Her cheeks were burning. Letting even a bit of her secret go made it feel less special, even though Lou didn’t know her or Ian. She immediately wished she hadn’t said anything. ‘I’m not meant to talk about it really. At least, not until he’s told his wife.’

‘Oh! His wife,’ Lou echoed.

Ali thought she heard disapproval, but when she looked, Lou simply smiled and gave the slightest shake of her head. They detoured round a white cow standing among a pile

of rubbish and plastic bags. ‘Odd the way sacred animals exist on such an unsacred diet.’ And the subject was closed.

For the rest of the short way, they walked in a companionable silence, each lost in her own thoughts. Entering the busy car park filled with sudden exhaust and engine noise, they found their minibus and chose two seats side by side.

*

As they drove to the safari lodge on the Chambal river where they were spending their last two nights, Lou found herself enjoying Ali’s company more and more. There was something about her that reminded Lou of her younger sister, Jenny, killed only eighteen months earlier in a motorway pile-up. Although Jenny had been a loner all her life, the two sisters had shared a particular bond. Since they were teenagers, they had confided only in one another, knowing that all their secrets were safe. Since Jenny’s death no one had come near to filling her place in Lou’s life, not even Fiona, her closest friend. Talking to Ali, Lou found a similar intensity to Jenny’s. She heard something like Jenny’s dry sense of humour, and sensed the same reserve. Lou had been given a glimpse into Ali’s life but she didn’t expect her to tell any more. Given her own unwillingness to bare her soul at this point in her life, Lou sympathised with the younger woman’s reticence and didn’t press her. She was relieved not to have to account for herself and explain the actions she’d taken only months before. There’d be plenty of time to examine the repercussions of those when she got home.

For those last two nights, Ali unexpectedly opened up. She followed Lou's lead and chatted with the others after supper around the dying embers of the bonfire, easily finding her place within the group. But this happened so late in the trip that there was no pressure for her to give anything of herself away. By the time they returned to Delhi for the flight home, Lou had arranged to meet Ali again on their home turf. She was intrigued by 'the cat who walked alone'.