

# Chapter One

**M**ost families, like most nations, have their Foundation Myths. Their Dreamtimes. Stories from a Golden Age when the sun always shone and heroes walked the land. My own family has its Foundation Myth. A lovely myth set long ago in a distant land, about a beautiful girl who fell in love with a handsome English adventurer and lived with him happily ever after in a sprawling mansion by the sea.

And like all good Foundation Myths, my family's story is based on fact. I know, because I was that young girl, and I still have photographs of that time. I have them with me now, curled and faded brown after sixty years, but full of light, and grace, and happiness. There is a photo of me with my chestnut mare, Dame Fashion, and one of my husband on his stallion Thor. And one of Brown Rascal, the children's pony, attended by its two syces and with a little blond boy on its back – dear Tony, who is smiling confidently for his Daddy though I remember how frightened he was.

I also have photos of Whitelawns, our lovely home set on terraced lawns above the sparkling sea, with its turrets on either side and its deep, shady verandahs. We called it Whitelawns because we saw it first at night, with its broad lawns painted white by the moon.

But like all Foundation Myths, ours was always only partly true. There were dark, dangerous currents beneath the happiness, debts of honour, and something else that even I could never have guessed at. And at the centre of that myth, at the centre of that enigma, was my husband.

I dreamt about Denis years before I met him. I don't mean that metaphorically, in the sense that he was the man of my dreams, but quite literally. He appeared in my dream exactly as he was to appear when I met him in real life, at the Selangor Club in 1936: a rather tall man with level blue-grey

eyes, a firm jaw, and a broad mouth in which there always seemed to lurk the hint of a quiet smile.

I was fifteen at the time of my dream, a gangling schoolgirl with a crush on the Scarlet Pimpernel and a head full of silly romantic notions. If I had invented a man of my dreams he would have been witty and foppish, like Sir Percy Blakeney, or arrogant and coldly enigmatic, like Mr Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*. No, I am quite certain that it was the real Denis who visited me in my dream that night in 1934, to prepare me for the future. He said things that have resonated down the years, and that make sense to me even today as I potter about my cosy retirement flat at Bateman's Bay, bored out of my mind and longing for the old days.

I had gone to sleep quite frightened, as I often did in my large, dark bedroom upstairs in the big house in Penang where I was boarding while my mother travelled overseas. The bright moonlight provided no comfort, lighting up as it did the huge, carved pieces of mahogany furniture with which the room was stuffed, and the dark oil paintings that crowded the walls. I have hated heavy, dark furniture ever since, which is why we were to have nothing dark or heavy in Whitelawns. Even the dining table at Whitelawns was enamelled pale green, and when Amah and I laid it for a dinner party, the silver cutlery, the delicate white side-plates, and the candles in their tiny crystal bowls seemed to float on its surface as if on the surface of a pond.

My sleep had been disturbed by the irrational fears that the room engendered, by real fears of Captain Ulrich and his wife, the owners of the house, and by the insistent calls of a fever bird from somewhere outside in the tangled garden. I had already woken once, to lie stiff and frightened with eyes wide open as I tried to work out what had roused me, only to drift back into that confused, fitful realm of sleep to which I had become accustomed.

And then I had my dream. It was what they call today a 'lucid' dream, because I knew at the time that I was dreaming. In my dream, Denis came into my room, sat on the chair by my bed, and lit the pressure lamp on my bedside table. I distinctly remember the scratch of the match, the hiss as the lacy mantle became incandescent, and the squeak of the chair as he sat back comfortably, to contemplate me with a quiet smile.

I made an attempt to get out of bed, but he held up a hand. 'Don't get up, Nona,' he said softly. 'I'm not here for a social visit, but we do need to talk. One day you will be coming away with me, but in the meantime you must stop being afraid. You are an awful lot better than this crowd you're with now,

and you mustn't let them get you down.'

'How will it be when I come away with you?' I asked. It seemed the most natural thing in the world to accept his quiet words as the literal truth, and I wanted to know what it would be like when we were together.

Denis did not answer immediately, then gave a slight shrug. 'Pretty good on the whole. The odd bump or two on the way, but we will always be together.'

I grinned and sat up, hugging myself with joy. The world lifted from my skinny shoulders and my heart seemed to be bursting with happiness. A thought suddenly struck me. 'You won't die?' I asked anxiously. I don't know why the thought popped into my head. Probably because a school friend had recently died. She had been on a trip to Frasers Hill and the family car had rolled, killing them all.

Again Denis did not answer immediately. 'I can't promise I won't die,' he said, only half-serious. 'That's something nobody on earth can promise. But you mustn't worry about things like that because in the end it's only a game we're playing. When the game's over, we'll pour ourselves a couple of decent gin and tonics and have a good laugh about it.'

I lay back and closed my eyes. Of course it was a game, and you only lost if you took it too seriously. When I opened my eyes again Denis had got up and was turning down the lamp.

'Goodnight, my dear,' he said gently. 'Sleep well. And remember – don't let anyone ever frighten you again. You're much too good for that.'

I turned over in the darkness, conscious of a lovely new presence in my life, and fell into a dreamless sleep.

At breakfast the next morning Captain Ulrich lurched against me as I was serving myself from the sideboard, running his hand quickly down my thigh and across my backside. In the past I had squirmed with embarrassment when he did that, pretending not to mind his fumbling, groping hands and the way he breathed into my face, his mouth open in a lascivious smile. But today I was a different person. I was loved and cherished by a man a hundred times finer than Ulrich and his awful wife, finer than anyone I knew. I stepped back, gripped him by the shoulders, and spoke fiercely into his face. 'Don't do that again, Captain. I don't like it and it's not right.'

For a second Captain Ulrich looked startled, then he spat – quite literally spat – into my eyes. 'Don't talk to me like that, my fancy little lady . . .' he began, but before he could finish I kicked him hard – in the shin.

The left shin, which I knew still had an open wound from the Great War. An awful, weeping sore that refused to heal and which he exposed sometimes to the sunlight, sitting in his baggy shorts on the upstairs verandah and laughing at the repugnance I could not hide.

The pain made him double over and when he straightened, his face glittering with malice, he struck me with a closed fist on the side of my face. The world seemed to contract as I nearly fainted from the force of the blow, but I kept to my feet and stared back into his eyes.

The blow changed everything, and we both knew that immediately. I would develop a huge black eye, and if I told the Sisters at my school how I had come by it they would believe me. My mother had enrolled me at the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus for a very good reason. Though she was Russian Orthodox she knew the value of being within the Catholic community in Penang in the 1930s. 'The Roman Mafia,' she called them, but they looked after their own, and people like Captain Ulrich, dependent on their beneficence, feared them.

So in an instant, in an exchange of looks, it was agreed. I would say nothing and Captain Ulrich would leave me strictly alone. He sat down, white-faced, blood beginning to ooze through the thick white sock on his leg, and ate his breakfast in silence. When Irma Ulrich came in she must have realised that something had changed profoundly. Instead of a sneering predator and a cowering victim she found two people being polite to each other. Two grown-ups instead of an adult and a child. I hoped she could not see the way my hands were trembling.

Irma was a different proposition to her husband. She was not a physical bully but she was just as much a predator. Her tactics were a cloying familiarity and a sly, manipulative manner that made me writhe with a mixture of embarrassment and fear. I did not quite understand why I was frightened of her but I did know that she had some plan for me that could only be to her advantage and to my detriment. Exactly what her plan was I was still to fathom, which made me all the more nervous. In my wilder moments I thought she was planning to sell me to white slavers. It may sound absurd in these enlightened days but it was not a completely fanciful notion for the time. Vulnerable white women were still being sold into slavery in the Far East in the 1930s. The papers often reported the disappearance of young European woman, particularly in China, with the almost inevitable speculation that white slavers had been involved. There was even a story current at the time

that one of the now-respectable émigré families in Penang had sold a daughter to the Chinese warlords during their escape from Russia, in exchange for cash and a safe passage to British Malaya.

My fear that Irma had white slavery on her mind may have been unjustified, but I knew she was planning *something*. Biding her time, just waiting for my mother to fall into one of her periods of financial distress so that she could pounce and take me as a form of security for unpaid board. And her manner towards me added to my apprehension. She was friendly in a poisonous, conniving way – winning my reluctant confidence only to crush it with a sudden, spiteful comment. Usually these comments were about my mother. ‘No letter from Mother again this morning, Nona? So long now! You must be very worried indeed.’ A false, bright smile as she reached out to tweak my cheek. ‘But I’m sure she hasn’t done anything. . . . stupid. I’m sure we will see her come back for you one day. But the fact that your board is *weeks* overdue must be a worry. . . .’ And the tweak would become a painful pinch.

But this morning, surprise at the changed atmosphere seemed to rob her of her normal poise and malice. Instead of sitting close to me and spinning her web she sat on the other side of the table and watched me speculatively. Like a snake watching a mouse, readjusting its plans to a fresh set of circumstances.

‘Don’t forget the Van der Staaten boys are coming over for dinner,’ she said at last, breaking a silence that had begun to strain my nerves. But even this banal comment was delivered with a raising of the eyebrows, a curiously conspiratorial inflection in her high-pitched voice.

‘I won’t, Irma. I’m looking forward to it.’ But in truth I had completely forgotten the arrangement, and to be reminded of it on this of all special days depressed me. It was not that there was anything wrong with John and Ronnie Van der Staaten. They were pleasant, gangling young men, rather good looking as Dutch Eurasians often are, but the dinner raised the contentious issue of whether I should be mixing with people my mother would have regarded as socially beneath her. The Russian émigré community in Malaya had lost everything in the Revolution except their arrogance, which they clung to with shrill tenacity.

And their father would be there, Big Jack Van der Staaten, an awful man even if he were one of the most successful traders in the Straits Settlements.

I sighed before I could stop myself and looked up from my chilled papaya to see Irma eyeing me coldly across the table. ‘I suppose your mother would disapprove,’ she said tartly. ‘Really, Nona, you Russian émigrés are all

alike. Airs and graces and no money to pay your bills. Julia should realise that the Van der Staatens are worth a hundred White Russians, for all their fancy titles. She should be grateful you've got a chance to meet the Van der Staaten boys on even terms.'

I felt a chill at her words. Surely I was far too young for Irma to be matchmaking! But even as I tried to comfort myself with the thought, it struck me that it was exactly Big Jack's style to pay Irma to further friendship between John and Ronnie and me. I may have been Russian, and an alien, and at times I thought probably illegitimate, but I was white and therefore quite a catch for a Eurasian family. Edwina Mountbatten may boast of her descent from an Algonquian Indian princess, and the ennobled children of Alexander Pushkin may trumpet their Ethiopian forebears, but in Colonial Malaya the emphasis was all on trying to be as white as possible. The whole business suddenly made me feel sick and I pushed aside my plate and got up. 'I think I'll go for a walk before it gets too hot,' I said.

Both Ulrichs looked at me coldly. 'Before you go, do put a compress on that eye,' Irma said sharply. 'Tell the amah to wrap some ice in a piece of towel, and press it to your eye. We don't want you looking as if you've been in a catfight, do we?'

I straightened my back. 'It's quite all right,' I said. I shot a glance at Captain Ulrich. 'I just banged it on the edge of my door in the dark this morning. It will soon be better.'

It was still cool in the leafy front garden, made cooler by the *tukan-ayer* who was splashing water into the deep drains around the house to clear them of leaves and dust. I strolled up the short drive to Argyll Street, then turned right and started walking aimlessly towards the town. It was a busy Saturday morning, with rickshaws and cars passing in a steady stream.

The house next to the Ulrichs' was a 'chummy', bachelor quarters for a group of young Englishmen employed by one of the rubber companies. A Singer Tourer and a battered Baby Austin with its hood down stood in the driveway, surrounded by a group of young men clearly preparing for a picnic at the beach. They had the short haircuts favoured by the rigger crowd, and the laughter that hung in the air was frank and unambiguous. It made me feel better immediately and I stopped within earshot, screened by the heavy ferns at the front gate. I had come to loathe the sly maliciousness at home, and I wanted to bask, even for a moment, in the cheerful good humour of the moment.

‘Get your carcass out here, Bob!’ someone shouted towards the house. ‘If we don’t get a wriggle on the girls will give us up for dead and cut over to the Swimming Club! And tell Cook to hurry up with the hamper!’

I could see it in my mind’s eye. Young men and pretty young girls at one of Penang’s beautiful North Coast beaches. A hamper full of good food – curry puffs, triangular sandwiches filled with anchovy paste, scones wrapped in linen, and screw-top pots of jam and cream. Cold Fraser & Neave lemonade and ice-cream soda, perhaps even some of the new American Coca-Cola. I could picture myself there in the sunshine, splashing at the edge of the sea, screaming in mock panic as somebody chased me into deeper water. Or perhaps just lying under the coconut palms, staring up into the blue vault of the sky, talking and laughing. Free of worry, free of fear . . .

‘Boo!’ My daydream burst as a grinning face confronted me through the ferns. One of the young men had spotted me behind the fronds and crept up on me.

‘I’m sorry,’ I mumbled, turning pink with embarrassment. What an ass I must seem! I backed away hurriedly, stepping into the busy street behind me.

‘No need to apologise!’ the young man grinned. ‘Anyone who looks as pretty as you do is entitled to lurk outside our front gate any time they like. Whoa there!’ and an arm pulled me out of the way of a rickshaw and back onto the safety of the pavement.

I turned even pinker but did not turn and run as I would have yesterday. Something had indeed happened to me since my dream. Denis had made me see myself quite differently: not as a gangling, frightened girl but as a poised young woman. I didn’t call him Denis then, of course, as I didn’t know his name. In those days when I wanted to think of the man in my dream I simply conjured up his face, the timbre of his voice, the level way he looked at me. He did not need to have a name.

‘Thank you,’ I said, standing as tall as I could manage and with as much dignity as I could muster. ‘But I wasn’t lurking. I’d just stopped to rest a moment in the shade.’

The young man bobbed his head in a half bow, acknowledging that he no longer had me at a disadvantage, then hesitated and cleared his throat. ‘Look, I do sort of know you. You live next door, don’t you? Would you think it an awful cheek if I asked you to come with us on our picnic?’

I would have given my right hand to accept the invitation but of course I couldn’t. Things just didn’t happen that way in Penang in the 1930s. We hadn’t

been introduced and I was from the wrong social level anyway. So I shook my head with a smile. 'I'd love to accept, but you know how it is. Things have been arranged for today.'

'Of course. I asked just in case. But perhaps some other time?' He had carrot-coloured hair and freckles, and his eyes pleaded with mine.

'Of course. Some other time.'

I turned on my heel and walked on down Argyll Street, my head held high and my feet hardly touching the ground. I felt like a film star, a princess. Denis had worked some magic for me that had already transformed my life, and I began to love him for it.

I wanted a talisman to remind me of Denis's visit, something small and symbolic that I could keep with me always. The obvious place to look would be the Chinese curio shops, where all sorts of things could be found and where a Straits dollar went a long way. At first, nothing I saw seemed appropriate. The man who had visited me had been dressed in quiet good taste, and I felt that something modest and understated would be appropriate. But Chinese taste ran to the flamboyant: bright red embroidered cushions, vividly coloured armlets, rings and pendants, little dolls in sequined cheongsams. I sighed in exasperation.

And then I found it, on a back shelf of Teng's Chinese Magic Curio Shop in Rope Walk. A tiny tiger carved in ivory and mounted on a black onyx base. It was small enough to keep in my purse and its symbolism was perfect: a tiger for courage, to make me remember never to be afraid.

I have kept it with me for over sixty years, and it rests now on my dressing table, guarding a little array of photographs of those I love in their tiny silver frames.

Lunch was a pleasant meal as both the Ulrichs were out for the day, and I got on well with Ahmet, who cooked *nasi goreng* for me because he knew I liked it. After lunch I went up to my room and unwrapped my talisman, placing it carefully on the night table where Denis had lit the pressure lamp.

I tried the chair but my skinny frame could not make it squeak the way Denis had. Sitting there, looking at my talisman, I half-closed my eyes and let the waves of relief and happiness wash over me. I was going to escape from the malicious, shallow and pretentious world around me, to the clean, real world that I had sometimes glimpsed. When I'd been with Robbie, my stepfather. Listening that morning to the young men at the chummery, planning a day of innocent good fun. In the books I read.



I let myself think about Robbie, something I rarely allowed myself to do because it caused me so much pain. Ernest Roberts had married my mother just before Christmas in 1927, at the Anglican Cathedral in Kuala Lumpur. I had been seven or eight at the time and the event had changed my life. I remembered the three years Robbie had been my stepfather as magic years. He had treated me not as an encumbrance but as a treasured child, and shown me a very different world to the one I had lived in, and to which I had returned when he died of malaria at his gold mine deep in the jungles of Pahang.

I felt the familiar prick of tears, and glanced at my talisman. Denis would have liked Robbie. They were both English gentlemen, and there had even been something in Denis's face and demeanour that, now that I thought about it, reminded me of my stepfather.

It began to rain, the heavy tropical downpour that came so often in mid-afternoon in Penang. I thought of the picnic party, perhaps laughing under one of the atap shelters a thoughtful Administration had erected near most popular swimming beaches, or staying out in the rain because it was a day at the beach and you expected to get wet anyway. I moved to the window and breathed in the cool fragrance of tropical rain on a lush garden. What a funny afternoon it was proving! I was happy despite the tears beneath my lids: a soft sadness, made bearable by the fact that I was no longer alone.

I decided to finish a blue dress I was making for the dinner party, and carefully laid out the remaining pieces, each pinned to its paper pattern, on the polished timber floor. Within minutes I was absorbed in my task, pedalling away on the Singer sewing machine my mother had left with me, measuring and adjusting as I went, my mouth full of pins and my mind focused.

I have always loved sewing, particularly making dresses to my own designs. My mother encouraged my interest, which is why she had left the sewing machine with me. A kindness, but, like all things Mother did, a calculated kindness – she had also left a long list of things to sew for her and for Madam Tanya, her companion, a young woman only a few years older than I was.

It was getting dark before I finished the dress and tried it on. Like all my things it was simply cut, with a demure, square neckline and long pleats falling to the floor. I twirled in front of my mirror, seeing the pleats fall open gracefully as I moved. It looked lovely.

'Are you going to grace us with your company, Nona? Our guests are nearly here.' Irma had stolen silently to my door, as she always did. But her

tart comment had no effect on my mood. I ignored her, curtsied towards the chair where Denis had sat, then swept past her into the upstairs gallery. Tonight, I promised myself, I would dedicate to the man who cherished me, and I would be beautiful and charming just for him.

The dinner party was not held in the breakfast room where we normally ate but in the gloomy dining room, which always looked to me like a set for a Dracula movie. A huge mahogany sideboard occupied a full wall of the overcrowded room, and the dining table itself was a monstrous affair with elephantine legs and an awful mother-of-pearl design set into its centre. Copies of Flemish paintings in heavy gold-leaf frames covered most of the wall surfaces, and dark red velvet curtains covered the rest. To add to the general air of gloom the electric lights had not been turned on, the only illumination coming from three giant brass candelabras that sprouted from the table like grotesque growths. The chairs were terribly uncomfortable, with thin red cushions on solid mahogany bases and upright backs so ornately carved they were painful to rest against.

‘So very English!’ gushed Molly Tan as we settled ourselves around the table. Molly was Jack Van der Staaten’s secretary and had become his social companion since his wife’s death a few years before. She was an intelligent, no-nonsense person so I glanced at her sharply to see if she was being ironic, but her thin features were set in a bland smile.

‘Thank you so much,’ Irma responded. ‘We do try to keep up the standards of Home.’ It struck me as an absurd statement. There was not a single drop of English blood in the room and yet so strong was the British Colonial ethic that everyone pretended that they were English outcasts stranded in a foreign land. The Ulrichs were Belgian, the Van der Staatens were a Dutch-Eurasian family from Junk Ceylon (now Phuket), Molly Tan was from a Straits Chinese family, and of course I was Russian. Of all of us only Molly had any real connection with England. As in many well-to-do Straits Chinese families, the Tans had a tradition of sending the brighter boys to Oxford or Cambridge, and Molly herself had spent a year at an English boarding school.

The meal itself was depressingly English. Irma clapped rather theatrically and the boy came in with a huge tureen of bland Brown Windsor soup. A bad start, and I knew it was not going to get any better: the sickly smell of overcooked roast mutton had pervaded the house for the past hour.

I wondered yet again why Penang 'society' insisted on second-rate English food when the local cuisine – particularly the spicy Nonya cooking that I loved – was available in abundance.

'Off your food again, Nona?' Irma asked, nodding pointedly at my barely touched soup bowl.

'Oh no, Irma...' I began, but then remembered my new resolve. 'Actually, I'm not that keen on Brown Windsor. But it's very nicely cooked.'

Irma's eyebrows had risen almost to her hairline. 'How delightful of you to tell me that it's nicely cooked!' she said, her mouth twisting as if she were biting into a lemon. 'So what sort of soup do you like, Nona? Borsch, I suppose. That awful stuff made from beetroot and sour cream.'

A small, awkward silence was broken by Molly. 'What lovely paintings you have on your wall, Irma,' she said. 'Are they originals?' Now I knew she had her tongue in her cheek – Molly would know as well as I did that the paintings were products of Ah Chong's Art Emporium. Ah Chong had a production line, using students from the Penang School of Arts – even artistic school children – to mass-produce copies of the Old Masters. Emporium paintings were almost famous in the Far East, being so obviously bad that it was quite fashionable to have one or two in the house as talking points.

'Actually, I think they are mainly by the Masters' students,' Irma said, mollified. Even Ronnie Van der Staaten rolled his eyes. I think he might have done piecework for Ah Chong in his time.

Jack Van der Staaten was in a mellow mood, probably due to Molly's deft social skills that smoothed over every rough moment and kept the atmosphere light and cheerful. He had some good stories to tell about Penang's earliest days and he told them with vigour and style. His ancestors had come over from Junk Ceylon with Francis Light in the 1790s, and the stories he told us of those early days made my hair stand on end. Pirates, robbers and assassins figured in the tales, which he embellished with graphic dialogue and the occasional heavy slap on the table with an open palm.

Captain Ulrich added one or two stories of his own, about his exploits during the Great War when he had been attached to a British regiment in Flanders as a tunnelling engineer. He was cool but impeccably polite towards me, and when the subject of my black eye came up, as it was bound to, he actually had the grace to look ashamed. Or it may have been merely a trick of the uncertain light: the guttering candles made us all look a bit odd at times.

Once or twice Irma turned her malicious tongue on me, but each time

Molly came to my rescue. I warmed towards this gracious lady, who smiled so nicely at me from behind her heavy, horn-rimmed glasses. It seemed so unfair that despite all her intelligence and charm, and her high status within the Straits Chinese community, she would never be accepted as a member of Colonial society because she was not European. The Swimming Club, the Golf Club, the Penang Club were all barred to her, and though she would be received at Government House it would only be on official occasions, as a representative of one of the lesser races of the Empire.

Several bottles of South African red wine were opened, and not being accustomed to alcohol I was quite muzzy-headed by the time the soggy bread-and-butter pudding came round. It was quite a pleasant feeling, as if I were floating gently above the table, and when Irma wound up the gramophone on the sideboard and played some popular English airs I felt so moved that tears threatened behind my eyelids. It was so unusual, this feeling of actually being accepted as an adult.

I even smiled at the incongruity of listening to the latest London music-hall songs while huge Malayan frogs croaked in the tropical garden outside and in the far distance sounded the faint clash and drumming of a Chinese band.

Don't misunderstand me – I was not anti-English. Far from it. I had grown up reading English books and all my heroes were English. Bulldog Drummond, Sanders of the River, Sir Percy Blakeney, Rudolf Rassendyle, Richard Hannay. During the three years my mother had been married to Robbie I had actually thought of myself as English. Robbie liked people to think I was his daughter, and he called me Norma in public, an Anglicised version of Nona. Initially only in public, but towards the end, when he was sick and I used to sit with him, he called me Norma even when there were only the two of us. At those times I convinced myself he was my real father, and we talked about going 'home' to England, and smelling new-mown grass as we walked together in Richmond Great Park on a Sunday morning.

But Robbie had died and reality had re-imposed itself. I was not, after all, 'dust who England bore, shaped, made aware, gave once her flowers to know, her ways to roam'. I was a little Russian girl, an alien, trying to make my way in a world fashioned for the English.

'Ronnie, you can waltz very well. Why don't you ask Nona for a dance?' I was saved from my maudlin thoughts by Irma's clumsy interference, and I was almost grateful to her.

'No. Thank you all the same, Ronnie,' I said more forcefully than I had intended. Ronnie's instant look of gratitude told me that there was no risk of heartbreak. He had been deeply involved in a conversation with his elder brother about the recent Bodyline cricket tour of Australia, a subject that had set the minds and tongues of young men on fire throughout the Empire.

'The boys prefer their cricket to women at the moment, I'm afraid, Irma,' Jack said comfortably. 'But give them a few more years and girls like Nona will have to run pretty fast to keep out of their clutches.'

The boys and I blushed scarlet, and another awkward moment descended on the table. An awkwardness which Molly once again stepped into to dispel. 'So you have at last found a buyer for Burnbrae?' she said turning to me. 'It could be a sign that the Depression may be lifting.'

I had no idea what she was talking about. Burnbrae was a tea plantation up in the Cameron Highlands of Malaya that Robbie had once owned. It had been swallowed up by debts at his death, just as had 'my' gold mine. I called it 'my' gold mine because Robbie had left it to me in his will, a lovely and romantic gesture that had meant nothing as the mine had been worked out and was worthless.

Irma turned greedy eyes on me. 'What is this about Burnbrae, Nona? I had no idea your mother owned any property.' She said it almost accusingly, as if mother had been cheating her in some way.

'Burnbrae is not Julia's,' Molly said quietly. 'It's Nona's.'

I was astounded by this remark, and must have looked it, because Molly abruptly changed the subject. 'So the youngsters won't dance, eh?' she said. 'Does that mean that nobody is going to ask me? Am I to remain a wallflower all evening?' And she turned such winsome eyes on Jack that he simply had to scrape back his heavy mahogany chair and lead her to the small parquet dancing space in front of the gramophone.

I had only a short reprieve. As soon as Jack and Molly were away from the table Irma started in on me again. 'And what is this about finding a buyer, Nona? Does this mean that you will be able to pay some of the arrears your mother has run up on your behalf? There is a considerable amount owing, and while I did not press you when I thought your scatterbrained mother was to pay, this does change everything.'

I was totally unable to respond, staring back at her with wide, shocked eyes. Molly Tan's brother was a partner in my mother's firm of solicitors, Mayhew, Jones & Tan. Peter Mayhew had been the executor of Robbie's will,

a careful old man with thin grey hair who had patiently explained to me why I would not be getting a cent from my bequest of a gold mine in the jungles of Pahang. But he had not mentioned anything about Burnbrae.

I had loved Burnbrae. We had stayed there once when Robbie had been alive. I had only the vaguest memories of the house itself – a long, low bungalow on a ridge overlooking a broad sweep of hillside covered in tea. Crowded, because Robbie's manager, George Fortin, had been living there with his Chinese wife and lots of children. But I did remember 'Happy Valley' very clearly. Happy Valley was of course a valley, and unsuitable for tea, but it would have made a delightful little farm. Robbie and I had explored it, walking down to the small, green meadow through a gully full of ferns and jungle trees.

Robbie had suddenly dropped on one knee and turned to me, his hands on my shoulders. 'Happy?' he had asked.

I had nodded solemnly, overcome with happiness.

'Then we will call this our Happy Valley. And when we set up a farm here, we will call it Happy Valley Farm.'

'Cat got your tongue?' Irma asked. 'Or is it that Molly has let the cat out of the bag?' She laughed unpleasantly at her accidental witticism. 'I think you and your mother should come clean about your means, don't you? I've been letting you stay here on a charitable rate of board because your mother told me she was in straitened circumstances. Straitened circumstances indeed!'

Molly loomed up beside me, concern on her face. 'I don't think you should be talking to the child like that, Irma,' she said. 'You must realise that she is under age and the estate, and everything to do with it, would be in the hands of the trustee. I'm quite sure you didn't know anything about the sale, did you, Nona?'

I shook my head, looking down at my hands, clenched in my lap. Molly had meant well, but her sudden demotion of me from an adult amongst adults to a scatterbrained child in need of protection was crushing. What she did not realise, of course, was that it was not just the sale of Burnbrae that had caught me by surprise but the fact that I owned the plantation. It meant that people had lied to me. Not just once, but repeatedly and over many years, because I had often talked about Burnbrae, and about Happy Valley Farm, which had lived on in my imagination.

This would not do! I suddenly remembered who I now was – a woman loved and *believed* in by her man – and got up abruptly from the table. 'I will

just go and powder my nose,' I said. 'It's become a little close in here, don't you think?'

I liked that. *It's become little close in here, don't you think?* It was just the sort of thing one of Jane Austen's heroines might have said in the circumstances.

Up in my room I touched my little tiger talisman, then sat on my bed and breathed deeply. So my mother had deceived me. And so must have Mr Mayhew. Robbie had left Burnbrae to me as well as the worthless gold mine, but nobody had told me. And now they intended to sell Burnbrae – and with it Happy Valley.

I looked towards the bedside chair. 'I won't let them do it,' I said quietly. 'I simply won't. If Robbie gave me Burnbrae, I intend to keep it.'

'Good for you!' I jumped at Molly's voice, then smiled a little shamefacedly as she came into the room and sat down in Denis's chair. 'I've come up to apologise for saying anything, Nona. I really am sorry. But I had no idea you didn't know they'd found a buyer.'

'It's not that, Molly,' I blurted out. 'I didn't even know I owned Burnbrae!'

Molly stared at me for a moment, surprise, then shock, registering in her eyes. 'Then I really do think you should speak to Mr Mayhew, Nona. And as soon as possible. He is your trustee, of course.'

I shook my head. 'Mr Mayhew lied to me too, Molly. Or at least he didn't tell me that Robbie had left Burnbrae to me. Could I speak to your brother? He's in the same firm, but I think I could trust your brother to tell me exactly what is happening.'

Molly frowned thoughtfully. 'I think professional ethics might not let him talk to you,' she said. 'But you do need independent advice, I'm sure of that. Look, let me think about what should be done. I'll give you a tinkle tomorrow – you are on the telephone here, aren't you?'

'Yes,' I replied. 'But really Molly, you shouldn't go to any bother . . .'

Just then a board creaked in the passage. Betrayed by the noise, Irma swept into the room. 'What are you girls plotting up here?' she said, only half jokingly. Her mean little eyes flicked over us, and before I could stop myself I had risen guiltily to my feet.

'Nothing at all, Irma . . .' I stammered.

'We've been plotting the overthrow of the government, Irma,' Molly said with complete composure. 'So I hope you are not a government spy.' Then her

voice dropped a tone. 'Actually, I would like to talk to Nona in private for a moment. Do you mind?'

A little taken aback, Irma backed from the room. 'Well, please don't be too long. Ahmet is just about to bring in the coffee.'

Molly rose from her chair and looked out into the passage. 'Not a very nice woman. I half expected her to be hanging about trying to overhear what we were saying.' She came and sat down, this time beside me on the bed.

'I've rather put my foot into it,' she said seriously. 'I shouldn't have said anything about your private affairs in public like that, and you would be quite justified if you reported my indiscretion to Mr Mayhew. I really am sorry, Nona. But I had absolutely no idea you didn't know you were your stepfather's sole heir. Do you mind if I smoke?'

'Of course not,' I said.

We sat in silence for a moment as Molly took a cigarette from a small brass case, fitting it into an amber cigarette holder before taking a long, deep draw. A small frown lined her forehead.

'I think I owe you as much help as I can give you,' she said finally. 'But I can't involve Paul – it would be impossible for him to help you without telling Mr Mayhew. Perhaps, though, I could introduce you to someone who might be able to check that . . . well, that things are as they should be with your trust.'

'Thank you, Molly,' I said sincerely. 'You are being a brick.' I sounded so much like one of my heroes from English literature that I had the grace to blush. 'I mean, you are being very nice to me.'

We descended to the dining room arm in arm. 'Just a little something we had to talk about,' Molly said in response to Jack's questioning look. Then quietly to me: 'I'll ring you tomorrow afternoon.'

I don't remember much about the remainder of the evening, except that both Molly and Jack were very kind to me, intervening whenever Irma threatened to renew her interrogation about Burnbrae. In fact, I was so impressed by Jack's change of behaviour that I mentioned the matter to John when we were all outside seeing them into their car. Jack had been an embittered man over the past year or so, affected by both his wife's death and the Depression, and the last couple of times I had seen him he had been drunk as a lord and almost abusive.

'Oh, we have a word for Pater's change in our family,' John had said. 'We say that he has been "Molly-fied". You know, as in mollified.'



I lay in bed that night with my head full of tumbling thoughts. About Denis, whom I now thought of as a real person involved in my life. About Burnbrae and Happy Valley. And about Molly, who had become my first grown-up woman friend.

As I slipped into slumber, I solemnly resolved to myself that Burnbrae would not be sold, and that I would one day develop a lovely model farm in Happy Valley. I imagined myself casually handing the title deeds to Denis on our wedding day. Proving to him that his wife was not just a penniless Russian émigré but a woman of property.

An appropriate wife who would face the future with him as an equal.