

PREQUEL
to
TIGHTENING THE THREADS

by Lea Wait

A high dark concrete wall separated the ancient brick building from the busy street on the edge of London. Perhaps once the nursing home had been a hospital. Perhaps fields and flowers had surrounded it. I liked to think that. But today the neighborhood was run down, and those in the streets looked as though they, too were destined for the building designated “INDIGENT HOME” on a plaque next to the creaking gate.

My home in Australia had been small, but bright, and open, and our little town was surrounded by grasslands. What would my life have been if my father hadn’t been taken from here? Would I have grown up in these dreary streets?

I’d come so far. But what would I find behind that wall, in that building?

I glanced down at the address I’d been given, hoping I was mistaken. This couldn’t be where my ninety-year-old grandmother was living.

But the address was correct. I couldn’t turn back.

I walked through the open gate and up the stone steps to the wide paneled doors and pushed one open. The hall inside was dark, covered with old photographs and plaques. Faded drapes covered the four tall windows.

I longed to tear down the drapes and wash the windows and let what light there was on this dismal day inside these walls.

“May I help you?” The gray-haired woman behind the reception desk looked as dour as the walls.

“I’m here to see Serena Byrne. I’m her granddaughter.” What had my great-grandmother been thinking when she named her little girl “Serena” ninety years ago, in another time and world? Whatever it was, it hadn’t guaranteed a good life for her child, although, at ninety, my grandmother had survived more than most. More than any should have to.

The woman looked through a file box of names. Nothing computerized here.

“Ms. Byrne is in Ward 37. Up the staircase to the third floor, and to your left.”

“Thank you.” How old was this building? How many feet had worn down the stairs I climbed so they were lower in the middle than on the sides? How many people had lived here? Had died here?

On the third floor I explained who I was visiting to a nurse at a wide nurse’s station. The air smelled musty, a mixture of urine and detergent and porridge. No other nurses were in sight, but in the background I heard the low murmur of voices, like a swarm of bees descending on a field of clover.

“I don’t remember seeing you before,” she said. She checked a list taped to the white washed plaster wall behind her desk. “I don’t believe Ms. Byrne has ever had a visitor. Her papers said she had no relatives.”

“I’m her granddaughter.” I said. “Sarah Byrne. She doesn’t know about me.”

The woman looked at me a bit sideways. “I see. Ms. Byrne is not well, you know. I hope you won’t do anything to upset her. At her age she doesn’t need any undue excitement.”

“I understand,” I said. “But I’ve come a long way.”

“Australia?” the nurse asked.

I couldn’t hide my accent. “Yes.”

“Come with me, then. Your grandmother doesn’t have much time left. And she may not

understand who you are. Some days she's not sure who she is herself."

I'd waited so long to meet this woman – maybe too long. She'd been told her son died of measles seventy years ago. No doubt she'd believed that. She wouldn't be expecting to meet a granddaughter born around the world from London.

I swallowed deeply, and followed the nurse down the long corridor to Ward 37.