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Opening extract from

Between Two Seas

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ONE

Grimsby, July 1885

I'm heading for the privy across the yard, carrying my mother's full chamber pot, when they catch me. Three tall girls emerge from the passageway that leads out to the street. Two of them block my way forward to the outdoor privy, the third cuts off my retreat to the safety of the stairway. I turn to face them, my back to the wall.

'Where do you think you're going, Marianne?' demands one girl.

Her name's Bridget. She's hard-featured and scrawny and lives downstairs in the same tenement building as I do.

One of her skinny arms shoots out and shoves me hard. I'm not expecting it, and I fall heavily against the wall. The chamber pot hits the stone with a dull *thunk*, and shatters, spilling most of its contents down my dress.

'Oh, look what you've gone and done,' Bridget cries, malicious delight lighting her eyes. 'You've got it all down you!' She sniffs at me and then turns to her companions, holding her nose. 'She stinks like the kennel!' They all laugh. I try to slip away while her back is turned, but she pulls me back and slaps me hard across

the face. I lift my arms, covering my face, before she can do it again.

‘And how’s your filthy mother? We all know what she is!’ Bridget’s voice rings out, loud and confident.

I don’t answer her. If I say anything at all, they’ll mock the way I speak. I don’t have their broad Grimsby accent.

‘Speak up, Marianne,’ cries another voice. ‘We can’t hear you.’

‘Marianne?’ taunts the third. ‘Who’d want to Marry Anne?’

They screech with laughter.

‘Marry Anne? No one marries a bastard!’

I stand still, waiting for the right moment to make my escape.

‘Where’s your pa then?’ It’s Bridget’s voice again. ‘Or doesn’t your mother know which one he was?’

‘Whore’s brat!’ the voices cry.

Their crude words ring in my head, but I’m past being upset. It’s mostly lies, and I’ve heard it so many times before. I’m just desperate to get back to my mother.

She’s lying upstairs, dying.

One of the girls is pinching my arm. I look down and see her filthy fingernails digging into my flesh. I slap her hand away and it works like a signal. They all close in, pulling my hair, pinching me, yanking at my dress.

I spot a gap and throw myself at it, tearing myself away from their cruel fingers. I knock the youngest girl flying into a pile of horse dung. I can hear the others scream with rage, but I’m free now, fleeing across the yard and up the stairs.

I slam and lock the door of our attic room behind me. Panting, I lean against it. My eyes seek my mother, lying quietly on her bed in the darkened room. Her rasping breathing is harsher than ever.

With trembling fingers, I wash my hands and remove my soiled dress. I only have one other, besides my best dress. Once I've put it on, I go to sit down by my mother. Her frail hands clutch the blanket. I take one of them in mine and hold it, hoping to comfort her. I can see she's in pain. There is fear in her eyes.

I can't even afford to get a doctor for her. It's always been a struggle for the two of us to manage, and now that she's sick, we have barely any money left. I haven't told her, but we are also behind with the rent. How shall we manage? I don't want to think about that right now.

'Can I do anything for you, mother?'

A small nod of the head.

'What can I do?' I ask.

Her eyes dart sideways to the slate lying on the chair by her bed. I put it into her hands and help her to sit up a little, propping her with pillows. She's no longer able to speak, and writing is becoming increasingly difficult. She grasps the slate pencil and begins to trace out a word. Her writing is shaky.

Sewing Box

I'm puzzled.

'I'd like to sit with you a little, mother dear, before I work some more.'

I can't sew by her bedside; the room is far too dark. I need to sit right over by the window to see what I'm

doing. My answer was not what she wanted. I can see her frustration as she slumps back on the pillows. I stretch out a hand and tenderly smooth back some stray strands of hair from her face. She clutches at my hand a moment, her eyes entreating me. Then her hand drops. She's exhausted even by this small movement.

'I'm sorry, mother, I didn't understand: my sewing box or yours?'

She jabs at herself with the slate pencil, and I go to fetch her sewing box. Sewing and embroidery is how we make our living, and our sewing boxes are precious possessions.

Mother gestures slightly and I understand I'm to open the box. I lift out the tray containing all her threads and needles. Underneath I find a small heavy package wrapped in waxed paper.

'Should I open it?'

A nod.

When I unwrap the paper, coins tumble out on the bedcovers, gleaming gold. Sovereigns. I'm speechless with amazement. Here is more money than I have ever seen together. I stare blankly, and then pick up a couple of the coins and weigh them in my hand. They feel smooth and heavy.

'Mother, we have been going hungry and doing without medicine for you, and all the while you had these hidden!'

There are two letters folded in the package with the money. One is sealed and addressed to Lars Christensen. That's my father. The other has my name on it.

'Do you want me to read this?' I ask, holding up my letter.

Her slight nod shows me that she does. I take it over to the window.

May 1885

My dearest Marianne,

I am writing to you before I become too ill to explain what this money is for. For many years I have been saving so that we can travel to Denmark together and find your father. I never saved enough. Now that I cannot go with you, there will be enough for you to go alone. Travel to Skagen and find him. Give him my letter. Please tell him I have loved him and waited for him through all these years. Seek a better life, Marianne!

Yours affectionately,

Your mother,

Esther.

This letter fills me with conflicting emotions. The mention of Denmark sends a thrill through me. Throughout my childhood it's been my fairy-tale land, the stuff of dreams.

But my mother's calm assumption that she's going to die appals me. I imagine her sitting down and writing this letter, months ago, accepting her fate, and tears prick my eyelids. I try to blink them back, but one escapes, trickling down my cheek and gathering on my chin. I brush it away quickly and return to my mother's bedside. I stroke her hands, her face, her hair.

‘I love you so much,’ I whisper brokenly. ‘I want you to grow strong again, to get well, so that we can go together.’

Mother shakes her head very slightly and frowns at me. I realize, perhaps for the first time, that she lost the will to live some time ago. She’s given up. Another tear slides silently down my face, and again my mother shakes her head. She doesn’t like to see me cry. She wants me to be strong.

I take a deep breath, and count the money: it seems a fortune to me.

‘Mother, let me fetch a doctor and buy some medicine for you with some of this money—I beg you!’

She shakes her head more vigorously than before and a spasm of pain crosses her face. She begins to write again. Slowly, tortuously.

Promise

‘Promise what? That I won’t get a doctor? That I’ll go to Denmark?’

A father I’ve never met, I think bitterly. A wild goose chase. Wasting a fortune going to find a father who doesn’t know I exist and might not welcome me when he does. I can’t help thinking that if he had wanted to, he could have returned years ago.

Perhaps with my mother, it would be exciting to go, but how can I do a journey like that alone? I’m sixteen, and I’ve never left Grimsby. The very thought is terrifying.

But mother’s eyes beg me, desperate. I drop to my knees and take her trembling hands in mine.

‘Mother, I promise to go to Denmark and look for my father if that is what you wish me to do. I swear it if that

will comfort you. But surely there is more than enough money here for the journey. Please, please let me get a doctor.'

Her face is set and stubborn. She won't give in now. And I've made a promise I must keep. My mother grows more peaceful.

It doesn't last, however. By the early hours of the morning she's no longer able to bear the pain. She is writhing and twisting in the bed, unable to make a sound, wild-eyed and sweat-drenched. I can't watch her suffer like this. Mother has been everything to me all my life; she needs help now.

'Mother!' I try to speak calmly and clearly, though my voice shakes. 'I'm not breaking my promise to you, but I am going to get a doctor!'

I can't tell whether she has heard me. Frantic, I run downstairs to Mrs Forbes. She is the only person in the building who has ever spoken kindly to me. One of the few respectable people who does not flinch at the sight of me, as though my illegitimacy were a visible stain. I hammer on her door.

Mrs Forbes appears, candle in hand, nightcap on her head.

'Is it your mother?' she asks.

'She needs medicine,' I tell her, and my voice is hoarse with fear. 'But I can't leave her alone.'

'Of course. I'll send my son for the apothecary at once. Go back to her, my dear.'

I turn and take the stairs two steps at a time. Mother has thrown off the bedclothes. I try to wipe the perspiration

from her brow with a cool flannel, but I can't get her to stay still. I let out a cry of despair. But in a few moments Mrs Forbes joins me, and together we are able to restrain her.

It is the first time there has ever been a visitor of any kind in our room, but I'm glad of her company. It seems an eternity until the apothecary arrives. He examines my mother. She is so thin, and an unsightly growth has disfigured her throat. He takes me aside.

'There is little I can do for her but ease the pain. I would guess that she does not have many more hours left.'

I nod, blindly. This isn't news to me. The doctor at the charity hospital told us as much weeks ago. The apothecary administers a dose of morphine. I hand one of our precious coins to him. It's hard to part with it. But he pockets it almost casually, as though he sees such money every day, and then departs.

Mother's eyes glaze and lose their fear for the first time in days. Her frantic movements slow and then cease. Only her rasping breathing remains. Since yesterday she has no longer even been able to swallow, so I can't give her water. Mrs Forbes returns to her own rooms, leaving me alone with my mother. I sit, holding her hand, and watch her slowly fall asleep.

'I'm scared, mother,' I whisper quietly. 'I'm scared to lose you.'

She doesn't wake again. Towards dawn her breathing becomes harsher, more laboured, but then begins to fail. By the time the sky outside is turning grey she has gone. And I am left quite alone.

TWO

August 1885

I sit by the window, my embroidery in my hands. The afternoon sunlight slants in through the dusty window, lighting up the different colour threads. It's stifling up here under the roof, and I can feel my concentration wavering. Mrs Forbes is visiting, and sits by me, her own sewing in her hands. I can see beads of perspiration gathering on her brow.

'It's a hot one today, and no mistake,' she sighs, dabbing at her forehead and neck with her handkerchief.

'Yes indeed,' I agree sympathetically. 'I'm sorry I can't open the window today. It's the wind direction. I tried earlier, and was almost smothered.' We can both see the smoke pouring from the chimneys of the iron foundry behind us, and hear the relentless bangs and crashes of the machinery.

Our room is at the back of the tenement building in Riby Square, and as well as the foundry, I can see St Andrew's Church from the window. I think of my mother resting in the earth in the churchyard, and feel the familiar prickle behind my eyelids. I turn my face away to hide my emotion. It is a month since my mother was buried. I was the only mourner, but I wept enough tears for many.

The room is empty of all the things that made it home when my mother was alive. In preparation for my journey to Denmark, I've sold everything I can't take with me: the furniture, bedding, and kitchenware. Even my mother's clothes. I sold my own sewing box, choosing to keep hers to remember her by. I think I would have grieved to see the familiar things go, had I not already been numb with grief from my greater loss.

I've kept only mother's pearl necklace, which she brought from her parents' home in Mablethorpe, south of Grimsby. She brought very little, as she was given only an hour to leave the house when her father discovered she was with child. She was just sixteen. The same age I am now.

'You've been such a great help to me, Mrs Forbes,' I tell her.

She chuckles.

'Where did that come from all of a sudden?' she asks. 'I'm sure you've thanked me more than enough already.'

'I was just thinking that I don't know how I'd have managed without you since mother died,' I say. 'You've given me so much advice and practical help.'

'Pshaw! You and your fancy words!' she scoffs. 'You sound just like your mother. What did you expect me to do? Leave a chit of a girl to manage alone?'

'You've been a kind friend,' I tell her.

My first ever friend, in fact.

'Well, whatever are you doing travelling off to the ends of the earth then? That's what I'd like to know. My dear, you can't go all that way alone. You're just a child.'

I knew she'd mention this again.

'It was a promise to my mother,' I tell her. 'And what alternative do I have? The life that we led was bearable only because we had each other. Alone it would be no life at all. I couldn't face it.'

'I know your dear mother was a true friend to you, young as she was.' Mrs Forbes reaches out and takes my hand, looking earnestly at me. 'But it's possible now that you will make other friends. Not replace her, that can't be done, but so as you're not as alone as you think you'd be.'

'How would that be possible? We never made any friends in all these years.' I'm surprised. She must know how we were shunned, though she never did so herself. 'I even wrote a letter to my mother's family, as I promised her,' I remind Mrs Forbes. 'I explained who I was and that my mother had died, and gave them the date of the funeral. You know I haven't heard from them. I'm wanted by no one here.'

Mrs Forbes lets go of my hand and takes up her mending again. Looking at her sewing as intently as she had looked at me a moment before, she says, in a careful voice, 'Well, my dear, you'll forgive my plain speaking, I'm sure. But your mother was too proud and too ashamed of what she'd done to make friends even with those as would've been willing. She felt her situation more than she needed to. Especially brought up high like she was, in a grand house and all. She never got over the change. She turned to you. Inward-looking, like. You could live different if you chose.'

Her bright eyes are on me again, shining in her lined face. She means it kindly, I know, but I'm not used to anyone speaking to me like this. I feel resentment welling up inside me at this criticism of my mother. No one but me knows how hard my mother found it to live here among these people who despised her. I press my lips together and shake my head.

'No. It's better I go.'

I've looked into many ways of crossing to Denmark. I tried the larger ships first, which take passengers across the North Sea from Grimsby. The Danish company DFDS has a ferry called the *Esbjerg*. There are also a number of freight ships sailing regularly to Esbjerg. But none of these are within my means, as I also need money to travel to Skagen once I get to Denmark. I have a tattered map of the country on the wall and I can see the journey from Esbjerg to Skagen will be a long one.

I have been forced to go from one Danish fishing cutter to another in the harbour and beg a passage. Some of the men speak no English, and of those who do, most shake their heads at once and turn away when they understand what I want.

'We don't take women or children,' they tell me.

'Please!' I begged one gruff, bearded fisherman. 'I have no other way of crossing.'

'No. Not possible.' He waved me away, ending the conversation abruptly.

'I need to go to my father,' I pleaded with a kindly-looking captain only yesterday.

‘Write him to come and fetch you,’ he advised me, a strong Danish accent on his words. ‘You are too young for coming alone on a boat like this.’

I walked home, defeated.

How can I write to my father?

He doesn’t even know I exist.

I can see the light has begun to change now: my stitching is tinted with the gold of late afternoon sunshine. I lay it aside, unfinished. It’s time to go down to the harbour; the fishing boats will be in. I feel the familiar lurch of dread in my stomach.

‘I need to go out,’ I tell Mrs Forbes.

She doesn’t ask where I’m going. I always go to the harbour at this hour, but discussing it might reopen the argument.

‘You’re welcome to stay here and sew a while,’ I tell her.

‘That’s all right, my dear, I got to get the evening meal on for the men.’ Mrs Forbes’s husband and son both work intermittently at the docks. She heaves herself out of her chair, and goes to the door, with a cheerful farewell.

As soon as she’s gone, I brush my long hair, repinning it in a bun at the back of my head. It is a style my mother persuaded me to adopt a few months ago instead of my plaits. She said it made me look more grown-up, and that I would need that if I were to manage alone. My hair is golden. Like my father’s, mother told me. She herself had lovely soft brown hair. Apart from our colouring, people always said we looked very alike. I remember her standing here where I am now, brushing her hair. I miss her so much it hurts.

I put my sunbonnet on and tie the strings under my chin. I look longingly at my cloak, hanging on its hook. I love to hide myself in it, but the day is much too hot. I sigh, and go down the stairs, out into the street. As I cross Freeman Street, the horse-drawn tram rattles by along Cleethorpes Road. I head in the opposite direction down towards the docks.

The streets are busy at this time of day, with trams and carts going to and fro from the harbour, and street sellers calling out their wares. There are some boys tormenting a dog at the corner, pulling its tail and throwing stones at it. I'm glad when a shopkeeper comes out and chases them off.

I've always hated going alone to the harbour. Sometimes my mother used to send me to buy fish. I would always hurry through the streets, my head down, avoiding the gaze of strangers. As I've grown older, I've come to dread it more, for now men sometimes call out or even try to speak to me. I always wrap my cloak more closely about me and hurry on my way, my face burning.

Mother bought fish direct from the boats as they brought their catch into harbour; it was cheaper and fresher that way. But I'm no hand at bargaining with the fishermen: I struggle even to understand their broad speech. When I pluck up courage to approach them at all, I can barely speak above a whisper. Mother always shook her head when she saw what small fish I had accepted. But she sent me often. I believe she thought I would learn the skill, as she had done. I never did.

And now, after her death, it is not the price of a couple of fish I'm negotiating, but the cost of a passage to Denmark. And it is deeply painful to have to ask.

The harbour, like the town, has grown out of recognition, even in my short lifetime. I walk along the quayside, searching the rows and rows of Grimsby fishing smacks, hunting for the boats that are flying the Danish flag. I have always liked that the Danish flag is simply the reverse of an English flag: a white cross on a red background. It's a link between the two halves of me.

At last I spot the flag on two blue-painted fishing cutters, smaller than the local smacks. I stand for a moment at a distance, watching the men on board, trying to summon up the courage to speak to them.

There are gulls on the quay, searching among the bundles of nets for pieces of fish. I watch one large gull tug a fish head from the net with its strong beak. It launches itself into the air. Two other gulls follow it screeching, and I watch them wheel and swoop in the clear blue sky.

I take a deep breath and approach the nearest boat. There is only one man on deck, sitting bent over his nets, mending them.

'Excuse me,' I say, but he doesn't even glance in my direction. Putting my hands on the side of the boat, I lean forward.

'Good afternoon!' I call out. The man, wizened and weather beaten, turns to look at me. His eyes are pale blue and rheumy.

'Do you speak English?' I ask him.

He shakes his head, but sits staring at me.

Do I continue speaking to him, or do I go away at once?

'I wish to go to Denmark,' I explain after a few moments' embarrassed silence. He puts one hand behind his ear.

'*Hvad?*' he asks.

He's forcing me to shout my business to half the fishing harbour. I can feel heat rising in my face.

'I wish,' I point at myself, 'to go to Denmark.' I make a wave movement with my hand, intended to signify a sea voyage, and point out to sea, to where I imagine Denmark lies. I feel so foolish. The old man stares at me a moment longer, and then shrugs, and turns back to his nets.

I take a step back and look over at the second boat; she has the name *Ebba* painted on the prow. To my mortification, there is a man standing smoking his pipe and watching me. He has obviously overheard everything. Should I walk up to him and repeat the ridiculous mime, or should I flee at once and spare myself the humiliation? But he's already beckoning me.

'You want to sail to Denmark?' he asks. 'How many people?'

'Only myself,' I reply. His sandy brows lift in surprise. I see him purse his lips, his bushy beard twitching as he does so.

'You travel alone?' he asks.

'Yes.'

He is silent a moment, looking suspicious. I wait for questions, but none come. He doesn't even ask my age.

'We sail to Esbjerg the day after tomorrow,' he tells me unexpectedly. 'If you can be ready you can come.'

‘How much?’ I ask anxiously. He names a price. It is more than I want to pay, but less than anything I’ve been offered so far. I should demur, and offer less, I am sure he expects it. But it is fish all over again, and after only a brief hesitation, I accept his terms.

He smiles and offers to shake hands on his bargain. ‘Captain Larsen,’ he introduces himself.

Now there’s no turning back. I am almost elated as I hurry back through the streets to share the news with Mrs Forbes. At the same time I am deeply afraid: at that price, I’ll have no money to return.