

Tea Tree Passage - Extract ...

(Chapter 1, pages 3–11)

'Nina?'

The name wove towards her through the hot still air. To her right, the screen door wheezed open and she jerked to a halt, hands poised over the lump of dough she was kneading on the kitchen table. Confused, she stared in the direction of the voice.

Outlined within the framework, the shape dark against the glare, stood the figure of a man. He was tall and lean with square-set shoulders. The hat on his head was turned up at the brim. A slouch hat, Nina realised, suddenly aware of pale light glinting off the rising sun badge. A momentary bewilderment skimmed her awareness. A soldier? Here in Tea-tree Passage? The war was over, had been for ten long months.

The voice wove towards her again. Scarcely audible. Strangely familiar.

'Nina. I'm home.'

Frank! Oh, my God! It's Frank!

The realisation sifted oddly through her consciousness like leaves. Leaves the colour of mulberries. Wafting. Settling. Falling in layers upon the hard dry core of her. For one impossibly long moment she couldn't speak, couldn't move. Her legs were heavy, like lead. They refused to function and she simply halted, overwhelmed by the unexpected sight of him. Disjointed thoughts slid against her awareness. Why hadn't he written, let her know he was coming? She would have gladly gone into town and met him at the station, not let him come home like this.

Without thinking, her hands came up to straighten her hair. Then, remembering the flour, she let them flutter back to her side. Only seconds had passed since he'd said that first word, but it seemed like months, years. An eternity of time. And all the while he stood by the door watching her, waiting, as though unsure what to say himself.

'Frank,' she pronounced at last, her voice thick, as though from years of disuse. Then: *'Oh, Frank!'*

The shock had made her light-headed and she put out a hand to steady herself. The room spun. Tears blurred her vision, walls and floor merging for a moment into a smudged kaleidoscope of colour. She knew she should go to him, greet him in some as-yet unknown way, but the kitchen seemed miles wide, a vast expanse of table and chairs and linoleum separating them.

'I've missed you, Nina,' he said simply and, unbidden, the tears fell, tracking a course down her cheeks.

As though sensing her distress, he moved towards her with a purposeful stride. They came together beside the kitchen table, laughing, crying. Frank, this stranger who was her husband, let the door slam shut with a loud bang and he scooped her into his arms.

She was aware of inconsequential details: the rasp of his unshaven cheeks as his mouth moved over her own, the smell of tobacco, the stiffness of his khaki shirt — new, she realised with surprise — and a distant scream of gulls from the direction of the sea wall.

'Frank! I never thought—'

He pressed a finger momentarily to her lips and the words were lost. 'Hush. I'm here now. There's time enough for talk later.'

As his arms wrapped her in a tight embrace, a slow sigh escaped Nina's mouth. It was so long since she had been held. She swayed against him, savouring the moment. There had been times during the past years when she had wondered if she would ever see him again, would ever be enclosed in those same arms. So many men hadn't come home.

When at last she pulled away, Nina was dismayed to see her own floury handprints outlined against the khaki of Frank's coat. 'Oh, dear,' she pronounced as she tried to brush them away. 'Look what I've done.'

'Leave it,' he replied, grabbing her hands, holding her wrists to his mouth. 'I've been through worse.'

He stared at her with sudden intensity, an eager yet uncertain look, as he dipped his eyes and smiled. She met his gaze, studying that now-unfamiliar face — the smooth flat planes of his cheeks, aquiline nose, hooded eyes — and sensed a momentary shock. This was not the same Frank whose image had been captured on that single photograph she had treasured through those long years of separation. This Frank was older, war-weary. Small lines creased the corners of his eyes and mouth. A sprinkling of grey hairs lined his temple. There was a leanness to his face and a spareness to his body she had not remembered. And she saw, her attention drawn back to his eyes, a disconcerting emptiness she was at a loss to explain.

Yet again, time seemed suspended, caught between the various floundering layers of her own self. In her mind the differing separate images of him scattered on top of each other, causing her to draw her breath. Small unconnected fragments. Here an eye. There a nose, mouth. She sensed a wash of concern, almost maternal. A concern she might have lavished on her child, had there been one. Her mouth wavered into something she hoped resembled a smile.

Slowly Frank released one of her hands and moved his fingers down the curve of her cheek, all the while watching, watching. Their eyes were locked and she could not, for one awful moment, bear to look away. Perhaps she was dreaming. One blink, one glance elsewhere, might cause her to wake and the scene to unravel its threads about her.

His fingers were warm against her face and, unbidden, a memory shuddered through her. How many times had she prayed for this intimacy that had so long been denied? How many times, in the past four years, had she lain in bed at night, running her fingers over her hot aching body, imagining they were Frank's hands exploring that moist place? How many —

She stopped and snapped her head upwards, acknowledging the room and the man who evoked such familiarity. This was no dream. *Frank was home!* The touching was like a spell, a familiar yet distant recollection, and her heart hammered away in her chest until she feared it likely to explode. Surely Frank could hear the pulse? His hand touched her breast, stroking and kneading at the nipple through the flimsy fabric of her dress. A slow heat built inside her, a giddy surge of desire that stirred in her belly and radiated outwards. *Four years*, she couldn't help thinking again. *It's been four years.*

His mouth trailed down, into that soft hollow at the base of her throat. Nina was aware, suddenly, of the ticking of the clock from the mantel over the stove. It sounded inordinately loud against the hushed stillness of the room. The clock, she thought, the idea random in her mind, was measuring out this homecoming, separating her thoughts, actions, into tiny compartments. *Tick! Tock! Tick! Tock!* Even the screech of the gulls had faded to some distant place, now unheard.

Frank's breath was warm on her skin. A sigh escaped his mouth, magnified unbearably. 'Christ, I've missed you! Missed *this*.'

He left no doubt as to the meaning of his words.

There was a sound behind them, a swish of skirt and a discreet cough. Face suddenly suffused with colour, Nina pulled away. Frank's mother stood in the doorway. 'You've come home,' she said, matter-of-factly.

'Mother.'

He went to her, giving her a quick hug and a respectful kiss on the cheek. Nina, watching, thought the older woman's body seemed stiff as she bent towards her son.

'You'll be wanting a cuppa, I expect,' she went on, her voice flat and devoid of any emotion.

Nina glanced at her husband. *Something's wrong*, she thought, imagining her own reaction to a son's return after an absence of years. Had there been, before or during her marriage to Frank, some family quarrel of which she was unaware?

Perhaps it is because of me?

The idea jangled back, taking her breath. She had always shared an uneasy alliance with Frank's parents since they'd taken her into their home after had Frank joined up. 'So silly to keep a place going just for one,' Frank's mother had said, thrifty as usual, leaving her no valid option.

Nina closed her eyes and breathed deeply. When she opened them again, she could see the older woman had taken a pot from the cupboard and had begun, methodically, ladling in spoonfuls of tea. Her expression was stern, her mouth was pulled into a tight uncompromising line.

The kettle whistled on the stove, emitting a narrow swirl of steam. Behind his mother's back, Frank gave Nina an uncertain smile. He sat at the table, folding his long legs under the chair. His hands splayed out in front of him, bony, large-knuckled. The thought occurred to Nina that he looked uncomfortable there, out of place, as though he didn't belong.

Pushing back the thought, she took the cake tin from the pantry. There was, she knew, a sponge roll inside, made fresh the day before. Carefully she cut three slices, one larger than the other, and put them on separate plates. The biggest slice she placed before her husband.

We are strangers, she realised with certain clarity as she struggled to remember those first few weeks of married life before Frank had gone away to war. It had been a hasty marriage, too hasty, some had said. Nina knew they had waited, those long-ago critics, as the months passed, to see if she were carrying a child, a reason for such expedience. But they had been wrong.

She smiled to herself now, remembering, as Frank's mother slammed the pot of tea on the table, bringing her back to the present.

'You should have let us know you were coming. We would have gone into town and met the train.' His mother's words echoed Nina's previous thoughts. But, unlike her own, they were half-hearted, and had a recriminatory tone to them.

Nina poured Frank's tea. His fingers, as he took the cup from her, trembled slightly, and the cup rattled ominously against the saucer until he steadied it with his other hand.

'Where's Dad?' he asked, setting the saucer on the table.

Frank's mother inclined her head in the direction of the sea wall. 'Taken the boat out.'

'It's going along okay, then?'

'No use complaining.'

'Plenty of fish?'

'They're about,' she replied tersely.

The abrupt little phrases jerked at Nina. Perfunctory words. Mechanical replies. There was a heaviness about them, an inexplicable poundage, and she felt flattened by the weight. It seemed they were skirting some larger issue, mother and son, but the essence of it alluded her. She noted the small frown of confusion on her husband's brow and glanced sharply at her mother-in-law. *Leave him*, she wanted to say. *He has been through enough.*

But Frank's mother was staring through the screen door, towards the direction of the water. And when she said the words, they were so soft, so distant, that Nina wondered if she had imagined them.

'It's hard to think that Bill's not coming back.'

William, Frank's brother. Killed at Pozières in 1916. Bill, whose framed photographs clustered, shrine-like, on the top of the piano in the parlour. Bill as a baby in a white christening dress, then as a sturdy young man riding a horse, or on the deck of the boat. Bill looking rakish in khaki, his hat askew, smiling diffidently into the lens of the camera. Bill who had followed Frank to war, saying, despite his mother's protestations, 'I can't let my young brother upstage me, now can I?'

Bill — the favourite of the family.

Nina stared at Frank. His face was flushed and he blinked so rapidly that his eyelids seemed to be working overtime. Open. Shut. Open. Pale lashes fluttered against reddened cheeks. She fought back an impulse to lay a cool hand against them, to still the movement. Then her thoughts slammed to a halt, concentrating on one detail only.

It was at that precise moment that she knew. Knew what Frank's mother was thinking. Knew with shocking certainty the reason for the abruptness, the lack of warmth. Knew the God-awful truth. *The wrong son had returned.*

The realisation jolted her. She threw her head up, willing it not to be true. She felt a bubble of nausea growing, nibbling at her stomach, and a sense of

shame that she was witness to all that had happened in that room during the past few minutes. Desperately she wanted to say something, wanted to scream at Frank's mother, to cry out at the injustice of it all. But she turned away, suddenly fearful. To voice her thoughts, she knew, would unleash and lay bare her dreadful knowledge.

I cannot say the words, she told herself. Cannot! Cannot! Cannot!

Instead, she ground her teeth against her tongue until she could taste blood, and the sharp sudden pain blotted out the need. Bending her head over the pot of tea, she arranged the remaining two cups and watched as the steaming liquid descended into pale china.

Frank will not suffer from this, she reassured herself. He will not suffer. Somehow she would take the remnants of their marriage and make them whole again. Together they'd build a new life, she and Frank, a safe haven. And, in time, there'd be children, children born of love and need and desire, not from any misdirected sense of duty or obligation. Children who would be equally loved.

She swallowed hard and raised her head, staring defiantly at Frank's mother. 'Here's to Frank's safe return,' she said, lifting her cup of tea towards her husband in salute.

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