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THE SOLDIER'S WIFE

PAMELA HART

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P A M E L A H A R T

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AUSTRALIA



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*In memory of Private Arthur Freeman
and his comrades,
and all those who loved them*

PROLOGUE

The telegram read: *I HAVE LEAVE. MEET TODAY NINE A.M. CENTRAL DESTINATION BOARD. LOVE. JIMMY.*

Clutching the telegram tightly in her gloved hand wouldn't make Jimmy get there any faster, she knew, but Ruby gripped it like a talisman anyway.

Sydney Central Station Destination Board was so long – she didn't know which end to stand, and the space in the middle, by the clock, was so full of soldiers and women and children all waiting for their families that she had no hope of edging her way in.

The board didn't list arrivals, only departures, but the Liverpool train was due to depart from Platform 16, so she positioned herself at the eastern end, which was closer to that platform, and tried to be calm.

At least there was a lot to see while she waited. It was overwhelming to a country girl, even after a couple of weeks in the city. So many people! More in this one place than lived in the whole of Bourke, she reckoned. People of every class – beautifully dressed women in cashmere coats floating towards the country platforms, porters following behind with luggage carts; family groups off to the mountains for the day, complete with picnic

baskets and blankets; men in hats clutching pink newspapers, queuing for the race train to Kembla Grange, some no worse than half flash and half foolish, others with the shifty glance of the tout; a few matronly looking women wearing Red Cross armbands, toting bags of wool back to their knitting groups. And soldiers, of course, soldiers and sailors everywhere. Clearly Jimmy wasn't the only one with leave.

The high domed roof echoed the sound back: laughter, winter coughs, shouts of 'Over here, Mavis!' and 'It's him, it's him!' Newspaper boys wandered through the crowds, yelling, 'German victory!' 'Troops fall back!' More bad news. And over all was the distinctive coal-and-wet-wool smell of a station in winter.

There was an old man with a white bushy beard playing the spoons in a corner, a sprightly rhythm she vaguely recognised. 'Click go the Shears', maybe. Some bush ballad. A pie cart smelling of gristle and fat, a fruit barrow, a news stand . . . everywhere she looked she saw someone being busy. It was galling to have to stand still, to wait and wait and —

There he was. In a group of soldiers, a head taller than the others, coming past the ticket collector in a rush. He looked around. For her. Even in that crowd of uniform khaki he stood out, handsome and strong and . . . and *keen*. More alive than anyone she'd ever met. He pulled off his hat and the light gleamed on burnished hair, slicked down ruthlessly to control those unruly curls.

Ruby felt her heart blossom – it felt just like that, as though inside her some enormous, tightly furled bud opened, exposing her heart, offering it irresistibly to him. Her whole chest was full of her expanding heart. The emotion travelled right through her, choking her throat, trembling her knees, blurring her sight

with tears, lifting her up. She took a shaky breath. He turned and saw her. His expression changed – for a moment his face was stripped as bare as her heart, with the same emotion.

She was moving without thinking, walking then running, dodging through the crowd, and Jimmy was running towards her, too. They met in a confusion of handbag and hat and arms and then she was in his embrace.

He kissed her. She forgot all good conduct, closed her eyes and kissed him back, leaned on him, felt him real and warm and wonderful under her hands. His mouth tasted of tooth powder and tea, and he smelled so good, so much like himself, despite the cold wool of his uniform and the reek of boot polish.

For a moment she was held suspended in the physical truth that he was there, right there, whole and wholly himself, and then she registered the heat of his mouth and the strength of his hands and fire swept through her. She whispered his name and his grip tightened, his arms strong across her back. It was a desperate kiss, hard and needy and intoxicating. She had never wanted him so much. If they'd been in private she would have dragged him off to bed immediately.

But they weren't. Ruby pulled herself away reluctantly. It was the woman's job to put a limit on this kind of thing; which didn't seem fair, really.

'Jimmy,' she said, managing a tone of wifely reproach, but her eyes betrayed her, she feared, because he grinned as though he knew she was just pretending.

Tenderly, he tucked a strand of her hair back under her hat. His face had regained its usual lively expression, but his eyes showed how he really felt. It was going to break both their hearts to part again.

‘Hello, old girl.’

Her eyes filled with tears at his tone.

‘Hey, none of that!’ he protested. ‘Or I’ll think you’re not glad to see me.’

Valiantly, she brought out a smile and took his arm. ‘Come and have a cup of tea.’

‘No fear!’ he said. ‘We don’t have time for that. I have to be back right here at nine o’clock tomorrow morning to march down to the ship. This is my first time in Sydney. What do you say to a spree?’

She blinked. She hadn’t imagined that. She’d thought . . . well, she’d thought they’d go back to the house where she was boarding and spend time together. Maybe Mrs Hannan, her landlady, would go visit a friend or something and they could . . . she blushed. But sitting in a little room and talking, well, that wasn’t much of a send-off for a soldier.

‘Whatever you want,’ she said, tucking her hand tighter under his arm. ‘Whatever you want.’

•

They went to the zoo and fed the elephant. They went for a ride on a ferry and had afternoon tea at a tearoom on the Corso in Manly. On the ferry home they stood out on the forward deck, tasting the spray, Jimmy’s arms around her, protecting her from the cold wind, his warm bulk reassuring and exciting at her back. As the ferry docked, she took her handkerchief out of her purse to wipe the sea salt from her cheeks, and found an envelope she was sure she hadn’t put in there. Puzzled, she looked at the front. ‘Certificate of Marriage’, it read. She opened it – it wasn’t her own lines, which were put away safely in the suitcase under her bed,

but Maree and Theo Hannan's. Her landlady must have put it in without telling her. What a strange thing for her to do. Why would she —? Ruby's cheeks flamed in sudden understanding, and she closed the bag hurriedly, before Jimmy could see.

Then they were on the dock at Circular Quay in the middle of the afternoon, looking at each other with unbearable desire. Jimmy wet his lips, as though unsure of himself.

'There's a hotel, just down Bligh Street,' he said. 'I know we don't have any luggage, but maybe they'll let us stay if we show them your wedding ring.'

Ruby touched his cheek, her breath coming shorter, heat surging through her body. She must remember to buy her landlady a thank-you gift.

'Oh, I think they'll let us stay,' she said.



His body was a revision – a lesson she had to learn all over again, where flashes of memory overtook her. The hollow under his throat. The long line of muscle which linked thigh and hip. So male. Utterly male. His taste. Each flicker of familiarity making her think for a moment that she knew what she was doing, but the next moment leaving her tentative, unsure. She knew very little about being a wife. They had only had a week of honeymoon, after all, two months earlier.

But his hands she remembered. Under her hips, on her skin, cradling her face, alive and gentle and so tender that she cried, just to have him wipe the tears away, softly, and kiss her, murmuring her name, only her name, over and over and over again.

He came to her like a man who, starving, still forces himself to have manners, to behave politely, with restraint, but she didn't

want restraint. If she was his meal she wanted him to devour her, to consume her completely.

So she touched him, encouraged him wordlessly until he lost that terrible self-control and buried himself in her as if she alone could keep him alive. She clutched him to her, wrapped legs and arms around him, wanting him closer, even closer, tighter, *nearer*. Dying inside while she loved him because he was going so soon, and she couldn't bear it; kissing him again and again until they fell back on the pillows and did it all once more.

The hotel room was small and badly furnished – a 'Family Hotel' patronised mostly by single men. It was painted a dark red below the dado and a deep cream above it, which reminded Ruby of fat around a piece of steak. She lay with Jimmy's sleeping head on her shoulder and stared at the dull red curtains as the room darkened. She didn't want to move, to wake him. Just to savour this moment, to memorise the feel of his body on hers, the rise and fall of his breath, all that curious mixture of strong and vulnerable which made him Jimmy. She tightened her hold on him and hung on.

Then it was morning, and time to bathe and dress and go to the station, grabbing a hasty breakfast on the way.

At Central, they found his company and he reported in. Collected his kitbag, his rifle, his canteen.

They kissed. Jimmy murmured, 'I love you' and she said the same, but none of it felt real. It was happening to someone else, surely. He pulled away from her, his face tight with misery, and none of it was real, until the last moment when his hand, the tips of his fingers, left the tips of hers and he was gone.

Turned into just another soldier.

PART
1

CHAPTER 1

16th July, 1915

‘Mrs Hannan, do I look businesslike?’

Her landlady looked her up and down, amused eyes assessing Ruby’s neat navy skirt and jacket, gloves, purse and well-shined shoes just peeping out from under her hem.

Mrs Hannan was trying to stir a pot on the range with her struggling two-year-old on one hip. Stooping, she set Eddie on his feet and gave him a gentle swat on his behind, pushing him towards the back door. ‘Out to the garden for you, my lad.’

‘Gerden!’ Eddie shouted, and ran with arms wide.

Mrs Hannan pushed her hair back from her forehead with the back of one hand. She twirled a finger and Ruby obediently turned a circle. Mrs Hannan shrugged. ‘I don’t know what a businesslike woman looks like. You look respectable.’ She smiled suddenly, with a touch of wryness. ‘*I’d* give you a job.’

Ruby wasn’t sure what that smile meant. Her landlady wasn’t easy to read; only a year or two older than Ruby, she

was far more . . . sophisticated wasn't quite the right word. No one would look at her serviceable print dress and ample figure and think 'sophisticated', a word which called up images of social graces and sherry-drinking. Mrs Hannan drank shandies. But she did drink shandies, not lemonade. And putting those marriage lines in Ruby's handbag had been the action of an experienced woman – she was generous, but practical with it, and she'd accepted Ruby's thank-you gift of chocolates with a composed, enigmatic smile.

'Off you go,' she said, as if she were Ruby's mother instead of Eddie's.



Respectability wasn't much to offer an employer. As she walked down to Rozelle Bay, Ruby wondered what Jimmy would think of her going off to work in a strange business. It wasn't *strictly* necessary. Now he had embarked, she could go back to Bourke. Back to the family draper's shop, back to live with her mother.

It made her oddly shaky to think of doing so. The three weeks she had spent there after Jimmy left to enlist had been so odd; she had felt herself neither flesh nor fowl: not really a wife, because she had no home of her own; not a girl, either, thanks to that wonderful, astonishing honeymoon week. She grew warm at the insistent memory of Jimmy's lips, his hands, his loving voice. After that, after that total transformation of who she was, it had felt wrong to simply slip back into her old room, to sit at her old chair at the dining table, to serve the same picky and inquisitive customers in the store, to be dutiful and obedient as though she were still an unmarried girl.

But that was just it. There wasn't a word for what she was

now, and there wasn't a proper place for her in Bourke. She was better off here. It was silly, she knew, but she felt closer to Jimmy here. And if she never served in a shop again it would be too soon.

It was not as cold as she had thought, despite being mid-winter, and Ruby hoped she wasn't going to walk into the office perspiring and looking frowsy. She slowed down a little so she would arrive fresh. The winter winds hadn't yet started to blow – her landlady had assured her they would come full force in August, but today Sydney Harbour shivered in bright sunshine.

Curry & Son's Timber Merchants were at the end of Johnston Street, facing The Crescent and backing onto Rozelle Bay. There were timber yards and docks all around Rozelle Bay, from one side of Glebe Island Bridge all the way round the foreshore to the other side, with a small break for Federal Park on the east. On the other side of the bridge was a quarry and commercial shipping wharves.

She had watched Curry's operations from Federal Park yesterday, judging if it were the kind of business which would warrant a full-time bookkeeper, or if the bookkeeper would be expected to do extra work, heavy work a woman couldn't do. They were a miller and wholesaler; the logs arrived on barges, were unloaded and then stacked in the yard.

She had watched as trimmed and shaped logs had been ferried across from Curry's to the new wharves being built on the western side of Rozelle Bay – a short trip, but tricky; the logs were huge, no doubt to make the pilings of the new docks. It had been an impressive operation.

Ruby swallowed a lump of pure nervousness and smoothed down her skirt before she crossed the street, avoiding an omnibus

and a horse and cart without too much fear – a new skill she'd only just acquired.

It was a big yard, the size of a home paddock. A long paling fence ran along the street frontage to a cream weatherboard office with a green door and a couple of frosted-glass windows facing the street; further down was a pair of big green gates, which were open for business. She could glimpse the ends of stacked timber through the gate as she walked to the front door.

Should she knock, or just go in? She took a deep breath and opened the door to the office, a knot of hope and anxiety under her breastbone.

The office overlooked the yard from a storey's height, the far wall having three big sash windows. In the corner was a door which led down to the yard. She could see the sawmill to the left, a big open shed with machinery running down the centre, busy with men and lumber, the saws shrieking and buzzing as each log went through. To the right, stacks and stacks of timber were neatly aligned in open corrugated-iron sheds. Vaguely, she remembered that timber had to 'cure'. A bit like leather, she supposed, which got harder as it got older.

The building was one big room, with wooden filing cabinets along one wall and desks in the middle. An end was partitioned off for two equal-sized offices, glass above wooden partitions. In the corner a barrel stove gave off a surprising amount of warmth.

One of the small offices was empty. The other was occupied by a man talking on the telephone. Mr Curry, perhaps.

The wall to her left was faced with boards of many different kinds of timber, from bright gold to a dark red, the boards oiled rather than varnished. Although the wood had been put together without any concern for looks, it was curiously attractive, with

the simple beauty of natural things. It took her a moment to realise that this was a sample wall, put there to show customers the different grades of timber available.

In the middle of the central two desks was a telephone, which was the only familiar thing she could see – it was the same model they used in the shop at home.

Two men were seated at the paired desks, checking over lists, and they looked like a pair, both older, both balding, in shirtsleeves with sleeve protectors on and looking up with identical expressions of surprise at seeing a woman. When they stood up, she realised they were not, after all, so alike – almost a foot in height separated them, and the shorter of the two was skinny as a snake, while the taller one's abdomen stuck out like a ball in front of him. Too much beer made a stomach like that, her mother had said and, sure enough, the blue eyes peering at her were a little bloodshot.

'Can we help you, miss?' the tall one said, politely.

'My name is Mrs Hawkins,' she said. 'I've come to enquire about the bookkeeper's position.'

They gawked at her.

The shorter one, whose bald head glistened with a light sweat, snorted and said, 'No jobs for the likes of you, young madam!'

His tone made it clear what kind of woman he thought she was.

'Now, Wesley,' the other man said. 'Lots of women are working these days.'

'God didn't intend it!' Wesley snarled. 'Get home to your children, woman!'

The door to the boss's office opened and a wide man came out. He was perhaps sixty, not so much corpulent as solid with

muscle. It was his shortness which gave the impression of width. His hair was black but speckled with grey, and his eyes were Irish blue. Ruby realised that she'd seen him at Mass last week, and a flicker in his eyes suggested that he recognised her, too.

‘What’s going on?’ His voice held an echo of Ireland. She was surprised that a man named Wesley – clearly a Methodist – should be working for an Irish Catholic. The shortage of men must be bad indeed.

When neither of the clerks spoke, the man turned his gaze on her, and she became aware of his authority. He was used to being obeyed. Clearing her throat, she said her prepared piece again. ‘My name is Mrs Hawkins. I’ve come to enquire about the bookkeeping position.’

Before he could respond, the door from the yard opened and a big man in shirtsleeves burst through, bringing with him the smell of wood and woodsmoke, the sound of the big saw screeching, and the tang of the sea. He seemed to fill the office with movement and noise. Ruby registered his red hair and the width of his shoulders.

‘Where the bloody hell is the carter? He’s supposed to take that shipment up to Haberfield.’

‘Tom,’ the boss said, nodding at Ruby. She tried to look like she heard bad language every day, but it was hard not to stare coldly at the man. When he saw her he coloured red to the roots of his hair, and shuffled his feet.

‘Sorry, missus, didn’t see you there,’ he mumbled. Then he regained his composure and looked at the tall man. ‘But where’s my carter, Wally?’

She almost laughed. Wally and Wesley.

'You'd better come in here,' the boss said to her. 'I'm William Curry.'

Mr Curry's office was more comfortable than she had expected. The visitors' chairs were upholstered in rich brown leather and there was a Turkish carpet on the floor. On the desk was a telephone handset and a bronze inkwell in the shape of a lion. It was all very masculine, and she wondered what she was thinking of, applying for a man's job.

Sitting down, she tried to look calm and professional, although her palms were moist inside her navy gloves. She resolved not to gush with nerves.

'So,' Mr Curry said. 'Bookkeeping. Done it before?'

'Yes. My father owned a draper's and haberdashery in Bourke. I kept his books for six years, ever since I left school.'

'Bourke. What are you doing in Sydney? Get married, did you?'

His manner was abrupt, but not unfriendly, though there was no trace of the blarney she had known in other Irishmen.

'My husband is in the Expeditionary Force,' she explained. 'I came to Sydney to see him off.'

'Hmph. Children?'

'No.'

He sat back in his chair and stared at her. It was an unsettling gaze and it brought out in her the defiance her mother had predicted would be her downfall, the same defiance that had led her to marry Jimmy despite the pronouncements of her acquaintance that 'marry in haste, repent at leisure'. She put her chin up and stared back, aware of the noise of the saws and the shouts of workers, the trundle of a cart and the clop

of hooves down the street. Perhaps the carter had arrived. After a moment of standoff, Mr Curry chuckled.

‘You won’t want to use the privies here, I can tell you.’

Her heart lifted. Did that mean he was considering her for the job?

‘I’m living only a few moments’ walk away, in Wells Street. I would go home for lunch.’

‘Might be best,’ he nodded. ‘The men won’t want to mind their tongues around you at break-time. And I won’t have them shamed into minding their tongues at other times, either. This is a man’s business. If you come into it, you’ll have to take us as you find us.’

‘Certainly,’ she said. ‘It’s not like I’m a child, Mr Curry, or an unmarried girl.’

‘True, true. Wouldn’t have a girl working here. Just lead to trouble. How old are you?’

That was rude – but what did she know about job interviews? Perhaps he asked all his applicants the same question.

‘Twenty-two.’

‘Old enough to know sense, then.’

He stared at her again, the light striking his face. She could see the line where he stopped shaving; above it a fine down of hair showed in the light. He had small flat ears, which lay back against his head. Neat ears, like a child’s.

‘My boy Laurence is with the Force,’ he said. ‘He’s a lieutenant. I didn’t want him to join up, but what can you do? His mother was English.’

She nodded to show she understood. Ireland was staying out of the war, hoping that Germany would weaken England enough to make Irish independence easier to achieve. Some

said the Irish were active sympathisers, supplying the Germans with safe harbours and supplies, but Ruby didn't believe that. The British-led government ruling Ireland would never allow it.

'What battalion?' she asked.

'The 20th.'

Her heart lifted. 'That's the same as my Jimmy.'

Mr Curry pulled at his lip, his manner changing slightly, becoming less reserved. 'Well, then. We 20th Battalion families had better stick together. You can start Monday. Half-past seven. Start early, finish early. Half-past four. Half hour for lunch at twelve. Half day Saturday. One pound ten for the first month, while you're learning, two pounds after that if you're any good.'

That seemed low to Ruby, but what did she know? Only the value of men's wages.

'All right. Off you go. Be here bright and early.' He stood up and ushered her to the door.

'Thank you so much, Mr Curry,' she said, suddenly aware that she hadn't said anything appropriate. 'I'll work hard, I promise.'

'No trouble,' he said. 'No trouble with the men. That's the main thing.'

She nodded firmly. 'No trouble at all. I'm a married woman.'

He sniffed. 'Just you remember that when your husband is a long way away.'

They were at the street door before she could think of a response. As if she would *ever* – but she found herself out on the footpath before she could put her indignation into words.

As she began the climb back to Wells Street, she was filled with elation. *I have a position!* An actual, proper, paid position. She calculated. Two pounds a week. Jimmy got six shillings

a day. The Army reserved one of those shillings for when he came back to Australia. Jimmy allotted her half of the rest, two shillings sixpence a day, so she received seventeen shillings sixpence a week and cabled the rest back to him. Once her month was up, she would have two pounds, seventeen shillings sixpence a week. Even paying her board, and even given the shocking price increases in things like stockings and tooth powder, she should still be able to put away a pound or so a week.

The thought filled her with an extraordinary sense of hope and excitement. Money of her own.