

# SUITCASE OF DREAMS

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# 1

**11 November, 1956**

**C**lusters of tiny lights were scattered across the darkened land before us. As we drew closer in the predawn, I was loath to relinquish the peace I felt, even amid the excitement and apprehension that swirled around me. Clutching the cold railing, I breathed deeply, taking in the sea air – Australian air – and held on to that moment of calm.

The rising sun lifted above the horizon, dusting the port of Fremantle and the ocean in a soft golden glow. Sandy beaches and small dwellings appeared out of the inky blackness, dotting the coastline and harbour. Australia, the golden land, was welcoming me and my family to our new life with open arms. I knew I would never forget this sight.

Erich was by my side and I could feel the thrum of excitement course through his body. At that moment, I felt that we were the only two people who existed, waiting on the edge of

*Tania Blanchard*

the world, relishing these moments of quiet and united in our desire for a better life.

‘We made it, Lotte. We made it,’ he whispered into my ear.

‘Yes, we made it.’ Relief flooded me. Our old life was gone – Nazi Germany, the war and a country changed forever – and our new life beckoned. Finally I would be able to cast off the pull of the rigid traditions and expectations I had grown up with and escape the poverty that had come with choosing a life with Erich. This was a new start and we could be anything we wanted to be. Australia was a young country, with opportunities for all people, we’d been told, opportunities that would never have been possible for us in Germany, our ruined homeland. Here we would have the freedom to choose the life we wanted.

‘Look, isn’t it beautiful?’ He pointed to the shore.

‘All shiny and new.’

‘Perfect for our family . . . Perfect for our new life.’ His anticipation and hope were plain to see under the deck lights and I felt sure that my face mirrored his.

‘It has to be.’ We’d left everything we knew behind us in search of a better life for ourselves and our girls.

Erich placed his hand over my chilled fingers, sharing his strength, warmth and comfort. ‘It will be.’

He gathered me into his arms and kissed me deeply.

Chaos erupted as we docked. Most of the passengers on the *Skaubryn* were German, as were those welcoming the ship to Australia, and bursts of our mother tongue drifted across to us, the shouts and screams of family, friends and acquaintances

## *Suitcase of Dreams*

waiting on the pier for those who were disembarking. There was frantic waving of banners and handkerchiefs. The atmosphere was reassuring. It would be the last time we would hear the sound of our language on Australian soil, I thought, before the inevitable tide of English was upon us. For a moment, I pretended we were still home and not halfway across the world. I wished we had someone greeting us, smoothing our transition into this strange country, but we knew nobody here.

Erich held my hand, his green eyes meeting mine. The girls were jumping out of their skins with excitement that we had finally arrived, fidgeting restlessly, keen to leave the ship for the day and explore, and my conflicted emotions were pushed to one side as we surged towards the designated areas for passport and health control.

'Don't leave Mutti's side,' whispered Greta to Johanna, her dark head against her sister's blonde one. 'I've heard that kangaroos jump down the streets here and take little children and stuff them in their pouches.'

'They do not,' said Johanna indignantly.

Greta nodded knowingly, her hands on her hips as if daring Johanna to prove her wrong.

'Do they?' My younger daughter shot a worried look to me. Her eyes were blue today. They often shifted between blue, like my own eyes, and green, like her father's, and sometimes it was hard to say what shade they were at all.

'Of course not,' I said, exasperated, but quietly, not wanting to make a scene. 'Don't tease your sister,' I said to Greta, giving her my sternest expression.

Greta just grinned at me, her brown eyes sparkling, her nose peeling from hours in the sun. She was ten years old and

*Tania Blanchard*

a month at sea had exhausted all the adventurous opportunities available as far as she was concerned; now she wanted to discover what excitement Australia had in store. Johanna, with her sun-bleached blonde hair, like my own, was two years younger and adored her sister. She was more sensible, wary of new experiences and fond of reminding Greta of the dangers of her latest endeavour. They were a good team, balancing influences, and fiercely protective of each other, despite the usual sibling rivalries. Whatever was ahead of us, I knew that they would be fine.

I spotted Erich returning with our paperwork. He cut an impressive figure – tall, athletic and broad-shouldered – and he carried himself with a natural elegance that many admired. Despite the humidity that embraced us and the throngs of anxious and impatient people, his crisp white jacket remained uncrushed. The matching wide-brimmed hat sat jauntily on his head, covering the luxuriant dark hair, now threaded with silver, that was swept back from his forehead.

‘All finished,’ he said. ‘We can take the bus to Perth.’

‘Where’s Perth?’ Greta pulled on his jacket sleeve. ‘Is it far?’

‘Not too far. I’ve been told there’s plenty to see. Come on, let’s not waste another minute.’ We were all excited to get our first glimpse of Australia before boarding the boat once again for the final leg of our journey to Melbourne.

The girls grabbed his hands, and Erich laughed and set off. The vice around my heart eased a little to see the joy on their faces. For a man in his mid-forties, Erich had the energy of a man half his age, but I still sometimes marvelled that he had decided to uproot his entire life and begin again in a new country so late in life. I had struggled with the idea much

## *Suitcase of Dreams*

longer than he had, even though I was only thirty-one. The girls' dark and blonde plaits swayed gently across their backs as they tried to match their father's footsteps. They were why we were here.

It was a beautiful day and our decision was made, so as I first stepped onto Australian soil, I was determined to stop worrying about the uncertainty ahead.

It wasn't until we were standing on top of the hill in Perth's famous Kings Park that I truly got a sense of Australia. The girls were eating ice cream and Erich and I drinking Coca-Cola as we surveyed the city, the beaches and the ocean beyond. Trees unlike any I had seen before were plentiful – the eucalyptus trees we'd been told about on the boat, their leaves fresh and pungent. The dry and dusty paths and the succulents that bordered them reminded me that we had left the verdant green of Germany behind. It was springtime but already evidence of the hot, dry climate was easy to find. I took photographs with the camera Erich and I had bought for the journey, beginning to grasp the vastness of the wild, tough landscape.

We arrived in Melbourne's bustling port five days later, thousands of lights and neon signs illuminating the pier. The screaming and shouting was deafening. Banners, flags and balloons jostled for prime position on the pier as names were called between land and the ship. Everyone wanted to be first to find their loved ones but it was nearly midnight before passengers could step ashore and into waiting arms. That was when the hysterics really started: tears of joy were shed by all at the happy reunions but there were more than a few who cried tears of sadness, those who had no family or friends here. Those who missed their homes desperately.

*Tania Blanchard*

We could go ashore for the evening too but it was late, and while those who disembarked made the most of their reunions, many of us would stay on board for one final night. My emotions were running high – our voyage here on the *Skaubryn* had been like a dream, the luxury of the liner itself was an unexpected pleasure as we sailed toward our new life. The next morning a train would take us to the Bonegilla migrant camp where we would be processed, given job placements and sent to our new homes.

‘It’ll be all right,’ said Erich, drawing me into his arms. ‘We’ll get through this together.’

I clung to him. He was my anchor and I knew he was right. Despite the difficulties of moving to a strange new country, we had every reason to believe that better times were ahead for us.

‘Let’s go to bed. We have an early start in the morning and the girls won’t give us a moment’s peace once they’re up.’

The following day was a blur as we made our way off the ship and through the crowd still clustered around the gangways. Pamphlets were thrust in our faces by faceless figures, promoting what I didn’t know. The girls stayed close to us, overwhelmed by the cacophony of voices calling out in different languages.

A group of dock workers stood a little apart from the fray and offered them ice cream and sweets. ‘Welcome to Australia,’ they said.

The men didn’t look like they could afford to give out treats, but I felt obliged to accept, and the girls were very excited to have sweets to sustain them through the hours of the train ride ahead.



## *Suitcase of Dreams*

The workers didn't force their pamphlets on us but Erich took one willingly and thanked them for their kindness. The pamphlet was promoting trade union membership to new migrant workers. Erich wouldn't need to be part of a union in his profession and new job, but it surprised me that Australians were proactive in the labour movement; we had been told they were a very relaxed people. Under the Third Reich in Germany, trade unionism was banned as a manifestation of communism and workers had no voice. But I was pleased that migrants were being welcomed so readily into the Australian way of life and would be guided and looked after by those who knew and understood Australian ways. It looked like freedom of choice and the freedom to speak your beliefs was a reality in this country and our hope for this was part of the reason we had come.

Then we were through customs with our luggage and onto a train bound for Bonegilla, six hours away. It was hard to believe that we were finally in Australia. At one point on our passage across the world I wondered whether we would arrive at all – the *Skaubryn* was one of the last ships to make it through the Suez Canal before it was closed by the crisis. It was still closed and nobody knew when it would open again.

'When will we get there?' moaned Greta and Johanna on more than one occasion. Each time, I threw them a frown. We were not alone in the carriage, sharing it with a doctor and his two sisters. Erich chatted amiably with them while I tried to keep the girls under control. My nerves were already frayed, worried about what would greet us at the end of this journey, and their restlessness didn't help my state of mind. The supply of sweets had dried up long ago.

*Tania Blanchard*

‘Look out the window for the kangaroos,’ said Erich to the girls when it was clear that I would soon lose my patience with them.

‘I’ve seen three already,’ said one of the doctor’s sisters, winking surreptitiously at me.

I smiled in thanks as the girls’ attention was drawn to the rolling countryside once again.

‘It goes on forever,’ I said to Erich. ‘I can count the number of small towns we’ve passed on one hand.’

‘Australia’s so much bigger than Germany.’

‘Yes, I know, but I never imagined how vast it would be and how few people live in such a big place. It’s so different from home.’

‘Not really. It’s mainly hilly farmland like at home and the cattle and sheep look much the same.’

‘You can see the farms are much bigger here and the countryside’s nowhere as green.’ Erich was only trying to soothe my anxiety but he was irritating me. ‘Besides, the never-ending sight of eucalyptus trees is a constant reminder that we’re not in Germany any more.’ I took a deep breath to calm down, gazing out at the blue-shaded mountains in the distance, and wondered what mysterious things might be found upon their slopes and rugged peaks.

He squeezed my hand. ‘I know. It all seems so strange at the moment. We’ll get used to it, I’m sure.’

I nodded and stared out the window once more. Although it was certainly going to take a while to adjust to all the changes we would find here, we had each other. And after what we’d been through during the war, and afterwards, we were well used to supporting each other through the toughest of times.

## *Suitcase of Dreams*

We reached our destination mid-afternoon, our nervous energy swirling around us as we alighted from the train to board the bus to camp.

'Look, Mutti and Vati!' said Johanna, pointing out the window to some figures lining the camp driveway.

'Aborigines!' said Greta with excitement. The three young men wore nothing but shorts, their tanned bodies and faces streaked with white paint. We'd heard about the Aborigines and their ancient culture while still in Germany and after experiencing exotic Colombo, Greta had hoped to see Aborigines everywhere.

The bus driver laughed. 'No, love. They're Swedes. They've been in the sun too long and burnt to a crisp.'

Although I didn't quite understand exactly what he said, I understood his meaning and translated for Greta. Her face fell and I had to hide my smile with my hand.

'But what about the paint?' Erich asked.

'That's calamine lotion for the sunburn. Don't you have that where you come from?'

'No.'

'Oh well, you'll soon get to know it. It's useful for all sorts of things, from sunburn to stinging nettle rash.'

Erich shot a perplexed look at me. I shrugged. I didn't know what he was talking about. Erich's English was now even better than mine but I somehow felt that we were not prepared for the variety spoken in Australia. It would take some time to understand all the strange things Australians said.

Bonegilla migrant camp lay close to the town of Albury. It was a beautiful spot, hilly and leafy with a large water

*Tania Blanchard*

reservoir nearby. We could see mountains beyond the camp, which we were told were only a fifteen-minute walk away. Behind them lay the Australian Alps, still snow-covered this late in spring. The girls were excited by the thought of swimming in the reservoir and although Erich's face lit up when he learnt that motor-boating was popular, I knew that, just like me, he couldn't wait to go hiking in those mountains.

The camp was enormous, with all the facilities we could want – hospital, school, kindergarten, canteen, cinema, theatre and churches. Each block was a small village of twenty corrugated-iron barracks and each barrack had ten small rooms, partitioned with plywood and sparsely furnished. There was a communal kitchen, dining room, laundry, shower room and toilets. It wasn't a palace but it was much better than the dilapidated farm cottage we'd lived in after the war. Erich and I had lived with my mother and aunt and her four boys with no electricity, no running water, only a little fuel to cook once a day and no heating. We'd managed then and we'd manage now.

'Look at the geraniums,' I said to Erich as we walked to our barracks. We'd been given two rooms: one for the girls and one for Erich and me. 'They're enormous compared to the ones at home.' The colours around us were vibrant, with flowering plants and bushes lining the paths and buildings of the camp.

'Everything seems bigger and brighter here,' said Erich in awe as we stepped inside our room. 'Even the sky is bluer. We'll make it feel like home for however long we're here,' he said as we looked around. Once you put your touches on the rooms, they'll be cosy and welcoming. Just you wait and see.'

## *Suitcase of Dreams*

'I know,' I answered. 'How long do you think we'll be here?'

'I've been told that it's only for a couple of weeks. I see the employment office in a day or two. Hopefully they have a job already for me. I'm excited to be working in engineering again. It's been too long.' He sighed, kissing my neck. 'We'll stay only as long as we have to. We'll have a place of our own soon.'

A few days after we arrived, Erich came home, face drained of colour. Thank God the girls were outside with some of the other children in our block, looking at where the fireworks display would be held to celebrate the beginning of the Olympics in Melbourne.

'What happened?'

'There's no job,' he muttered, almost to himself.

My heart began to pound in my ears. I wasn't sure I'd heard him right. 'What did you say?'

Erich looked at me then, and his face crumpled. 'There's no job waiting for me. I've let you down.'

I grasped his arm, not sure if it was to give him strength or to make sure I wasn't in some horrible nightmare. I led him to a chair and sank down beside him. 'What do you mean?'

'I presented all my documentation. Everything was in order, but it didn't matter. Foreign qualifications for professions like medicine, law and engineering – professions like mine – aren't recognised in Australia. I can't work in my field unless I go to university here and retrain.'

Erich knew everything about planes and how they worked. He had been unable to find work in his field in Germany after

*Tania Blanchard*

the war and had struggled to find continuous work to sustain our family. But the Australian Consulate in Frankfurt had promised him engineering work in Australia and that information had helped us make the decision to migrate.

‘How can this be?’

‘They lied to us to get us to come here. We’ve been lured here under false pretences.’ Erich’s voice was hard and flat.

‘That is ridiculous! How can they get away with it? It’s not right . . .’ I raked a trembling hand through my hair. ‘What are we going to do?’

‘We have no choice. I was reminded of the fact quite clearly today.’ He looked me in the eyes. ‘We’re committed to staying here for two years. I have to take any job I’m given, regardless of what I was promised. Besides, even if we wanted to go back now, we could never repay our passage to the Australian government.’

I stared at Erich. His words were like a slap in the face. All the planning, the heartache and the difficult decisions . . . We’d been through so much. But he was right – false hope and indignation weren’t going to get us anywhere. We had no choice.

‘I’m so sorry, my *schatz*,’ he said. ‘You don’t deserve this.’

I wrapped my arms around him but I wanted nothing more than to scream and shout – to throw something at any Australian official who crossed my path. But none of that would do us any good. Bureaucracy could not be swayed by the act of a single person, righteous or not. I sat back, steeling myself against what was coming.

‘So what happens now?’ My voice sounded small, although I was trying to put on a brave face.

## *Suitcase of Dreams*

'The best they can offer is to find me work in some related field, probably as a mechanic.' He shrugged. 'We're no better off than we were at home.'

'It's not your fault.' I squeezed Erich's hand, summoning my strength. 'We've done it before, we can do it again.'

He straightened in his chair, pulling himself together. 'Maybe it's a start. I can save some money and get us settled and then perhaps I can study to get my qualification.'

The vein at his temple was throbbing and I could see the supreme effort it took him to remain calm and logical. As much as this blow devastated him, he had his family to provide for. We had to come first.

I kissed him and held him tight but a little voice inside me wondered how long it would take for us to find our feet.