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# JOSEPHINE COX

## A Family Secret



JOSEPHINE  
COX

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Secret



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## PROLOGUE

Blackpool, North-West England, 1935

‘**W**AS THERE EVER a more splendid sandcastle?’ said Marie, beaming on her daughter, Anne. ‘Those little flags on the sand-pies round the moat make a castle fit for the King.’

‘I like this one best,’ said Anne, pointing to the paper Union Flag, fluttering furiously in the strong April breeze blowing straight off the Irish Sea. ‘It matches my bathers.’

‘That blue matches your skin all right,’ laughed Derek. ‘Tony and Eileen have got the right idea – going for a stroll along the Promenade. Tony said he’d look what’s on at the Winter Gardens; said he’d treat us to a night on the town if we can get the landlady to babysit Anne.’

‘Yes, he’s a good friend,’ Marie said, leaning forward in her deck chair to unscrew the lid of the

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Thermos and pour a steaming cup of tea. 'They both are. Tony's such a generous sort, kind-hearted and so sweet with Eileen.' She lowered her voice. 'She told me she'd like a little one, too, but they've not been blessed yet. Still, there's time . . . Here, love, have some of this.' She passed Derek the cup and poured another for herself. 'When I've drunk this I think I'll take a stroll, too, if you'll keep an eye on Anne? This saggy old deck chair is starting to lose its appeal.'

Having drunk her tea, she climbed up the steps to the Promenade, stopped at the railings to wave to her husband and daughter, then set off in the direction of the Tower, hoping she might bump into Tony and Eileen returning from their walk.



Two workmen, canvas bags containing paint pots and brushes at their feet, were leaning over the railings a few yards down from where the pretty, dark-haired young mother had emerged up the steps and onto the Promenade.

One was a striking figure, a handsome towering giant of a man with a fine pair of shoulders so broad they looked as if they could carry a horse. A huge dark beard covered almost the whole of his lower face and thick neck, and his narrow dark eyes constantly danced, missing nothing.

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In contrast, his colleague was slight of build, with small features, fair colouring and bright blue eyes, and when he turned to address his mate his voice had a musical Irish lilt.

‘The first of this year’s Blackpool Beauties,’ he said, watching the young woman walk elegantly away.

‘Aye, gives you something to hope for,’ said the big fella, his voice betraying his Scots heritage. ‘I tell you, Danny Boy, it’s not just better weather I’m looking forward to. It’s the sight of the ladies sunbathing on the beach that makes my hard working day worthwhile.’

‘I’ll drink to that, Big John,’ said Danny Magee.

‘There’s a fair few things you’ll drink to,’ grinned John Ferguson. ‘Comes of being Irish, I reckon.’

‘So what’s your excuse?’ laughed Danny, slapping him on the back.

‘Luckily we’re going her way,’ said John, nodding at the receding figure of the pretty young woman who had been on the beach. ‘First pint’s on me if you can find out her name. Your round if she tells me.’

‘Yer’ve got money to lose, big man.’



Marie started along the Promenade in the direction of the Tower, the cold wind lifting the skirt of her coat. She glanced back and waved to Derek, and to Anne, now snuggling into a towel, filling Marie’s heart

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with joy. What fun to be on holiday with the four people who meant most to her in the world: her darling daughter, her handsome husband, and her dearest life-long friends. The Blackpool holiday had become an annual treat by now, sometimes at Easter and some years in summer, when the weather was more predictable and the beaches were packed with workers from the industrial towns on their break. She spotted Eileen and Tony sitting on the Blue Bench, the renowned meeting place for visitors and locals alike, a refuge for lost children, a trysting place for young sweethearts and place for weary travellers to rest. Since last century the bench had occupied this prominent position facing the sea and had passed into local folklore. No one could remember now how the bench had come to be there in the first place, and today, Marie saw, it was beginning to betray its age. Although it had been repainted every year, the iron-work was showing through with rusty stains. Marie thought that so far this year the Corporation hadn't got round to repainting it and she hoped it wasn't going to be neglected and allowed to fall into disrepair.

'Hello! Eileen, Tony, how was your stroll?' Marie called as she approached.

'Marie, we guessed if we sat here for a bit you might come to find us,' grinned Tony, shuffling along to make room for Marie on the bench next to Eileen. 'Didn't think you had the staying power.'

'Oh, it's not *that* cold,' Marie protested. 'Although



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Anne insisted on wearing her bathers and I left her looking bright blue.'

All three laughed and Eileen passed across a brown paper bag of humbugs. 'Here, love, help yourself. Neither my waistline nor my fillings will stand another one.'

For a while Anne sat sucking the sweet while Tony related what he'd seen of the programme at the Winter Gardens and Eileen commented on the choice.

'We'll simply have to go to hear this new Wurlitzer organ that's been installed in the Empress Ballroom,' she enthused. 'There's a new organist – Horace Finch his name is – and he's supposed to be brilliant. To me, that's the sound of the seaside.'

'The sound of the seaside to me is the howling of a gale,' said Tony, deadpan.

The women burst out laughing and by the time their chatter had receded they saw that there were two young men in overalls standing before them. From the look of the bags they were carrying their business was with the bench the friends were sitting on.

'Good afternoon,' said the short wiry man with the fair curly hair. 'And a fine afternoon it is indeed.'

'Good afternoon to you,' Tony responded. 'I'm guessing you're here to smarten up the Blue Bench?'

'Right you are,' answered the Irishman, 'but it seems downright rude to turf the ladies off when they look so comfortable. I'm guessing you're on holiday, is that so?'



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‘I think that’s a fairly safe bet,’ said Marie with a smile.

‘Smart as well as pretty,’ said the irrepressible workman, lifting his flat cap politely. ‘Though it just happens I do have a bit of a gift – being the seventh son of a seventh daughter – and I can tell ye a thing or two about yerself ye wouldn’t expect me to know.’

The other workman rolled his dark eyes in mock exasperation. ‘Just listen to his blarney,’ he said as Eileen dug Marie in the ribs with her elbow and they whispered and giggled.

‘All right, you’re on,’ said Marie, ‘but I’m not crossing your palm with silver.’

‘No need, dear lady,’ answered the little fella. ‘My gift is free to a beauty like you.’

‘Hark at him,’ guffawed the big man, who had a Scots accent.

‘All right, then, where are we from?’ asked Eileen.

Fortunately for Danny, Eileen had the distinctive accent of the area, and Danny had a good ear for the various Lancashire and Cheshire voices that were so often heard among the Blackpool holidaymakers. When he’d guessed right, his answer greeted with oohs of admiration, he decided to direct the conversation back to the young mother before he got out of his depth.

‘Now, give me your hand,’ he said, and Marie half-reluctantly extended her left hand into his none-too-clean, rough and work-worn one with a slightly nervous smile.

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He studied her hand carefully for half a minute, then said, 'Now I can see that you're married, am I right?'

Marie, Eileen and Tony caught each other's eyes and rocked with mirth.

'I think the wedding ring is a bit of a clue,' Marie spluttered, and this time all of them were laughing.

'All right . . . all right . . . Let me see . . . I see a handsome husband, a tall man with dark hair. He's a bit older than you are. Would I be right?'

'Yes!' said Marie. 'How did you know that?'

'It's the gift,' said the workman. 'And . . . what's this? A child, a little girl . . . maybe four or five years old?'

'Right again,' gasped Marie. 'Anne is four. How did you know that? You really do have a gift, don't you?'

'The gift of the gab,' said the big fella. 'Only saw you on the beach earlier, didn't we?'

Marie snatched her hand away, tutting at her own gullibility, but she couldn't be cross at the charming rogue with the twinkly blue eyes.

'You had me for a moment there,' she smiled.

'Me, too,' said Tony, impressed with the friendliness of these two likely lads. 'Do you always try your "gift" with the visitors?'

'Only the pretty ones,' the big Scot answered. 'I'm John Ferguson, by the way, known as Big John round these parts, and this is my workmate and partner in mischief, Danny Magee, known as Danny Boy.'

'Tony and Eileen Withers.'

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‘And I’m Marie Foster.’

‘Your round, I think,’ said Big John to Danny, inexplicably to the others.

The young workmen appeared to be in absolutely no hurry to begin their painting and settled down on the path in front of the bench where they continued to chat. They asked about the visitors’ holiday plans and what they had seen so far. Eileen passed round the bag of humbugs and John and Danny moved on to entertaining anecdotes about their various tasks as handymen for Blackpool Corporation. It was clear they were often in trouble with their boss and had probably held on to their jobs partly through a combination of low cunning and charm, and partly by being rather good at what they did – when they were actually doing it.

‘Right . . .’ said Danny, rubbing his hands together in a show of enthusiasm for the task ahead, ‘I think you and I had better be starting on this here Blue Bench, if these lovely people don’t mind?’

‘No, of course you must get on. And so must we,’ said Eileen. ‘Heavens, Marie, have you seen the time? Derek and Anne will think we’ve gone back to Cheshire and left them.’

‘Oh, good grief!’ Marie exclaimed, looking at her watch. ‘I said I wouldn’t be long, I’d better run ahead. Goodbye, Danny, goodbye Big John. I hope we’ll see you around. We’ve got a couple more days here so I’ll look out for you.’

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‘We all will,’ said Tony, shaking hands with the workmen. ‘See you soon.’

‘I hope so,’ said Danny, looking especially at Marie. ‘And if not this year, then maybe next year?’

‘If I’m not on the other side of the world,’ said John.

‘Or in the clink,’ said Danny, and as he watched the three friends happily making their way down to the beach he thought that Marie really did have the prettiest laugh he’d ever heard.

PART ONE



*Old Secrets*



## CHAPTER ONE

Blackpool, July 1970

EILEEN PRIMPED HER perm with the large-tooth comb then patted her bubbly new hairstyle in place. She put the comb on the hotel bedroom dressing table and, peering into the looking-glass, applied a slick of coral lipstick.

‘Will I do?’ she asked Tony.

Tony heaved himself out of the armchair and came closer to admire his wife. She’d kept her slim figure and always made an effort to look good, but over the last twenty years her face had grown sharper, the line of her mouth disappointed. Not that he was looking so dapper himself these days, what with the extra weight and the thinning hair. Once she’d told him he was love’s young dream – that seemed a long time ago. He knew the lines of disappointment on Eileen’s once-pretty face were there because of him.

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‘As proud to have you on my arm as always. You’d give any of those dolly birds on the beach a run for their money.’

‘Even though I’m old enough to be their grandma?’

‘To me you look as good as the day I married you.’ Tony beamed at her, pleased to make her happy this evening. ‘I’ve booked our favourite restaurant on the Promenade for seven o’clock.’

‘Oh, Tony, you are spoiling me. We’ve had such a lovely holiday that I shan’t want to go home.’

‘Me neither, love.’ For a moment he looked stricken, an expression on his face that Eileen had seen a few times over the last few days.

‘Tony, you are all right, aren’t you?’ she asked.

Tony was looking distinctly uncomfortable now. ‘It’s just that . . . well . . . I’ve had a letter.’

‘Bad news? It’s nothing to do with Beth or her brother, is it? I’ve never liked that fella she’s married to and it wouldn’t surprise me if he doesn’t treat her right. I know she’s only a friend and I should mind my own business, but she’s such a lovely girl and I’ve grown that fond of her I feel that she *is* my business, if you know what I mean?’

‘No, it’s nothing to do with Beth or Ronnie.’

‘Then what? Come on, Tony, I’m dying of suspense.’

‘If you’d just let me say—’

‘*What?*’

‘Marie. It’s Marie who’s written to me. She’s asked to see us and she’s coming here.’



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‘What? Now? Marie’s coming out to dinner with us?’

‘Course not, love. No, she wrote last week asking to meet us. Suggested tomorrow, as it happens. She knows we’re here for our annual holiday and she . . . she just thought that after all the happy times we had together it would be a nice place to meet up – sort of neutral ground.’

‘Well she knows she’d never be welcome at our home again, not after what she did. I really don’t want to set eyes on her again. But why follow us here? The cheek of the woman writing to you—’

Tony reached out and took Eileen’s hand as her voice became shrill and her face darkened with anger. ‘Listen, love, it was my fault as much as hers – possibly more. You’ve forgiven me –’ forgiven but not forgotten, he might have added – ‘and maybe she wants to try to put things right, to be friends again. And I suppose over the years we had so many lively, lovely holidays up in Blackpool she felt it would be easier here than home? Marie’s not getting any younger either; perhaps she’s the one who’s not well. I think we should meet her and hear her out.’

‘Oh, do you indeed!’

Eileen turned away and was silent for so long that Tony looked at his watch, thinking of the restaurant reservation. He silently berated himself for tackling the subject of Marie and her letter only now. He’d thought the prospect of an evening out would have

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offset the news he had to break to Eileen. Of course, this wasn't the first time he'd totally misjudged the situation, he reflected ruefully.

When Eileen turned back Tony was not entirely comforted by the expression on her face, though her words could be interpreted as conciliatory.

'All right, we'll see her. Let's hear what she has to say after all this time.'

'Thank you, love. That's very generous of you. She said she'd meet us late morning, at the Blue Bench. But actually, she said she'd be staying here tonight.'

'Good grief, it gets worse! Why on earth . . .?'

'I don't know, Eileen. Maybe she didn't want to miss us if I'd said no to the meeting or if we didn't show.'

'Sounds a bit desperate to me.'

'Aye, well, I think you're right there, love, but let's just see what she has to say, eh?'

Eileen sighed heavily. 'All right, Tony. Whatever you want.'

'Good girl.' He kissed her cheek, glanced again at his watch and started to gather his loose change into his pocket. 'Time we were off. We might be a few minutes late, even.'

'You go down, Tony, and perhaps you'd better phone the restaurant from the foyer to say we're running late while I check I've got what I need in my handbag.'

As soon as Tony had closed the door behind him

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Eileen grabbed a sheet of the hotel stationery and quickly wrote a few words. Then she took one of the smart blue envelopes and addressed it to 'Mrs Marie Foster'. If she were quick she'd be able to leave it at Reception while Tony was busy telephoning.

## CHAPTER TWO

ON WHAT PROMISED to be a glorious summer's day, two workmen strode purposely back along Central Pier, the echoing thud of their heavy work-boots resounding a soulful rhythm against the ancient, wooden boards, their shoulders hefting their canvas tool bags.

On this gloriously warm morning the first priority was a true labour of love; the task being the ongoing restoration of the famous Blue Bench, one of the oldest and much-loved landmarks along the entire coast.

Painstakingly painted year after year in a shade as blue as the skies above, the old bench was instantly recognised and cherished by those who had often found comfort and peace when seeking to rest awhile.

For over eighty years, as far as the records implied, the small, upright bench had proudly stood in the same place, from where it offered much-needed refuge for both locals and the many hordes of

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holidaymakers who arrived at the resort, year after year. Danny shook his head in admiration. It's a great pity but we may never find out where she came from, he thought to himself. I'd love to know who put her there, standing forever strong against whatever the weather throws at her. Sometimes feel a bit sorry for the old thing, when the holidaymakers have gone, the Blue Bench could look sad and lonely, her paint would start to crack and peel and her arms would creak and rust. That bench must have witnessed many unforgettable sights, silently keeping the secrets of many sad souls who used her as refuge. He hoped she would stand there facing the elements long after he and John were departed, he thought, with a gentle smile lighting up his eyes.

'Hey, Danny Boy!' John Ferguson called out to his colleague, who had hurried ahead of him. 'Slow down, man! There's no need to rush about to start another hard day's work? Especially in this damned heat!' He gave a low, agonising groan. 'If there was any justice, the two of us would be flat out on the beach right now, sunning ourselves!'

'Fat chance o' that, me old mate!' Danny kept up his pace. 'We're not here to lie on the beach. Like it or not, you and I, Big John, are just two working men, bought and paid for. We've looked at those handrails, now we'd better see what else is to do. And I, for one, think the pair of us should be grateful to be still earning a wage at our time o' life!'

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Having spoken his piece, Danny pressed on along the pier, with Big John ranting on as he followed. 'Slow down! Why the big rush? I dare say that useless bench will outlive us, you see if I'm not right!' Once John climbed onto his soapbox, there was no shutting him up. 'I mean it, Danny Boy! It's time we took it a bit easier. Like I said, we're at a certain age now. We're no longer two young men just larking about. We've grown old, and that's the truth of it!'

Their attention was duly diverted to watch some children scampering over the wide stone steps leading to the sea front and to the ice cream shop. 'It's a wonder the little devils don't get seriously hurt . . . fighting and shoving like that.' Shaking his head, John looked away and moved on.

Danny took a moment to watch the children. 'It's like a Christmas sale at the Co-op!' he chuckled. 'Hordes of frantic women knocking seven bells out of each other, fighting like cat and dog in order to reach the bargains before anyone else. It's downright mayhem, so it is!'

John laughed, 'Is that so? And how would you know that, eh? Unless you were there in the queues yourself?'

Grabbing Danny's shoulder, he pushed him forward. 'Stop your idling now, and employ your mind to something useful. Come on, eyes front, before the boss catches us wasting precious time.'

Having said his piece he increased his pace and

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strode steadily onward. Danny measured his step so as to walk alongside the big man, who appeared to have slipped into a silent world of his own. But Danny continued to chatter along.

‘We’ve had some good years haven’t we? Lived for the moment, with our boozing til dawn, backing the horses good and bad, mostly losing our shirt into the bargain! Enjoying ourselves come what may, never giving a thought to the consequences.’

Their wayward antics over the years had now begun to hit them hard as age caught up with them, but each man always looked at the bright side, no matter the woe or the weather.

John nudged his pal, ‘We were good at the game though and still are. When we’re not worn and knackered from a hard day’s work, that is.’

That’s what Danny Boy could do to him, always put a smile on his face. The twinkle in his eye grew bright as his thoughts wandered back to good times.

Ever practical, John remained a straight-talking fellow. In the main a hard-working man, he liked to work and earn a wage, and he enjoyed the treats that money could buy. Now in his sixties, he was thankful to be healthy and able, although he deeply regretted the years passing by so quickly. A man could still dream his dreams, but he did so now with a heavy heart.

He was as huge and as handsome as he’d been in his prime and his heavy-booted feet still made the walkways tremble as he thumped along.



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Danny Magee and John Ferguson had been close friends and workmates for more years than either of them cared to remember. By now, they were more like brothers than workmates. Each man had earned the respect of the other, having been tried and tested through good times and bad. They rarely rowed, but when they did – usually about work and women – it was fast and furious, then soon forgotten. In some ways theirs was an unlikely alliance, each man having strongly held views and differing opinions on many subjects, though they shared a powerful passion for the after-work leisure, especially football. If George Best was their hero, Stanley Matthews had been their god. More often than not these days, this leisure time would find them growing increasingly rowdy and comical as they relayed stories of their heyday, while they supped their pints of beer, played their shots at the billiard table, and still made time to ogle the good-looking women.

Danny Boy, grown slighter and shorter with the years, his hair now thinning, turned back to address his mate in the musical, Irish lilt he'd retained. 'John, me old friend, will ye move yerself! Don't forget, we planned to sneak away early tonight and there's work to be done.'

'D'you think I don't know that?' Big John spat on the ground. 'You don't need to tell me how it is and I know we should be grateful to have work to go to. I understand that.'

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‘Good. And let’s not forget Blackpool in summer does have its compensations,’ Danny gently reminded him. He gave a wide grin as he stole a peep over the railings and down to the beach. ‘Hey!’ He pointed excitedly. ‘Take a look at that little beauty stretched out. There, the one against the wall on the pink towel!’ He made a whooping sound. ‘It’s a crying shame we’re not down there, taking it easy and chatting up these dolly birds.’

John treated himself to a peek at the blonde and gave a cheeky wink. ‘Let’s not forget that we’re a bit long in the tooth for chasing the young’uns. It might improve our chances if we had money to throw about, but neither of us has ever been fortunate in that respect.’

‘That’s very true, more’s the pity,’ Danny sighed. ‘The sad truth is we’re meant to work till we drop.’ There was real regret in his voice as thoughts of various women who had passed through his life, and one in particular, crowded his mind.

As his mood lowered, he forged ahead, calling back to his mate, ‘Move yourself, will you? And don’t think I can’t see you sneaking another glance at the half-clad women down there. We’re agreed we both need this job, at least for a few more years. So let’s get on with it . . .’

John tried to raise the mood with some banter. ‘As for you, Danny Boy, you try to keep your eyes ahead, too. Forget the beautiful women, ’cos they’re not

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looking at you, are they?’ He gave a snigger. ‘While they would happily spend a night with a fine man like myself, I’m not altogether sure they would really appreciate a crinkly-faced little squirt like you.’

Danny took the harmless dig in the spirit in which it was given. ‘I’ll have you know there’s a heap o’ life in this old dog yet. I’m nowhere near ready for the knacker’s yard.’

John gave a mischievous wink. ‘Me neither. And though I say it myself, there is still a good tune left in this old fiddle.’ Giggling like two naughty school-boys, they each recalled the wild and naughty antics in a misspent youth, when their manly prowess and lust for the girls was at full throttle. Life had been theirs for living to the full, and pretty girls had flocked round them like bees to a honey-pot.

Eventually the big man broke the mood with a great sigh. ‘Well, Danny Boy, we really did have some great times back in the day, didn’t we, eh? How desperately I wish we were young and virile again!’

Danny gave a sorry little snort. ‘You mean when we had more hair on our heads, and naughty tattoos proudly across our chests and a woman on each arm?’ He sighed at the memories. ‘Now the girls have moved on, and the tattoos are sagging.’ His voice dropped as he added sombrely, ‘Just like everything else if you know what I mean?’

‘Oh, but I do.’ John lapsed into silence. ‘I really am worried about the future,’ he admitted eventually.

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‘How could we have been so stupid? We should have made plans for our old age. We’ve been enjoying ourselves too much, that’s why!’

‘We’ve only ourselves to blame. We’ve never earned much but what we had we spent. Still, what’s done is done and we can’t ever turn the clock back. It’s no use grumbling about it! Instead, we should be thanking our lucky stars that we’ve been able to enjoy life and still be as healthy as we are. Look on the bright side, we’ve got good jobs and a regular wage. And though we’ve left it a bit late we are now, at last, starting to think about the future.’

‘Not every working man is as fortunate as us. Look at poor Len Waterman. He’s a year or two younger than us, but he’s so crippled with arthritis he can hardly get along. Fate can be so cruel. If he hadn’t fallen off that roof, he might have been working alongside us even yet. But he seems to get worse as the days pass. More’s the pity.’

‘But by God, don’t the years just fly by. Even when we were in our forties we had enough knowledge to start our own business. We should have taken the bull by the horns back then,’ John said quietly. ‘You’re right, Danny Boy. We’ll just have to concentrate on what we’ve actually achieved and not dwell on what we’ve lost. Who knows, we might yet give another thought to the idea of setting up in our own business? We can make a success of it if that’s what we aim for. ’

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Both men felt uplifted to have discussed most of the matters that had been weighing heavily on their minds. They squared their shoulders and put a spring in their step as they continued along the Promenade, ready and raring to set about the day's workload.

Taking a grubby old handkerchief from his trouser pocket, John slapped it across his nose and blew hard. 'Dammit, I reckon I've got a cold coming on.' He moaned under his breath, before blowing his nose again. 'Look there! Do you see that tired old woman across the way? Poor old bugger, she's been lumbered with that huge bag . . . no doubt filled to the brim with kids' stuff, all dumped on her by her family. Really struggling she is.'

Danny stole a glance at the woman. 'Bless her old heart. I'm sorely tempted to go and help her. She looks well and truly done in, so she does.'

John produced from his overalls pocket a piece of paper on which was scrawled a list of tasks for the week, some already crossed off. 'Come on, matey! We'd best crack on. No time for rescuing damsels in distress, and look her family are catching her now. I wouldn't mind betting she's got a little dram o'whisky hidden inside that bag. The crafty old devil.' He gave a deep-throated chuckle, before waving the list under Danny's nose. 'I expect you'll want to start on her first?' He gestured in the direction of the Blue Bench. 'She's looking a bit weathered of late, don't you think?' John strode on, clutching his list

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and grumbling as he went to his own tasks, leaving the bench to Danny.

He paused to admire her, ‘She’s like an old friend,’ he murmured, ‘this place would never be the same without her. And you’re right . . . she does seem to be looking a bit worse for wear, but you can’t blame the old girl for looking worn out. Not when she’s facing the elements twenty-four hours a day, year in year out.’ He chuckled loudly, ‘In some ways, she’s a bit like us, don’t you think? Forging onwards, whatever the weather throws at us, and just like her, we’ve learned to stand strong against the elements. I’d love to know what her story is.’

When Danny looked up at the Blue Bench, his ready smile faltered and his heart seemed to flip over. It couldn’t be . . . Surely not! The lovely Marie Foster sitting on the bench – alone.