

Also by Christine Crawford

Through Windows

The View From Out Here

Distance can bring the past into focus

Christine Crawford

Periplum.



Chapter Three

Martin stirred, rolling over. A gentle crackling sound accompanied his movements. Folding back the flap of his swag, he peeped out. Frost covered the grass around him. Reaching out with one hand, he patted the outside of the canvas. He recoiled at the cold, crystalline feel of the frost covering his swag. He would need to put the tent up from now on. His first two nights on the road had been relatively mild, and in any case, he had been too tired to think about erecting the tent. Now, further inland, nights were obviously going to be colder and a lot more preparation needed to go into setting up camp.

Despite the cold, Martin had been surprisingly warm in his swag, sleeping in trakkie pants, hoodie and warm socks. During the night, he had surfaced briefly into wakefulness, considered his need to pee and, vaguely aware of the chilly air, had sunk back into sleep. Now, it was urgent. Undoing the zipper of his swag, stiff with the cold, he slid awkwardly out of his cocoon, and pulled on his Ugg boots.

A quick glance around the campground reassured him the caravanners across the way were not yet up. Two tiny tents nearby were also silent. Underfoot, the icy grass crackled, as he headed for a bank of bushes. There, he let go a stream of hot urine, steaming in the cold air.

He looked around, taking in the morning. The sky was infused with a gentle pink; wispy clouds stretching across, blue-grey edged

with pale gold. The first rays of the day caught at the frosted world, which glinted and sparkled.

Back at his camp, Martin moved his swag, dragging it into a sunny spot and draping it over a log to dry out. He set up his tiny gas stove and made coffee and toast. The sun warmed his back as he sipped his coffee. The young European travellers close by had still not stirred. When they had arrived last night they had been friendly but their limited English and his non-existent German made communication difficult. It seemed they were planning to see as much of Australia as they could in three weeks. In one day they had covered a similar distance to his three days of travel.

By contrast, the caravanners offered too much talk. When he ran into them in the amenities block, they related detailed sagas of their travels and invited him to join them around the campfire. The manager of the caravan park had also encouraged him to join in 'happy hour' last night but he had baulked, hearing the laughter and chat drifting across and feeling alienated from the air of camaraderie the group exuded.

There was loneliness but also peace in time alone, he thought. For now, he didn't need people. He knew he would, possibly sooner rather than later, but right now, he was happy enough by himself.

He had texted Ali the first night, to reassure her he was safe. She had replied immediately with 'Excellent!! Take care. Love you!' His message had been sparse, with minimal information and no love and kisses. Surely it shouldn't be that hard to text your wife in a loving, fun way? But it was. Ali always surprised him with her easy openness.

He looked across the caravan park. Women in dressing gowns were heading to the showers, their husbands wandering back from shaving. He thought back to all the laughter he heard last night; it sounded like they knew how to have fun.

He hadn't contacted Ali the following two nights. They had agreed he didn't need to.

She sifted carefully through the contents, noting what else was there, but not lingering to read. There were several notebooks, which may have been diaries. She resisted the urge to open them. Did she have any right to read them? Were they Mary's? They looked quite old, were they Rosalie's?

She came across a light blue business envelope. It held only a single folded sheet; a creased copy of a birth certificate. The baby was Mary Jane, born 1942, mother Rosalie Harris; father *unknown*.

'Hmn,' Alison said aloud, 'were you following this up before you died, Mary?' Was the 'Me' a search for her origins? She wondered whether Martin had any idea his granddad was presumably not his biological grandfather? Would it have any effect on his family medical history – good or bad? She hoped his real grandfather didn't die young of a heart condition.

Okay, she reasoned, enough for now. She'd get back to this later. These were two very interesting ladies, and she wanted to find out more of their story. She gathered up the papers from Mary's 'Me' envelope and placed them into a separate plastic box.

Chapter Nine

Sydney 1941

Rosalie checked her appearance in the mirror in the shared bathroom. With only a tiny hand mirror in her sleeping area, she really had no idea how she looked. She nodded approvingly at her hair, lifted in a high wave above her forehead and falling into shoulder length curls. She pinched her cheeks to bring some colour to them and rubbed a little Vaseline across her lips.

'That will have to do!' she declared, 'I look good enough for any of those soldiers.' She returned to her curtained bedroom, passing similar niches where the other country girls lived. Grabbing her clutch bag, she hurried down the wide stairs and out the grand front door of the big, old boarding house.

It was quite a walk to the train station, but she was used to walking and in these days of rationed fuel there were few buses. She'd have to walk home later in the dark, the street lights off and the houses in shadow with their black-out curtains. Perhaps a nice young soldier would walk her home? The boarding house wasn't that far from one of their training depots.

As she approached the station, she could see groups of people, young women like her, dressed for a night out, attracting the attention of clusters of young servicemen.

‘But,’ Martin began, and she interrupted him. ‘I know,’ she said, ‘why? Because, who else will do it? And the crazy thing is, I still love him.’

She suddenly turned to the group of men. ‘Bugger off you lot, you’ve heard enough! And you too,’ she glared at the remaining sole drinker.

Martin and the Blond Bombshell were alone. ‘Wow,’ he said, ‘you are special.’ His voice broke, as he considered the steadfast devotion of this woman to a possibly undeserving man. He touched her lightly on the arm and she turned away to walk back into the kitchen, carrying his empty plate. Martin walked out into the glaring sunshine.



In the kitchen, the woman stopped midway through scraping Martin’s plate.

‘She’s a lucky woman, whoever’s got you,’ she said aloud. ‘A bloke who listens!’ Back in the bar, she picked up a newspaper one of the customers had left open. Bold, colourful print advertised shows currently playing in Sydney. She hesitated, thoughtful, then drew out her mobile. It was some time before her call was answered.

‘Ronnie,’ she said, ‘I won’t be over this week.’ A pause. ‘Sorry, that’s just how it is ... you’ll have to look after things yourself.’ Another long pause. ‘What am I doing? I’m going to meet up with a girlfriend and go to a show in Sydney. I’m doing something for me. I’ll talk to you later.’



Martin sat in his vehicle, waiting for the air conditioning to take effect. He thought with admiration of the Blond Bombshell. He could see she was an attractive woman, appeared strong and capable. She seemed well able to handle her mainly male clientele. He wondered whether she owned the pub? Would she have recovered enough financially to be able to do that?

But it was her long-term commitment to an alcoholic husband that most impressed him. It saddened him too; a woman with strength and ability carrying a huge burden. Could he himself show such devotion? He adored Ali, and perhaps it was love that made such sacrifices possible, but could he do what this woman did? He thought not. Could Ali do it for him? Very likely. Not that he would ever be a drinker; until this trip he rarely went into a pub.

There was a tapping at his window. He jumped and looked out to see the Blond Bombshell gesturing to him. As he wound down his window, she said, ‘Sorry to startle you love, but I wondered, if you’re around for a few days, whether I could use you? Ever pulled a beer?’

Martin laughed, ‘I was thinking earlier how rarely I go into pubs, until this trip. Different story when I was young. And yeah, I worked behind the bar back then. Not sure that I would still know how to do it.’

‘I could show you, love. Hasn’t changed that much. I’m a bit desperate; there’s no-one here I could trust to do it. My usual cover lives way out of town, and I don’t usually call on him until the weekend. You’ll do it? It’s only for a couple of days; I’ll be back by next weekend.’

Martin found himself nodding in agreement, then was immediately engulfed by worries. How to use an electronic till? All those different kinds of beer and then there were the mixed drinks. He knew nothing! Perhaps he needed a special permit or something? And what about the cooking – he’d only ever cooked at home. And anyway, he hadn’t planned on staying here.

The woman was watching him in amusement. ‘You’ll be fine,’ she said, ‘the locals will virtually tell you what to do, and Sue will come in to do the kitchen work.’

She paused and looked at Martin steadily, ‘I need to do this,’ she said, ‘and I’d appreciate it greatly if you could help me out.’ She reached her hand through the car window. ‘Josie Myers,’ she said.