A Stranger in Baghdad

Elizabeth Loudon
PART ONE
When I first arrived in London, I thought I’d deal with the body, not the mind. Orthopedics, perhaps, or dermatology—as if skin and bones don’t tell stories. But when it was time once again to choose a specialty (for it was a choice I’d made before and then been forced to abandon), I thought of that warm evening in Baghdad when my father’s friend Mahmoud Aziz turned to me and asked what path I might follow. I had known from the soft hope in his eyes what he’d wanted me to say. Psychiatry, Mahmoud. Like you. Well, I thought, why not? There’s so much left to understand, and maybe psychiatry will help. Maybe Mahmoud was trying to tell me something—god knows everybody else was. And so, almost as casually as if I’d flipped a coin, I chose the pathways of the mind over the veins and arteries of the body.

I spent my early years as a doctor in an NHS hospital in South London. It was a difficult beginning. My colleagues found me brusque and detached and told me as much to my face. All too many of my patients saw my name badge, heard my accent, and asked for a referral. I was increasingly tired and irritable, and so, with my husband Hugh’s blessing, I set up a private practice that catered solely to Arabic speakers. I rented a consulting room on a handsome side street that’s off Harley Street, the way some New York theaters are off Broadway—close enough to reassure, but no cigar. My room had a large single window that looked out at a wall lined with
a hatch work of fire escape ladders. In one window I could see a dusty office kitchen where nobody ever made anything, although occasionally a figure moved in the background. The others were shrouded in blinds. Behind the buildings revolved the one-eyed head of Post Office Tower. It faced north, and was very quiet.

I didn’t advertize, but it wouldn’t have been hard for Duncan Claybourne to find me there anyway, especially given that finding people was one of the things he was paid to do.

It was the end of the day when he came to me. My last patient—a young, rich Kuwaiti woman with cropped hair and bitten nails—had gone. I’d opened the window after she left to clear the air of Givenchy and sweat, then locked it shut. I turned to pick up my bag, and as I did, I heard a faint but unmistakable click. Somebody had entered the waiting-room.

*The cleaning crews,* I thought, *coming early.* But there was a silence after the click, and I wondered whether the Kuwaiti woman had come back. Had I caught a note of vengeance in her? Her sister had died in less than clear circumstances. The sister had been the favored one, and ten years later her parents were still extravagant in their mourning. My patient carried a mute rage that she fed with envy. She frightened me a little, this woman. I knew she wanted to punish me, as if I were her mother.

I opened the door to the waiting-room quietly once I’d buttoned up my coat and closed my bag. I even had my Oyster travel-card in my hand. And indeed, there was somebody there, sitting in the armchair. An older man. Very old. Not Arab. European. He had a sagging pale face, with wisps of rusty hair growing over patches of scaly sun damage on his scalp. He wore the same kind of rumpled mustard-colored corduroy trousers that Hugh wears on Sundays, and a shabby woolen sweater. And brogues.

I didn’t recognize him at first. He rose from the chair with the *whoompf* sound that the elderly make when they stand up.
“Dr Haddad?”

I took a step back. Even in those two words I’d caught the Scottish brogue, and it was coming to me: Duncan Claybourne. I shrank inwardly. His face was lined and reddened, but those were the same small, steely eyes, and my repugnance was instant and deep.

“And to what do I owe the pleasure?” I asked. Which was exactly what my mother would have said.

“May I have a word?”

“May I ask why?”

I thought: He’s come about one of my patients. He’s still working—although he’s what, eighty-something? Ninety?

He’s on his last tour of duty. He’s come to demand a file. To interrogate me. I thought all this in the mere seconds it took me to turn back and unlock my office door, even as I hated myself for my instant compliance.

He followed me in, looked around and gave a brief nod of appreciation for the photographs on my wall, then sat down, taking care as he did to land just so on the seat. He made a strange movement with his hand, as if he wanted to wave an intrusive thought away.

“So, what can I do for you?”

He raised his eyebrows and smiled. “How long do you have?”

“Long enough.”

“You remember me,” he said. It wasn’t a question.

“I do.”

“Very good. I knew you would.”

I sat behind my desk. I never sit there with patients. I use the soft armchair for consultations.

“And what is it I can do for you?” I asked. I hoped my tone was acid.

He smiled slightly. “It’s more a case of what I can do for you, perhaps.”

“Really? I can’t take you on as a patient.”
“No? That’s interesting. It’s not why I came, but why not?”
“Conflict of interest.”
We were both joking. Sort of.
“A pity,” he said then. “I hear you’re good.”
That put me even more on my guard. He’d heard from whom? Hugh and I had a computer that sat like a small stranded spacecraft in the corner of our living-room, its squawking dial-up tone pleading for connection. Those were early days yet for the Internet, but I knew all too well that people could already be looked up, hunted down. I’d never looked Duncan Claybourne up, but there were others I’d tried to find from time to time. Ziad’s friends. Ziad himself.
We made small talk for a few minutes. Blair, Bush, the invasion, my own long delayed passage to England—I’d had to wait seven years before I could join my mother in London. As for Duncan Claybourne, he’d turned into a widower in fine fettle who could boast that he’d only recently resigned as the secretary of the local lawn tennis club.
You learn in my profession how to wait. If need be, you wait for a very long time. I could tell he had come because he was troubled by his conscience and wanted permission to talk. He pressed his lips tightly together and shook his head as he turned it all over in his mind, and his gaze rose to the dart-and-egg cornicing along the ceiling.
“Where to start?” he said at last.
“Why not start at the beginning?” I asked. “Whenever that was? When did you first go to Baghdad?”
“Same time as your mother. Same ship, in fact.”
This surprised me. I’d always assumed he’d arrived in Baghdad later than her, although I knew he was there already by April 1939, when the King died.
“She was only twenty-one,” he said.
“Twenty, actually.”
I wasn’t surprised he got her age wrong. Her passport made it clear enough: she was twenty when she married
my father in 1937 and still twenty when she sailed to Baghdad, but my father was already thirty-one. That eleven-year wedge gave him an angle of advantage over her that never narrowed, and in retaliation she’d shaved a slice off the gap between them, making herself not younger but older. She told everyone she was twenty-one, and kept up the falsehood until she left Baghdad almost forty years later. For some reason—shame, perhaps—my father never contradicted her. I did, once, and got a look of icy scorn, as if I were a heartless pedant. She’d have lied to Duncan about her age, the way she lied to everyone.

He’d seen my mother’s photograph on the front page of the papers. That was why he’d come to my clinic. When he realized she was still alive—and not just alive but well enough to join a protest march—he thought the time had come. So many other people, after all, were dead. But he’d decided it would be best to contact me first. He didn’t want to alarm her. He wanted my advice, he said, about how to proceed. That was why he was there.

“Proceed? With what?”

He didn’t answer my question. Instead he said, “I’d have thought she’d do anything to get rid of the regime in Iraq. Why was she protesting?”

I couldn’t help myself. “She likes to play it both ways. Also to show off.”

He made a noise, half cough, half laugh, that could have been scorn or amusement, or maybe both. “She does indeed. But I imagine she still suffers.”

“About what?”

There was a bit of throat clearing, a stretch of an arthritic knee.

“She lost a great deal.”

He smiled kindly at me. Perhaps it was the unexpected warmth in his voice, but for the first time in many years I wanted to weep. The sensation amazed me. I’d almost
forgotten it: the ache in my throat, the welling of tears in my eyes, the soft collapse somewhere inside my ribs, as if a cliff of sand was tumbling inward and down—when had I last felt that? I steeled myself. I had learned not to cry, ever, in my own office, despite the empathy that sometimes tightened my chest when my patients broke down. I wondered whether he was going to tell me that my brother was still alive, and hope surged through me. Ziad. Alive. Ziad. Alive.

“Both my brothers are gone. So yes. She’s lost a great deal.”

“But she hasn’t given up,” he said. He was still in a state of wonder that at her age she’d gone on that march. “She never did. Remarkable woman, your mother.”

I’d heard those words often enough before: remarkable woman. Usually I could shrug them off. But when he said them, it was like falling. I knew a worse pain was about to strike me. I had time to consider that it was my own fault. I had allowed him in. I had let him sit down. Yet I was taking my diary out even now to confirm that yes, this time was usually free. And while I wrote his name into my book, he was looking far away, over my shoulder, back into the past. He was going to tell me whatever he wanted to tell me. He wasn’t going to confess for my sake, to ease my aching heart. He was going to confess for his own.
In Baghdad, fame came easily to a beautiful European woman with a troubled past, but once my mother returned to England she was a nobody. She hated the anonymity. She’d loved playing the heroine in a dramatic story, victim and vixen all at once. She looked, mostly in vain, for any opportunity to play those roles again.

The million-strong march against the war in Iraq provided her with a perfect chance. She could prove her pluck, and also tell any admiring strangers within listening range about her life.

She asked me to accompany her. I refused, hoping she’d give up. She was an old woman, I pointed out. She had no business protesting. Besides, Hugh had warned me against going. Most protestors were young, and some were aggressive. I was embarrassed by her enthusiasm, even though I wouldn’t be there myself: it was the ancient embarrassment of the daughter whose mother’s energy outstrips hers. I’d only thrown fuel on the fire by objecting, anyway. She went by herself, strong enough despite her age to hold a hand-made “Stop The War” placard in one hand while pumping the air with the other. Her silky white hair was caught up in a bun, and she wore linen trousers and a fresh white shirt onto which she’d sewn her own red buttons. She was a stylish woman even then, with a bit of Vanessa Redgrave about her.

The photographer who spotted her was accompanied by a journalist, who asked her why she was marching when she could “have her feet up.”
Inside her fragile body a fire still burned. She had a story to tell, and she was quick to set the journalist straight. “My husband was Iraqi and I lived in Baghdad for almost forty years. I lost my entire family to those murderers, so I’m very well aware of what we’re up against. I know right from wrong, and an invasion won’t solve a thing. Blair’s just kowtowing to Bush, and there’ll be more graves in Baghdad.”

And lo, it turned out that the journalist worked for The Guardian, and there she was, on the front page of the very paper that she “took,” as she would say—as if a newspaper was medicine. She rang me up to tell me all about it, as she knew I didn’t read newspapers and Hugh “took” another one altogether.

Her voice was a little breathless with excitement, the way it always was when somebody paid her attention.

“That’ll show them,” she said, without specifying who exactly would be shown. “Do you know what that nice young thing called me? A woman warrior. That’s what she said. Like those women from that nuclear missile camp, what do you call it? Common—”

“Greenham Common.” The nice young thing was the journalist, I guessed.

“Do buy yourself a copy. It’s really quite a good photograph.”

The following day she rang again. The giddy, reckless mood that swept her away whenever people paid her attention had evaporated. Now she was full of regret.

“Oh Mona,” she said. “I do wish I hadn’t let them take my photograph. I’m not a warrior at all. Or a protestor.”

“But you protested,” I said, even as I thought, without irony, that you wouldn’t have caught me dead on that march.

“Do you think somebody might see it? And recognize me?”

“Of course. It was on the front page of The Guardian.”

“But somebody who knows us, I mean? Who knew us back in Baghdad, who might have information of some kind? Or who might talk about us?”
This was how fear worked. It was an infection that would never clear from your bloodstream. She’d have lost sleep worrying.

“Nobody’s left from those days,” I pointed out. “Everyone’s dead.”

I could have added: *Everyone except me, and I have a husband and two sons, so you are not alone in the world.* But I didn’t. I knew how little difference that would make. *Her entire family,* she’d said.

“Anyway,” she said after a pause. “How would anybody find me?”

“The phone book?”

“Ah yes, I hadn’t thought of that.” After so long in Baghdad she’d never got used to the idea of a public phone book where your number was available to any old Tom, Dick, or Harry. “Oh Mona.” Her voice was breaking. “If I only knew where Ziad’s grave is.”

I felt my resistance rising, the gates of my own compassion closing tight. Ziad had no grave. I knew that much. And Ramzi had been burned into flakes of fire that fell from the sky.

I was standing in my kitchen, looking out at the Thames. The tide had turned and the water was making its way back to the sea, dragging branches downstream with it. I’d been thinking, as I did pretty much daily, of the slower, warmer Tigris and all the rubbish that floated away with it every day.

“I’m here, Mama.”

But I didn’t count.

She lived in a garden flat in Twickenham, not far as the crow flies from our house in Hammersmith, and every week I crossed the curve of river that lay between us like a loop in a length of rope. She’d reached the age of truth-telling, of score-settling and reminiscence. She cherished her stories and had nobody else to tell them to. Who else would understand what it meant that she’d once cared for the darling little Prince? Who would know what it was like to live under
a wicked government that dragged innocent people from their homes and murdered them in cold blood? Who would be charmed by tales of life in the beautiful old house on the banks of the Tigris—looted now, no doubt, its shutters torn and the courtyard strewn with mattresses?

I did my best, but sometimes I had to leave the room when she was talking. I’d put the kettle on in an effort to control my futile desire to correct her, for she got details wrong, dates and street names and the names of political parties and my friends and the years Ziad had spent with the Jesuits—all of that. And if I did correct her, she’d become defensive and slippery, saying somebody should have done something about it all long ago, a solution should have been found—although nothing had been done and it was too late, no matter how many people marched.

On the Saturday after Duncan’s first visit, I went to her as always. She was restless and angry. Baghdad was in the news for all the wrong reasons. She’d run out of milk. We went to the corner shop together. No sign now of the protestor’s fist-pumping confidence. Now she was caught up in a dither of old age and regret. She hobbled down the windy street, staying close to the railings as indifferent people pushed past her. Her eyes scanned for cracks in the pavement. She could fall down the steps of her own home, she told me. One fall and it would all be over, tumbling down, broken bones, and you never walk again.

“That’s how old people go,” she said.

“I’ll look after you. You’re not dying, anyway.”

She still had a rippling, girlish laugh. “That’s right. Of course. My daughter the doctor. Or psychiatrist, rather.”

She disliked psychiatrists. She didn’t think we were real doctors. We practiced a dark art, extracting secrets that we held up with our analytic tongs for consideration, and we didn’t speak when spoken to. Psychiatrists asked leading questions. They probed. As far as she was concerned, my main job was to be
her help-meet and tea-girl, the confidante she took for granted. Besides, as she was fond of pointing out, I worked only three days a week and saw only a certain kind of patient—wealthy Arabs with too much oil money, as she’d put it.

When we got back from the shop, she wanted to go outside into her little garden. Milky cup of tea in one hand, pruning shears in the other, she contemplated a hydrangea bush, then began chopping off dusty flower-heads, an unspoken accusation falling before her like a long shadow pointing straight at me.

“What’s Hugh getting up to now?”

My husband is a human rights barrister. That’s how we met. I went to a lecture he gave on trauma and its impact on disclosure, and he made a bee-line for me afterward. I was helpless: he was so curious about me, so insistent. I didn’t know that his curiosity would soon be sated and his interest in my past would fade, or that when he thought about other people’s suffering he was only thinking of how he could win arguments on their behalf. By the time I discovered that, it would be too late for me to extricate myself. I couldn’t blame my mother for not quite trusting him, but still I was irritated by her constant implication that his work is somehow not quite legitimate.

“He’s working on a case, Mama.”

“A case about what?”

“I don’t know.” I did know. It was something to do with Senegal. “Mama, why did you never grow roses? You loved your roses in Baghdad.”

“Did I? I’ve forgotten.”

She hadn’t forgotten. I knew she hadn’t. And I knew, too, that if I said Duncan Claybourne came to see me, she would instantly stand taller, coming to full attention.

I’ll tell her inside, I decided—in her sitting room. It would be safer there. Ziad and his friends still grinned at us from a Kodak snapshot framed on the mantelpiece, arms slung around each other’s shoulders, cigarettes dangling on their bottom lips, squinting into the light. How cool they looked,
with their flared jeans and shaggy hair! Ziad’s hair was the longest of all and his jeans the widest: our maid Halwa had stitched bright floral triangles into the seams. I allowed myself a moment to consider him while she fussed with a packet of biscuits: my sweet baby brother who scuttled along with his head down, his leather bag full of poetry books and bootlegged American cigarettes, his skin the color of wet sand. The boy with a nervous blink and a habit of tossing his head to make his long hair flip up out of his sleep-encrusted eyes. Ramzi had given him his nickname, \textit{al-ghorab}—crow-boy—because he always wore black and had a beaky nose and rasping voice made worse by his pack-a-day Marlboro habit. Our crow-boy, flying as the crow flies. In the photograph, he’s wearing boots with a heel, but at home he walked barefoot, with the beatific inward gaze of a pilgrim on his way to a place where none of us could reach him.

Tara and Huda are in the photograph, but not me. I took it. It was 1975, that narrow slice of time when you’d think from our clothes and our music that we could have been anywhere. London. Athens. New York. Young, free, Western. But we were in Baghdad, the camera was illegal, and the prints were developed in secret.

“You could put your protest picture here, next to the one of Ziad,” I said.

My mother shook her head.

I hesitated. “Mama, do you still wonder what happened to him?”

Ziad? Her lips tightened. She had her own best guesses, she said. Then she talked about the memories that had come to her since the march, of the great floods that used to creep over the palm groves in Rusafa on the east bank: the shimmer of wind on the water in the morning, the way the noon heat sucked the water down into the mud, the drowned roads along the riverbanks, and the wreckage when the water receded. All that mess. That was before they built the Mosul Dam and
the flood defenses upriver, before I was born. She remem-
bered the swarms of mosquitoes after the floods, how they
floated toward her through the smoke from one of the fires
where they roasted the masgouf fish, how the men laughed and
snatched the insects out of the air before they bit into her
delicate English skin. She reached into the air with her right
hand, a withered hand speckled with age spots, and snatched
at nothing, laughing.

Finally, when she was so tired that she was almost mum-
bling in her sleep, she spoke about the accident that killed
Ghazi. The wheels had slewed across the road and the car
flew through the air in Harthiya as if it had sprouted wings.
They were playing around. That was all they’d been doing.
Playing around. Nobody deserved to die for playing around.

“What car?” Then, after a pause, I asked, “Were you in
it, Mama?”

She shook her head.

“No,” she said. “And anyway, it’s all water under the
bridge.”

I took the tea-cups to the kitchen, washed them, and let
myself out.
HUGH AND I ARE OPPOSITES. He is untidy, I’m precise, although he might say I’m controlling. He works late, I rise early, although he might say I’m anxious. He shouts, I fall silent, although he might say I sulk. He eats, I quietly starve, and that he never notices. My nourishment of myself is not his concern.

In our Hammersmith home we have the usual things that indicate a family life—books, plants, running shoes, pots of basil on the windowsill, and even at one point a cat. The boys’ rooms today are more or less as they left them when they first went to university. I’ve made their beds and hung up their clothes, but thanks to Hugh the rest of the house looks as if some disaster has struck its owners and they had to rush away, leaving everything behind for disposal or a fire sale. Ripped open envelopes and papers and unwashed mugs lie on tables and desks and floors, details of asylum seekers and torture victims and Home Office hearings in plain view of any visitor.

The files are his. I would never take a client or patient file home, would never carry one with me on the Tube. I learned that much in Baghdad. They’re all locked up in my office.

I decorated the office at first with neutral pieces from John Lewis and a photograph of an Icelandic lake, a landscape that couldn’t be more different from the cities and deserts of the Middle East. Then I became bolder. Why should I conceal who I was? I put up red velvet curtains, laid down a good Persian rug, and hung framed sepia-tinted
photographs of Baghdad that I’d picked up at an auction house in Ealing and had never wanted to display at home, where Hugh would ignore them. The photographs showed the great arch at Ctesiphon, the southern marshes where dark-skinned boatmen pushed through the reeds, and the Haydar-Khana mosque whose onion dome, spangled in sky blue and emerald green, still rises above the cracked pillars of Rashid Street.

My patients are mostly Iraqi women, referred to me by various charitable agencies that deal with traumatized immigrants. You would not know, if you saw them on their housing estates in Harrow or along the A3, what these women have been through. They’re hardened survivors. They prickle all over with a ferocious pride, fire people born of burning summers and heated passions. They know their rights as tenants, they can make a chicken last a week, and with one evil-eye glare they can scatter the gangs of boys who block their way on the pavement. They remind me of the old women who used to sit on the stoops in Souk al-Shorja, the ones who’d mentally measure the length of my skirt with scornful eyes, but who’d pluck me into the safety of their doorways in a second if I were harassed. I care about these brutalized women very much, and admire their tales of heroic resistance.

They search my office before sitting down, peering below their seat and assessing the photographs with grudging approval. Then they take my measure again. Green eyes. Brown hair. Pale hands. I’m as British as I’m Arab and as Arab as I’m British.

If they ask, I tell them the truth.

“And your English mother, she lived in Baghdad?”

“For forty years.”

“Ah, ah. She speaks Arabic, then?”

“Yes, very well. But at home we spoke English.”

“Of course,” they say, in a tone that combines pity as well as scorn. “The English wives always do.”
Then they take pains to assure me that they’re grateful to Britain for taking them in and supporting them, even though we’re speaking in Arabic, without a government-funded interpreter sitting beside them. How do they know I won’t report their secrets back to the Home Office? “The Home Office!” they say. “Those dreadful letters they send! You can’t hide! Your name is on the computers and even here in London there are spies everywhere and they drag people from their beds at dawn and send them back, never to be seen again!”

Their outrage touches me. They can’t understand how the Home Office can be so cruel when Britain is so kind and fair, such a second home to the afflicted, the birth mother of their tattered constitutions. They love Britain. They love our proper Queen with her pastel suits and brooches. Some malign influence must have found its way to Westminster—the Saudis, perhaps.

But what they fear most isn’t the Home Office. It’s each other. Who else has come to me? Who do I see? What if they tell me something about somebody else? Or if somebody tells me something—lies of course—about them? Will I have to report it? I understand their fear. I’ve been afraid, too, of djinns in the smoke as well as bullets in the head. I know how fear can grow inside us, feeding on itself, and I don’t make the mistake of trying to reassure them. My task is to say nothing, to sit quietly and let discomfort swell within them and within me, too. *Be a listening post*, I tell myself. *Be the watcher on the roof*. *You’ll learn more that way.*

Those were the techniques I used with Duncan Claybourne. He came to me another five or six times over the next few weeks. Always at six, but once he stayed until nine. Once he brought three faded photograph albums in a plastic Tesco’s bag. Once he left after forty-five minutes.

I took no notes until he left, but as soon as he’d gone, I wrote and wrote. We never discussed payment, and the longer
I let it appear that he was doing me a favor of some sort, that these were sociable visits from an old family friend—or warning visits from a ministry—the less able I was to say that I price my time.

My own treasures, the lost and the recovered, are not so substantial. They are only memories, unreliable and powerless to cure. For so long all I’d had was the moment when, sticky-eyed and yawning, I watched Ziad open his rucksack and tuck his copy of *The Prophet* inside. Or when he hugged me and I caught a bitter smell, like a forest floor in autumn when something’s rotten beneath a carpet of leaves. Fear. The way he crept softly out of the tent and vanished into the empty quarter like a bottle thrown into the sea. The margin of shade that shrank as I sat on a rock and waited, the sun crawling over my feet, my ankles, my legs, until the light hit my face and a thought came to me like a bird landing in a thick rush of wings in a tree.

I’d never see Ziad again. I’d known it then.

When I listened to Duncan in my consulting room, I had stones in my throat, but I stayed still, for slowly I was given a gift of sorts. I began to see my mother as she’d once been: Diane Cutler, the pretty young nurse from Hampshire who married an Iraqi doctor before the war and went to live in a house in Baghdad where she was never alone, the house where my brothers and I were born and where, one day, my father would die. My mother the liar who spat out the truth, the avenging angel of Baghdad, and my mother the girl who’d sat on the upper deck of the Strathdern in December 1937 and watched the south coast of England disappear.

*At least, I thought, I can tell her story.* As for my own, I tucked that away in the dark of my past.
It was a long time before the land disappeared. Then it vanished all at once, swallowed up by the rim of the sea, and that was that. She was on her way as Mrs Diane Haddad now (although it wouldn’t be Mrs in Iraq, would it? And when she asked Ibrahim, confusingly he said she would still be known by her maiden name). It would have been quicker to travel to Iraq by train, but sailing stretched days as well as miles between their two countries, and they both wanted a brief respite before meeting Ibrahim’s family in Baghdad.

The Strathdern was a P&O ship filled with British Empire matrons returning to India for the winter. Diane curled up out of the wind, wrapped in a scratchy scarf that she’d stolen from her father at the last minute, but the matrons tracked her down. They brought her glasses of tonic water and pretended to admire her highbrow choice in books—A Farewell to Arms, Maurois’ biography of Shelley, a book on Nineveh by Austen Layard.

She didn’t tell them this, but none of the books had been chosen by her. Her father had given her the Hemingway, because he’d wanted to share something of his own with her before she left. Her flatmate Lucia had lent her the Maurois before they stopped speaking to each other, and Ibrahim had noticed the Layard at a secondhand bookshop on Charing Cross Road and bought it for his older sister Laila, the intrepid archaeologist. She was going to like Laila, he kept insisting,
which only made her wonder what it was about Laila that she wouldn’t like—or what it was about herself that would be difficult for Laila.

The matrons touched their curls when the lively young nurse told them she was married to the somber Iraqi doctor: how unexpected. They complained to Diane about their hill-station servants. She was to watch out for servants in Baghdad. They were never honest. And what did her family think of her marriage?

“Oh, they think it’s marvelous,” said Diane.

They had in fact been mortified. Her father, Clifford Cutler, was a rear admiral decorated with a chestful of medals, her mother, Oona, a keen amateur soprano who sang with the Portsmouth Choral Society. There’d never been any leeway for what Oona called wobbling. Wobbling was emotional, and emotions were hazardous things, like unruly children who might knock something over. You were expected to keep them at bay by following the rules of correct behavior at all times, or who knew what might happen—and if you stepped out of line, then you were expected to face the music. Diane had stepped out of line. It was sheer emotional extravagance on her part to go for such a foreigner. Oona predicted that soon, if not immediately, Diane would face all sorts of music. In the meantime, there must be some flaw in her, a crack in the diamond, and when you thought about it, there’d always been something a bit off about her.

But they’d given the necessary consent. “If you absolutely must,” Oona had said.

She’d met her foreigner at Guy’s Hospital, where he’d been sent to learn new surgical techniques. He was one of several doctors who looked after the Iraqi royal family, and the year in London was a reward of some sort, but he wasn’t happy. Despite his courtly, beautiful English, he found it hard to talk to actual English people. He had lodgings in Shoreditch: sputtering water, a shared toilet, no visitors
permitted. He was dying inwardly of loneliness on that chilly day in February when he’d first dared to talk to the young nurse who walked so fast.

“Lady,” he’d said. He loomed above her on the top step outside the hospital’s front door.

He thought this was how it was done. He thought you called women Lady. It sounded as if he were pleading.

She’d wheeled around, laughing, but his eyes were so serious that she was touched. He looked like a kindly donkey, with his long face and bumpy nose. And he asked so little: would she join him for a cup of tea at the Lyons teashop on the corner? He’d let three heaped spoons of sugar fall like drifts of snow into the cup as he talked about Qasr al-Zuhour, the royal palace named for its rose beds, and his ancient family home on the Tigris. Diane thought of the Moghul miniatures she’d seen in the British Museum. She imagined a merry Eastern funhouse, boulevards spanned around it like white buttresses, their edges speckled with the blood-red drops of tulips. Men on horseback pranced toward the gates, their cloaks flowing behind them.

He blazed with homesickness. He could have set the teahouse on fire, although he wore a scarf around his thin neck and blew on his fingers. Afterward he stood with his hands in the pockets of his overcoat. He looked suddenly slighter, as if he’d shrunk. They walked alongside the sooty brick wall of Lambeth Palace, shouldering their way through five-o’clock crowds. Her dress wrapped against her in the wind. An anesthetized patient can still hear, he told her. Before operating, he would think of one thing he knew the patient wanted to live for: a child to raise, a garden to plant. He would hold this image in his mind as he made the first cut.

So he wasn’t a green young registrar like the others. He was compassionate, and he had experience.
She would never quite get rid of a niggling feeling that she’d cornered him into the marriage—or perhaps it was herself she’d cornered.

Spring came early that year, with the lush promise of long evenings, longer days. They walked around Regent’s Park on bright Saturdays. The leaves burst out on the plane trees. Pansies beamed from the borders. Dachshunds trotted past them on leather leads. Norland nannies pushed prams with huge wheels, brisk in their regulation lace-ups. Ibrahim told her about the new teaching hospital that the royal family had paid for.

Diane strode beside him. She wasn’t a woman who could be outwalked.

“You cannot imagine how much there is to do,” he kept saying. His big head tossed from side to side. He stopped walking, took his glasses off, cleaned them with a handkerchief, and pushed them back onto his face. He wore tweed jackets and plain ties, and a homburg hat that looked a size too small for him. He opened doors and pulled out chairs, although at least he’d stopped calling her Lady. She took him to Westminster Abbey once, and a sweet old man, one of the bell-ringers, told them that he had a key to a sacristy side door and liked to come early in the morning to have the place to himself. The moment seemed charmed, distilled in its own amber light for them, the young couple falling slowly in love.

But so slowly! For a long time he kept at least a foot between them, even when they had to squeeze through the half-closed park gates at dusk, the park-keepers sizing them up as they waited, or through the narrow doors of tea shops and cinemas. He didn’t enjoy the films as much as she did — she could feel him tense and shift from side to side in his seat, confused by the sassy cut and thrust of A Day at the Races, but she knew that if she asked to go to the pictures every night of the week he’d find a way to take her. He exalted her. She didn’t mind. It didn’t really have anything to do with her. He’d be gone soon enough.
When he met Lucia, the artist who shared her flat, he became didactic, like a professor pleased to find an eager new acolyte. Lucia, barefoot in a floaty frock, knew a surprising amount about Iraq and its fabled hanging gardens. Chin propped prettily on one fist, she asked if Ibrahim had been to Babylon? Of course he’d been! Babylon, where writing was invented! There were no gardens, hanging or otherwise, at Babylon. That was a myth.

She could tell he was flirting with Lucia. He asked to see her pictures. One was of Diane, who had been forced to lie on the hard-cushioned sofa for hours while Lucia considered her. He offered Lucia money for it.

“Have it for free if it means so much to you.”

Diane felt as if she herself were being exchanged, but for what she wasn’t sure.

“What will you do with it?” she asked Ibrahim.

“I will frame it and hang it up, of course,” he said instantly. “Hang it where?”

“In my home.”

They went on talking until it was dark, then she saw him downstairs. A poisonous fog blurred the edges of the street outside, as if the city were dissolving. She stood close to him. It was as if a fine wire stretched taut between them, sounding a low note with every movement or whispered word. He kissed her, and for a while they stood like that on the street outside the flat, arms around each other, swaying slightly with their faces buried in each other’s necks.

“My, you’ve made a conquest there,” Lucia said later, before going off to the Arts Club for supper.

Alone, Diane fought off her sadness. He would sail back to Baghdad at the end of the year. She must brace herself. He would leave. She would be left.

She often worked night shifts and he worked twelve-hour days, but he found her easily enough. She enjoyed the cat-and-mouse
game of lingering on the steps of the hospital after her shift, waiting to see how long it took him to catch up with her. It was easy to indulge him because it was easy not to take him too seriously. He was a foreigner to the tips of his elegant fingers.

*Lady Diane,* she’d sometimes hear as she leaned over a patient’s chart. *Lady Diane,* as he let those fingers trail lightly over the back of her hand, and she felt warmth spread through her whole body.

One evening she wore high-heeled shoes, although they made her as tall as him. They walked along Oxford Street in the haze of a summer dusk, heading toward Hyde Park. As she stepped down from a pavement, Ibrahim held out a hand to steady her. She shook her head, saying something about climbing country stiles all her life, and tripped. It was the stupid shoes. Her ankle twisted, and for a moment she was in real pain and thought she’d broken a bone. He caught her elbow a fraction too late, then led her to safety beneath the awning of a chemist’s shop.

His face was even whiter than hers.

“It’s not your fault,” she said. “It’s the shoes. I should have known better.”

“Sometimes when I see a person in pain,” he began, but then stopped and leaned over, as if to help the blood flow back to his brain. When he straightened up, he was still pale. “It’s a weakness in a doctor,” he said.

“What is? Not catching clumsy damsels in distress?”

He said, “I feel the pain, too.”

“That’s a nice thing in a doctor.”

“No, I feel the pain as if it’s my foot. Sometimes I think it is me who will faint. Once in the operating theater I almost did.”

“Everyone’s like that in their first year of nursing,” she said. “Fainting left, right, and center. Then you get used to it.”

She didn’t say that it was disgust, not empathy, that nearly undid her at first. Disgust with the fluids, the smells, the whiskey
old women with their mottled skin and bad breath. Sometimes she felt her compassion skip away, and had to yank it back into place. Nurse Cutler, she’d tell herself sternly. Get a grip on yourself.

She began to hobble onward. He followed her. He was still distracted, his hands in his pockets.

“I am not a nurse,” he said. “And I am not getting used to it, evidently. My own ankle hurts.”

“Which one?” she asked, teasingly.

“My left, of course.”

“Well, you’re not limping the way I am.”

“I am very stoical,” he said, and she laughed. Then she adopted a glassy, careless tone as she said she’d miss him.

He raised his head and looked at her as if he were seeing her for the first time.

“Lady,” he said, “I will miss you, too.”

“Don’t be silly. It sounds as if you have an awful lot you need to get back to. A widowed mother, grieving sisters, an heir to the throne, your work at the hospital, that public clinic in the slums you go on about. My head’s spinning thinking about it.” She was chattering like a madwoman.

He said, “Yet you will be here.”

She saw it clearly then. It could happen. It wasn’t impossible. She only needed to wait as he circled closer. She could feel the heat of it approaching, as if the sun were about to tear through a cloud, but she didn’t wait, as she should have. It was she who spoke first.

“Take me, too.”

She’d meant to sound as if she were joking, letting him decide what value to put on the plea, but it came out as a wail. “Take me, too!” she said again. A wave rose through her, filling her throat so that she could barely catch her breath, pulling her down and tossing her upside down. She was crying, and then she was in his arms.

“But my dear. You’d have to leave behind everyone you know. That’s asking a great deal.”
“I’d soon know other people. Your family sound marvelous. Won’t they like me? Is that what you think?”

“They will treat you like one of their own.” After a pause, he added, “And you can come back to visit your own family, as often as you wish.”

Relief had seeped in through a tiny crack, and then it was as if a dam burst. She’d drawn back to look at him. His expression was radiant and calm. Had he thought it all out beforehand?

Only later did she wonder whether she’d forced his hand. It was a matter of honor. He had to take her because of how much she’d allowed, and then how much she’d asked. He didn’t have any choice.

Ah well. People were already saying there’d be a war. But what did the Germans care about Baghdad? And she’d be free, just like that, of dark, rainy England and the long days on the wards and the miserable worry that she’d never meet anybody suitable. For he was surprisingly suitable: a doctor with royal patients and old-world manners, a man at once idealistic and decisive. And they were in love, weren’t they? She pictured a stone balcony, a bit like the Hotel du Palais in Biarritz, which her parents had taken her to. She saw herself laughing with a scarf tied round her hair; her lips red and her eyes shielded by enormous sunglasses. Then she saw children: long dark lashes on pale cheeks, glossy brown hair that she would gently comb at night. They’d be adorable, with serious, trusting eyes.

Her own family still knew nothing of their daughter’s Moorish suitor. Later that evening she walked to the payphone on the corner, rang them, and told them she was bringing a special friend to meet them. They’d be there that weekend.
She’d borrowed Lucia’s car, lent on condition that Ibrahim drove, not her. There’d been rain the night before and the grassy shoulders of the road were draped in watery diamonds. When they came to the crest of a hill, sunlight bounced up like the glare off a shield. The village lay below them, nestled in its own spring mist. Ibrahim drove slower as they drew close, slipping down the curves of the hill and past a row of semi-detached cottages, a pond with geese, the church and village shop and pub, and a few older houses with thatched roofs. Finally, they reached a gate to their right.

The Grange was a four-square house, a gloomy stronghold smothered in ivy and skirted by paddocks, the gravel driveway flanked by staddle stones shaped like mushrooms. Ibrahim took this all in without comment.

“Madam,” he said when Oona opened the door. Then he bowed, which was even worse.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake do call me Mrs Cutler,” said Oona. “Clifford! They’re here!”

Clifford Cutler emerged from the sitting-room, where he’d been sunk in his favorite armchair by the hearth, a copy of The Telegraph spread over his knees. He was wearing his striped royal naval tie in their honor.

“Clifford Cutler,” he said, holding out his hand. He was standing stiffly, as if they were at an above-board inspection.

“Ibrahim Haddad, at your service.”
Another error.

Diane’s older sister Priscilla had been called home as a sort of witness to the prosecution. She was astonished that her flighty younger sister had produced a living, breathing beau before she had. Older than Diane by two years, she had a narrow, pointed face and a narrow, pointed mind. She’d got a job at the Admiralty, thanks to their father, and lived with an aunt in Ealing. The comparisons between the sisters were as inevitable as they were predictable. Diane was more expansive and free-ranging, the one who ended up bruised or soaked, who laughed too much and banged away at the piano too loudly. The best anyone could hope for was that Diane would be tamed by a man, and the sooner the better. They had in mind somebody who was comfortable, inquisitive, and tolerant. She was skittish, with a short fuse. She needed calming down.

Nobody had a man like Ibrahim Haddad in mind to do the calming.

The Cutlers and their guest traipsed into the sitting-room, braced for a difficult conversation. Oona had laid out a tray with tea and biscuits. Outside, autumnal skeins of cobweb were draped over the grass. Inside, a fire had been lit. The wood was insufficiently seasoned and a great many old *Telegraphs* had to be torn and crumpled and poked until a thin orange flame took hold. Cinders curled up and vanished into the chimney. Tea was passed, along with jugs of milk, sugar in a bowl with sugar tongs, and a plate of cream biscuits.

“I didn’t make a fruit-cake,” said Oona. “I meant to, but the day ran away with me. There’s lamb for supper. You do eat lamb, don’t you? It won’t cause a mutiny?”

Diane said, “Ibrahim eats everything.” Every word her mother spoke felt like a cut.

Her father asked, “What, even pork? I thought your lot eschewed the pig.”

Ibrahim was confused. The word *eschew* sounded like *chew*.
“Pork is not customary, it’s true,” he said with a smile when it was explained to him.

“So, it’s Baghdad you call home, is it? I gather Iraqis are highly intelligent people. Didn’t you lot invent writing?”

Ibrahim said yes, they did. He took off his glasses, showing deep red dents on either side of his nose. Diane could see how he’d look when he was older, much older—a myopic man who’d knock things over and miss an acquaintance waving on the far side of the street. The stoop would increase with the years, the hooded eyes would dim, the hairline melt back an inch higher on the already high forehead.

Priscilla thought that Baghdad must be stifling.

“Our winters can be quite cold,” said Ibrahim. “Visitors often say they’ve never been colder than in Baghdad. Many of the older houses aren’t heated. My own family home, fortunately, has a large stove.”

“Well, this house is jolly cold,” said Oona in a self-satisfied tone, as if it were something to be proud of.

The Cutlers had bought the Grange back in the years when the Rear Admiral was away at sea for months at a time. Oona told Ibrahim that it was her berth, her safe harbor—she loved to steal her husband’s maritime metaphors. He wouldn’t have known this, but she was reminding her daughters that everything was thanks to her inherited wealth: the Grange, the holidays in Biarritz, the King Charles spaniels, the girls’ education at Benenden. She had a helpless ostentation that was invisible to the serious-minded Iraqi doctor.

A polite interest was shown in his career. Clifford Cutler said that he knew Arabs were good doctors. Then he looked at a reproduction of Constable’s *Hay Wain* above the fireplace, as if he were testing the idea of Arab doctors out on the painting.

Oona pressed him on his family. He explained that his father had passed away, and that he was caring for his widowed mother and four sisters. They were an old family, he told them, on his father’s side. Old as in hundreds of years
old, older even than the Ottomans. Diane had heard this all before. She had the impression of a direct line, father to son over and over, of cultivated opulence. His father had been a minister of planning in the government who suffered from ill health—for a doctor, Ibrahim was vague about the nature of his father’s illness, but he suggested it had been heart disease. His mother was from Sulaymaniyeh in the north, he explained, and not as educated. They had married for love and scandalized their families. His mother’s people were farmers, simpler than his father’s, and there were relatives who’d never forgiven them their love match and no longer spoke to them. And he had three sisters. The oldest, Laila, had a PhD from SOAS. She’d only just returned to a job at the museum that Gertrude Bell had founded in Baghdad. Then there was Bushra and Hana, the youngest. Bushra was living with his mother in Baghdad, while Hana was at a women’s college in Beirut.

“Where was it again you said your mother was from?” asked Oona, blinking in the face of so much disclosure.

The *Times Atlas* had to be hauled off the shelf and opened to the page for Iraq. Until she met Ibrahim, Diane couldn’t have placed Baghdad on the map, but now she was eager to point out the great sites of ancient history to her parents: Babylon, Ur, Samarra. There in the north lay a ring of mountains, and there in the middle of the country two great rivers veined through the green heartland before joining together in an arterial plunge into the Gulf. Across the empty quarters of the desert to the west, the borders zig-zagged in psychotically perfect straight lines.

“The Holy Land,” Oona said, admiringly.

“Iraq isn’t the Holy Land,” said Ibrahim. “It’s nowhere near Palestine.”

“What’s there?” asked Priscilla, indicating the little symbols for reeds scattered above the point where the rivers merged in the country’s swampy crotch.
“Those are the marshes.”
Priscilla thought they must be malaria ridden, and that got Ibrahim going. Malaria wasn’t the worst, he said.
“We have leprosy. Leprosy! Can you imagine?”
“Well, that sounds pretty Biblical,” said Oona.
In his first year at the Royal Hospital he’d chosen to work in a clinic for the poor. That was where he’d seen leprosy, and also a case of bubonic plague.
“No,” Priscilla chided. “Come off it. It wasn’t really the plague.”
He disliked contradiction. Diane knew that much already. He held up an admonishing finger.
“Do you think it has been eradicated?”
Diane felt a sudden panic, the same kind she felt when people talked about You Know Who in Germany, and the war that she couldn’t believe would happen.
“Here in London you will never see it,” said Ibrahim. “But the rats that carry it still live in our slums. Where people are poor, of course you will see the plague, despite the quarantine laws you put in place. Quarantine is an Arabic word, by the way.”
“Ah, there you’re wrong,” said Clifford Cutler. “It’s from the Latin for forty. You’re quarantined on a ship for forty days.”
Ibrahim shook his head, refusing to be corrected even by a rear admiral. “There’s the Karantina district in Beirut.”
Diane let her attention wander while the men agreed to differ. After dinner, Ibrahim would speak to her father. He’d ask for her hand and all that. It would be better that way, they’d decided. If they waited until the morning, there’d be a suggestion of duplicity. Ibrahim would have slept under his future parents-in-law’s roof under false pretenses, as it were, and their consent mattered. Diane Cutler was not yet twenty-one. She didn’t doubt that her father would give his blessing—he always did what she asked—but she felt sorry for
him. He’d been her friend and now she was about to hurt him. And he’d miss her. She was better company than Priscilla. She was a good sport, easy going and adaptable.

She tried to catch his eye as she dug into her baked apple, but he was paying assiduous attention to Ibrahim, asking why Iraq was known as the cradle of civilization.

Two dark half-moons of exhaustion were forming beneath Ibrahim’s eyes.

It was time, finally, for tiny cups of coffee before the fire, but still Ibrahim made no move. Diane mentioned a rumor she’d heard that little German boys were cycling through English villages and taking secret pictures of churches and bridges.

“Who says such things?” asked her father.

“Well, Lucia.”

“Is Lucia the young woman who shares your flat?” asked Priscilla. “I suspected as much. I expect she read it in *The Daily Express.*”

Clifford Cutler said, “If I told you whether there’ll be a war or not, I’d be a betting man.”

His tone of strained jocularity meant his dander was up. *He knows what’s about to happen,* she thought. *He knows why I’ve brought this man to the house.* But still Ibrahim made no move to ask her father for a moment of his time, to talk alone with him.

Oona yawned conspicuously.

“This has been delightful, but it’s time to show Dr Haddad to his berth.”

Diane stood up quickly.

“I’ll do it,” she said.

The spare room was ice cold. The grate was filled with a nest of paper dusted by rubble that had been dislodged by the jackdaws who roosted in the chimney. How many guests had stayed there? Her parents had so few friends, and they tended to see them at one of her father’s two London clubs, or at the opera.
He took her hands and swung them back and forth. It was almost like fighting. She wanted to raise her hands and resist him.

“Why didn’t you speak to my father?” she whispered.
“Because I want to be sure.”
She stepped back. “Aren’t you?”
“Sure of you, I mean.”
“Ibrahim!”

“Your parents are good people, and they are worried. I can see it in their faces. And you might not want to upset them.”
“Ibrahim, what have they got to be worried about?”
She’d raised her voice without intending to. He hushed her, and drew her close. “Their daughter will be a long way away,” he said, his mouth buried in her hair.
“I want to be a long way away.”
“It will not always be easy.”
“Of course it won’t,” she said. Saying this cheered her up. Not easy was what she wanted. It was what she was best at.
“Your mother will miss you.”
“That I doubt. She’s closer to Priscilla.”
He didn’t answer. Perhaps he didn’t believe her. They stood with their arms around each other, knowing they’d already been quiet for too long up there. The bath, she thought.

_I really ought to mention the old geyser of a hot water heater, and how you have to turn the tap on full and then turn it back a bit or the water won’t run hot._

“I will talk to your father tomorrow,” he said eventually.
“Ibrahim, are you sure?”

She’d no sooner asked than dread ran like ice through her veins. Because if he wasn’t, he would never say so. He was honorable to the bone, she knew. He would never back down now, never abandon her. She was compromised already, and belonged to him. Only marriage would set her right.

*
Diane spent a restless night in her narrow childhood bed. In the morning she woke early and pulled on the woolen skirt and jumper and thick brown stockings she’d worn the day before. She found Ibrahim and her father standing side by side on the porch, looking out over the weed-infested paddock. She waited, not daring to interrupt. Her father was swaying, as if he stood on the deck of a plunging ship. She plucked up her courage and walked toward the French windows. They both turned at once as she stepped out, Ibrahim’s face alight, her father’s drawn.

“I must be the first to congratulate you,” he said. His voice was hoarse.

So he wasn’t going to oppose her. “Oh Daddy,” she said. “Do be happy. It’s such an adventure.”

“You haven’t spoken to your mother?”

“Of course not. You first. We can tell her together,” she suggested. She was dreading her mother’s response.

“Not a good idea,” said the rear admiral. “I will speak to her.”

He did, and Diane would always concede that Oona was—no other word for it—a brick. She bustled downstairs in her silk dressing-gown to dispense butterfly-light kisses on her daughter’s cheek and to get right on with planning the wedding. They didn’t have much time, after all.

“Does Priscilla know? No? Then we must wake her up and tell her immediately,” she said.

Priscilla yawned, said “Bully for you, I suppose,” and made tea. From the way Priscilla glanced up and down her slender body, Diane realized that her parents and sister assumed that the marriage was one of shameful expediency. They could think of no other reason for such behavior.

“You don’t look as if you’ve gone mad,” Priscilla said as soon as they were alone together in the kitchen, while Ibrahim and her parents walked sedately around the perimeter of the lawn.
“What would mad look like?”
“Like you. One takes it at least that Ibrahim’s of the one-wife-only school.”

Diane was too appalled to breathe. At least? It wasn’t the implication about Ibrahim she most resented. It was the implication about her.

“Of course he is. And I’ll be back, you know. For visits.”
“Is that allowed?”
“What do you mean, allowed?”
“Your husband won’t stop you?”
“His name’s Ibrahim. No. Ibrahim won’t stop me. Any more than any other husband would. Perhaps less. He’s the most chivalrous man I ever met.”

“Chivalrous?” There was a sly curl to Priscilla’s lip.
“Yes. Chivalrous. He respects me completely.”

“There’s no need to get shirty. Though I suppose I’d be pretty defensive if I were throwing myself into the arms of a Mohammedan husband and dashing off to the Near East for the rest of my life. What will your children be, by the way?”

“Healthy, I hope.”

“Seriously. Will they be Muslims?”

“I expect they’ll be a mix of everything,” she said, meaning to sound blithe. Had her mother set Priscilla up to ask these questions? Were her parents asking them of Ibrahim out there on the lawn?

The truth was that she hadn’t thought about the question of religion, although she’d thought about children. What she’d thought—or felt, rather, since she’d hardly been able to put it into words—was that her children would be more fully hers if they were born far from England. There’d be no Oona or Priscilla to tell her how it should be done, no constricting rules and traditions. She could rewrite all that, far from her home, and do it her way. She didn’t doubt that she’d get her way: Ibrahim was honorable and respected her, and surely she’d be listened to? Being British? Surely she’d have the greater power?
“You can always come back when it doesn’t work,” Oona Cutler said briskly later that morning, as she and Diane filled a bag with the first windfall apples for the journey back to London. She might as well have been saying that Diane could always throw an apple away if she found a worm in it.

“Mother. It will work.”

“Very well. It’s your funeral. But marriage is a very long road to travel. It helps, in my experience, to have a little something in common with one’s husband.”

She managed not to answer back only because she’d heard Ibrahim’s footsteps in the hallway. He was coming to remind her that they needed to allow for traffic on the road to London. He was punctual even then, and departures made him nervous. He wanted to be sure she had time for her goodbyes.

It took her a few minutes to find her father. He’d retreated to his study, a brown den that smelled of ashes. He looked exhausted. The lines on his face had deepened overnight, and his hands fumbled as he packed his pipe with tobacco.

“You’re going soon, I hope,” he said.

“In five minutes.”

“I rather meant to Baghdad. If there’s a war, the steamers heading through Suez may not take civilian passengers much longer. Anyone who wants out should get out now.”