The Ship of Brides

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Published by Hodder Paperback

Extract

PROLOGUE

The first time I saw her again, I felt as if I'd been hit.

I have heard that said a thousand times, but I had never until then understood its true meaning: there was a delay, in which my memory took time to connect with what my eyes were seeing, and then a physical shock that went straight through me, as if I had taken some great blow. I am not a fanciful person. I don't dress up my words. But I can say truthfully that it left me winded.

I hadn't expected ever to see her again. Not in a place like that. I had long since buried her in some mental bottom drawer. Not just her physically, but everything she had meant to me. Everything she had forced me to go through. Because I hadn't understood what she had done until time – aeons – had passed. That, in myriad ways, she had been both the best and the worst thing that had ever happened to me.

But it wasn't just the shock of her physical presence. There was grief too. I suppose in my memory she existed only as she had then, all those years ago. Seeing her as she was now, surrounded by all those people, looking somehow so aged, so diminished . . . all I could think was that it was the wrong place for her. I grieved for what had once been so beautiful, magnificent, even, reduced to . . .

I don't know. Perhaps that's not quite fair. None of us lasts for ever, do we? If I'm honest, seeing her like that was an unwelcome reminder of my own mortality. Of what I had been. Of what we all must become.

Whatever it was, there, in a place I had never been before, in a place I had no reason to be, I had found her again. Or perhaps she had found me.

I suppose I hadn't believed in Fate until that point. But it's hard not to, when you think how far we had both come.

Hard not to when you think that there was no way, across miles, continents, vast oceans, we were meant to see each other again.

India, 2002

She had woken to the sound of bickering. Yapping, irregular, explosive, like the sound a small dog makes when it is yet to discover where the trouble is. The old woman lifted her head away from the window, rubbing the back of her neck where the air-conditioning had cast the chill deep into her bones, and tried to straighten up. In those first few blurred moments of wakefulness she was not sure where, or even who, she was. She made out a lilting harmony of voices, then gradually the words became distinct, hauling her in stages from dreamless sleep to the present.

'I'm not saying I didn't like the palaces. Or the temples. I'm just saying I've spent two weeks here and I don't feel I got close to the real India.'

'What do you think I am? Virtual Sanjay?' From the front seat, his voice was gently mocking.

'You know what I mean.'

'I am Indian. Ram here is Indian. Just because I spend half my life in England does not make me less Indian.'

'Oh, come on, Jay, you're hardly typical.'

'Typical of what?'

'I don't know. Of most of the people who live here.'

The young man shook his head dismissively. 'You want to be a poverty tourist.'

'That's not it.'

'You want to be able to go home and tell your friends about the terrible things you've seen. How they have no idea of the suffering. And all we have given you is Coca-Cola and air-conditioning.'

There was laughter. The old woman squinted at her watch. It was almost half past eleven: she had been asleep almost an hour.

Her granddaughter, beside her, was leaning forward between the two front seats. 'Look, I just want to see something that tells me how people really live. I mean, all the tour guides want to show you are princely abodes or shopping malls.'

'So you want slums.'

From the driver's seat Mr Vaghela's voice: 'I can take you to my home, Miss Jennifer. Now this is slum conditions.'

When the two young people ignored him, he raised his voice: 'Look closely at Mr Ram B. Vaghela here and you will also find the poor, the downtrodden and the dispossessed.' He shrugged. 'You know, it is a wonder to me how I have survived this many years.'

'We, too, wonder almost daily,' Sanjay said.

The old woman pushed herself fully upright, catching sight of herself in the rear-view mirror. Her hair had flattened on one side of her head, and her collar had left a deep red indent in her pale skin.

Jennifer glanced behind her. 'You all right, Gran?' Her jeans had ridden a little down her hip, revealing a small tattoo.

'Fine, dear.' Had Jennifer told her she'd got a tattoo? She smoothed her hair, unable to remember. 'I'm terribly sorry. I must have nodded off.'

'Nothing to apologise for,' said Mr Vaghela. 'We mature citizens should be allowed to rest when we need to.'

'Are you saying you want me to drive, Ram?' Sanjay asked.

'No, no, Mr Sanjay, sir. I would be reluctant to interrupt your scintillating discourse.'

The old man's eyes met hers in the rear-view mirror. Still fogged and vulnerable from sleep, the old woman forced herself to smile in response to what she assumed was a deliberate wink.

They had, she calculated, been on the road for nearly three hours. Their trip to Gujarat, her and Jennifer's last-minute incursion into the otherwise hermetically scheduled touring holiday, had started as an adventure ('My friend from college – Sanjay – his parents have offered to put us up for a couple of nights, Gran! They've got the most amazing place, like a palace. It's only a few hours away') and ended in near disaster when the failure of their plane to meet its scheduled slot left them only a day in which to return to Bombay to catch their connecting flight home.

Already exhausted by the trip, she had despaired privately. She had found India a trial, an overwhelming bombardment of her senses even with the filters of air-conditioned buses and four-star hotels, and the thought of being stranded in Gujarat, even in the palatial confines of the Singhs' home, filled her with horror. But then Mrs Singh had volunteered the use of their car and driver to ensure 'the ladies' made their flight home. Even though it was due to take off from an airport some four hundred miles away. 'You don't want to be hanging around at railway stations,' she said, with a delicate gesture towards Jennifer's bright blonde hair. 'Not unaccompanied.'

'I can drive them,' Sanjay had protested. But his mother had murmured something about an insurance claim and a driving ban, and her son had agreed instead to accompany

Mr Vaghela, to make sure they were not bothered when they stopped. That kind of thing. Once it had irritated her, the assumption that women travelling together could not be trusted to take care of themselves. Now she was grateful for such old-fashioned courtesy. She did not feel capable of negotiating her way alone through these alien landscapes, found herself anxious with her risk-taking granddaughter, for whom nothing seemed to hold any fear. She had wanted to caution her several times, but stopped herself, conscious that she sounded feeble and tremulous. The young are right to be fearless, she reminded herself. Remember yourself at that age.

'Are you okay back there, madam?'

'I'm fine thank you, Sanjay.'

'Still a fair way to go, I'm afraid. It's not an easy trip.'

'It must be very arduous for those just sitting,' muttered Mr Vaghela.

'It's very kind of you to take us.'

'Jay! Look at that!'

She saw they had come off the fast road now and were travelling through a shanty town, studded with warehouses full of steel girders and timber. The road, flanked by a long wall created from sheets of metal haphazardly patchworked together, had become increasingly pockmarked and rutted so that scooters traced Sanskrit trails in the dust and even a vehicle built for breakneck speed could travel at no more than fifteen miles an hour. The black Lexus now crept onwards, its engine emitting a faint growl of impatience as it swerved periodically to avoid the potholes or the odd cow, ambling with apparent direction, as if answering some siren call.

The prompt for Jennifer's exclamation had not been the cow (they had seen plenty of those) but a mountain of white ceramic sinks, their wastepipes emerging from them

like severed umbilical cords. A short distance away sat a pile of mattresses and another of what looked like surgical tables.

'From the ships,' said Mr Vaghela, apropos apparently nothing.

'Do you think we could stop soon?' she asked. 'Where are we?'

The driver placed a gnarled finger on the map beside him. 'Alang.'

'Not here.' Sanjay frowned. 'I don't think this is a good place to stop.'

'Let me see the map.' Jennifer thrust herself forward between the two men. 'There might be somewhere off the beaten track. Somewhere a bit more . . . exciting.'

'Surely we are off the beaten track,' said her grandmother, viewing the dusty street, the men squatting by the roadside. But no one seemed to hear her.

'No . . .' Sanjay was gazing around him. 'I don't think this is the kind of place . . .'

The old woman shifted in her seat. She was now desperate for a drink, and the chance to stretch her legs. She would also have appreciated a visit to the lavatory, but the short time they had spent in India had taught her that outside the bigger hotels this was often as much of an ordeal as a relief.

'I tell you what,' said Sanjay, 'we'll get a couple of bottles of cola and stop out of town somewhere to stretch our legs.'

'Is this, like, a junkyard town?' Jennifer squinted at a heap of refrigerators.

Sanjay waved at the driver to stop. 'Stop there, Ram, at that shop. The one next to the temple. I'll get some cold drinks.'

'*We*'ll get some cold drinks,' said Jennifer. The car pulled up. 'You all right in the car, Gran?' She didn't wait for an

answer. The two of them sprang out of the doors, a blast of hot air invading the artificial chill of the car, and went, laughing, into the sunbaked shop.

A short way along the road another group of men squatted on their haunches, drinking from tin mugs, occasionally clearing their throats with nonchalant relish. They eyed the car incuriously. She sat in the car, feeling suddenly conspicuous, listening to the tick of the engine as it idled. Outside, the heat shimmered off the earth.

Mr Vaghela turned in his seat. 'Madam, may I enquire – what do you pay your driver?' It was the third such question he'd asked her, every time Sanjay was absent from the car.

'I don't have one.'

'What? No help?'

'Well, I have a girl who does,' she faltered. 'Annette.'

'Does she have her own quarters?'

She thought of Annette's neat railwayman's cottage, the geraniums on the windowsill. 'Yes, in a manner of speaking.'

'Paid holiday?'

'I'm afraid I'm not sure.' She was about to attempt to elaborate on her and Annette's working relationship, but Mr Vaghela interrupted.

'Forty years I work for this family and only one week's paid holiday a year. I am thinking of starting a trade union, *yaar*. My cousin has the Internet at his house. We have been looking at how it works. Denmark. Now, there's a good country for workers' rights.' He turned back to the front and nodded. 'Pensions, hospitals . . . education . . . we should all be working in Denmark.'

She was silent for a few moments. 'I've never been,' she said eventually.

She watched the two young people, the blonde head and the black, as they moved within the roadside store. Jennifer

had said they were just friends, yet two nights previously she had heard her granddaughter sneak along the tiled corridor into what she assumed was Sanjay's room. The following day they had been as easy with each other as children. 'In love with him?' Jennifer had looked appalled at her tentative question. 'God, no, Gran. Me and Jay . . . oh, no . . . I don't want a relationship. He knows that.'

Again, she remembered herself at that age, her stammering horror at being left alone in male company, her determination to stay single, for quite different reasons. And then she looked at Sanjay, who, she suspected, might not be as understanding of the situation as her granddaughter believed.

'You know this place?' Mr Vaghela had started to chew another piece of betel. His teeth were stained red.

She shook her head. With the air-conditioning turned off, she could already feel the elevating temperatures. Her mouth was dry, and she swallowed awkwardly. She had told Jennifer several times that she didn't like cola.

'Alang. Biggest shipbreaker's yard in the world.'

'Oh.' She tried to look interested, but felt increasingly weary and keen to move on. The Bombay hotel, some unknown distance ahead, seemed like an oasis. She looked at her watch: how could anyone spend nearly twenty minutes purchasing two bottles of drink?

'Four hundred shipyards here. And men who can strip a tanker down to nuts and bolts in a matter of months.'

'Oh.'

'No workers' rights here, you know. One dollar a day, they are paid, to risk life and limb.'

'Really?'

'Some of the biggest ships in the world have ended up here. You would not believe the things that the owners leave on cruise ships – dinner services, Irish linen, whole

orchestras of musical instruments.' He sighed. 'Sometimes it makes you feel quite sad, *yaar*. Such beautiful ships, to become so much scrap metal.'

The old woman tore her gaze from the shop doorway, trying to maintain a semblance of interest. The young could be so inconsiderate. She closed her eyes, conscious that exhaustion and thirst were poisoning her normally equable mood.

'They say on the road to Bhavnagar one can buy anything – chairs, telephones, musical instruments. Anything that can come out of the ship they sell. My brother-in-law works for one of the big shipbreakers in Bhavnagar, *yaar*. He has furnished his entire house with ship's goods. It looks like a palace, you know?' He picked at his teeth. 'Anything they can remove. Hmph. It would not surprise me if they sold the crew too.'

'Mr Vaghela.'

'Yes, madam?'

'Is that a tea-house?'

Mr Vaghela, diverted from his monologue, followed her pointing finger to a quiet shopfront, where several chairs and tables stood haphazardly on the dusty roadside. 'It is.'

'Then would you be so kind as to take me and order me a cup of tea? I really do not think I can spend another moment waiting for my granddaughter.'

'I would be delighted, madam.' He climbed out of the car, and held open the door for her. 'These young people, *yaar*, no sense of respect.' He offered his arm, and she leant on it as she emerged, blinking, into the midday sun. 'I have heard it is very different in Denmark.'

The young people came out as she was drinking her cup of what Mr Vaghela called 'service tea'. The cup was scratched, as if from years of use, but it looked clean, and the man who had looked after them had made a prodigious

show of serving it. She had answered the obligatory questions about her travels, through Mr Vaghela, confirmed that she was not acquainted with the owner's cousin in Milton Keynes, and then, having paid for Mr Vaghela's glass of *chai* (and a sticky pistachio sweetmeat, to keep his strength up, you understand), she had sat under the canopy and gazed out at what she now knew, from her slightly elevated vantage-point, to lie behind the steel wall: the endless, shimmering blue sea.

A short distance away, a small Hindu temple was shaded by a neem tree. It was flanked by a series of shacks that had apparently evolved to meet the workers' needs: a barber's stall, a cigarette vendor, a man selling fruit and eggs, and another with bicycle parts. It was some minutes before she grasped that she was the only woman in sight.

'We wondered where you'd gone.'

'Not for long, I assume. Mr Vaghela and I were only a few yards away.' Her tone was sharper than she'd intended.

'I said I didn't think we should stop here,' said Sanjay, eyeing first the group of men nearby, then the car with barely hidden irritation.

'I had to get out,' she said firmly. 'Mr Vaghela was kind enough to accommodate me.' She sipped her tea, which was surprisingly good. 'I needed a break.'

'Of course. I just meant – I would have liked to find somewhere more picturesque for you, it being the last day of your holiday.'

'This will do me fine.' She felt a little better now: the heat was tempered by the faintest of sea breezes. The sight of the azure water was soothing after the blurred and endless miles of road. In the distance, she could hear the muffled clang of metal against metal, the whine of a cutting instrument.

'Wow! Look at all those ships!'

Jennifer was gesticulating at the beach, where her grandmother could just make out the hulls of huge vessels, beached like whales upon the sand. She half closed her eyes, wishing she had brought her glasses out of the car. 'Is that the ship-breaking yard you mentioned?' she said to Mr Vaghela.

'Four hundred of them, madam. All the way along ten kilometres of beach.'

'Looks like an elephant's graveyard,' said Jennifer, and added portentously, 'Where ships come to die. Shall I fetch your glasses, Gran?' She was helpful, conciliatory, as if to make amends for her prolonged stay in the shop.

'That would be very kind.'

In other circumstances, she thought afterwards, the endless sandy beach might have graced a travel brochure, its blue skies meeting the horizon in a silvered arc, behind her a row of distant blue mountains. But with the benefit of her glasses, she could see that the sand was grey with years of rust and oil, and the acres of beachfront punctuated by the vast ships that sat at quarter-mile intervals and huge unidentifiable pieces of metal, the dismantled innards of the defunct vessels.

At the water's edge, a few hundred yards away, a group of men squatted in a row on their haunches, dressed in faded robes of blue, grey and white, watching as a ship's deckhouse swung out from a still-white hull anchored several hundred feet from the shore and crashed heavily into the sea.

'Not your usual tourist attraction,' said Sanjay.

Jennifer was staring at something, her hand lifted to shield her eyes against the sun. Her grandmother gazed at her bare shoulders and wondered if she should suggest the girl cover up.

'This is the kind of thing I was talking about. Come on, Jay, let's go and have a look.'

'No, no, miss. I don't think this is a good idea.' Mr Vaghela

finished his *chai*. 'The shipyard is no place for a lady. And you would be required to seek permission from the port office.'

'I only want a look, Ram. I'm not going to start wielding a welder's torch.'

'I think you should listen to Mr Vaghela, dear.' She lowered her cup, conscious that even their presence at the tea-house was attracting attention. 'It's a working area.'

'And it's the weekend. There's hardly anything going on. Come on, Jay. No one's going to mind if we go in for five minutes.'

'There's a guard on the gate,' said Sanjay.

She could tell that Sanjay's natural disinclination to venture further was tempered by his need to be seen as a fellow-adventurer, a protector, even. 'Jennifer dear—' she said, wanting to spare his embarrassment.

'Five minutes.' Jennifer jumped up, almost bouncing with impatience. Then she was half-way across the road.

'I'd better go with her,' said Sanjay, a hint of resignation in his voice. 'I'll get her to stay where you can see her.'

'Young people,' said Mr Vaghela, chewing meditatively. 'There is no telling them.'

A huge truck trundled past, the back filled with twisted pieces of metal to which six or seven men clung precariously.

After it had passed, she could just make out Jennifer in conversation with the man on the gate. The girl smiled, ran her hand through her blonde hair. Then she reached into her bag and handed him a bottle of cola. As Sanjay caught up with her, the gate opened. And then they were gone, reappearing several seconds later as tiny figures on the beach.

It was almost twenty minutes before either she or Mr Vaghela could bear to say what they both thought: that the young people were now not just out of sight but way

over time. And that they would have to go and look for them.

Revived by her tea, she struggled to suppress her irritation that her granddaughter had again behaved in such a selfish, reckless manner. Yet she knew that her response was due partly to fear that something would happen to the girl while she was in her charge. That she, helpless and old, in this strange, otherworldly place, would be responsible in circumstances she could not hope to control.

'She won't wear a watch, you know.'

'I think we should go and bring them back,' said Mr Vaghela. 'They have obviously forgotten the time.'

She let him pull back her chair and took his arm gratefully. His shirt had the soft papery feel of linen washed many, many times.

He pulled out the black umbrella that he had used on several occasions and opened it, holding it so that she could walk in the shade. She stayed close to him, conscious of the stares of the thin men behind, of those who passed by on whining buses.

They halted at the gate, and Mr Vaghela said something to the security guard, pointing through at the shipyard beyond. His tone was aggressive, belligerent, as if the man had committed some crime in allowing the young people to go through.

The guard said something apparently conciliatory in reply, then shepherded them in.

The ships were not intact, as she had first believed, but prehistoric, rusting hulks. Tiny men swarmed over them like ants, apparently oblivious to the shriek of rent metal, the high-pitched squeal of steel cutters. They held welding torches, hammers, spanners, the beating chimes of their destruction echoing disconsolately in the open space.

Those hulls still in deeper water were strung with ropes

from which dangled impossibly frail platforms on which metal moved to the shore. Closer to the water, she lifted her hand to her face, conscious of the pervasive stench of raw sewage, and something chemical she could not identify. Several yards away a series of bonfires sent toxic plumes of thick smoke into the clear air.

'Please be careful where you walk,' said Mr Vaghela, gesturing towards the discoloured sand. 'I do not think this is a good place.' He glanced back, apparently wondering whether the old woman should remain at the tea-house.

But she did not want to sit and face those young men alone. 'I shall hold on to you, Mr Vaghela, if you don't mind.'

'I think this would be recommended,' he said, squinting into the distance.

Around them, on the sand, stood chaotic piles of rusting girders, what looked like oversized turbines, and crumpled steel sheets. Huge barnacle-encrusted chains snaked around everything or were piled in seaweedy coils, like giant sleeping serpents, dwarfing the workers around them.

Jennifer was nowhere to be seen.

A small group of people had gathered on the sand, some clutching binoculars, others resting against bicycles, all looking out to sea. She took a firmer hold of Mr Vaghela's arm and paused for a second, adjusting to the heat. Then they moved forward slowly down to the shore, to where men with walkie-talkies and dusty robes moved backwards and forwards, talking excitedly to each other, and children played unconcernedly at their parents' feet.

'Another ship is coming in,' said Mr Vaghela, pointing.

They watched what might have been an old tanker, towed by several tugs, becoming gradually distinct as it drew towards the shore. A Japanese four-wheel drive roared past, screeching to a halt a few hundred yards ahead. And it was then that they became aware of voices raised in anger and, as they

turned past a huge pile of gas cylinders, of a small crowd further along, standing in the shadow of a huge metallic hull. In their midst, there was some kind of commotion.

'Madam, we should probably head this way,' said Mr Vaghela.

She nodded. She had begun to feel anxious.

The man, whose generous pot-belly would have marked him out from the others even without the aid of his smart car, was gesturing at the ship, his indignant speech accompanied by sprays of spittle. Sanjay stood before him in the circle of men, his hands palms down in a conciliatory gesture, trying to interrupt. The object of the man's ire, Jennifer, was standing in a pose her grandmother remembered from her adolescence, hips jutted, arms folded defensively across her chest, head cocked in an insolent manner.

'You can tell him,' she interjected periodically, 'that I wasn't trying to do anything to his bloody ship. And that there's no law against looking.'

Sanjay turned to her. 'That's the problem, Jen. There *is* a law against looking. When you're trespassing on someone else's property.'

'It's a beach,' she yelled at the man. 'It's ten kilometres long. With thousands of bloody people. How is me looking at a few rusting ships going to make the slightest difference to anything?'

'Jen, please . . .'

Around Sanjay, the men stood watching with unconcealed interest, nudging each other at Jennifer's jeans and vest-top, some bowed under the weight of the oxygen cylinders they carried on their shoulders. As the old woman approached, several moved back, and she caught the smell of stale sweat, overlaid with incense and something sulphurous. She fought the urge to put a hand over her mouth.

'He thinks Jennifer is from some environmental group, that she's here to gather evidence against him,' Sanjay told her.

'It's obvious I'm only looking,' said Jennifer. 'I haven't even got a camera on me,' she enunciated at the man, who scowled at her.

'You're really not helping,' Sanjay remonstrated.

The old woman tried to assess how much of a threat the man might be. His gestures had become increasingly abrupt and dramatic, his expression florid with rage. She looked at Mr Vaghela, almost as if he were the only adult present.

Perhaps mindful of this, he detached himself from her and moved through the men, his carriage suddenly erect. He went to the shipbreaker and thrust out his hand, so that the man was forced to take it. 'Sir. I am Mr Ram B. Vaghela,' he announced.

The two men began to talk rapidly, in Urdu, Mr Vaghela's voice wheedling and conciliatory one minute, determined and assertive the next.

The conversation was evidently going to take some time. Without Mr Vaghela's arm, the old woman found she felt wobbly. She glanced to each side of her, searching for somewhere to sit down, then backed a little way from the group, trying not to feel self-conscious – or fearful – of the blatant curiosity of some of the men. She spied a steel drum and walked slowly towards it.

She sat on it for several minutes, watching as Mr Vaghela and Sanjay tried to placate the shipowner, to convince him of the naïvety and commercial innocence of his visitors. Occasionally they waved towards her and she fanned herself under the umbrella, conscious that her presence, an apparently frail old lady, would probably aid their cause. Despite her benign appearance, she was furious. Jennifer had wilfully ignored everyone else's wishes and, in the process, set back

their journey at least an hour. Shipyards were dangerous places, Mr Vaghela had muttered as they crossed the sand, not just for the workers, but for those who were thought to be 'interfering'. Property had been known to be confiscated, he had said, looking back nervously at the car.

Now she mulled over the fact that she was going to have to walk the same distance back across the hot sand, and that it was entirely possible they would have to pay these people before they could leave, which would eat further into her already depleted budget. 'Foolish, inconsiderate girl,' she muttered.

In an attempt at nonchalance, she stood up and began to walk towards the bow of the ship, keen to be away from her irresponsible granddaughter and the blank-eyed men. She raised the umbrella and held it low over her head, kicking up dustclouds of sand as she went towards a shaded area. The ship was half dismantled and ended abruptly, as if some giant hand had cut it in two and removed the back half. She lifted the umbrella high to get a better view. It was hard to see much from so far underneath, but she could just make out a couple of gun turrets that had yet to be removed. She studied them, frowning at their familiarity, at the peeling pale grey paintwork, a soft colour you saw nowhere but on British naval ships. After a minute, she lowered the umbrella, stepped back, and stared up at the broken hull looming above her, stiff neck temporarily forgotten.

She lifted her hand to shield her eyes from the fierce sun until she could see what remained of the name on the side.

And then, as the last of the letters became distinct, the arguing voices receded, and even in the oppressive heat of an Indian afternoon, the old woman beneath the ship felt herself possessed of a sudden and icy cold.

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The shipbreaker, Mr Bhattacharya, was unconvinced, yet even in the face of his mounting hostility, the growing restlessness of the crowd and even that they were now a good hour behind schedule, the young people were still bickering. Mr Vaghela wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. Miss Jennifer was kicking sand angrily behind her, her expression one of sulky acquiescence. Mr Sanjay wore the uncomfortably flushed countenance of someone who feels himself to be defending an unwinnable argument. Periodically he would look at Miss Jennifer, then away, as if he, too, were annoyed with her.

'I don't need you to have my arguments for me, okay?'

Mr Vaghela tapped her arm. 'If you will forgive me for saying so, Miss Jennifer, I do not believe your grasp of Urdu leaves you up to the task.'

'He understands English. I heard him.'

'What is the girl saying now?' Mr Bhattacharya, he could tell, was offended by her barely decent mode of dress. Mr Vaghela suspected that while he secretly knew the young people were innocent of his charges, he had worked himself into such a rage that he was determined to continue the argument. Mr Vaghela had met many such men in his life.

'I don't like the way he's talking to me.'

Mr Sanjay moved towards the girl. 'You don't even know what he's saying! You're making things worse, Jen. Go back to the car and take your gran with you. We'll sort this out.'

'Don't tell me what to do, Jay.'

'Where is he going? Where are they going?' Mr Bhattacharya was watching Mr Sanjay with increasing fury.

'I think it would be better if the girl left your yard, sir. My friend is just persuading her of that.'

'I don't need you to—' Miss Jennifer stopped abruptly.

There was a sudden silence, and Mr Vaghela, who was uncomfortably warm, followed the eyes of the crowd to the

shaded area under the hull of the next ship.

'What is wrong with the old lady?' said Mr Bhattacharya.

She was sitting slumped forward, her head supported in her hands. Her grey hair looked silver white.

'Gran?' The girl sprinted over to her.

As the old woman raised her head, Mr Vaghela exhaled. He was forced to admit he had been alarmed by her stance.

'Are you all right?'

'Yes. Yes, dear.' The words seemed to come out automatically, Mr Vaghela thought. It was as if will hadn't had anything to do with them.

Forgetting Mr Bhattacharya, he and Mr Sanjay walked over and squatted in front of her.

'You look rather pale, Mammaji, if I may say so.' She had one hand on the ship, he noticed, a curious gesture, which she had to bend awkwardly to make.

The shipbreaker was beside them, cleaning his expensive crocodile shoes on the back of his trousers. He muttered to Mr Vaghela. 'He wants to know if you'd like a drink,' he told her. 'He says he has some iced water in his office.'

'I don't want her to have a heart-attack in my yard,' Mr Bhattacharya was saying. 'Get her some water and then please take her away.'

'Would you like some iced water?'

She looked as if she was going to sit upright, but instead lifted a hand feebly. 'That's very kind, but I'll just sit for a minute.'

'Gran? What's the matter?' Jennifer had knelt down, hands pressed on her grandmother's knee. Her eyes were wide with anxiety. The posturing arrogance had evaporated in the heat. Behind them, the younger men were murmuring and jostling, conscious that some unknown drama was being played out before them.

'Please ask them to go away, Jen,' the old woman whis-

pered. 'Really. I'll be fine if everyone just leaves me alone.'

'Is it me? I'm really sorry, Gran. I know I've been a pain. I just didn't like the way he was talking to me. It's because I'm a girl, you know? It gets up my nose.'

'It's not you—'

'I'm sorry. I should have been more thoughtful. Look, we'll get you back to the car.'

Mr Vaghela was gratified to hear the apology. It was good to know that young people could acknowledge their irresponsible behaviour. She should not have caused the old lady to walk such a distance in this heat, not in a place like this. It indicated a lack of respect.

'It's not you, Jennifer.' The old woman's voice was strained. 'It's the ship,' she whispered.

Uncomprehending, they followed her gaze, taking in the vast pale grey expanse of metal, the huge, rusting rivets that dotted their way up the side.

The young people stared at each other, then down at the old lady, who seemed, suddenly, impossibly frail.

'It's just a ship, Gran,' said Jennifer.

'No,' she said, and Mr Vaghela noted that her face was as bleached as the metal behind it. 'That's where you're quite wrong.'

It was not often, Mr Ram B. Vaghela observed to his wife on his return, that one saw an old lady weeping. Evidently they were much more free with their emotions than he had imagined, these British, not at all the reserved stiff-upper-lips he had anticipated. His wife, rather irritatingly, raised an eyebrow, as if she could no longer be bothered to make an adequate response to his observations. He remembered the old woman's grief, the way she had had to be helped back to the car, the way she had sat in silence all the way to Mumbai. She was like someone who had witnessed a death.

Yes, he had been rather surprised by the English madam. Not the kind of woman he'd had her down as at all.

He was pretty sure they were not like that in Denmark.