

THE SEA BETWEEN

Book One

Longing

Prologue.

Auckland. 1919

It was here – the day she was leaving the world – and, even now, life was asking Dot to reconsider. As she stepped down from the tram and began to walk, the clean scent of rain steamed from the drying road. Bright flowers in front gardens lifted sodden faces to the sun. The grass was as green as a Granny Smith. Sparrows hopped, pecking, sipping; and, somewhere in the canopy that overhung the convent wall, hidden birds opened their small throats in a pure and rapturous singing.

The suitcase was heavy. As she set it down, a young man and woman walked towards her. Their chuckling toddler, only just up on his feet by the gait of him, reached down for a puddle, tottered and collapsed. Astonishment and dismay scudded across his face. His mouth opened wide. At the same instant the mother's body folded in a quick, tender swoop, and the father began a beguiling game of smiles and peek-a-boo. Dot watched the family until they turned the corner and passed out of sight. Her heart beat with unbidden yearning to feel everything. She was only eighteen years old. Beyond the convent door, her worldly life would end. She would never be close to her family again, or have a husband and babies of her own. It was a terrible sacrifice to make. People said so, meaning well, but they had no understanding. She had to remember how all her experience had brought her to this choice. Worldly love was fickle. People left you. Only God was constant. God was Love. Whatever the price, she would pay it. With a determined hoist she lifted the case, climbed the convent steps and rang the bell.

A young Sister came to open the door.

“You must be Dot Butler?” She smiled. “We’re expecting you.”

The girl nodded and followed the nun inside.

Wellington. 1913

1

The trans-Tasman liner was being prepared to sail on a blustery August morning when Maggie Butler ran onto the dock of Queen's Wharf. Hatless, without gloves, still in the morning dress that no lady would wear to town, she paused to scan that surging crowd of seamen, embarking travellers and their wellwishers. Locating her husband, who stood near the gangplank, she rushed over to him.

"Mother of God, Charles! It's lucky there was one decent lawyer in your office to tell me what you were up to. How can you think of doing this?"

Onlookers stopped their conversations. A group of sailors grinned. The man looked at his wife's flushed face and dishevelled hair, then with embarrassment to the boat deck. "You shouldn't have come," was all he said.

She searched his expression for any trace of relenting. She clutched his arm. Her voice was pleading. "Would you really leave us like this, without a word?"

"I've made arrangements for your welfare," he said. "You needn't worry on that account."

Maggie released her grasp and stepped back. Worry! He spoke as though deserting his family was a minor matter. He planned to dispose of her like one of his precious books – an entertainment, to be done with and filed on a shelf. He thought he could father a family and go. She began a torrent of accusations but he cut her short.

"Maggie, this time I won't change my mind. There are documents in the post. I've left you everything."

"Why would I trust you?" She snatched a rolled-up page from her bag and thrust it forward. "Sign this, or I'll be in that harbour and drowned. Can you live with that?"

He glanced at her scrawl and took out his fountain pen. "As you wish." He signed his name. "There."

The single word convinced her. This time he was really going. He even expected her to summon her dignity and walk away, but she didn't care what people overheard.

“What an honourable man you are! What a gentleman, standing there in your fancy clothes. I could never meet your standards, with your lawyer's brain and your books. Mind, I was useful to bear you three children, run your home, see to the charity work. When I was the toast of Wellington society you were keen enough to marry me.”

There was deep-seated resentment in his eyes. “More than you were, to marry me. It's old ground. This is a step I must take. You know the way our conjugal life is.”

“Oh yes, I know. And you know what the church says. Why should you care?” He only crossed his arms over his buttoned coat. “Maggie. I'm sorry. I'm sorry! It's too late. We've been through this a hundred times. We'll say the failure's mine.”

His tone was soft and painful, but her words were audible all over the embarkation area. “When you sail, look up to our windows and think of the children, wondering why their father ran off and left them. What would you like me to tell them?”

“Whatever you must.” He had withdrawn. She had no access to him now. He seized his valise as three mournful blasts keened out. While passengers exchanged last affections, he hesitated, only for a moment. Without a word he turned and went aboard. Sailors began to shout orders. Soon the gangplank was hoisted away. Across the gulf from land to ship's rail, people were calling, waving, tossing streamers.

For a time Maggie stayed, whipped by the gusts that rollicked over the white-crested water of the harbour. Her anger was failing. Secondary fears came crowding in. Alone. Yes, it had come to that. At home a household waited, but with the head of the house gone, who was Maggie Butler? Separation and divorce were scandalous. Wellington society had no opening for a deserted wife. The steamship was moving, tossing on the waters like an image in a dream.

She began to walk away, leaving the wharf, her skirt whipping in the wind. She hardly noticed when she stumbled on a kerb or bumped a passer-by. Her focus was contracted to the next step she must take; otherwise the city was amorphous, as if a heavy fog had settled.

Wellington, the nation's capital, retained in summer the charming air of a seaside resort, its little bays and beaches running out from a city compact enough to walk from end to end in a few hours. Now, deep in winter, the streets were bleak and freezing. Thorndon, the inner suburb where she lived, clung to the bush-clad heights of Tinakori Hill. Wooden cottages and villas on the lower slopes gave way to the elegant homes owned by society families. The Butlers' residence was halfway; a two-storied wooden house with a small front garden guarded by a white-painted picket fence. The howling wind wrenched the front door from Maggie's grip and slammed it. Exhausted, she stood in the hall, facing the illuminated scroll that commemorated her husband's term as city councillor. He'd been so proud of it. She snatched it from its hanger and turned it to the wall before making her way up the carpeted stairs to the upper storey. There was a view of the harbour from the landing but the boat was not in sight. She stumbled into her bedroom. The children would have to be told. Otherwise, she could not imagine any future.