

Sailing Wives

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At the end of World War II, more than 100,000 British women had married American soldiers. These women, some with children, were desperate to travel to America to be with their husbands, and in 1945, the United States Embassy in London was picketed with war brides demanding ships.

On December 29th 1945, the War Brides Act was passed by the United States Congress, which allowed war brides and minor children of American citizens entry into America.

The War Department commenced project 'Diaper Run', an operation to reunite husbands with their foreign brides and children in America. The first ship set sail on January 26th 1946, arriving in New York Harbour to sounds of 'Here Comes the Bride'.

"You have undertaken to become an American - just as millions of other people have done before you. Getting to know your adopted country will be an exciting adventure: the future is before you.

You have no doubt heard a great deal from your husband about the part of the United States you will probably live, but you may still be wondering how you will get acquainted with people, what they will be like, and how you will manage your new home. This short guide cannot answer all your questions, but it may help you in making plans and adjusting yourself to American ways of living."

-Good House Keeping Magazine (1945)

P A R T O N E

CHAPTER ONE

MADELINE PARKER CLUTCHED her hat to her chest and waved fiercely to her parents. The ship groaned and heaved beneath her feet, as if straining beneath the weight of so many women. Heels cascaded over timber, the decibels of high-pitched female voices assaulted her eardrums, but nothing could quell the excitement beating a steady drum in her stomach. This was it.

A ship that had once transported soldiers to war was now taking them across the ocean to their husbands. To a new life so far from London they could have been travelling to another world.

A shriek made Madeline turn. She watched a young woman fall to her knees, sobbing as the ship pulled away. Madeline looked back to catch a final glimpse of her own mother, of her father bravely holding his wife against him. Tears fell absently

against her cheeks, but she held her head high. She was leaving home for the man she loved. It was time to start her own adventure and she couldn't wait.

All around her, women cried, giggled, screamed and chatted. It was incredible. All these girls fleeing their families, leaving everything they'd ever known, to be with those handsome GIs who'd swept them off their feet.

"America," whispered Madeline. America. It sounded so exotic, so unknown, so decadent.

Her heart skipped its rhythm just thinking of her husband. Three weeks they had known one another, three emotional, exciting weeks they had spent together in total, and now she was finally to be with him. As his new bride. All those months of waiting, hoping, and the day had finally come.

Madeline lifted her bag and moved away from the ship's edge, the people on the dock like specks now, dots in the distance.

She was surrounded by women, although she knew no one. But she didn't feel alone. They were all leaving England with the same purpose, all wives who had patiently waited to be transported to their new homeland.

Signs had already started to be pinned to boards, with different States scribbled across the top. Madeline watched as a group of women scrambled to add their names to a list. At the

entrance to the lounge was a huge poster – a map of the United States of America. She could see painted fingernails tracing every inch of it.

The flutter of identity cards pinned to jackets made her look down, then finger her own. Each colour represented the state they were destined to live in, but right now hers made her feel like a refugee. Cargo even.

“Great idea, don’t you think?”

Madeline turned. The voice belonged to a pretty blonde, her hair a shimmer of short curls, falling almost to her shoulders. A sweep of red lipstick adorned full lips that were set in a wide smile.

“Ah, yes, it is clever.”

“Alice Jones,” said the other girl, extending a petite hand. She turned her shoulder to reveal another woman, standing behind her. “And this is June West.”

“Madeline,” Madeline replied.

They shook hands and smiled, before a shy June stepped forward.

“Where are you headed?” asked Alice. “Except into your husband’s arms of course!”

Madeline couldn’t help the smile that tugged at her lips. She held up her red identity card.

“New York.”

“Oh my goodness! Us too!”

Alice clutched Madeline’s hand and linked arms with June, before marching them off in the direction of the lists.

“We must sign up now. Imagine who else we could meet.”

“Are we assigned to rooms?”

Alice shrugged. “I don’t know, but we’ll bribe whomever we have to so we can all room together, don’t you think?”

Madeline nodded and trotted alongside her new friends. She guessed, from the still-shy expression on June’s face that she was a new recruit of Alice’s too.

She was relieved. It was going to be a long journey and having someone fun to pass the time with was precisely what she needed.

The beat of heels on the wooden deck was deafening, the sway of the ship as she moved out in to deeper ocean already sending unwelcome rumbles through her stomach. Betty Olliver pressed one hand to her belly and tried to focus on breathing. In and out, she reminded herself, but it wasn’t as easy as that. She had snapped her over-size stomach in tight under her blouse, terrified one of the authorities would notice her pregnancy, and now all it was succeeding in doing was making her feel faint. So faint she had a feeling she was about to keel overboard.

Betty grasped a nearby railing and wished she could just let her waist out from its restraints. She had been darned if she was going to wait around at home and give birth without a husband near, but now she was starting to feel differently. Very differently indeed.

When the letter had arrived telling her it was time to depart, there was no chance she was going to be left behind.

“Oh dear, are you okay?”

She looked up and into the kindest blue eyes she'd seen in a long time. Betty just nodded, squeezing her own eyes shut for a second as if the act itself would give her strength.

“Oh no you're not,” said the voice again. “I shall call an official over.”

“No!” Betty expelled the word with all her might, reaching for the woman's wrist. “No.”

The blue eyes turned from kindly to uncertain. Betty released her grip. She noticed another two women, standing slightly to the left. Their eyes were wavering. She smiled apologetically.

“I'm sorry, it's just, well,” she dropped her voice an octave. “I'm in the family way.”

The three women looked at one another. Betty felt dread crawl up her spine. Had she been too quick to voice her condition? Too trusting?

"Alice," said the first woman, the smile back in her eyes.
"And this is Madeline and June."

Betty smiled back at them gratefully, pleased to see a flicker of understanding cross their faces.

"Betty Olliver." She regained her composure and straightened her shoulders. "I'll be fine in just a moment."

"Do you need to sit down?"

She didn't need to think that one over. She'd never been so in need of a seat. "Yes. Oh yes."

Alice wound her arm around her and took her weight. Betty didn't want to be a charity case but she wasn't above admitting she needed help.

"I really owe you," she managed, feeling a sharp pain with every step despite the help. "I just . . ."

"You're not wearing a corset under there are you!" The woman she thought was Madeline hissed, pulling at the back of her cardigan. "Ooohh, you are, aren't you?"

They all stopped. Betty knew she looked guilty but what could she say? It was wait around alone or get on the first ship to find her husband. The first plan wasn't an option she could have ever entertained. Not when she had no family at home in London.

"I might not know a lot, but medical matters are what I do know something about. You could hurt the baby, not to mention

yourself! And what if it brought the labour on before you're both ready?"

Madeline looked angry and Betty didn't have the will to fight. Maybe it had been a silly plan, but she was on board now and there was no going back.

"Quickly, let's undo these laces and you can throw this shawl over yourself. No one will notice, not with all the fuss."

"Thank you." It was all she could say. "Thank you, thank you so much."

Madeline tsked and Alice just smiled kindly. So did June. Betty was on the verge of bursting into tears. It was nice not to feel so alone, to have company after so long without it.

"There are medics on board," said June, her voice whisper-soft. "If something does happen, there will be someone to care for you."

"Come on, let's find a cabin," announced Alice, holding out a hand. "I've heard there's eight hammocks in each, but the ship's not full and I'm sure we can get one together."

The girls huddled around Betty as she attempted to catch her breath. Lying down, without the corset, was helping. Her lungs still felt like they were heaving, even now her breathing had regulated, and she was grateful for the support. Three strangers were giving her more help than she'd ever received before. With

her parents dead, and no siblings, she'd been pregnant and alone for so long. For once it was nice to be cared for.

"How many months are you?"

Betty gulped. This was not a question she wanted to answer. The girl, Madeline, seemed to know a lot about pregnancy, and she'd probably think even less of her once she knew.

"It's okay, we won't tell."

She smiled at Alice who, she'd decided, was perhaps the prettiest girl she'd ever met. All smiles and dimples, with a face that couldn't be called anything other than beautiful.

Betty noticed that Madeline was pursing her lips. She had a feeling she was the one who would tell. Or judge her. But maybe she just knew the most about babies. And dangers.

She felt all eyes on her. There had been times she had wondered what it would feel like to be interrogated, to be a prisoner of war like she'd feared her husband could have been, and now she had an inkling of what it might be like.

"Betty?"

They deserved to know. She knew that. They had shown her kindness, helped her, when she needed it most. But could she risk it?

The faces around her were smiling, worried, tense.

She blew out a deep breath. There wasn't an easy way to say it. "Eight months."

"Oh my goodness, and you were trying to wear a corset!"

Betty's face flushed burning hot. A trickle of dread passed over her, but a warm hand thrust into hers helped her breath to steady again. It was Alice's face she braved a look at first, followed by June - who was looking upset but not angry, and then Madeline. She still looked alarmed.

Betty swallowed a gurgle of tears and thrust her chin up.

"I just didn't want to do this alone. I wanted to be with my husband. I've no one else."

The nodding of heads around her made her realise she wasn't alone.

"And you felt like you'd waited long enough," finished June.

"There are lots of pregnant women on board," said Madeline, her voice reassuring. "It's not like being pregnant or having a child with you is forbidden."

She shrugged and glanced at the girls. "They would have wanted a doctor to examine me first, and I'm too far along." She rubbed her belly. "There's more than a chance I'll have this baby on board. Once we're out at sea there's nothing they can do, but they could have stopped me getting on in the first place."

They all looked at her, a combination of smiles and frowns. She guessed they all understood, in a way. As would the women

divided into the other side of the ship with their children. What had the paper called them? The floating nursery?

It was a feeling they all knew well, that desperation to be with their men. It wasn't every day you were surrounded by women who felt the same way, who were in love and desperate to see, to feel, their husbands in their arms once more.

"So how did you meet yours?" Betty asked.

Alice laughed. A gentle noise that made even Betty, with her still-aching stomach, grin.

"You do realise we've all got different answers to that question," she said.

"And we probably all have really long answers to that question," chimed in June.

"Just so happens I've got all night," insisted Alice.

"I think what we need is some sustenance, then we can yap all afternoon."

Betty smiled at Madeline. "I'm all for the sustenance part," she said, rubbing her belly. "But I think I'll stay put for a bit longer."

Madeline stretched and stood. "I'll go investigate. Anyone else want to come?"

Alice jumped up and joined Madeline, leaving Betty to stay reclined, with June tucking up in the adjoining hammock bed beside her for company. June might be the quiet one of the

bunch, but there was something very reassuring about having her near.

It felt odd lying next to a pregnant woman who she had only known for all of an hour. But somehow it felt right. They both lay in silence, but June felt comfortable. It was the sort of silence that wasn't empty, that didn't need to be filled.

"So how long have you been married?"

That made Betty smile. "Guess?"

"Don't tell me. Seven, eight months?"

They both laughed.

"I fell pregnant on our honeymoon. We spent a weekend together at a little guest house, and I've only seen him once since."

June nodded. "I haven't seen my man since he left after our wedding."

"Are you nervous about seeing him again?"

Their eyes met, warily at first, but June recognised her feelings reflected in her new friend's pupils. It was a hard emotion to describe, one that only another war bride could ever share, but still June had worried that she was the only one terrified of seeing her husband again. They had met and fallen in love so quickly, faster than would ever have been allowed if the war hadn't been breathing down their necks. But fallen in

love she had, and now she had left everything she had ever known behind. Forever.

“So tell me about him. Your man. What’s he like?”

Betty had looked exhausted, but the question about her husband seemed to revive her.

“I need a few more minutes to catch my breath.” Betty smiled and changed position. “You go first.”

June reached over to plump the two pillows behind Betty’s back and wriggled to sit cross-legged on the hammock beside her, thankful it was sturdier than it looked. It was like sitting with her sister, like they had always done at night, gabbing away about what they had seen that day, who they had talked to, and of course who they had fallen in love with.

A shudder of sadness traced through her body but she did her best to ignore it. She had agonised for months about leaving her family; about never seeing her sister again or her mother and father. For all twenty-one years of her life, they had meant the world to her, and now she had left them forever to follow a handsome soldier she hardly knew. But then she had known that when she’d married him, that if he survived the war she would have to travel to be with him, and besides, she’d made a promise before God.

“You want the short version or the long version?”

Betty rubbed her hands together smiled broadly. "I want every last detail," she said, resting her hands on her belly. "I'm a hopeless romantic, in case you hadn't already figured out."

The clatter of heels made them both turn to look, and Alice and Madeline appeared at the doorway. They had managed to smuggle four cups of something steaming, and what appeared to be some tomato sandwiches.

"You're just in time," announced Betty.

"For what?"

Madeline passed two cups to Betty and climbed into the edge of the facing sling. Alice did the same to June.

"June's telling me how she met her man."

All eyes turned to June, and suddenly she wasn't sure if her story was even interesting enough to tell three other women.

"It's really not that interesting."

"Nonsense," insisted Betty. "Now settle back down and get talking."

So she did. With three pairs of eyes on her and a cup of sweet tea in her hands, June let her mind drift back to almost eighteen months ago, when she had first met the man of her dreams.

CHAPTER TWO

WIND ECHOED THROUGH the trees and pulled her along in its embrace. She felt lucky today - there had been no bombs, no explosions to hinder the warmth of the sun. For once it was high in the sky and not hidden behind grimy clouds and belching smoke-filled air.

That was when she'd seen him. Sitting on a park bench, his head lolled back as if his neck could snap with the weight of it. It wasn't like she hadn't seen a soldier before. Almost all of the boys she had grown up with or known from the neighbourhood were off fighting in the war, and the only young men she had seen of late had been soldiers. But he was different.

She had heard talk of the American soldiers, even seen a few of them, or heard them wolf-whistling out to the girls when they passed. They wore uniforms that looked clean and crisp, not

quite freshly laundered but close. They would stand on street corners chewing their gum, talking in their drawling accents.

This young man looked just like those men, in his five-button uniform jacket, but she wondered if there was something wrong with him. It wasn't often you saw a soldier sitting alone, and certainly not asleep!

She didn't know what to do. It was only a few minutes walk to her house, but she didn't want to just leave him there. Couldn't just leave him there. He was a soldier, from an allied country, it wouldn't be right to just ignore him. Would it?

"Huh-hmm." She cleared her throat with as much force as she could, almost starting a coughing fit. "Excuse me, sir."

She wondered if he was injured. There was no blood or wound she could see, but he seemed to be in a very heavy slumber.

She took a step forward, then another, inching slowly closer to him. She went to open her mouth then gulped back the air already in her lungs. He stunk. The pungent stench of alcohol seemed to seep from him.

"Yoo-hoo," she muttered. When there was still no response she kicked him firmly in the lower leg. "Soldier, wake up!"

A snort of a snore emitted from him and then his head snapped straight up. June jumped at least a foot backward, eyeing him with caution.

"Soldier, you must have fallen asleep."

He blinked a few times before dropping his head in his open palms and rubbing at his face.

June waited. She quickly smoothed her hair, checking it was still in place, then folded her hands in front of her.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

The soldier shook his head, squinted one eye at her, as if the sun was simply too bright for his pupils, then cleared his throat.

“I think I’m drunk.”

She tried not to giggle. As if his accent wasn’t funny enough without a drunken slur attached to it.

“I think you might be correct.”

He tried to stand up and sat back down again with a thump.

“Yup.” He hiccuped.

June went against her better judgement and moved forward to offer him her hand. She balanced the bag of groceries with the other. How had a simple trip to the store ended in a rescue mission of a stranger?

“Here, take my arm. I’ll take you home with me to clean you up.”

“You would?”

He stumbled as she helped him, his nose falling only inches away from her own. Even smelling like a pub and unable to stand on his own feet, June couldn’t help but notice how handsome he

was. He had dark brown hair that had flopped ever so slightly over his forehead, touching the tips of his eyebrows. Eyes the colour of a hazelnut cracked open stared back at her – even slightly glassy and alcohol-enhanced they were the most honest, deep eyes she had ever looked into.

“Hi,” he said, looking like a puppy dog as he watched her back.

“Come on.” She forced herself to look away. “Just put one foot in front of the other.”

And so they walked. She assisting a soldier, and he gazing back at her as if he’d never in his life seen a woman before.

June took a deep lungful of air before pushing open the door to her house. She didn’t exactly want to be alone, unescorted with a strange man. She had never caused her parents alarm before, and she didn’t want to start now.

“Hello. Anyone here?” she called, into the dark depths of the hallway.

There was no reply.

“Ma!” she hollered this time.

When there was no response June fought against better judgement again and hauled the soldier in with her. He had hardly uttered a word the entire way, with the exception of the odd hiccup or apology for stumbling.

"Come on now, sit here," she instructed him.

The soldier complied, thumping down in a seat by the stove. June looked out the window and saw her mother wrestling with washing on the line. That gave her a few moments to compose herself before they had company.

"What's your name?" she asked, busying herself with putting the kettle on to boil.

He gazed up at her, a goofy smile on his face.

"Edward West," he told her. "My friends call me Eddie."

She smiled over at him as she poured hot water into the teapot. "Well, it's nice to meet you Edward. My name's June."

He took the cup happily, holding on to it while she spooned some sugar and gave the liquid a stir.

"Now, Edward . . ."

He interrupted her.

"Eddie," he said, narrowly avoiding swishing his tea over the floor. "You can call me Eddie."

"Eddie, my mother will be inside soon, and I need you to sober up. She doesn't take kindly to men that drink.'

"I don't usually drink," he said, his dark eyes wide with honesty. "It's just my friends got me drunk, we were out all night, then they left me."

June nodded. For some reason she thought she could trust him, but it was her parents he was going to have to convince.

"Either way, just drink that tea then I'll show you where you can wash up."

Eddie gulped down the last of the hot tea, the cup lost to his big paw of a hand, and stood to his feet. Still slightly unbalanced, she noted, but getting better.

"Come on, quick," she said, eyes on her mother following the path back in, dry washing in her arms.

June led him to the washroom, passed him a towel and face cloth and closed the door.

"Is that you home, dear?"

She leant against the timber frame and counted to ten. Her mother might frown upon her spending time alone with the young man, but she would never turn him away. Her father would have done the same thing in her place. The American's were going to help them win the war, and that meant showing gratitude and kindness in their direction whenever possible. So why was she so worried about facing her mother.

"June?"

"Coming Ma," she called back.

A bang in the room behind her made June's heart jump, but she ignored it. He could make all the noise he wanted so long as he came out smelling of soap with his hair combed.

"You okay love?" her mother asked as she joined her in the kitchen. "Look like you've seen a ghost, you do."

Another bang echoed, louder this time.

“Is that your father home early?”

June felt her face flush hot. “Ah, no, it’s not Father,” she said.

Her mother pursed her lips, her eyebrows knotting in the middle. “Well what’s all that noise then?”

“Make me a cuppa and I’ll tell you all about it.”

To say her mother had been taken by surprise would have been an understatement. But being the type of woman that she was, she had simply dealt with having a strange American in her home, and gone about making dinner. Although she was not convinced about exactly how they’d met.

“You sure you’ve never seen him before?”

June glared at her mother. “I’ve told you, I have never set eyes upon him before. Ever.”

Her mother raised an eyebrow.

“Ma! I’ve never even met an American before.”

A door down the hall banged shut. June gulped. Her mother put down the wooden spoon she had been using to stir the stew and wiped her hands over her apron.

Eddie appeared in the kitchen, and June nearly lost her balance. She gripped the old wooden chair. She had expected him to come back out looking no better than when she’d left him.

How wrong she'd been.

Eddie had combed his hair back off his face, scrubbed his skin clean, and his cheeks were soft from being freshly razored. She guessed he'd found her father's blade, but it didn't matter. His eyes were still bloodshot, but he was quite possibly the most handsome man she had ever encountered.

"Well, I take it you're our soldier?"

Her mother asked as if he was a pet her daughter had just brought home rather than a man serving his country.

"Yes Ma'am," he replied, his voice lacking the slur it had had earlier.

June guessed he had been splashing a lot of cold water on his face.

"I'm Eddie West." He held out his hand.

June's mother nodded and looked all flustered, taking Eddie's hand and giving it an awkward shake.

"Well, Eddie West, you're sure lucky our June here found you." She turned back to the stove. "I'm hoping you like a stew, I'll be serving dinner soon."

June glanced up at Eddie and he gave her a wink in reply. She felt the blush start at her toes and work its way up every square inch of her body.

"Is there anything I can do, Mrs?"

"Mrs Smith," she replied.

"Mrs Smith," he said, smiling at June as her mother kept herself busy. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

Madge Smith turned around and waved her spoon at him.

"Now why would I let a guest help me in the kitchen, and a man at that?"

He shrugged. "My mother always told me to keep myself useful. She'd give me a clip around the ears for taking liberties."

June stifled her laugh as her mother muttered away to herself about men in the kitchen, before catching Eddie's eyes again and feeling a blush creep up her neck once more.

"Why don't you show me around?" asked Eddie.

She glanced at her mother, who didn't respond, and picked up her shawl that was resting on the table.

"All right."

"So where is it you come from, Eddie?"

He stretched back on the seat outside, his long legs crossed at the ankle. June was trying hard not to stare at him, but it wasn't easy. The olive skin on the planes of his cheeks, the dark lashes that framed those hazel eyes, even the way his hands moved in expression as he talked. She was fascinated by him.

“Home is a long, long way away,” he said, his face turned up toward the sky. “I come from a place called New York. We’ve got a farm there, with fields planted in crops, cows milling around, even a few horses. A wooden stable block beside the house.”

He looked at her, his eyes searching hers, as if worried she wasn’t interested. She tried to stop the pull of her lips as they ignited in a smile.

“We’ve lived there all my life,” he said, taking her smile as an invitation to continue. “It’s two storey, built from wood with my father and grandfather’s own hands. We have a big porch where we eat in summer, there are trail rides nearby for taking the horses out, and a lake where I fish with my Dad. Just me and my sister, our parents, and a whole lot of animals.”

“It sounds incredible,” she said, almost seeing the picture in her imagination. He spoke with such enthusiasm, such love, that it was hard not to imagine it along with him.

“It is,” he said, turning back to face her. “I really miss it, and my family. My sister would like you.”

She wondered how he knew his sister would like her, when they hadn’t even known each other more than a couple of hours, but she believed him. Her worry was that her own sister might like him too, and that was not a thought she wanted to entertain.

He watched her then, his eyes locked on hers. She had never been attracted to a man before, not like this. She was only nineteen, there had been no romances in her life before, and for the last couple of years all the young men she might have met had been away fighting. And now here was Eddie, this dashing soldier in an American uniform, looking at her as she imagined a sweetheart would. His eyes on hers, his body a little too close, and her breath catching in her throat as if she'd just run a mile.

"Dinner's ready!"

Her mother's voice jolted her from the little fantasy she had been lost in.

Eddie stood and held out a hand.

"I'm starved," he said with a grin. "Been a long time since I've had a home cooked meal."

June took his hand to rise then walked ahead of him, conscious of his presence behind her. She knew it was silly, but she wondered if it was possible to fall in love with someone so quickly. She may have led a sheltered life, but she'd never felt like this. Ever.

Eddie reached in front of her to open the door and she walked through. But not before the side of her body brushed past his arm. She didn't dare look up at him.

Her illusion abruptly ended when she saw her father already seated at the table. She cleared her throat and composed herself. Moved another step away from Eddie.

"I'm told we're in the presence of a soldier," her father said, smiling as he stood.

She glided the few steps between them and kissed her father's cheek.

"We are, Daddy. This is Edward. Eddie West."

"How do you do Sir," said Eddie, gripping her father's hand as he offered it. "It's an honour to be in your home."

Her father shook his head. "It's nice to have a soldier for dinner. Especially an ally."

Eddie moved to assist her mother as she clutched a large pot of heavy stew, taking it from her hands and ferrying it safely to the table.

"You're not a deserter though, are you son?"

June could have laughed at her father. He must have been beside himself, worried they could be harbouring a coward.

"No Sir," said Eddie, looking unfazed by the question. "I'm on four days leave, then back with my unit."

"Very well." Her father sat back down.

June grinned at Eddie as he watched her from across the table, then tried to concentrate on her dinner. She had gone from feeling unfortunate for stumbling across him in the street

to feeling very, very lucky. Not for the first time since the war had started, she thought about how being in the right place at the right time sometimes meant everything in life.

Thank goodness her sister was at a nurses meeting. She wouldn't have stood a chance otherwise.

Eddie grinned at her and she tried to avoid his gaze.

Or maybe she would have stood a chance still.

"How about I take you to a dance tomorrow night?"

June tried not to smile too hard, instead wrapping her hands one over the other and squeezing hard.

"That would be lovely."

He grinned at her, looking wolfish in the almost darkness. A ray of light illuminated only part of his face and it made his mouth look lopsided, white teeth glinting.

"And then the night after that the pictures?"

June couldn't stop her smile that time. He wasn't still drunk, was he? Could he really be as attracted to her as she was to him?

"What do you say?"

She swallowed her fears and looked up at him.

"I say that sounds like a nice idea."

He took one of her hands in his, his skin rough against the softness of her own. Manly, like hands that had known real work.

"You English girls are so restrained."

She almost pulled her hand away. Fought not to. What did he mean by that?

He responded by dropping a kiss filled with laughter to her palm.

"Nice?" he repeated. "I was hoping you would say that a night or two with me sounded smashing, but you just think it would be nice."

She giggled and swatted at him.

"Eddie . . ."

"What?" His eyes were alight with what she could only think might be excitement.

A noise nearby made June leap away from him.

"Is that your mother?" he whispered.

June nodded. "Uh-huh."

"It's been a lovely evening, but I really must be off now." His loud voice belied the humour in his face.

All she could do was nod. She knew her mother would be listening. It seemed Eddie did too.

"I'll just thank your mother for tea and ask your father's permission to escort you to the dance tomorrow evening, then I'd best be off."

The tap of a door closing softly signalled her mother disappearing back inside, probably to sit down with her feet up and pretend that she had been there all along.

Eddie stood first, then pulled her up to her feet with him. He leant in and stole a kiss to her cheek – a wet, cheeky press of his lips that had blood pumping so fast through her veins that she almost keeled over right there on the spot.

It wasn't even on the lips, yet it felt like her first real kiss.

June waited, her breath crowding her face as she lay with the blankets tucked up to her forehead. It seemed like she'd been lying there forever, listening to her sister bang about as she came in, talk to their mother as she ate leftover stew, and finally traipsed down the hall to the room they shared.

She continued to stay still, silent, as a sliver of light spilt into the room from the hallway.

"Lilly!" she hissed, flinging the covers back as her sister appeared.

"June," Lilly scolded, throwing her cardigan at her. "You scared the blinkin' life out of me."

"Just scoot in here, would you!"

Lilly ignored her for a moment, pulling off her clothes and getting into her flannel nightdress. June wriggled over in the

small bed so her sister could fit in beside her. They both had their own beds, but since they were little girls they had tucked in beside one another to talk, sometimes long into the night, before parting ways to sleep.

“Okay, spill,” said Lilly as she snuggled beneath the covers and they wriggled together for warmth. “What do I hear about you entertaining soldiers while I’m away doing my duty?”

June blushed, her cheeks igniting as if fire had kissed them. She was pleased the blanket of darkness hid her excitement. So her sister couldn’t tease her about her naivety and inexperience with the opposite sex.

“Before you say anything, don’t get any fancy ideas about your date tomorrow night.” Lilly dug her in the ribs with a sharp elbow as she teased. “Mother has appointed me your chaperone, so he had better have some nice friends.”

June stayed silent. It wasn’t because she was disappointed about not going alone. Her sister was older than her by two years, knew about things like boys and dances and how to impress. But she was used to being overlooked when her sister was nearby.

“So? Come on. What was he like, how did you find him, and how did you get him to ask you out?”

The pale light in the room was making June nervous. They had black-outs over the windows and her father preferred a dim light to sit and talk in. But she wanted a bright light under which to scrutinise her appearance.

"You look fine, June," announced Lilly, gracing the room with her presence.

She did an impromptu twirl, encouraging her calf length dress to flit out around her. Her blond hair was pulled half-back from her face, eyes made up and lips pouting in a hard-to-find pink. Her sister had had enough dates for the both of them, and June guessed one of them must have been American for her to end up with such a decadent new lip shade.

"Are you sure about this dress?" She had a feeling it was too much. Too girly. Too . . .

Lilly grabbed her and swung her around. "You look gorgeous, little sister, just gorgeous."

Their father looked between them and chuckled before standing and kissing each of them on the cheek.

"Lilly, beautiful as ever," he said, reaching for his eldest. "But June, you look lovely tonight. Belle of the ball."

She had a feeling her father was trying to make her feel better, but her mother was nodding her head too and dabbing at her eyes. Heavens! It was as if she was off on her wedding vacation, not just going out with her sister to a dance.

A tap at the door made June freeze. If it hadn't been for Lilly grabbing her hand she'd have run to her bedroom and locked the door.

"For heavens sake, you're nineteen!" scolded her sister. "And you'll be fine," she added with a whisper, dragging her along. "If he liked you yesterday he'll love you tonight."

June hoped so. Oh, she hoped so!

She sucked back a deep breath and opened the door. Lilly stood behind her.

"June!"

Eddie thrust a handful of daisies at her and placed a clumsy kiss on her cheek.

"Ah, thank you."

Lilly prised the flowers from her and passed them to her mother.

"They're beautiful, Eddie, they're . . ." She looked over at them then back at him.

"From your neighbour's garden." He said it with a touch of regret, and she liked that he was at least honest.

She also liked that he didn't so much as glance at her sister.

"This is Lilly. My sister," she said, waving back in her direction.

“Eddie,” he said, taking Lilly’s hand for a polite moment before touching June’s elbow.

“Like a love sick puppy, this one,” she heard Lilly laugh to her mother before following them down the street.

She didn’t care though. She was the luckiest girl in the world as far as she was concerned. And right now, that was all she cared about.

June was thankful to have her sister walking with them. Aside from his initial welcome, Eddie had seemed even shyer than her. They were walking side-by-side, arms bumping every few steps, and she felt every touch. Lost her breath every time he glanced at her and didn’t know how she could possibly cope with dancing in his arms.

“So Eddie, our June tells me you live on a farm.”

Lilly winked at June and she wished it was dark. That night would fall and conceal her face.

“Country born and bred,” he answered.

“And you’re not married or promised to a lass back home?”

“Lilly!” June couldn’t believe she’d even thought to ask something like that.

“No Ma’am,” said Eddie, his voice overlapping with June’s.

He stopped walking and faced her sister. Had he taken great offence to her question? Was he going to put an end to their night here and now? June bit hard on the inside of her mouth.

“I wouldn’t have asked your sister out if I was promised.”

The look on his face was so serious June might have laughed if she wasn’t so embarrassed.

Lilly nodded. “Fair enough.”

“I love her,” he blurted. “I fell in love with her from the moment she found me.”

June felt heat rush through her body. He loved her?

“Love?” repeated Lily, waving her hand dismissively in the air. “Only an American would waffle on about love. You’ve only known her a day!”

But though she couldn’t muster the energy to look at him, was too embarrassed to even think of responding, a warmth filled June’s heart that she couldn’t describe.

Eddie took her hand and squeezed it tight. She did the same. And as they walked, palms pressed together, for the first time in her life she started to believe in the idea of love at first sight. She might have despaired at finding him, when she’d first seen him, but one look in those dark hazel eyes had been all she’d needed. Had taken the breath from her lungs. She also knew, from that day forward, that she’d follow Eddie to the end of the earth, if it meant never having to let go of his hand.

CHAPTER THREE

JUNE WIPED A tear as it trickled a path down her cheek. Just thinking about Eddie had her heart thumping. Would it still be the same? Would he be waiting for her as he'd promised? And her sister. Her mother. Her father. Would she truly be able to live a happy life without them?

"You'll be okay luv'. It'll all be fine."

She squeezed Betty's hand and turned to face her. The other two girls had already fallen asleep in their hammocks, tired from the excitement of the day. But June had decided to stay awake with Betty, who was struggling to get comfortable and still had cramps in her stomach.

"June?"

She reached to pull a blanket over herself and made out Betty's face in the fading light.

"You're right, it'll all be fine." She sighed. "It just feels like there's a long road ahead."

"You never did say what happened to your sister. Did she find her own prince charming?"

That made her laugh. "Our Lilly had plenty of suitors, but she went and fell for a Yank too."

Betty was suddenly upright. "Oooh, please, you have to tell me!"

June shook her head. "I've done enough talking for today. Let's just say that Lilly met a man that night at the dance who managed to knock the cynicism out of her. But she was never going to be manhandled off to America."

Betty reached one hand out to June, the other rubbing in large circles on her belly.

"Did they marry?"

"Yes. But only once she'd made him swear that he'd never ask her to move to Big Sky Country. Once the war ended, he came back and they rented a little cottage down the road from our parents house."

"You're going to miss her terribly. You know that, don't you?"

June blinked as tears filled her eyes again. "Let's just hope these men are worth it."

"They will be, won't they?"

June could hear the sincerity in Betty's voice. It was a hard thing to do, leave the world you knew behind and as good as go to live on the moon. Because that's how far away they were going to be from their families. Decent people who worked hard, but would likely never be able to afford to visit their daughters abroad.

"Betty, even if they're not, we've got to make the most of it."

She did her best to ignore the sob threatening to strangle her throat. Betty squeezed her hand harder.

At least she had someone to pass the hours with. Someone who could be her friend now and in America. Or at least she hoped.

* * *

"So, what do you know about New York?"

Alice smiled and placed one hand dramatically over her forehead. "Why, it's the place movie stars and moguls live, ain't it."

Her American accent had them all giggling.

"I think you're mistaken for Hollywood," corrected June.

Betty wriggled beneath the wool blanket they'd pinched from their cabin as Madeline and June sat down with a paper bag full of chocolate chip biscuits.

"Where did you get those?"

Alice flicked her fingers in delight and Betty smiled.

"The canteen has food like you've never seen," said June. She passed the packet around.

"And stockings, and pretty writing paper and pens."

June rolled her eyes before taking a biscuit for herself. "I was more interested in the food, but it was rather incredible."

"How much money do you have?"

June blushed before whispering. "I tucked a little extra away in my knickers."

Alice put out her hand for another treat. "You'll have to give us all another one then to stay quiet."

"£10 doesn't go very far. I think that was a bit mean not letting us bring any more. I mean, what if something happened and we had to live off our own means for a while?"

They sat and ate, nibbling the chocolate and licking at their fingers.

"Do you think they let you do this in America?"

Betty giggled at Alice. "What? Licking fingers?"

She nodded.

June reached for her bag and pulled out a magazine.

“Haven’t you girls been reading up on our new country?”

That made them all laugh.

“My mother bought this for me the week before I left.

Thought it would help me, you know, prepare.”

Madeline wiped her fingers on a napkin then sat back in the sun. “You’d better start sharing then.”

“How about a quiz?” June waggled her eyebrows.

“Oooh, I love a good game,” said Betty.

June waited for the other two. They nodded, reluctantly.

“Don’t make it too hard,” moaned Alice.

“Let’s start with names.”

“Names?” They all answered in unison.

“You know, like what the American word is for things,” said June.

“I thought they spoke English?”

June leaned over and placed an arm around Alice’s shoulders. “Well, they might not speak Chinese but there’s a few differences.”

June giggled as the girls sat like school children, crowded around her. “No peeking,” she instructed. She held the magazine high against her chest. “All right, an easy one to start with. What’s the name for a sweet biscuit?”

Betty thrust her hand into the air. “Cookie.”

“Well done, Miss Betty.”

Alice groaned and closed her eyes, the other two clapped politely.

“How about lavatory.”

“As in I’d rather be in a lavatory right now?”

“No Alice! What’s the word? No one in America will know what you mean if you ask where the lavatory is.”

They all looked back at her plain faced.

“Toilet.”

“Oh, I knew that one!” Betty sat up straighter. “Come on, more.”

“What is a scone?”

“Biscuit!” yelled Madeline.

A sharp look from an official made them drop their voices.

“Verandah?”

They all stayed silent.

“Porch,” she whispered.

“How about you read to us and we’ll just listen?” suggested Alice.

June flicked through the pages and then dumped the magazine on the table. “I think you all need to read it anyway. I’ve done enough talking for the day.”

A plop of rain hit Alice on the forehead and she squealed.

“Quick, to the cabin!”

June gave Betty a hand to her feet, then linked arms with her and Madeline. They followed Alice as she fled, heels starting to skid on the deck as rain fell with fury from the clouds above.

Alice grimaced as she peeled her wet cardigan from her body and strung it up on the line hanging across the room. She re-tucked in her camisole and reached for a woollen pullover.

“I guess we’re stuck here until dinner?”

Alice looked up as Betty spoke.

“We could go to the lounge?”

June shook her head and tucked up under the covers. “I think we should stay right here.”

“While you read us out passages from Good Housekeeping?” teased Madeline.

“No, while one of you tells us your story.”

They all looked in opposite directions.

“Come on now! You made me tell mine, so now it’s someone else’s turn.” June glared at them.

Betty pointed at Alice. “Make her do it,” she said. “I just get all emotional talking about my Charlie.” She rubbed her belly, eyes downcast.

Alice straightened her shoulders and stretched her back, before slipping a scarf around her neck to combat the cold and

sitting on the centre hammock. "You really want to hear my story?"

"Yes," affirmed June.

"How long do I have?"

"Until dinner," said Betty.

Alice gave a dramatic, arms spread wide poses then lay stomach down, elbows propping her up. She blocked out the murky cream walls and peeling paint, and let her mind wander. It wasn't hard, she thought about her man constantly, remembered everything about him. Every moment they had spent together.

"My father always said that to sit idle during the war was to not make an effort at all. If you believed in your country, no matter how old you were or what your standing, then you had to do something. So I joined up with the Red Cross, trained as a nurse, and started to look after our men as they came home. Or any men really, soldiers who needed medical assistance."

She let her palms cup her chin and closed her eyes. It still felt like just yesterday . . .

* * *

Alice would never forget the day Ralph Jones grabbed hold of her wrist. She was walking between the beds, refiling waters and

checking temperatures, when a strong grasp commandeered her skin and wouldn't let go.

"Don't leave me." The voice croaked, tight as if it hadn't spoken in days.

"It's okay, soldier, you're not alone here."

He still didn't let go of her wrist.

"Please."

Alice scanned the room. The battleaxe who passed for head nurse was nowhere to be seen.

"Would you like water?"

His head moved, only just, side to side. "No."

Alice looked again but saw no one. "If you let go of my wrist I'll pull out a stool and sit with you."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

She reached beneath the bed and slid a seat out. She knew there was one there because she had stored it there herself before the bed was filled. Alice felt for his charts and had a quick scan.

"Well, Captain Jones, you're lucky to be here."

There was no response. His eyes were closed. She put the chart back and pushed back the stool to stand.

He touched her wrist again. Not the strong hold like before but a skim of his hand against hers. She stopped.

“Please.”

Alice sat down again. She had lost plenty of soldiers since she'd started. Had many propose to her. Even fancied the odd one. But this man was different. Even with the bandage disguising half his face, the leg suspended in a cast and blankets covering almost all of his body, there was something about him. A strength, a power that he couldn't disguise even from the hospital bed he was cast upon.

She reached for the water and tucked her arm beneath his pillow. “Take a sip.”

The Captain leant forward, his lips parting softly as she tipped the water for him.

“Thank you.”

It was then Alice felt a peculiar sensation trace her arm. She placed the cup back on the side table and took up her seat again. The soldier kept his hand on hers, his fingers caught against her own. The sensation kept crawling against her skin. Tickling her. Making her aware of him.

He opened his eyes, turned his head slightly, and looked straight at her. She swallowed, not breaking their gaze.

“You can call me Ralph.”

“Alice,” she whispered.

“Alice,” he repeated. “Thank you Alice.”

Alice stood, worried about being caught. She watched him, listened to his breathing, and decided he was asleep. Like he'd collapsed back into unconsciousness.

She ran her fingers over his palm, said a little prayer that he'd still be alive when her shift started in the morning, then left.

Every day that she saw Ralph Jones was a good one. Even when she wasn't rostered on, Alice found an excuse to visit him, to sit beside his bed and read to him. The paper, poems, anything really, just so she could spend time with him. He told her stories of America, talked about friends he hoped to see again one day, and every day he told her that once he could walk, they'd go dancing.

"But I'm your nurse, that wouldn't be proper!"

"Sweetheart, I'm a Captain in the United States Army. No one's gonna tell me off for taking you for a spin."

"How about that sweetheart of yours back home? I'll bet she'll care!"

She had always loved to tease him, but this time she wanted to know. This time she wasn't kidding.

"I don't have a sweetheart back home, Miss Alice. Would I be talking to you like this if I did?"

And then she'd done what she did every day. Pressed a kiss to his forehead, squeezed his hand, and walked away. She didn't want to get too attached, and besides, she liked to keep a man hanging.

But the day she arrived at work, rushing to spend time with Ralph before her shift started, and he wasn't there, she regretted playing hard to get. It was all she could do not to sob and stomp and crawl into a ball on his bed. She might have, had his bed not already been filled.

She had rushed into the nurses station, hands shaking, to find a note pinned to the board. A messy 'Alice' was scrawled on an envelope.

Alice reached a finger out to trace the smudged writing, before pulling it from the board. It didn't say much. No words of love or misery. But in all her life she would never forget what he'd written.

I'll find you.

Every day after, for two months, she'd wished those words to come true.

Alice was so tired that her head had felt as if it belonged to a giant. Part of her wanted to ignore the door, but she was too polite to hide. Her shift had gone on hours longer than expected, and she'd seen more blood than she could ever have

imagined witnessing in her pre-war life. When every day had been simple, easy, unlike the endless hours that stretched out as a nurse.

A bang echoed down the hall. She cringed. Company had not been part of her plan. The empty house had suited her mood just fine.

She hauled back the timber door.

Her eyes locked on a uniformed body. On piercing grey eyes that didn't blink. It couldn't be, could it?

She looked him up and down again before braving another glimpse at his face.

"Remember me?"

She couldn't have stopped her smile if she'd tried.

"Ralph!" Alice flung her arms about his shoulders. "Oh, Ralph."

"I said I'd find you."

It had been months since he'd disappeared. Months since she'd last held his hand, whispered a kiss on his cheek, watched him sleep.

And now he'd found her.

"Are you going to let me in?"

Alice moved aside and let him enter. She didn't even bother to close the door. She touched her fingers against his and took the hand he offered.

Ralph was back. That was all that mattered.

She could inspect his old wounds later. He was here.

“I was called away, love, as soon as they discharged me. But I always knew I’d find you.”

Deep down in her heart, Alice had known that too.

Before the war, Alice had been used to the high life. Not that her family was particularly wealthy, but she’d always managed to find nice men who liked to indulge her. Take her out for pricey dinners and shows.

Ralph, well, he was a cut above the London men she’d once been impressed with. He showered her with gifts, found things that just weren’t possible to locate in wartime rationing, and made her heart race like no man before.

The stockings, squares of chocolate, and even ridiculous luxuries like legs of turkey, only made her love him more.

It was the official uniform, pressed and distinguished, the way even her senior nurse looked the other way if Ralph wanted to see her at work, that really made her excited though. The power made her giddy. Although she never let him take charge of her like he did his men.

Until she discovered that he was needed in Europe. His post in London had ended so abruptly that she wondered if he’d even

been real. And now she didn't know how much longer she had him for. Or what was to become of them.

Alice had happily accepted his marriage proposal the day he had turned up on her doorstep. Her heart wouldn't have let her say no. But now she was facing life alone, again, without him. Would he ever come back to her? Could he even make that promise again and know in his heart he would be able to keep it?

"Alice?"

Ralph's voice rang out in the crisp London air. She had purposely chosen a quiet spot to sit. A seat hidden by the breadth of a large Oak tree, in the little clearing near the hospital. It had once been a private garden, now it was a park of sorts for injured men to be wheeled about in.

She stood, revealing herself. Her eyes drank in the outline of his figure, the press of his uniform.

"Alice!"

Ralph lengthened his stride until he reached her. His smooth cheek touched hers as his kiss lingered.

"You're going today, aren't you?"

The solemn depth of his eyes told her she was right. Alice bit the inside of her lip until the tears passed, then cleared her throat.

"How long do we have?"

Ralph pulled her against him. She inhaled the smell of him, the feel of his body beneath her hands. She was in love. So desperately in love. How would she survive without him?

“I fly out at 2200 hours.”

It was just before noon now. That gave them less than twelve hours.

He was coming back, she told herself. He wasn't on the front line. He'd be fine. This wasn't the end. He hadn't made it to Captain without being good at whatever it was he had to do.

“Alice, you know I don't want to be unromantic, but . . .”

Her heart thumped.

“We need to get married today.”

Alice squeezed her eyes shut. A war time marriage was never going to give her the wedding she had dreamed of as a girl, but if it meant their union would be recognised, that she could legally become his wife, she wasn't going to say no.

“I have a priest organised.”

He liked taking charge. That's what made him so well respected. Of course he had a priest.

“Alice?”

She nodded. It was all she could do. Of course she'd marry him, if it was their only chance what other choice did she have?

Ralph pulled her down to the seat. She complied. There was nothing he could ask of her right now, with him on the cusp of leaving, that she wouldn't do.

"I have something for you."

He reached into his breast pocket. She held her breath.

"Here."

He opened his palm to reveal a gold heart on a fine chain. Alice bit her lip again.

"You like it?"

"I love it."

Ralph touched her shoulder and she turned, just slightly, as he fixed the necklace. The light touch of it against her skin was cool, calming.

"It looks beautiful on you."

She smiled. Tears filled her eyes, but she didn't give in to them. Tomorrow she could let them out, but today was about being together and being happy.

"The day I saw you in that hospital, Alice, well, you did something to me. You mesmerised me."

She fingered the heart. She wished she could tell him how much it meant to her, but she couldn't get the words out.

"Ralph, I . . ." her voice died.

"Come on, kitten. Let's get you home to tell your parents."

Alice imprinted the weight of his hand in hers in her memory. Squeezed tight to make sure he was real.

He was the man she'd dreamt of. She just hoped by the time she finally made it to America that he would be right behind her. Or already there. Anything so long as he wasn't only known by a white cross pushed into the earth somewhere in Europe.

CHAPTER FOUR

A WHISTLE BLEW and alerted them it was time to rise. Madeline stretched and rubbed at her eyes. It was like being a soldier, sticking to a routine, but she wasn't complaining. No lolling about and wishing for home, or time to worry too much about what awaited them in the country they were sailing toward. It was only day five and they had another ten to go.

What they did have time to worry about was how to be good American housewives. There was the odd list of instructions floating around, but she'd heard their new families had reams of notes prepared for them. Maybe it was a silly rumour. But the magazine *Good Housekeeping* dedicating entire issues to foreign brides was real. It was like they were all expecting untrained natives!

Surely being a good wife in America was the same as in their home country? If you could cook, sew and run a household, what more was there to know?

“Come on Mads, I don’t want to miss breakfast.”

Madeline grinned at Betty, who stood with one hand wrapped around her stomach and the other rubbing at her back. Always hungry, that one. But then she was eating for two.

“You go ahead, I just need a few moments.”

The other girls might think her silly, considering there were only females on the ship, but she didn’t want to go down without making at least a small fuss over her appearance. Looking well groomed had always been her thing. Something her mother had insisted upon since she was a little girl.

Her mother had been the most well-kept women on their street. She never left the house without a sweep of lipstick, a carefully swept hair-do and pressed clothes. They may not have had a fortune, but her mother sure liked to appear as if they did. To succeed in life you have to believe in yourself, Madeline. And to succeed you have to look the part. They were words she knew she’d never forget, no matter the time that passed away from her family.

“You ready Madeline?”

Alice called out as she passed and Madeline nodded.

She placed the last pin into her hair, checked her skirt for creases and followed her friend.

“Alice,” she called, catching her up.

Alice stopped to wait for her.

“We will stay in touch, when we get to America, won’t we?”

Alice grabbed hold of her arm and squeezed it tight.

“There’s no chance I’m giving up you lot when we get off this blinkin’ boat.”

“Promise?”

“Promise!”

Betty sighed and let her head rest on Alice’s shoulder before they walked off arm in arm.

“I’m glad we found each other.” Her voice was so soft she wondered if she’d even spoken out aloud.

“Me too, Mads, me too.”

The dining hall was crammed full of women. Wafts of perfume and fatty foods cooking added to Madeline’s nausea as the ship rocked back and forth, but the crew were strict about the girls eating.

Madeline giggled as she thought of the most recent letter Alice had entertained them with. She’d been writing letters to her family almost every day – letters she was going to send in one big bundle to her family as soon as they arrived in America.

We have four meals a day, us girls.

Madeline could still hear her reciting it, having them all in stitches of laughter after dark.

Two down, one up! We eat a hearty meal then opt to give it to the ocean for dessert.

The food had been a shock to the system - eggs, meat, cheese - all the wonderful, delicious things they'd missed while every type of food in London was rationed. Madeline knew she'd never stomach a powdered egg again. But the swaying of the boat and the rich food wasn't so easy to digest either. She hadn't been too bad but some of the girls had taken to wearing big belts around their skirts just to hold them up around their disappearing waists. Keeping food down was the main topic of conversation, besides yapping about husbands.

The din of so many women eating had been unbearable at first, but now she found it comforting. She loved that they were all trying their hardest despite the conditions.

"The first issue of Sailing Wives is out today," said Alice, piling scrambled eggs on top of a piece of hard toast. "Think there might be some good tips for us wives in there?" She wagged her eyebrows and made them all laugh.

"The official publication for the sailing brides of American men," said June, mimicking the clipped voice of the onboard official.

"In America, your husband will expect you to sing the national anthem every morning before you leave the marital bed," announced Betty, her voice shrill and fake.

They roared with laughter. Madeline had tears streaming down her face.

"He will expect you to forgo tea for coffee, and paint pictures of the American flag to be pinned around the house."

They all laughed as they picked at their food.

"I think we should brave a stroll up on the deck in our swimsuits," whispered Alice, voice lowered as an official passed.

"Huh! I don't think they let elephants out in swimsuits," said Betty, her hands disappearing to rest on her stomach.

She was keeping it mostly concealed – a huge shawl wrapped around her so far hadn't attracted any unwanted attention. There were plenty of women with children on-board, the odd pregnant one, although none were as far along as Betty.

"What do you say, June?"

Madeline shook her head along with June. "Not a chance! Imagine getting sent back home just for a spot of sunbathing."

"They wouldn't really send us home, would they? Not just for forgoing modesty?" asked Alice.

Madeline got up, her plate still half full. "How about a game of cards instead? I'll go back and get them and maybe we can show our ankles to the sun and not get in trouble."

"What are we playing for?"

Madeline rolled her eyes at Alice. If there was one thing for sure, it was that Alice would keep them entertained until this darn ship docked.

"Oooh, I know!"

Betty's excited voice made them all look up.

"I know what you're going to say," said Alice, reclining back, her legs crossed at the angles as she posed. "Silk stockings from the shop."

Betty burst into laughter, before showing off her own ankles. "No silk stockings are going to do these legs any good at the moment."

June tut-tutted before placing her cards out in a fan and dropping them, face up, on the table.

"I win ladies. Tell me what the prize is."

"Chocolate," said Betty, her voice animated. "Chocolate from the shop."

Madeline had plenty of money left, but she'd been a scrooge ever since they'd left home. No amounts of sweets, gum, stockings or anything else that had been forbidden during the

war were going to tempt her to spend. What if she needed it for transport? For food? What if no one was there to meet her and she had to survive on her own until she found her new family? The way she'd been told of the ship leaving only days before it departed meant she hadn't even confirmed details with her new family. She didn't even know if her husband was safely back home yet!

The what ifs were making it hard to sleep at night. She had never had to fend for herself, and yet here she was with only herself to rely on.

"Madeline?"

She looked up.

"Not tempted by the illicit treats?"

She smiled. "No Alice. Not tempted at all."

Alice wasn't going to let her get away with it, she could tell by the smirk on her face.

"Oh go on, let's play for chocolate!" Betty was practically salivating.

Alice spoke again. "Losers have to tell a secret."

"Guess you girls need to spill, since I won and all."

Now it was June sitting back, one hand shielding her face from the sun.

"I don't know . . ." Madeline wasn't convinced.

"I'll go first," announced Betty.

They all placed their cards on the table.

"It's naughty though."

Alice squealed with excitement.

"Calm down or you'll get us sent back below," Madeline hissed.

"We're having a boy," she said, her eyes dancing.

"Not such a great secret," said Alice, unimpressed. "Not by the size of that belly."

"Oh yes it is," giggled Betty. "Want to know how I know?"

That kept Alice quiet.

"The night I fell pregnant was on our honeymoon. They say you make a boy by, you know, being on top." She paused, cheeks flushed crimson. "All I know is that I was on my husband most of the evening, so there was no chance for a little girl to be made!"

Madeline blushed, June laughed and Alice stomped her feet with glee like a kid after her first bite of a sweet. Betty looked embarrassed, but her eyes were shining.

"Alice, your turn," she said. "If you think you can beat that."

"Me?" Alice wriggled around before giving them all a wicked grin. "Well, it's kind of naughty too. In a different way."

Madeline held her breath.

"It can't be any more naughty than Betty's story."

Betty giggled, her cheeks still flushed. "We're all married women. There's no harm in a little chitter chatter."

Alice batted her eyelids dramatically and leaned forward.

"Before the war, I was propositioned by a married man."

They gasped collectively. Alice dropped her voice an octave. "He had a Rolls Royce, a moustache and a bespoke suit."

"Did you . . . take him up on his offer?" June's voice came out as a gasp.

Alice shook her head. "I was so young, and he was so, so handsome." She paused and looked down at her hands. "So I went for dinner with him. He even kissed me." She giggled. "His moustache tickled my lips."

They all sat silent.

"He offered me a life as his mistress, with lots of money, and an apartment of my own. But every time I looked at him I thought about his wife, his wedding ring seemed to glint at me under the light every time I looked up."

"So what did you do?"

Alice grinned. "I was a little tipsy from the wine, but I excused myself to go to the rest room, and then I slipped out the back door and found my way home."

Madeline gave Alice a push, but from the serious expression on her face, the story was true.

"You just left him there?" Madeline knew she would never have the nerve to do that.

Alice shrugged. "He was a very rich man, and very rich men are hard to say no to."

The heat went off Alice when she swivelled to watch Madeline. The other two did the same.

She felt uncomfortable. It was her turn and she didn't know what to say. Or she did, but she didn't want to say it aloud.

"Come on Mads!"

"My secret?" she said, gulping a lump of . . . what? Fear? "I don't have anything much to call a secret, but, well, I guess there's something I'm keeping to myself at the moment, if that counts?"

She looked up as silence surrounded her. The smiles were wavering, unsure of what she was going to say. She could have cut the air with her mother's cheese knife.

"I'm scared that I'll get off the ship, that you'll all run into the arms of your husbands, and there'll be no one waiting for me."

"Oh Madeline! Don't say that." Alice switched seats to put her arm around her and June came to her aid too.

"He'll be waiting for you, Mads, don't even think that."

"Here here," added Betty, hands on her stomach. "I'd give you a hug too but my ankles are too swollen to get up."

"I know," said Alice, fingers tickling along Madeline's arm. "How about you tell us all about your man, Miss Secretive, and we'll help you decide if he'll be waiting or not."

* * *

There was a reason Madeline was attracted to Roy. He wasn't the most handsome man, he wasn't the most charming, but he was the first who had asked her to dance. And he was the first to come to her door with flowers. The first to ask her father if it was acceptable to take her out on a date. And then the first to ask for her hand in marriage.

She knew she was attractive, the smiles and attention directed her way at Church every Sunday wasn't just because her father was the local butcher. But it was as if no one had ever had the courage to ask her out. Or maybe no one in the village thought of her that way. And she was only seventeen, so it wasn't as if she'd been available for very long.

So when Roy had made his interest clear, a butterfly in her stomach that she'd never felt before had started to beat its wings with fury.

She loved her family, but it was like the touch of Roy's skin, the drowsiness of his kisses, had spellbound her. Even seeing her father with tears in his eyes when he knew she was

going to accept Roy's offer of marriage had not changed her mind. Her strong, manly father who never showed his sadness, nor his fear, only his happiness.

Sometimes she wondered if she had been drugged. For her to say yes to leaving her parents, her sisters, even her little nieces and nephews . . . it was such a huge decision it was a wonder she had ever been able to make it.

Sometimes she hadn't been sure. Sometimes she thought all she wanted was a nice local boy, so she could move into a home nearby, like her sisters had, and raise a family. But when he'd asked her, she'd forgotten all that. Then suddenly they were married, and there was no backing out. Not even when the reality of what she'd committed to had sunk in. And not when he'd left to go back to war after their wedding, and she hadn't seen him again before she'd had to get on the ship and say goodbye to everyone she loved.

The night air sent a chill across her shoulders and Madeline wished for Roy's warm coat. She had a cardigan slung over her, buttoned under her bust, but it was no match for the cold that had swept in with the dark.

"You still haven't told me about your home," she said. She could count how many times she'd asked him about America, but he seemed reluctant to talk about it.

"I've told you, Maddy, I come from a farm in New York."

She fought to wrap the cardigan even tighter around her. It was like a tiny fly constantly landing on her leg. A niggle that just kept persisting. Every time she brought up his home, they went from happy-go-lucky and fun to quiet. Silent. Did it hurt him that much to recall the home he'd left behind?

"But what's it like? What is your house like? What are your family like?"

A look she couldn't quite identify passed over his face, but it disappeared so fast she almost wondered if it had ever been there at all.

"Honey, what do you need to know?" He took her hand and dropped a kiss to it. "We live in a farm house in a little New York town, where hens mill about and there are endless fields and long sunny days."

She smiled. How could she not? When he put it like that it sounded, well, wonderful.

"And your family?"

"You know I have a sister. She is unmarried, or at least she was when I left, and my parents are just usual Americans. There's really nothing to tell."

"So your sister lives at home too? How many bedrooms does your house have?"

"What is this? Twenty questions? Enough already." Roy stood abruptly and stalked a few steps away.

She bit back a response. Most of the time he was so kind and loving, so sweet, other times he got annoyed and rude with her, like she had no right to ask him personal questions. It was like they lived in a bubble, where everything was wonderful, until she spoke out of turn.

But her father had told her that Roy had come over to see him, that he'd asked for her hand in marriage. And now it was all she could think about. She needed to know what kind of life to expect if the question was put to her.

Could she really leave everything she knew behind? Leave her family for good? It was something that worried her every night before dark, because she'd thought about marrying him plenty before now. She did want to marry him, but she had no idea where New York even was on the map. Didn't she have a right to know a little about where she might be moving if she said yes to him?

"Roy, I'm sorry, I just . . ."

He turned to face her, a smile just noticeable from where he stood in the half light. She felt that now-familiar tickle in her stomach, the one that reminded her she was in love.

"Maddy, it's me who's sorry." He knelt in front of the seat, taking both her hands in his own.

Oh God.

Was he going to ask her now? Did she have to decide tonight? Her heart started racing, thundering at her neck and in her wrists. It was a wonder he couldn't see it catapulting beneath her cardigan.

"You can ask all you like." He leaned forward to kiss her nose. "I'm just thinking about the war. About leaving. About . . ."

She pulled his hands into her lap. "You can tell me."

He shook his head. "I just think we need to live in the now, not waste time talking about America or what might be. Are you cold?"

She nodded. He pulled off his coat and tugged it around her shoulders.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Madeline felt the warmth spread through her, inhaled the smell of cologne on his jacket and looked into his eyes. Maybe you were meant to ask for a man's coat? She had no experience and she'd just guessed they were meant to offer. It made her feel bad for doubting him. He was a good man. A kind man. She just had all types of romantic ideas flitting through her imagination. It wasn't good for her.

"Let's get you home before your father comes looking for us."

She leant into him as he slung an arm around her. Every now and again she questioned him, worried about whether he was right for her, and then at times like this, she wondered why she was so silly.

But then she'd only known him such a short time. He'd be gone soon and yet she had to make a decision that in pre-war times would not have had to be made so fast.

"Tell me about the farm again," she asked him.

This time he was relaxed. This time he pulled her closer rather than push her away.

Roy dropped a kiss to her head. "Every morning someone goes down to collect all the eggs and let the hens out. They roam free across the fields, until they're called in for a dinner of hot mash."

"You feed chickens mash?"

"Hens, baby, hens," he drawled, slowing down their walk.

She giggled.

"You got a lot to learn about being a farmer's wife."

Madeline's heart started to thud again. It seemed like a question, like a hint, but she wasn't going to acknowledge it, not until he asked her outright.

Because she wasn't ready to make a decision, not yet.

"Have you given that boy an answer?"

Madeline turned her eyes back into the house. She had been gnawing on a piece of toast and gazing out the window.

Her father looked up over his glasses, newspaper held down so he could see her.

“I haven’t been asked.”

She’d always been honest with her father, but it felt awkward talking about this. They normally chatted about books and happenings, about her friends, about the butcher shop, but never about boys. She’d never had a boy to talk about.

“He’ll be asking you soon.”

Her father went back to reading the paper, but she didn’t look away. Was he saying it was all right to say yes? Did he want her to say yes? She was the last of his four daughters to be at home. The youngest, but still the last. Her sisters had married young, had children.

She watched her mother fuss in the kitchen as she always did, listened to the shuffle of paper as her father turned the page. It was all so familiar, yet one day she’d have to leave it behind. But to think about not hearing or seeing them go about their daily routine scared her.

“You’re not still thinking about him are you?”

Her father hadn’t even dropped the paper this time. She glared at the newsprint but it was hard not to smile.

“Of course not, Daddy.”

She heard him chuckle.

"I'll bring you home," he said.

Her mother dropped something metal into the sink. The clang echoed.

He folded up the paper and placed both hands on the table, before stretching to stand up.

"If you marry the boy and it's that bad over there, I'll bring you home."

"Harold!" Her mother's face was bright red. "We haven't the money to bring her home if she takes a fancy on coming back."

He swatted behind him without even looking – a wave of the hand as if to silence her. Madeline kept her eyes on him, trying to stop the tears in her own.

"She's my youngest daughter, Sylvia. If Madeline here roughs it out there and the boy doesn't treat her right, or something happens, I'd sell everything we have if need be to bring her home."

He walked the two steps around the table and stamped a kiss on her head.

"I don't want you to, girl. But if you love him, you say yes to the boy when he asks."

A dance of tears tickled her eyes, but she fought to keep the smile on her face until her father had turned away. She

loved her mother, but she adored her father. And if she had his blessing, and Roy asked her, she would go.

She wouldn't want her father spending all his pennies on bringing her home, but if it was that bad over there, at least she knew she was wanted here. Even if it did mean coming home a woman no one else would ever be interested in.

Her father loved her and that was what counted.

The days seemed to drag by. Every time she saw another couple holding hands, every time she listened to her friends talking about their sweethearts, every time she so much as breathed, her heart felt like it could burst and explode into hundreds of tiny shards. The weight that consumed her chest made her feel like she was suffocating. And the thought of what she was going to leave behind made her want to retch.

She kept seeing Roy's face. His dark brown eyes swam in front of her. She could almost feel his sandy blonde hair beneath her fingers. Fingertips that itched to touch him.

She saw the farm as he'd described it. Or perhaps how she wanted to imagine it. Plump hens strutted about, the fields were full of thigh high grass, and a horse gazed from over the post and rail fence. Just like the ranches she'd read about.

She dreamed of the babies they would have. Of toddlers barefoot and perhaps even riding ponies.

But then that only reminded her that any babies born would probably never see their grandparents, and that made her want to be sick all over again.

The night he asked her had felt so right. Nothing over the top, nothing contrived. Just the two of them sitting on the wooden seat in her family's back garden, the light from the moon illuminating the ring he had pulled from his pocket.

"You know I love you, Madeline."

She had simply nodded her head. Mute.

"I know you love your family, but I want to make our own family together." He had dropped to his knees, pulled out the ring, and was staring straight in to her eyes. "I don't want to leave tomorrow and not know that you'll marry me. I want you to be my wife Madeline."

Tears had trickled down each cheek, words dying in her throat. But somehow she had managed a smile as he pushed the ring on her finger.

"You will marry me, Madeline. You will, won't you?"

"Yes," she had whispered. "Yes, Roy."

He had pulled her in for a kiss. Held her tight until she had stopped crying and held her hand up to squint at the ring. A simple, thin band that said she was promised.

"Let's go tell your parents, okay?"

She followed him inside, aware of her hand clasped in his, and nearly burst into tears again when she saw her parents – waiting – sitting at the table.

Their reaction had been happy. Her family had pulled out a bottle of sherry that was tucked away for an occasion, and Madeline had sipped at her glass. Still unsure. Still fighting with the emotions that battled her daily.

And now here she was, waiting.

Her fiancé was at war, like most of the other young men on the continent. He had been promised leave to marry her, now that their permission had come through. And then she would be lucky to see him again before she arrived in America. Unless he came back injured and needed recovery.

She didn't let herself think about the possibility of him coming home a body rather than a fiancé.

CHAPTER FIVE

"I think it's fair to say he loves you."

Madeline gave Betty a tight smile. It felt odd talking about her feelings, opening up. But the other girls had and there was something nice about being honest.

"It's not that you don't think he's fond of you, is it?"

She turned as June spoke. They all did.

"It's that you don't think you'll love being with him as much as you loved being at home with your family. You don't think he'll be the same when you arrive."

Madeline brushed at the tears collecting on her cheeks. She nodded. June had guessed right.

"We've all had those thoughts," June continued. "Or at least I've had them. Will he still love me after all this time?"

Will his family like me? Will I wish I'd stayed at home? Married a local boy."

Alice agreed. "I used to think that every night," she said. "Now I just pretend he loves me, pretend it will be perfect, and leave it at that."

"At least none of you are pregnant," moaned Betty. She lifted the mood as usual. "If he didn't love me then, he ain't gonna love me with this big bulge."

Madeline laughed, her tears starting to disappear. "He'll love you, Betty. If one of us are going to be loved I'll put my money on you."

Betty rubbed her stomach the way she always did when they spoke about her. Only Alice looked indignant.

"I'll have you know my man loves me," said Alice with a theatrical pout. "Or at least he better. I'll give him the flick for another if he doesn't."

That made them all giggle.

A whistle blew.

"That'll be lunch," announced Betty triumphantly, extending a hand.

"Food, it's all she thinks about," muttered Alice.

"You wait until you're eating for two. This fella's got an appetite."

“What say we hit the shop after? We can share a block of chocolate between us later?”

Alice nodded her agreement and Betty licked her lips.

“You coming hon?”

Madeline smiled and watched them. They were all grinning at her.

“I just feel like sitting a while. Save me a sandwich.”

“You sure?” asked June. “I don’t mind staying?”

“Go have lunch.” Madeline swatted at the air. “I just need a minute to catch my breath.”

She didn’t let the smile fade until they’d disappeared. It didn’t matter that she’d told them, although it felt good to get it off her chest. But she needed to relive it for herself. Needed to just think about her marriage. About her family.

Besides, she hadn’t told them everything. Would their reaction have been the same if she’d been completely truthful? She loved Roy dearly, couldn’t wait to see him, but that didn’t mean she was free of concerns.

* * *

Their wedding day brought with it a steady trickle of rain, before the clouds parted and allowed a light grey sky to appear. Roy had arrived the day before. She had been bursting with

excitement about seeing him, desperate to hold him and talk with him again, but something had been wrong.

His eyes had shown none of the love she had expected. But then she lost herself with so many daydreams sometimes she wondered if she expected too much.

He had sat with her, in her family's kitchen, before turning in for the night. Her mother had set up a bed in their sunroom, and once he was asleep they continued the wedding plans. They were to be married in the little church down the road, the one she had visited every Sunday since she was a girl. Neighbours had kindly pooled rations to see to it there was a cake, and her mother was mixing the icing as one of her sisters sat and fiddled with her dress.

"Concentrate," her sister said.

She stopped wriggling.

"If you weren't so tiny I wouldn't still be here." She grumbled, a pin between her lips, but Madeline knew her sister was happy to fiddle with the dress and see it worn again. It was only a few years ago she had worn it down the aisle herself.

Madeline just shook her head and smiled, but inside her stomach was dancing. She had lost weight with the worry, with the anticipation. But now that he was here, the knot of worry had wound even tighter.

"Madeline?"

Her sister's voice startled her.

"You're not having second thoughts are you? You're away with the fairies today."

She braved a smile. "No. It's just, well, I kind of thought he'd be more pleased to see me."

Her sister threw her hands in the air. It put a stop to her tears before they released.

"He's a man who has just arrived back after being on the front line. War, Madeline, goodness only knows what the poor man's seen." She wagged her finger for effect. "These are hard times and you need to be patient with men at the best of them."

Her mother looked slightly more sympathetic. "How about you take yourself off to get ready and we'll finish up here. You've just got a lot on your mind. Start fixing your hair and I'll come to help soon."

She reasoned with herself that they were right. It was the stress of not having seen her groom for so long, of wondering what he was thinking. Not to mention their honeymoon or going to live abroad. A night away at the little cottage, tonight, on their own.

That scared her more than anything.

She undressed, sucked in a big breath of air, and came to the conclusion that the only way she was going to survive the day was to turn off the thinking part of her brain.

Then her eye caught the little pile of things on her dresser. It made her breath catch in her throat. A frilly garter that she'd never seen before was propped against a baby blue corsage that she recognised from her sister's wedding. Something borrowed, something blue. It sent a trill of excitement down her spine. Did it count for old too?

Madeline reached for the garter, to feel the soft lace, and her hands skimmed over a string of white pearls hidden beneath. Her mother's. She would recognise them anywhere. When they were children, her parents used to go out for dinner and she'd finger them around her mother's neck before they left.

Now they were waiting for her to wear. Her something old. Or maybe something borrowed too.

Was Roy waiting for her to wear the garter?

She was almost too scared to find out.

The only thing Madeline was sure about her marriage, was that Roy took his conjugal rights very seriously. She had become a married woman with little other than fear of her wedding night. Not an all-consuming fear, just a worry that she might not know exactly what was expected.

She needn't have worried.

After Roy's leave was unexpectedly extended, she had come to know precisely what was expected of her. It wasn't that she

didn't like it, but the fact it was a nightly routine had started to become exhausting.

Two weeks after their wedding, she sat in her room, brushing out her hair. If Roy wasn't here, she would have simply crawled into bed and fallen into a much-needed sleep. But she knew he would stay up for another drink, long after everyone else had retired to bed, and then he'd expect her to be waiting.

A creak made her place the brush back on the dresser. She looked around and met eyes with her husband.

"Hello wife."

She felt a familiar flutter. That tickle that tore her between love and uncertainty. She was also worried about telling him that tonight was not going to go as he expected.

He started to take off his clothes. She swallowed away her worry and tried to think of herself as a grown, married woman who shouldn't have to worry about talking to her own husband about delicate matters.

"Roy, I . . ."

He watched her, impatient as she stuttered.

She cleared her throat. "I'm experiencing my monthly, ah, cycle."

He finished taking off his clothes and got into bed. "So?"

"Well, I just wanted to explain why I'll have to refuse you tonight. I didn't want you to think I . . ."

"I'm not going without just because of, well, because of a little blood."

A crawl of embarrassment made its way from her stomach all the way up her neck and to her face. Her skin felt like it was burning.

"Come on, it's our last night."

She felt sick. Physically sick. Was that what it meant to be a wife? To not have a choice in the matter even at a time like this?

During the day, when they were together, even at night when they were in one another's company, she loved him. So much she could burst. But this? Something about it just didn't feel right. But then she was the inexperienced one, so maybe it was just normal? If only she was brave enough to broach the subject with her mother, or one of her sisters to ask.

"Madeline?"

"Give me a moment," she said, forcing a smile. "I'll be back in a second."

She ran to the bathroom, toes light to avoid waking anyone. She clicked the door closed behind her and sunk to the floor. Humiliation suffocated her.

All she had ever wanted was to be married. But right now, her husband was acting like a monster.

Was she being immature?

She let the tears fall, staying as silent as she could, then rose to press a cold cloth to her face. She didn't want to disappoint him, but . . .

She almost wished he was back on the battlefields already.

Madeline touched a dab of perfume behind her ear, took a towel with her, and decided to brave up. If this was what marriage was all about, then she'd just have to get used to it. Besides, he was a man about to return to war. Her mother would tell her to suck it up and fulfil her wedding vows, and that's exactly what she had to do.

* * *

"Madeline!"

She raised her eyes from surveying the ocean and pushed up on her elbows, pleased to put her memories at bay again.

"You don't have to get that excited over my sandwich." She smiled as June came flapping toward her.

The smile died on her face.

"What is it? What's happened?"

June was puffing and stopped to catch her breath before pushing out the words. "It's, it's Betty. We think she's in labour but she doesn't want us to call the doctor."

Madeline jumped up and scrambled for her shoes. "Where is she now?"

June's eyes were wild. "Alice is taking her back to the cabin."

They started hurrying toward the door.

"You know anything about babies?"

Madeline laughed. She knew more about babies than she cared to. That was one thing she wasn't naïve about.

"I have three sisters, and they've all got children. I helped deliver one before we left."

June looked ready to pass out. Madeline grabbed her arm and marched her faster.

"I can deliver this baby, with some help," she told her. "So long as nothing goes wrong I know what to do."

June nodded, the colour slowly inching its way back into her face.

"She's a silly girl saying no to the medics though."

But she wasn't going to tell her off. Betty could get in trouble for lying to the authorities, and now was not the time for her to worry. All they had to do was make sure this baby came into the world kicking and screaming, with no complications. They could deal with any trouble later.

"Isn't she rather early?"

June eyes widened. "At least hree weeks, she thinks."

Madeline didn't even think about it. If the baby was ready to come out, there was nothing they could do to stop it. She picked up the pace.

"Come on June. Hurry!"

CHAPTER SIX

WATER HIT THE deck as the ship swayed from side to side, and Betty tried to focus on the movement rather than the next wave of pain. She listened to the insistent drum of rain as it intensified, bracing herself for the next contraction. They seemed to mimic one another. Her pain and the raging storm conspiring against her.

“You’re going to have to push this time,” instructed Madeline. “Hard.”

Her friend’s face was stretched into a determined grimace, much like the other two women crowded around her.

“No!” she wailed, delirious with pain. “It’s too early.”

“Betty, you don’t have a choice. This baby is coming now!”

The pain built in a series of spasms, each more painful than the last. She tried to fight it, to ignore the wave of despair, but Madeline’s words kept echoing in her ears.

“Push, Betty. Push!”

I can't, she thought, I can't. No . . .

“Push!”

A hand slipped into hers and she squeezed it tight, holding on as hard as she could. Another hand pressed a cold cloth to her forehead, and still the word echoed in her mind.

Push.

As the next contraction bore down on her, Betty fought for oxygen, sucking in sharp bursts of air. It built with all the fury of Neptune in the sea below her, and this time she tried to weather the storm. To push with all her might and force this baby out.

“Ooohhh . . .” She cried out as a pain that threatened to deplete all her energy tore through her body. A pain so bad she wondered if she was even alive. “I can't, I can't push anymore,” she sobbed.

“You can do it,” soothed Madeline, her voice softer, kinder now. “You can, honey, just a couple more might do it.”

“I can see the head!”

The excited squeal from one of the other girls gave Betty the confidence she needed. Maybe she should have called for the doctors, but she felt like she was in good hands.

“Come on honey, come on.”

She waited the seconds until the next spasm hit and then pushed as hard as she could, holding her breath as she fought.

A burst of noise filled the room, like a kitten meowing, and suddenly she couldn't feel the pain, the hurt, nor the worry she had felt only seconds before. She could hear her baby!

"Oh Betty, it's a little boy!" June had been waiting with towels and warm water, and was now wiping down a bloody, messy little scrap of a child.

Tears of joy fell in cold drops against Betty's hot skin. She had done it. She had done it! Charlie's face swam before her, and she let her eyes drop shut to hold him there in her mind.

"We're not quite done yet," said Madeline. "You should feel another contraction and then . . ."

Betty pushed once more.

"Done." Madeline smiled. She looked relieved. "Now we need to get you cleaned up."

"Here Mummy."

Betty looked up as June spoke. The pure joy of seeing her little bundle, wrapped in a soft towel, brought on a fresh wave of tears.

Betty held her arms out, trying to stop them shaking as she waited for June to release him. The girls were all cooing and

smiling, weeping and giggling as he squirmed then let out a giant wail.

“Good set of lungs,” announced Alice. “That’s what we like to hear.”

“Your Dad will be proud, little one,” murmured June, tucking one finger against the baby’s cheek. “What will he say when he sees you getting off the ship, huh? A son already.”

They all stood in silence, united as only women can be, as Betty swallowed her modesty and pushed down the front of her night dress. The baby squawked indigently as she tried to get the hang of things, before latching on and sucking hard for his first meal.

“Ooh, he’s a fighter this one,” said Madeline, as they all laughed at his balled fists and slurping noises. “Tiny as a bird but a fighter.”

“Like he’s at the milk bar!” laughed Betty. She loved watching the enthusiastic way he suckled.

“So what are you going to call him?” asked June.

“I think I’ll name him after my father. William. I lost both my parents to a virus before the war, and I miss them so much still. Always, even after all this time.”

They all smiled.

“William,” said June. “He looks just like a William, I reckon.”

Madeline nodded then quietly clapped her hands together.

“Let’s give them some time to get to know one another,” she said. “Have a little sleep and then we’ll come back with something for you to eat.”

Betty nodded her thanks, conscious of how weary she was. She glanced down at her wee man and saw that his eyes had fallen shut, although his mouth was still sucking, just every so often, like he was thirsty even in sleep.

“Good night, my love,” she whispered.

And as the ship continued to sway from side to side, the storm still beating on the deck, Betty let herself fall into the beginnings of slumber, lulling her into its embrace. Her head swarmed with the twinges of pain that still ached, her baby’s little face, and of Charlie. Her dear Charlie.

She hadn’t dreamt of him since they’d left England, but tonight she had an inkling that she might see him. That she might remember. That she could go back in time and be with him.

* * *

The dance hall was crowded with young people. Betty played with a loose piece of cotton on her dress and moved from foot to foot. She had always been uncomfortable in large groups, and the squeals of women and thumping of music wasn’t helping her mood.

Neither was the fact that she was standing alone.

She had walked for five miles with her best friend, Lucy, to get here. The night air had been warm on their arms, shoulders bare except for their shawls. Her friend's mother had rolled her hair into a chignon, and she felt wonderful. She had been nervous, but it had been good just to get out and have fun again. Forget the war and black outs and food rations and just be young.

If she'd thought about it she would have realised that Lucy wouldn't be by her side all night. The whole reason they had gone was because a young American had invited Lucy to join them. And sure enough they hadn't been there fifteen minutes before she was whisked away to dance.

Betty surveyed the room again and smiled. She could just make Lucy out, lost in the arms of the handsome Yank she had been yabbering about for days. Other young people looked wildly in love, wrapped together as the song slowed its beat.

It was silly worrying about standing alone, given what was going on in her own country. She scolded herself. There were men and women dying all over the world in this war, so standing alone while her friend fell head over heels in love was a predicament she should relish.

"Excuse me."

Betty turned at the deep drawl. Was someone talking to her? Her eyes fell on a man standing less than two feet away. His wide brown eyes shone as he looked back at her.

“Is this seat taken?”

He was talking to her. She looked over one shoulder just to make sure there wasn't a woman behind her before she made a fool of herself.

“Ah, no. Please go ahead.”

The young man sat down. She wriggled in her seat, not sure what to do. Should she introduce herself? She knew what she shouldn't be doing and that was ogling him, but it was hard not to.

He had sun-kissed skin and light-brown hair. It was parted yet slightly unruly. His uniform, not to mention his accent, made it clear that he was an American. Like almost all the men here.

Had he sat down to rest his legs, or had he come over to see her? She didn't consider herself a complete fool when it came to men, but she sure didn't know what to do with herself right now.

She saw him look across the room and she followed his eyes. A group of guys were nudging and elbowing one another. Were they laughing at her?

“Would you like to dance?”

Betty's face burnt hot. She didn't like to be made fun of.

"You can tell your friends that I'm not interested in, in being the butt of some joke!"

Now it was his turn to look embarrassed. He turned his flushed cheeks to her, eyes pleading, and shook his head fervently.

"Oh, please, no. You aren't a joke, it's just . . ."

She glared at him. She'd heard these Yanks could talk a dime to the dozen, but she wasn't going to be fooled. She crossed her legs delicately and turned her shoulders away.

Betty saw him slump back in the chair. She was still curious, but she wasn't going to be swayed.

"I've been watching you since you arrived with your friend, and they've been trying to get me over here, that's all. Honest."

That made her turn slightly. Maybe she'd over reacted. Still, she wasn't going to let down her guard just yet. She kept her back on an angle.

To her surprise he got up and walked away. Walked away! If that didn't make a girl feel dejected then . . . Betty fumed inside. If she hadn't promised Lucy she would have walked straight out the door. She stood up and looked for her again, wanting to beckon with her head that she wanted to go.

"Huh-hmm."

Betty turned. What the . . .

"Hi, I'm Charlie Olliver." He held out a drink to her.

She didn't know what to say.

"I'm sorry about before, can we start over?"

Betty searched the crowd for Lucy again and couldn't locate her, so she reached for the drink in his left hand and gingerly extended her right for him to shake.

"Betty Sanders," she said. She sighed as he looked rather pleadingly at her. "And yes, we can start over if you'd like."

Charlie grinned at her, and she knew that she'd been wrong to judge him. He might look cheeky, but he had an honest face. That's what her mother would have said, if she were still alive.

"So Betty, what on earth are you doing sitting at a dance alone."

She laughed and shrugged her shoulders. She was hardly going to point out that she had rarely ever danced before. Let alone been faced with men desperate to ask her.

"The other guys are just too scared to ask you. Pretty girl like you should be dancing 'till her shoes wear out."

Now she knew what Lucy's mother had been on about, warning them about the charm of an American.

They have silver tongues, she had said, waving her finger at the girls' before they'd left. They don't call a spade a

spade like our local boys, and it don't mean you should believe what they say.

Betty and Lucy had giggled on their walk here, taking turns to mimic her mother, but she suddenly understood. American boys were different, and she knew exactly why so many girls were falling in love with them.

She sipped on the punch and felt a brief rush to her head. The last thing she wanted was to meet a dashing young man then sway and fall at his feet. Or worse, be taken advantage of. She put the cup down.

"So how about that dance?"

Charlie grinned at her before standing and extending a hand to her. She took it.

"I'm not much of a dancer . . ."

"Nonsense," he insisted, keeping hold of her hand and walking closer to her than she'd expected. "A girl that looks as good as you has got to be good on the dance floor."

Betty tried not to laugh.

Oh yes, she understood how easy it would be to fall for an American's charm.

The band burst into a rendition of the Glenn Miller orchestra as the singers belted out The Andrews Sisters, and Charlie tugged at her wrist so insistently she thought it might actually fall off.

“Come on girl, let’s get dancing!”

Betty thought of resisting, of digging her heels into the floor and not trying something new. But Charlie was so persuasive. He didn’t even need to say anything. The flash of his eyes, the width of his smile, the pull of his body as he stood waiting for her.

She sucked in a deep breath of air, filled her lungs with enough oxygen to make herself light-headed, and swallowed her fears. She had wished for her very own prince charming for years; imagine if this was him and she let fear stop her from finding him?

As soon as their hands touched again, once her arms were pressed against his, she felt a burst of excitement. She straightened her shoulders, followed his lead and felt as if her feet were moving so fast they weren’t even touching the ground.

Charlie had a smile on his face like she’d never seen on a human being before. Perhaps it was the war making the good times seem happier than ever. Maybe it was the heat in the room, the swill of the crowd, the thrum of adrenalin caused by the band, but Betty found herself lost to Charlie.

Only moments earlier she had thought of ignoring his advances.

Only moments earlier, she hadn’t even known he existed.

And now here she was, twirling, swirling and falling into his embrace, acting as if they'd been sweethearts for months.

As the band wound down, belting out the last tunes of a song, Charlie spun her out then pulled her in tight against him. She was cocooned between his arms and his chest. Like an insect in a web with no chance of escape.

If he'd let her, she would have looked away. But his eyes on hers were not letting her wriggle away from him.

"You're beautiful, you know that?"

She listened to his drawl and tried to push the words away. She wasn't used to compliments.

"You are, Betty." He paused and looked at her, ignoring the fact the band had started another tune. A slow tune. It felt as if the room was spinning away from them, the other couples a blur in the far distance. "You're the most beautiful girl here."

He kept his eyes on hers, his arms looped around her body. She'd never in her life been this close to a man, never before felt the excitement of being held in a man's arms.

Charlie brought his lips slowly toward hers. She raised her chin, fighting a tremble as he moved even closer. It felt like an age before his lips actually touched hers; before their skin met. Her mouth parted ever so as they kissed. A soft press that lasted forever yet was over too quickly.

As Charlie pulled away a whoop made her turn. Charlie tugged her back against him, glaring at his friends. They were all clapping and cat-calling. He hadn't just kissed her to show-off to them, had he?

"Charlie . . ."

"Ignore them, sweetheart," he said, drawing her close. They swayed together to the soft, slow lull of music. "They're just jealous."

She believed him. Not the jealousy part, but the fact that he wanted her in his arms.

The spicy scent of his aftershave filled her nostrils, the breadth of his shoulders felt endless beneath her palms. And the feel of his hands as they skimmed her waist made her forget that there was anyone else in the room.

"I am going to see you again, Betty, aren't I?"

He held her away from him for a heartbeat and she gazed into his eyes. Her voice felt as if it had been stolen away from her, so she just nodded in response.

Charlie let her nestle back against him.

"You know what I said to my friends when you walked in tonight?"

She shook her head against his chest, her forehead tucking under his collarbone.

“I said, that’s the girl I’m gonna marry, and you know what they said?”

She fought a laugh and swallowed her worries. He might be exaggerating but she didn’t mind.

“They said you haven’t got a show of getting that girl to fall in love with you, Charlie. She’s way out of your league.”

Betty was pleased the music was still playing and she had an excuse to stay tucked into his arms.

She had a feeling that falling in love with Charlie Olliver wouldn’t be so very hard at all.

* * *

“I think we should just leave her be.”

Betty awoke to the whisper of voices in the room. She sat up in the near-darkness and blinked, trying to clear her sleepy eyes. Where was she?

A pain in her lower regions made her shut her eyes tight again. William. Her baby.

Charlie.

The dream echoed in her memory still and she fought to hold on to it. Being in Charlie’s arms, feeling him, tasting him.

“Honey, are you okay?”

“I think she needs something to drink. And some food.”

A light flicked on and Betty was forced to open her eyes. She recognised the faces of her friends surrounding her, crowded around her. The dull cream colour of the room, the other hammocks crowding the space around her.

But not William. "Where is he?"

She could hear the panic in her own voice.

Madeline pushed her back down with a firm hand and soothed stray hairs from her face.

"He's fine. June swaddled him and took him for a little walk."

She watched as Alice reached for a glass of water and took it gratefully as it was extended to her.

"Thank you."

"And you'll be needing something to eat, too," said Madeline, moving away from the bed. "The little blighter has a big appetite so you'll need your strength."

She nodded and reached beneath the bed clothes to rearrange herself. She was aching, but it was bearable. Especially given the gift she'd just been blessed with.

"He is all right, isn't he?" She still couldn't believe that he'd come so early.

"He's just fine," whispered Alice, settling herself down beside the hammock with a bowl of soup. "Now eat this and you'll be ready to feed him again."

Betty took the spoon and sat up, happy to comply. She was hungry and she needed to regain some strength.

She still ached for her husband. For Charlie. She would do anything to have him here right now. To have his arms wrapped protectively around her, holding their baby. To know that he was safe and that they could finally be together.

Ever since her parents had died she'd had no one. It was why she'd taken a risk by getting on the ship pregnant.

Charlie and William were her life now. All that she had. There was no going back and she didn't want there to be.

Unlike the other girls, she had no fear. Charlie would be waiting for her, waving his cap at her as the ship pulled in to dock. Running toward her to fold her in his arms. Not to mention their baby.

"Come on Betty, you're away with the fairies you are."

Betty plucked her eyes open and re-focused on Alice.

She could do this. They were almost there. She was almost with Charlie.

P A R T T W O

CHAPTER SEVEN

ALICE WRAPPED HER jacket tighter around her body. She tilted her chin and squared her shoulders.

The others looked scared, worried, but she was fine. She didn't have anything to be concerned about.

The siren echoed, loud and clear, just like they'd said it would. She couldn't help the wide smile that sprang into action across her face. The tingle that ran through her body as she breathed a sigh of relief.

They were finally in America.

She was finally going to be with Ralph again. In his arms. Part of his family.

As his wife.

"Alice! Quick, come and see it."

She smiled as June ran by excitedly, Madeline holding her skirts and running alongside her. But she didn't move.

America was close. So close she could almost smell it on the air. New York was within view, the captain could see it himself.

She didn't need to push up against the other women for the view. Alice just closed her eyes and saw Ralph. Watched him in her mind as he smiled, so dapper in his uniform.

When the others started to part ways, she would walk to the edge of the ship and hold the handrail. She was in no hurry to push her way to the front.

"Alice! Alice, what are you doing?"

That voice did make her turn.

Betty was standing behind her, baby tucked under one arm, scarf draped around them both. Alice laughed. They looked so at ease and yet a mess all at the same time. But they looked happy.

"I'm just watching," she said, taking a step back so they were side by side. "Can't see the point in elbowing my way up there."

Betty sighed and held William out.

"Want a hold?"

Alice shook her head. "I'm sorry, it's just . . ."

Betty pulled him back in against her and started to rock him.

“Don’t worry, Willy, the other girls love you,” she cooed. “Aunty Alice just doesn’t want to get her pretty jacket all yukky.”

“It’s not that.”

Betty gave her a nudge before dropping a kiss to William’s head.

“It’s okay Alice, I’m just so used to the other two wanting to grab him all the time.”

She felt awkward. And she wasn’t used to feeling awkward.

“I’m just not . . .”

“I know, I know.” Betty smiled at her then cooed at the baby again. “You’re a good friend, Alice. You don’t need to hold my baby to prove that. You were there when it counted, you’re just better at looking after me than William.”

“I’ve seen it! I’ve seen it with my own eyes!”

Alice was pleased to be distracted. She didn’t like the wet in her eyes. Or how it was making her feel.

Madeline was jumping around like she’d just won the lottery and June wasn’t acting much different.

“We’re here. We’re actually here.” Madeline breathed the words like she was whispering a secret. “I’ve seen the Statue of Liberty, the actual statue!”

They all stood, staring at one another and then out at the horizon. At the tiny block of land that was New York and the giant statue holding a torch high toward the sky.

"We are all going to keep in touch, aren't we girls?" Alice had to ask. She might be the confident one, the one who was sure about how her life was going to pan out. But she didn't want to go it alone. Not when she'd made friends like these three on her voyage over.

"You bet." June leaned into her.

"I don't ever want to lose you girls, not ever." Betty held William tight against her, but she shuffled closer.

"So that's settled then," affirmed Alice.

"We are to keep in touch, no matter what," said Madeline. "Our friendship is forever."

They all looked at one another. Alice couldn't help it. She started to cry. Big, fat dollops of tears started falling, and no matter how hard she tried to choke them back or look glamorous, there was no way to stop it.

Betty, June and Madeline were the same. Tears falling, sobs escaping, like someone had just died.

Only William's sharp cry made them all snuffle back their emotion.

"Look at us!" Alice tried to be the brave one again.

"Crying like a bunch of old ladies."

“I love you girls,” said Betty, swinging her baby back and forth.

Alice didn't need to say it back. She loved them too. They all did. Aside from her husband, friendship was more important to her than anything. Especially here, on the other side of the world.

Friendship meant everything. Or at least it had for the past weeks.

Friendship had been all they'd had.

CHAPTER EIGHT

BETTY HAD THAT sinking feeling like the one she'd had the day of her labour. A tremor that waded through her body and left a dull ache in the base of her spine. There was no way she could know, but the thought pulsed in her mind. Troubled her.

For the first time since leaving London she was worried Charlie wasn't waiting for her. There was an emptiness within her. A thud that was trying to tell her he wasn't there.

The crowd was a thriving, moving mass of people. The same song played over and over again, even when she had been waiting for her papers to be stamped in the crowded office. Loud and clear through jittery speakers. Here Comes the Bride. If she heard the beat once again she would scream.

William made his little bleat, the tiny lamb sound he often whimpered.

"It's okay, darling. Shush now." She pulled him tighter against her.

Betty's other arm felt dead but she didn't let go of her case.

She shouldn't have let the other girls go without her. Charlie had promised that the day she arrived he would be waiting at the dock. Standing closer than any other person dared. Flapping his cap in the air. Waiting to spin her around and around and welcome her to America.

But he wasn't.

Charlie, where are you?

She gave William a little jiggle as he whimpered again. He was hungry, and she didn't want to feed him in such a public place.

"Come on then." She forced a smile and used her best sing-song voice. "Let's find somewhere quiet, huh?"

Charlie would find her. He would come for her. She had never doubted him before and she had no reason to start now. There could be any number of reasons that could have delayed him, and the worst thing she could do for her marriage's sake was to put blame before it was warranted.

She could see the size of the crowd with her own eyes. He could be stuck in traffic, a delayed train . . . she wasn't going to doubt him. Not yet.

“Betty!”

She turned. June was battling through the crowd. Betty waited.

“Betty! Oh, thank goodness I found you.”

She grinned at her friend. “I’m just looking for somewhere to feed William.”

“Where’s your Charlie?”

Betty felt the tears threaten again.

A tall, brown haired man appeared behind June. He slung his arm around her waist. She watched as June giggled and wished it was her. That Charlie was standing with his arm about her.

“Betty, this is my husband Eddie. Eddie West.”

“How do you do?”

Betty held out her hand as he spoke. “I’ve heard a lot about you, Eddie. Pleased to meet you.”

“Your husband meeting you here?”

June reached for William and Betty passed him. Willy loved the girls, they had held and coddled him as much as she on the voyage. He made a fist and then grabbed at June’s hair.

“I haven’t found him yet.” She said the word with as much bravery as she could muster. “I’m going to feed my son and then keep a look out.”

“Here, let me take that.” Eddie reached for her case. “How about you settle over there,” he pointed, “we’ll help you over.”

June passed William back to her and they all walked side by side.

“He was going to meet you here, wasn’t he? I’m sure you could travel with us if you need to.”

Betty shook her head. “I’ll be fine, he’ll be here soon.”

Eddie put her case down and gestured for her to sit. “We can wait if you’d like.”

“Please, Betty, come with us. I can’t leave you here alone.”

“Go,” said Betty. She gave June her biggest smile. She wasn’t going to ruin their day too. “You two need to get on your way.”

June looked unconvinced but she bent to give William and then her a kiss anyway as Eddie took her hand. “Eddie’s mother and sister are waiting, so I suppose we should.”

Betty felt a lick of jealousy and quickly wished it away. She would have loved to be greeted by her new family. To have found them straight away and be ushered into their care. June deserved it, but it still hurt.

Eddie pulled a card from his pocket and passed it to her.

“If you need us, just phone the number on here anytime. A friend of June’s is a friend of mine.”

She took it and tucked it into her bag. The embossed cream card did at least give her a back up if something serious had delayed Charlie. If she was temporarily stranded.

“Have a good trip.”

Eddie had to drag June away but Betty was fine. All she wanted was to feed her baby, then find Charlie. The crowd was slowly thinning out already. Surely it would be easier to find him once there were less people about?

Betty was alone. The dock was still busy, but it was as if she'd been waiting hours. She had no idea how long it had been, but it felt like too long. The majority of people had left, but it was still more crowded than she felt comfortable with. Her hair curled, damp, against the base of her neck.

William was starting to fuss again.

“Betty Olliver?”

Her head shot up. A middle-aged, tired-faced woman stood before her. She clutched a photo in one hand.

Betty squinted up at her, eyes burning from the tears she'd been trying to hold back. “I'm Betty.”

“Oh, thank goodness.” The woman reached for her case and extended her other hand to help her up. “I thought I was never going to find you.”

She held William tighter and kept an eye on her luggage. She didn't trust strangers.

"I'm sorry, are you Charlie's mother?"

"We weren't expecting a baby yet," she said. "Luke said you were in the family way but . . ."

"Luke?"

"The other Mr Olliver," she said, pulling at Betty's arm as she started walking.

Betty dug her heels down and stopped. "I was expecting Charlie to meet me. I think I'll wait if you don't mind."

Who was this woman?

The lady stopped. She sensed a sadness there. The woman smiled. The type of smile that made Betty's toes tingle with worry. What was going on?

"I'm sorry dear, I should have introduced myself. It's been a long day." She put the case down. "I'm Ivy. Luke's housekeeper. He asked me to meet you and take you home to him."

"But . . ."

"My dear, you did receive the telegram before you left, didn't you? We weren't sure you'd still come, but when we had no word back he said I'd better come down to meet you just in case. We were prepared for you after all."

Betty's head started to thump. She squeezed William, hard against her.

"Where is Charlie?" She felt hysterical, like she wanted to scream.

The woman reached for her, eyes suddenly damp with tears. She gave her a tiny smile, followed by a big sigh. The way she held her body, the slump of her shoulders, told her something was wrong. That this kind looking woman didn't want the burden of sharing something with her.

Betty shuddered as her heart thumped, pounding like a pendulum. Tick-tock. Harder and faster until she thought it might actually beat right out from her jersey.

"Betty, I'm sorry, I didn't think I'd be the one to have to break it to you . . ."

"Where is he?" the voice she heard didn't even sound like her own. It was strangled, pained. Heartbroken. Could almost taste what was coming next. "Where is my Charlie?"

She let the woman take William for her as he started to scream. Her hands were shaking too hard to hold him herself.

"I'm sorry, my love. Charlie's dead."

* * *

June tried to sit still. After so long at sea, she was desperate to stamp her feet on the ground, but they were back travelling, this time by train. Eddie was off in search of refreshments.

"We are so excited to finally have you here, June." Eddie's sister, Patricia, grabbed hold of her hand and squeezed.

Tears tickled at her eyes, but she blinked them away. Having another girl, a sister-in-law, beside her made her nostalgic. Would she ever hold her own sister's hand again? See Lilly, or her mother and father?

She braved a smile as she saw Patricia and her mother-in-law, trade glances.

"Are we not what you expected?"

"Oh, heavens no! I mean yes," she laughed at her fumbled words. "It's just you remind me of my own sister so much."

Patricia threw her arms around her and held tight. "You'll love it here. We know you will."

Eddie appeared in the carriage door. They had a private compartment to themselves with four large seats.

"What's going on here?" he passed around coffee from a tray and set it down on the table. "You're not scaring my wife are you?"

June couldn't help but smile back at him. His grin was infectious. From that first day when she'd struggled home with him, helping him despite his drunken stupor, she'd not been able to take her eyes off that smile.

"We like her just fine, Eddie." Patricia thumped him on the arm as he tried to manhandle her out of the way.

Eddie winked at June as he managed to dislodge his sister and steal her seat. He put his arm around her.

"We call her Patty," he said, indicating with a thumb at his sister. "She landed in a cow pat as a kid and the name stuck."

Patty squealed. "I did not!"

Their mother put her hand up and Eddie pulled June against him and planted a kiss on her head.

"Didn't I tell you she was the best?"

The two women laughed. June felt her cheeks heat to a burning fire-red.

"You must miss your family terribly, June."

She looked up and met her mother-in-laws eyes. "Yes."

"Will they come and visit?"

June gulped. Her family weren't exactly poor, but coming all the way to America was too extravagant.

"One day, maybe. It might be a struggle though."

The older woman smiled and looked at Eddie. "Well, I'm sure we can help them make a visit one day, can't we, Eddie?"

He echoed his mother's kind smile. It made June feel . . . content. She had been so worried about meeting his family, tied in knots over the idea that they might not like her, and here they were doing their best to be kind. To welcome her.

Eddie pulled her tighter.

“Oh, and June?”

She looked from the window back to Eddie’s mother.

“You’re part of this family now. Call me mother, or Irene. Whatever you feel comfortable with.”

She snuggled closer into Eddie. For the first time since she’d stepped foot on the ship to leave home, she felt truly happy. There was not a doubt in her mind that she’d done the right thing.

Eddie was her husband. She had a wonderful new family. And if Irene kept her word, one day her family would come to see her.

“Have a sleep, darling,” Eddie whispered into her ear, brushing her hair back with his thumb and index finger. “Just relax.”

She was tired, so she didn’t argue. Instead she just lay her head against his shoulder and let her eyes flutter shut.

She’d spent all those days at sea worrying. Staying awake at night and torturing herself with visions of what she might be coming to. Some of the other girls had been full of dreams and fancy ideas, but she’d had none. No illusions.

For once in her life it seemed her modesty had been rewarded.

June's heart thudded with excitement. Patty and Irene were waving frantically to a man with a moustache, who was pulling to the side of the road in a car with no roof.

"Eddie. Eddie!" She called to him as he lugged her case over.

He gave her one of his big grins. "Thought you'd like the car."

"It has no roof!"

She danced over to him and clung on to his forearm.

"Don't need a roof in New York. Not in summer."

She followed him to the car. The other two were already sitting in the back seat. June watched shyly as the man kissed his wife on the cheek, before walking around to greet her.

His stomach protruded over his trousers in a well-fed kind of way. Her mother would have said it was evidence that a woman loved him and laboured in the kitchen for him. He ran one hand over his thick moustache as he neared her, before taking the hat off his head.

"Well if it isn't my new daughter-in-law, huh?"

She crossed her ankles awkwardly on the spot, not sure what to do.

"We've heard a lot about you, my girl. Eddie's talked of nothing else since he arrived home."

She nervously took a step forward, then wondered why she was being so silly. Eddie's father pulled her in for a big bear hug, before planting a kiss on each cheek.

"Welcome to the family, my love."

She knew her cheeks were flushing. She couldn't help it.

"Thank you for having me."

He gave Eddie a slap on the back and took her case.

"You were right about her, eh? What a girl."

It made her heart sing. Made her skin alive with excitement.

"Wait 'till you've seen the new house. We've been . . ."

"Dad!"

He put his hand over his mouth and gave her an apologetic look.

"What house?"

"It's a surprise," said Eddie. "Come on."

He took her hand and helped her into the car. She sat beside Patty, the three women all tucked into the back. Eddie took the front passenger's seat and his father drove.

"Hold on to your hats, ladies."

They all laughed. June louder than any of them.

Life couldn't get any better than this.

Or could it.

June hated being in the dark, but she dared not peek. The scarf was tied tightly over her eyes. Eddie was leading her, and she held on to his arm.

The others had mysteriously stayed up at the house, refusing to show her what room she was to call their own. The home had been beautiful, statuesque and elegant. Full of lovely furniture, frames of photos, delicate cushions that she was sure were handmade.

The entire property had stolen her heart from the moment the car had ascended the drive. Up the slight incline of a hill, and flanked by endless fields full of cows and planted in crops. A real life ranch if ever she'd seen one.

"Almost there."

"Eddie, please! Let me take it off."

He stayed silent for a few steps, not offering her any words. Then he stopped.

"Okay, if you must."

She tugged the knot at the back of her head. The handkerchief slipped away.

Oh. It was a house.

She looked at him. Why were they here? Who lived here?

"Eddie, where are we?"

"Home." He said the word simply.

"But . . ."

His smile couldn't stretch any wider if he tried.

"Let's have a look."

She was puzzled. Why would they look inside the house? And why had he called it home? They'd just been at his home.

It was large. Two storey, made of wood. Cream weatherboards that shone with the appearance of fresh paint. Two chimneys stood proud on the roof, large windows looked out over fields. It was settled high on the land, looking down to the contours of the fields below.

Eddie was almost at the front door. She hurried over to join him.

"Stop."

Her foot froze mid-air. He'd opened the door but halted her with his hand before she could walk inside.

"Eddie . . ."

He scooped her up into his arms and carried her over the threshold, before kissing her softly on the lips.

"I've been back almost four months," he told her, placing her down on polished timber floorboards. "I've worked with my father and his builder every day on this house to have it ready for us."

June gulped. "This is our house?"

Eddie grinned at her. A smile that lit his eyes and made them crinkle in the corners. "All ours."

“Oh Eddie. Oh my goodness!”

She walked through the lounge and into the kitchen. Her palm rested on the solid timber bench top before skimming along it. She took in the new stove, the appliances, before walking back into the lounge. The fire was set with kindling, despite the warm weather.

“Is this really ours?”

He nodded. “Do you like it?”

She ran into his arms and squealed like she’d never done before. “I love it! Oh Eddie, I can’t believe it’s ours. Truly ours!”

“We need to get some more furniture, but it’ll do for now.”

“Do? Eddie, it’s perfect.” She exhaled the word with a sigh. “I don’t ever want to leave.”

He took her hand to lead her up the stairs. “I’ll show you around then we’ll go get your things. Everyone’s waiting to see what you think.”

“I can’t believe they would help you to do this for me. Have you been living here?”

He shook his head. “We only finished it last week.” Eddie shrugged. “And I wanted us to spend our first night here together.”

He moved away from her and disappeared through one of the door ways.

“Where are you?”

She looked in. He was lying propped up by one elbow on a large bed. June didn't know where to look. Not with the way he was watching her.

“Want to try it out?”

“Eddie! We can't.”

He sat up and grabbed her hands before pulling her down on the bed too. He rolled on top of her and sat astride, holding her down.

“Eddie!” But there was no use. He was too strong.

He leant down and kissed her neck, teasing her.

“Eddie, please! Stop!”

She couldn't stop giggling.

But he didn't. He released her arms and kissed her mouth instead, but he didn't stop.

“I love you, June.” He paused and looked down at her, his eyes searching hers.

She sighed. “I'm glad I found you that day, Eddie West.”

He rolled off her and tugged her into the crook of his arm.

“As much as I'd like to stay here, mother will have half the neighbourhood at the main house by now. She's throwing you a party.”

June jumped up. “Oh no! They can't see me like this.”

She fingered her hair, unwashed and in need of styling. Her clothes embarrassingly crumpled.

Eddie bent to kiss her then straightened his trousers.

“Stay here. The bathroom’s down the hall, and the hot water’s on. Mother put towels in there already. I’ll run back and get your things.”

Eddie took off and she lay back down on the bed, stretched out like a starfish.

She couldn’t wait to write to her family.

She’d worried about her husband, whether he would have regretted marrying her on a whim in London. She’d expected his family to be cautious, distant even. Thought she might have set her hopes too high on what their home, what the farm would be.

But she had underestimated. Been too low with her expectations.

It felt like her every dream, every wish had been answered.

If her family could see her, could be here with her for even one moment, it would make her the happiest girl on the planet.

CHAPTER NINE

BETTY'S HEAD FELL against the cool of the windowpane. The car lurched forward, before coming to a crawl in the traffic again. She heard William cry but her body ached so much that she couldn't even muster the energy to turn to him. Wanted to ask about Charlie, but didn't want to admit to the truth of it. Couldn't.

"I think Master William here needs a feed."

She lifted her head and the thump of pain hit her between the ears.

William. Her baby's name was like a wave of relief.
William.

Betty reached for him, taking him from the woman. He gurgled as she cradled him.

Ivy passed her a blanket and she draped it over herself for modesty and let her little boy drink.

Tears stung at her eyes, but she wouldn't let them fall. Crying would be admitting that Charlie was gone. Crying would mean that it was real.

"Do you need something to eat? I brought a sandwich for you just in case."

She didn't look at Ivy. A shake of her head told her no. Besides, the choke of emotion in her throat wouldn't have let her answer back.

"Oh love, I'm so sorry. I just, well, I think you'll feel better once you've spoken to Luke."

Betty heard the kindness there, knew this woman was trying her best to comfort her, but she didn't want to hear it. How could Charlie's brother make things better?

"He wants you here, Betty. Luke will care for you. He won't let you or young William go without."

Betty turned her eyes back out to the landscape. To the whizzing farmland outside the window. She had hoped to enjoy the surroundings. To absorb the countryside of the place that was to be her home.

She didn't want Luke to look after her. She just wanted Charlie.

His hands encircled her waist. Betty laughed, she couldn't help it. Being around Charlie was like having a comedian on hand, telling her jokes, making her laugh. She'd never felt so alive before. Or so scared.

"Can't we just pretend you've injured yourself?"

Now it was Charlie who was laughing. "Oh, sergeant, I've got a broken heart. I can't fly! Let me stay."

She shook her head at his drawl. They might be making fun of it, but it was real. She'd already waited for him while he did his last stint away, and he hadn't exactly hidden the fact that less than half his crew had come back.

They didn't call them widow-makers for nothing.

"But Charlie . . ."

"Baby, let's forget about the war. Come on, let's get something to eat."

It wasn't like he had a choice. She knew that. And he wanted to go. He didn't even seem the least bit scared.

"They reckon it'll be over soon enough, you know that, right?"

Charlie hugged her tight again.

"Who's they?"

"Come on babe, let's catch up with the others."

She still didn't know who they were, but she was going to take his word on it. Once this war was over, they had their

whole lives ahead of them, so long as he made it back in one piece.

She slipped away from him slightly and caught his hand instead. Betty surveyed the flop of his hair as it shook with each stride he took, the smile that never seemed to leave his face. She wanted to remember the way he looked for the rest of her life. Wanted to hold his face in her mind and think that he was right there beside her. Always.

“What’re your family like, Charlie? You know all about mine but I know nothing about yours?”

He stopped and pulled her in close, pressing a kiss to her lips.

“Charlie!”

“What?” He bent for another. She fought to pull away but he didn’t let her go. “We’re married, who’s gonna care about us necking?”

Betty swiped him across the shoulder with her handbag.

“So?”

He started walking again and swung her hand in the air, back and forth.

“I’ve got an uptight brother who can be a pain in the neck, a mother who would be able to run this war if she set her mind to it, and a father who spends most of his day reading the paper and snoozing in his chair.”

She pictured them all, hoping they'd be as kind as Charlie.

"Oooh." Suddenly she didn't feel very well.

"You all right?"

Charlie's steady hand supported her.

"I think I'm going to be sick." She leant against him and took a few deep breaths.

Charlie guided her to rest against a little stone wall off the road. She sat down. Then up again.

She was sick on the grass.

"I'm sorry, oh Charlie, I'm sorry. I . . ."

He held back her hair and rubbed her back. "You'll be fine."

Betty wiped at her mouth delicately with a handkerchief then tucked it back into her bag. Alarm bells rang in her head. It was the second morning in a row she'd been physically sick.

She looked up at Charlie. His eyes said it all. She wasn't stupid. She knew it wasn't everyday you married a man who would hold your hair back while you vomited. Look at you with such concern.

"Charlie?"

He sat down and pulled her on to his lap.

"Charlie, I . . ."

"What is it, are you ill? I can take you home if you want to lie down."

She smiled and touched her open palm to his cheek.

"I'm not sick, Charlie, I think I'm pregnant."

He stared at her. Then stood up, forcing her to her feet too. Then he turned, walked a few steps, before grabbing her by the shoulders.

"Are you sure?"

"I think so, I was sick . . ."

"Seriously? We're actually having a baby?"

She nodded. She'd missed her monthly already.

"Woo-hoo!" Charlie took hold of her and flung her in the air, twirling around and around.

"We're having a baby!" He shouted.

"Charlie, I'm not feeling that great."

He dropped her to the ground before wrapping her in the tightest hug she'd ever felt.

"We're having a baby," he whispered.

Yes, she said silently. So make sure you make it home safely. I can't do this alone.

* * *

The dream made her wake with a smile on her face, but reality hit her like a cold sting of water the moment she opened her eyes.

William was still asleep in her arms, tucked into her body like he was part of her.

“We’re almost here.”

She blinked to help her eyes focused and looked up.

Betty still felt numb. Her body was moving, but her brain was sluggish. She didn’t trust her voice to cooperate. Thank goodness for the comfortable leather seats in the car.

“Luke will be at the house soon after we get there. He planned to finish work early.”

Betty nodded. “And their parents?”

Ivy smiled. “The boys never did see a lot of their family. Kept to themselves mostly. Mrs Olliver can be, well, let’s just say I worked for the family for years and I was mighty pleased when Luke asked me to run his home instead.”

She nodded again. Just saying those few words had left her throat dry and aching.

“Shall I take the baby for you? I’m happy to hold him again.”

Betty changed her position and rearranged William in the blanket. “I’ll be fine.”

She was grateful for Ivy helping her, but she wasn’t going to give up William. He was all she had now, all she had to live for, and she wasn’t letting him out of her arms again.

She wondered what this Ivy thought of her? What Charlie's family would think? They'd expected a heavily pregnant British widow, not a girl with a baby in tow, not knowing of her husband's passing.

William gurgled, but she didn't feed him. She hadn't even had anything to eat on the journey, her stomach flipping into a web of knots instead. She doubted there was anything to give him.

But she vowed to make herself drink then eat when they got to the house. William was her baby. She needed to feed him, needed to care for him. Her life was William. Without him, she had nobody.

"Not far to go now." Ivy patted her kindly on the leg.

Betty looked up. She couldn't help it. She had waited for this moment for so long, only she'd expected to be seated next to Charlie, gabbing away about her trip across the sea, snuggling into him, stealing kisses. Not seated beside the housekeeper, hoping her brother-in-law wouldn't turf her out, or insist she go back to London. And certainly not a widow.

The car turned. She listened as gravel crunched beneath the thick tyres. The driveway was wide, flanked by trees that were yet to have their leaves returned to them for summer.

A house loomed in the distance. In London, they would call it a mansion. She couldn't remember what the Woman's Guide would

have called it here. But it was impressive. A little too big, too cold looking for her liking, but beautiful.

Another car was already outside, taking first place at the foot of the entrance.

“Luke’s home already.”

Betty took a deep breath. William let out a muffled cry.

“Shoosh now, shoosh William.” She gave him a jiggle. “It’s time to meet your uncle.”

He opened his eyes to watch her. Betty’s heart wanted to shatter into a million shards, but she stuck her chin up and sniffed back the tears.

William was about to meet his uncle. If he couldn’t have his father, at least he had someone who might care about his well being, other than her. Family.

He wasn’t waiting at the door for them. Betty had hoped he would look like Charlie. That he would have the same happy enthusiasm as Charlie. She hadn’t seen him yet but she knew instinctively that he wasn’t like his younger brother. Charlie had been like an over-excited puppy

He would have been waiting at the front door.

She told herself off. Never judge a book by its cover.

Well, she wasn’t so much judging as summarising. The big triple brick house, the servants in his employ, the fancy car. Betty

gulped. She hadn't hoped for wealthy or cared about status, all she'd cared about was Charlie, and yet here she was.

"Why don't I show you to your room," said Ivy, nudging her along.

Betty looked back to see the driver taking her case from the boot.

"Your things will be brought in. Now let's get you upstairs, then you can come down to meet Luke once you're freshened up."

She could see the anxious look on Ivy's face. Was she worried how Luke would react to the baby? Had he been hoping she would have stayed behind in London? Her body shuddered. Tears burnt against the back of her eyes again.

Betty followed Ivy and kept her head down, her focus on holding William. But she couldn't help but notice the expensive antiques and lavish rugs, the polished wood of the floor as she passed, nor the elegant swirl of the staircase as they ascended it.

She wished Charlie had mentioned how well off his family was. At least she would have known what to expect.

A deep male voice carried up the stairs. Ivy was quick to hurry her along.

"You know, Master William looks just like the boys when they were babies. Splitting image."

Betty gave her a tight smile. She knew what Ivy was trying to do. Wanting to make her feel okay for the baby coming early, but she had no shame. This was Charlie's baby. She'd never been with another man before, and she'd hoped to never be. She still did.

"Here we go."

Betty looked into the room as Ivy swung back the door.

"This was to be your room to share with Charlie. We expected you both to live here for at least the first few months."

Betty changed her grip on William and let him face the room too, his back firm against her chest. The room was enormous. She wriggled off her shoes and felt the plush thickness of carpet beneath her toes. The drapes were heavysset and dramatic, swept back from the windows by what looked like a handful of claws at each side. The walls were painted a deep cream, and a door on the far wall opened into what she presumed was a nursery.

Ivy waved her hand toward it.

"He can sleep in here with you if you'd prefer, we can bring the basinet in, otherwise the nursery is all set up for him."

Betty walked toward it. Tears caught in her throat as she looked in.

A tiny basinet was set beneath the window, a cot for when he grew older against the other wall. There was a changing table, shelves for his clothes and large wicker baskets that she guessed would be for toys. There was even a delicate looking wooden pen that he would be able to play in once he was bigger

If she'd had Charlie with her, seeing such a room would have been a joy, but alone she just felt fraudulent.

"Betty?"

She didn't turn. Instead she placed William in the basinet, smiling through her tears and tucking the blanket over him. He whimpered, but she ignored it. She needed a moment. He'd barely left her arms, or those of her friends, since he'd been born, but she needed to put him down, just for a little while.

Betty turned slowly. Ivy was still standing inside the doorway. Her face was like that of a mother's, of a grandmother's, the type of face that knew what it was to deal with heartache, to help heal someone's wounds. She could see that now. It had been a long time since Betty had her mother to hold her, to guide her, but right now, she wished for it more than ever.

Ivy took a few hesitant steps toward her. When she held out her arms, Betty fled into them.

Her sobs racked her entire body, tears hurtling with ferocity down her cheeks.

“Oh, Betty. My dear, it’s going to be okay.”

She squeezed her eyes shut. She wished she could believe her, but her life was no more going to be okay than if she’d stayed in London.

“There, there. It’s all right my dear.”

Betty held on, tight. Her sobs were starting to ease, but the desperation in her heart was only becoming worse.

Ivy pulled back slightly and wiped stray hairs back from her face.

“I’m going to leave you for a moment and tell Luke that you’re not up to meeting him today. I’ll draw you a bath and then you can both have an early night.”

Betty shook her head. She wiped at her eyes and braved a tiny smile.

“I’ll be fine, I just need a moment.”

Ivy looked unsure.

“I need to thank him for allowing us into his home. I want to meet him.”

Ivy gave her a stern look then sighed.

“How about that bath though? You can take an hour to yourself, soak for a while, and I’ll look after William. Then you can have dinner with Luke.”

She nodded her acceptance.

Betty didn't mind the compromise. A bath sounded heavenly, Exactly what she needed. So long as Luke didn't think it was rude, drawing a bath first, she was grateful. But she was determined to meet him today and get it over and done with. She was going to make her brother-in-law like her, no matter what it took.

She was an orphan and a widow. There was no one in her life besides William and now the boy's uncle. She had no where else to go, no one to return home to.

This was her life. Charlie or no Charlie, America was her home now, and she had to do the best she could. There was no other choice.

There was a tap at the door.

The driver appeared with her one large case and her duffel bag.

"Thank you."

The man gave her a smile that showed the odd spot where teeth should have been. She'd hardly noticed him earlier, too numb to be polite, but now she saw the same kindness in his face that she'd recognised in Ivy's.

"It's nice to have Charlie's wife here, Ma'am."

He held his cap in his hands.

Betty nodded. "I just wish he was here too." She was proud of herself for getting the words out.

"Me too, Ma'am. We all wish he'd made it home."

Betty gave him a quick smile then turned away. She wasn't going to cry again. There was a time for grieving, and that was when she was alone. These people were all making an effort with her, and she needed to remember how lucky she was not to be turned out on the street. She'd faced that before, when her parents had died, but her friend's family had opened their doors to her. It hadn't been the same, but it was a kind of security for her. Only she'd never considered that it might happen to her all over again one day.

She was sure not all American families would welcome foreign brides, widows, with as much concern.

William started to fuss.

"Don't touch that baby!" She heard Ivy's bossy voice the moment she went to step toward him. "The bathroom is straight across the hall and the water is running."

Betty hesitated.

"Off, young lady!" Ivy disappeared into William's room. "Before I have to march you in there myself."

She thought she'd be worried about leaving her baby with a stranger. Before she had fought the urge to even take her arms from her child, but leaving him now didn't feel wrong. Ivy somehow felt like family already, even if she'd hardly been able to say a word to her yet.

She could only hope her feelings for Luke would be the same.

The water was almost cold. Betty eyed the towel, draped less than a few feet away from her hands, and could barely summon the energy to reach for it. Her body was starting to chill, but the water had been such a luxury that she hadn't been able to resist staying in it until the end.

She'd listened to William cry then whimper and then fall silent, and he hadn't made a noise since. Neither had Ivy. But she was missing him. And so was her body. It was time to feed her baby.

Betty stood up in the bath and cocooned her body with the towel. She rubbed at her skin, still enjoying the luxury of being in a real bathroom. There were tiles on the floor, the faucets were all gold plated. It was like something she'd never even dreamed of before.

She wrapped the towel tighter around herself and stepped out, before reaching back in to pull the plug. Water gurgled as she turned to face the mirror. Her own reflection surprised her. Last time she'd looked at herself properly, her face had been full, not to mention her belly. Now her cheeks looked less like those of a chipmunk and more like the Betty of old. The Betty she had been when Charlie had first danced in to her life.

Her fingers traced over her hair, wet from washing and fragrant from the delicate shampoo that had been resting on the edge of the bath. It was already springing into loose curls. From the days she'd spent above deck with the other girls, her skin was less pale than it usually was, a barely-there smatter of freckles tickling over the bridge of her nose.

Betty sighed. She hardly had any decent clothes with her, but at least she looked okay within herself. When she'd left London, her stomach had been huge and she'd disguised her body beneath over-size garments.

Hopefully Ivy had some cotton. She might need to get darning. Not to mention knitting some clothes for William.

"You all right in there, Betty?"

She smiled at Ivy's voice and pulled her eyes from her reflection. Betty tightened the big fluffy towel around her body and pulled the door open.

"Sorry, it was just so good in there."

Ivy didn't look worried. "The wee man's still asleep."

"Thank you."

"Let's get you dressed and down to see Luke, then, shall we? He's waiting for you."

Betty gulped. This was it.

"I don't have many good clothes to wear."

Ivy patted her arm and guided her across the hall and into her room. "Let's find something for now, when you're more settled I'll take you to the dressmaker. She'll put some nice things together for you in no time."

Ivy must have seen the look cross her face. She couldn't disguise it. She hardly had a penny left, not after her cravings on board the ship for chocolate and buying some things for the baby. There was little left, let alone for new dresses. She hadn't even had close to the £10 limit imposed on travelling brides.

"My dear, you don't need to worry. Luke is a wealthy man and you're the mother of his only nephew."

She looked up and met Ivy's eyes. There was honesty there, and compassion, but she didn't expect charity.

"Ivy I . . ."

"Come on, love, let's get you dressed. We can talk about all this in the morning, once you've settled in."

Betty held her tongue. She wasn't going to argue. This woman was her only ally right now, the only person she could trust. It could be weeks, if not longer, before she saw the other girls from the boat. What she had to do was make a good impression and take care of her son.

She opened her bag and searched for something presentable to wear.

“I’ll come up for you shortly.”

Ivy closed the door behind her.

Betty held her breath then let it out in one long sigh. She could do this. She had to do this.

William began to cry. She wriggled into some undergarments, pulled out her only pre-pregnancy dress and fled to the nursery. She needed to feed William, find some way to press her dress, and do her hair.

Then it was time to meet her brother-in-law.

Betty let her hand glide along the polished timber of the banister. Her heart hammered in her throat. Nausea bubbled in her stomach, but she kept her teeth gritted and rehearsed words in her mind.

Thank you for having me in your home. William is fortunate to have an uncle like you. Please accept my condolences. Charlie was a wonderful man. We are grateful that you have opened your doors to us.

She only hoped her voice box would comply.

William cooed in her arms. She looked down at him. His dark eyes twinkled at her, a funny smile pulled at his entire mouth.

“We’re going to be fine, my wee man. He’s going to love us.”

Betty almost tripped over her own feet at a deep cough. She stopped. A man stood, a glass in his hand. He was watching her. Had he cleared his throat to announce his presence? Or had he been there all along?

There was no doubting he was Charlie's brother. He was younger than she'd expected, but he looked years older than Charlie. Where Charlie's hair had been longish and flopped over his forehead sometimes, Luke's was cut closer. More businesslike. He had the same lightly tanned skin, although his was lighter than Charlie's. Strong shoulders, tall, commanding.

Worry ran like a shiver down her spine. Her mouth felt as if it was stuck together with glue. William's hand fisted around a curl of her hair, but she didn't have the energy to stop him.

Luke spoke first. He placed his glass on a sideboard and walked slowly toward the foot of the stairs.

"You must be Betty."

He extended his hand. She walked the last few steps and reached out with her own. It was an effort to make a smile appear, but she did it. This was the man who was keeping a roof over her head. She had to make a good impression.

"I'm sorry, you just look so like Charlie," her voice was soft, low. "It took me by surprise."

She watched as something passed over his face. A darkness, a sadness perhaps.

“And this is my nephew?”

She took the last step to land beside him and propped William up in the crook of her arm.

“This is William Charles Olliver,” she said proudly. “I named him for my father, and for his own father too.”

Luke nodded. She noticed that he kept snatching looks at her face, but it didn’t bother her. He was probably as unsure of her as she was of him.

“Let’s have dinner, shall we? Then you can tell me all about your voyage.”

He took up his glass. She walked beside him, keeping his pace.

“I want to thank you for taking us in, Luke. I am so grateful. Without Charlie . . .”

He cut her off. Abruptly. “William is my only nephew and you are my sister-in-law. There are too many rooms in this house unfilled as it is.”

She felt a coolness that hadn’t been there before. Had she said something to offend him already? She hoped not. He was hard to read.

“Ivy has dinner waiting.”

Not for the first time, Betty wished Charlie was by her side. Wished he was joking and prodding at her, teasing his

brother, introducing them himself. Talking about their plans, their future. Instead she was hoping not to be a charity case.

Luke might bear a resemblance to his little brother, but she had a feeling that was where the similarities ended.

“Shall we let Ivy take William while we eat?”

It was a simple question, but Betty couldn't help the quiver in her bottom lip. Charlie would have wanted William at the table, in a baby chair or on his lap even.

“Of course.”

He dropped his now empty whisky glass on a low table as they passed and led her to the dining table. It was huge. Ridiculous even. She was only pleased to see they didn't have to sit at opposite ends.

Ivy appeared. She had a younger woman by her side who carried a tray of food. Ivy gave her an encouraging smile.

“Thank you Ivy, are you sure you'll be okay with him?”

She hated to put the woman out. Looking after him twice in less than two hours!

“My dear, that's why I'm here.” She reached for William and tucked him against her body. “He'll be fine. Enjoy your dinner.”

Luke stood at his chair, waiting for her to be seated. She complied and watched as he folded himself into his seat. She found it hard to meet his gaze. Dark eyes that seemed to search her, to watch every move she made.

It wasn't so unusual. He'd probably formed a picture in his mind of what she'd be like, how she'd look. She was embarrassed to say she'd thought little of him. Charlie had always been on her mind. She had often thought of where they might live, but other than looking forward to meeting his family, they hadn't often filled her thoughts.

Betty tried not to wriggle nervously in her seat, Luke to her left. In the centre was pepper and salt, and in front of her was a steaming bowl of soup. She thought of her childhood. Soup had always been accompanied by her mother's own crusty loaf of bread, used to mop up every splash of soup. But dunking bread didn't seem fitting given her surrounds here.

Luke smiled and dipped his spoon into the velvety soup. She'd eaten well enough on the ship, but the constant motion had made her feel queasy. Not that sitting with Luke was helping her nerves any, but the soup was delicious.

"Ivy tells me you didn't receive the telegram."

She stifled a choke and placed her spoon down. She'd hoped they wouldn't cover anything serious too soon.

"I'm sorry if you weren't expecting me." She kept her eyes down. Where could she look? Was this his way of telling her he wished she'd stayed behind?

Luke's eyes drilled a hole into her. She had to look up. He was waiting for her to make contact, she could just feel it. Commanding her.

"I'm sorry Luke." She barely recognised her own voice. "I'm sorry for Charlie, and I'm sorry for not staying behind."

She wanted to flee. To run so fast up those stairs, gather her things and go. But she didn't. She stayed glued to her seat.

There was no where else to go.

Luke picked up his spoon again and started to eat. As if nothing had happened. She did the same. Swallowing was hard, but she forced each mouthful down.

When there was no soup left in his bowl, he put down the spoon again, wiped at the corners of his mouth, and folded his arms, chair pushed back from the table ever so.

Betty hadn't finished hers but she did the same. She doubted she could force any more down if she tried.

The young maid scurried over and took their bowls. Betty wished she wasn't alone with Luke, but the girl left the room as quickly as she'd appeared.

"It's not that I don't want you here, Betty." Luke looked thoughtful. She saw a flicker of, what? Something that reminded her of Charlie, only briefly, in his eyes. "It's just an awkward situation."

She nodded. He was right.

He smoothed a hand over the table cloth, long fingers tracing a rhythm over the surface.

"Charlie was my only brother, and he would have wanted me to look after you. I'm unmarried, there are no heirs to our my family's property and interests, and William is my nephew. He will want for nothing."

Betty felt a shadow fall over her. A whisper of cool air that told her she deserved better than what sounded like a business arrangement. Something mapped out to merely ensure the family had a successor.

"I loved him," she said, forcing the words out. "He was my husband, and I loved him."

The young girl appeared again then, with two plates, one in each hand. She placed them down. Betty could feel anger burning in her veins, threatening to explode, but she held her feelings tight.

"Roast duck, with an orange cointreau sauce, candied yams and green beans."

"I've no doubt you loved him," Luke said in a low voice once she'd disappeared. "Charlie wrote home about you frequently. He was very pleased you were expecting."

"He's Charlie's son." She almost spat the words, forgetting her manners.

Luke smiled tightly at her and picked up his cutlery.

"My dear, he looks very much like an Olliver. I never doubted it, not once I saw him."

Betty took her anger out on her food, cutting violently at the meat.

His words hung, stale, in the air. Was she to presume he had doubted it until he saw William? Her hands started to shake, but she wasn't going to flounce off.

Luke was a strong man, but then she was strong too. You didn't survive losing your parents and being newly married in wartime London without being a fighter.

She wanted so desperately to ask how Charlie had died. To know if his body had been recovered, how it had happened.

But she would wait. She could question Ivy later, once Luke had retired for the evening.

CHAPTER TEN

MADELINE STARED AT her hands. She couldn't help it. She could see every line, every crevice. Raw from hours in soapy water and beneath dirt in the fields.

They told a story of their own.

A thud echoed down the hall and hit her eardrums. She cringed.

"Hurry up girl!"

Madeline didn't bother with a response. She hated her mother-in-law's voice more than the persistent miaow of a cat or whine of dog. Loathed hearing the coarse, common accent of a woman who treated her like dirt beneath her boot.

"You not hear me girl?"

And she hated being called girl.

"I heard you just fine, and no, I'm not finished, as you can well see."

She wished she'd bitten her tongue but it wasn't in her nature. She'd grown up with parents who treated their children and those around them with kindness. Asked little of their daughters beside respect and moderate help around the house.

Here, she was no better than a maid. A slave. Working in a house that was meant to be her marital home. Instead she had to work her fingers to the bone just to keep a roof over her head and food in her belly.

Her mother-in-law, Sarah, gave her a look of disgust and inspected a plate from the pile Madeline had almost finished washing. Madeline tried to ignore the woman's tobacco stained fingers.

The plate was dropped back into the water.

Sarah gave her a cruel smile.

"Wash it again. Didn't your mother teach you how to be a wife?"

Madeline struggled to breathe. She held the words in check that she so wanted to scream, but she wasn't going to put up with this any longer.

"If it's not to your liking then perhaps you should attend to them yourself," she said.

The old woman glared at her, spittle forming at the edges of her mouth as she flustered.

“I’m not feeling myself. Please excuse me.”

Madeline turned sharply on her heel and walked away. Calmly. Shoulders squared, with dignity, moving as slowly as she could.

“Don’t you walk away from me!”

She squeezed her eyes shut for a heartbeat but kept moving.

Her room appeared in front of her. She was at least grateful that it had a door. The room her sister-in-law slept in was separated from the living area by only a curtain, hanging crudely from a low pole protruding from the wall. The privacy was her saviour.

Madeline jammed a chair beneath the door handle as a makeshift lock and flopped down on the bed. Springs assaulted her spine but for once she didn’t care.

She half expected banging on the door, for Sarah to come in and demand she get back to the dishes. Pull vegetables from the garden or hoe weeds. Or worse. Ring the neck of a hen for dinner.

Madeline shuddered. She had no idea what to do.

Her father kept appearing in her head, swimming in front of her eyes. She could hear his words, over and over. I’ll bring

you home, Madeline. He had said. If it's that bad over there,
we'll do whatever it takes to bring you home.

Could she ask that of him? Would he still want to help her if she truly told them what it was like here? What her new family expected of her? How they treated her?

When she'd met Roy's mother, it had been a shock. A stooped lady who had once been very tall, with a mouth set in the meanest of lines, not to mention her grey hair and sharp eyes. Like a witch, she'd thought upon meeting her.

Since she'd arrived, there had been times when Sarah had smiled. Or been kind. But never to her. Sometimes to her daughter, and always to her son. It was as if she thought Madeline inferior. Not good enough for him.

She had never been one to compare, but it was she who felt superior in this house. Not even from a monetary point of view, but certainly when it came to manners and status.

But the biggest shock had been her new sister-in-law, Carolyn. Mean as the mother, if not meaner, with a look on her face that read disgust.

They treated Roy like royalty, when in fact she'd come to realise he was anything but. He worked like a peasant for his parents. And he certainly cared more for them than his new wife.

Where was the man she'd met in London? Where was the strong, assertive young soldier who had made her believe in him?

Impressed her family and made her want to leave them behind just to be married to him? No wonder he'd avoided her questions about his home.

The doorknob rattled. "Madeline, open up right now!"

Speak of the devil.

She rose and pulled the chair away. He burst through. One hand ran wildly through his hair, the other hung limp at his side as if he didn't know what to do with it.

"Mother had to run and tell on me, did she?"

She sat back on the bed. His face showed every inch of his anger.

"I had to come up from the field, Madeline. You better have a good reason for disobeying . . ."

"Disobeying? For goodness sake, Roy, she's supposed to be my mother-in-law, not my master!"

He glared at her. "All she asks of you is a few chores."

She laughed. Out aloud. If she didn't laugh she would have started balling her eyes out, and showing Roy she was anything but strong wasn't going to help her cause.

"I work hours every day, Roy. Hours. That's hardly helping out around the house."

"While you're a guest in this house . . ."

She stood. Eye to eye with him. Far braver than she felt. Braver than she'd ever known she could be.

"I am not a guest, Roy. You married me and brought me here. I should not have to feel grateful, it should be my right. Isn't a husband expected to provide a home for his wife?"

His throat pulsed with anger. She could even see a tick in his eye, face burning red.

"So when are we going to move to our own place? Because I'm sure as heck not going to put up with this any longer."

"Or what?" he spat.

"Or I shame your entire family by filing for divorce and going home."

"You wouldn't."

She didn't miss the hesitation in his voice. The way his throat stuttered.

"One message home and I'm on the next ship out of here."

They stared at one another. Madeline knew she only had another few minutes before she couldn't pretend any longer. But she was determined to stay strong.

"I would have to take a job in town. You don't expect me to just leave my parents, do you? Who would help them here?"

She glared at him.

"One month, Roy. Otherwise I'm gone."

She lay in bed. Still. Too frightened to move.

Tonight, she'd walked into the kitchen, her back straight, and reached into the fridge. She'd taken a block of cheese, plunged a knife into it to retrieve a few slices, before returning it and helping herself to a slice of bread. Then she'd turned on her heel and retreated to the bedroom.

They'd all been watching her, she knew that. Their eyes had been like the devil on her skin, following her every move. But no one spoke. They rarely did at the dinner table.

It was so unlike her own home it made Madeline feel sick. She could imagine them now, Harrold laughing and entertaining his daughters, her mother trying to purse her lips and swatting at him, but giving in to his jokes in the end. His grandchildren huddled around him as he told them a story, in the lounge beside the fire. Crowded on the floor as he rocked in his chair.

Madeline let the door fall from her fingers with a bang, and she sat down to eat her cheese and bread. They would have made a mental note of what she'd taken, to write on the chit they kept, to record how much it was costing them to keep the newly married couple.

But she knew better. She'd never taken what wasn't hers. And the work she did here everyday accounted for a whole lot more than what they gave her in food.

But she had a plan. Tomorrow, she was going to start walking into town. Someone passing would give her a ride.

Besides her new family, the other farmers seemed kind enough. Not fond of Roy's parents, but no different than the farmers her father had dealt with at his butcher shop. Nice people who would be hard pressed to drive past a young woman and not offer her a seat in the car or cart.

Madeline swallowed her final mouthful as Roy swung open the door.

"This is ridiculous."

She smiled sweetly at him. "You're right. This hell hole is ridiculous."

The words didn't come easily to her, but she forced them.

"Madeline, you are being unreasonable."

She liked that he was so agitated. Part of her hated him. Had come to loathe him. In four weeks, she'd started to despise him. For lying to her about his home, for allowing his family to treat her as they did. For everything.

But most of all for deceiving her, for telling her he loved her, and bringing her here.

"I'll have a word with them. Ask them to go a bit easier on you."

She watched his face. At the premature lines that had embedded themselves in his forehead, at the dark tinge around his eyes.

A flicker ignited within her, but she stomped it out.

She couldn't feel sorry for him, but she almost did. The brave man she'd met in London had disappeared. Sucked back under the thumb of his mother and no longer important, he was a nobody.

But she sensed his vulnerability. Could tell that unlike back in England, here she needed to stand up for herself, assert her rights. Be everything she wasn't to get what she needed.

Roy sat on the bed beside her, his head dropped into his hands.

"We can't afford to move out."

She nodded. Touched her fingers to his hand.

"I'm going to get a job."

His head snapped to attention. "You're what?"

"A job. I'm more than capable."

"They won't let you. Don't be ridiculous!"

"Who?"

But she knew exactly who he meant.

"It would shame the family. Everyone in town would think we couldn't even make enough money from the land to feed one more mouth."

She smiled. "More so than if I left you?"

His face was tortured.

"I am going to get a job, and so are you. Or they can pay you what you're worth. Then we will find a house of our own.'

Roy stood up and left the room. She didn't call him back.

Slowly she undressed, stepping into her nightgown, and lay beneath the covers. Tears stung at her eyes and fled her lashes as if they fell from a waterfall. She hiccuped softly, swallowing what she could, not wanting to be heard.

A footstep sounded nearby. Madeline turned her head and cried silently into her pillow.

She was going to look for a job, but what she hadn't told Roy was that she wouldn't be able to hold anything for long.

If her suspicions were correct, she was pregnant already.

She touched her belly and the tears began to fall harder.

All her life she'd wanted to be a mother. Now she was stuck over here, as good as alone.

She wanted to go home.

When Roy came to her tonight, slipped beneath the sheets in their bed, she intended on refusing him. Every night until they moved out.

He was going to be like an angry bear with a stuck thorn, but she didn't care.

It was either her rules or a ship back to London. The decision was his.

Home was like a mirage, disappearing into the distance of her memories. It called her, pulled her like a magnetic current, but it was slipping from her grasp.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

JUNE COULDN'T BELIEVE IT. Every time she looked around, every time she stepped foot inside a room, she couldn't believe it was hers. Theirs. Built with her husband's own hands, with the land gifted to them by his family.

A knock echoed at the door.

June fiddled one last time with the stem of a flower, pushing it further into the bunch, then wiped her hands on her apron.

"Come in!"

She loved the sound of her voice ringing out clear down the hallway. Her family home had been modest. Lovely, but not large. This house was big enough to accommodate for an entire brood of children.

"June, what are you doing?"

Patricia appeared.

“Just fiddling with things.”

Her new sister laughed and waved her hand at the window.

“Haven’t you noticed what a nice day it is?”

Of course she had. “I just want to get the house right. Nice for Eddie.”

That elicited an even louder laugh. “He built the darn house, and he’s got you in it, so come on. You could have it looking like a dump and he’d still smile when he arrived home.”

June blushed. She couldn’t help it. Eddie was like her own personal ray of sunshine. Every time he looked at her, touched her, laughed with her, it made her feel alive. Happy. So incredibly happy.

“So do you want to come?”

“Where?”

Patricia followed her into the kitchen.

“No time for a cuppa, ‘luv” she said, in her best British impersonation. “Mother’s taking us into town for lunch.”

June laughed. She was so lucky to have a nice sister-in-law, not to mention a mother-in-law who was determined to march her about with glee to show her off. “What’s the occasion? Have I missed a birthday? Eddie never mentioned anything this morning . . .”

"We don't need an occasion, silly." Patricia laughed, pulling the kettle from her hand and marching her back down the hall and toward the stairs. "We've got you to show off."

June felt her face flush. "Me? Oh, I don't know. Really, I think I'd . . ."

Patricia gave her a firm push on the rear end.

"Put something nice on. You've got fifteen minutes."

"Fifteen, but . . ."

"Get a wriggle on girl."

She took one look at Patricia, hands on her hips, and went up the stairs. Maybe it would be nice to go out, to have a look around and be pampered by her new family. But she didn't like to be made a fuss of, certainly not the centre of attention.

Although it would mean she could post her letters and try to find the other girls.

And maybe they could drop in and see Eddie at work.

That made her move. Any excuse to see her husband.

The sun beat down on June's skin and made her smile all over again. It was hard not to. She'd worried about not fitting in here, of being so homesick that she'd be miserable, but it couldn't have been further from the truth.

Patricia had her arm slung firmly in hers as they sauntered down the street. She was glad she'd come. Being out in town for the day was nice.

"So where to for lunch?"

"Mother wants to take you to Gregory's for lunch."

Sounded fancy. Far too fancy for her.

"Aren't we meeting Eddie . . ."

Patricia swatted at her. "Don't you get sick of seeing him all the time? I mean really, he's nice and all, but you don't have to pretend you're that crazy about him."

June stopped dead. They thought she was pretending?

Her sister-in-law must have seen the look on her face.

"Kidding, June. Kidding." Patricia held her hands up like a criminal who'd just surrendered. "Geez, you Brits take things so seriously."

June smiled and sighed in relief. She wasn't used to the way American's joked. Especially not about things like that! Besides, how could she ever tire of her Eddie?

"Anything you want to do?"

They went back to walking, arm in arm.

"Post some letters back home, that's all."

"Don't need to stop and look at baby clothes?"

June felt her eyebrows cross, but she tried not to react.

"Another American attempt at humour?"

This time it was Patricia who pretended to look horrified.

“Well, you being a newlywed, not to mention you and my brother being holed up in that new house of yours every night just made me wonder, that’s all.”

June couldn’t help the blush that stung her cheeks. She’d never get used to how brash women were over here. Laughing about intimate matters?

“So?”

She looked sideways. “Can I call you Patty?”

“Of course.”

June kept walking. She hadn’t known if Patty was just the name Eddie called his sister and she kept forgetting to ask.

“But that still doesn’t answer my question. Baby clothes or not? I’m ready to be an aunty!”

“No baby clothes yet.” June was surprised with how firm her voice was. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to be, heavens did she want to be! But she hadn’t been blessed yet, and she wasn’t about to jinx herself by buying clothes before she needed them.

“Oh look, there’s Mother.”

June followed Patty’s gaze and they walked off together. Patty was already busy chatting about something else, but June was still stuck on the baby thoughts.

Eddie was as desperate for a family as she was, but all they could do was hope and pray.

She suppressed a giggle.

And keep trying. They still couldn't keep their hands off
one another.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ALICE FELT LIKE there was a hand around her throat. Tight, squeezing the breath from her windpipes, suffocating her. She woke with a start. Hot and clammy, hair trapped against her forehead.

Only the noise of snoring made her realise she was safe. Or at least she was as safe as could be. For here.

She lay her head back down on the pillow and listened to the now familiar rumble of her husband asleep. Sometimes she kicked him and then stayed deathly still, pretending to be asleep, but it never helped. He would stop, fidget, then start the bear-like breathing all over again. Her only saviour was falling asleep first, but waking up like this from a nightmare left her awake for hours.

And left her thinking.

Her life here was nothing like she'd hoped. Not even a shell of the life she had imagined as they'd sailed across the ocean.

Where was her husband? Where was the man, the soldier, who she'd fallen in love with? Where was the in-control, strong, devilishly handsome man who had looked so dapper in his uniform, so kind when he lay helpless on a hospital bed? Who had courted her so diligently? Who had progressed through the ranks in the United States Army to become a Captain before his 25th birthday?

Alice rose and wrapped her shawl tight around her shoulders. The house was cool, but then maybe it was just her skin. She was exhausted from work, tired of worrying, and sick to death of missing home. But most of all she was annoyed at having to watch every penny they spent.

She'd expected lavish parties, a handsome townhouse, never having to lift a finger herself unless it came to the odd spot of housework.

How wrong she'd been.

Here, she worked five days a week, cooked for her husband, cleaned, washed, managed the household. And worried each week about the bills they had stacking up on the counter.

Not to mention watching as every spare penny they had was used to buy whisky for her husband to drink away. Before passing out on his chair, or ranting at the wireless, or worse, yelling

at her. Or maybe when he refused to speak to her was worse again.

She wanted to go home. So desperately. She wanted to step back in time and turn down Ralph's advances. But she knew if it happened over again, she would still marry him. No girl would have turned him down. Not the way he had been then.

But that didn't help her cope with the disappointment. Her husband was a loser. A man who had been important once, in the army, but who floundered in the real world. Who had lost everything and given up. What had happened? What had changed since she'd last seen him?

Tears prickled her eyes and she blinked at them. Half-heartedly. And as she often did in the wee early hours of the morning, she boiled the jug and made herself a sweet cup of hot chocolate, like she always had back home, and let big juicy tears roll into her cup as she bravely took each sip.

She was a lonely, miserable excuse for a married woman. She hated her job, she hated her home, and worse of all, she hated her husband like she'd never hated a human being before.

She thought of the soldier whose eyes had caught hers when she was on duty as a nurse. Of the strong, tall man who had so gallantly proposed to her, searched her out and knocked on her door.

And she listened to the repetitive, snarling snore from the other room.

What had she ever done to deserve this?

Alice didn't want to argue today. Not again. Every time they were together they either argued or he ignored her, and today she didn't want to. She preferred the silence.

She stared at her complexion in the mirror and fought against the frown that was hovering over her mouth. Her lips seemed to be in a constant fight with gravity these days, whereas before she'd found it hard to wipe a smile from her face.

Alice smoothed powder over her skin, gently sweeping the blush over her cheeks. Then she picked up her lip brush and fought the shake of her hand, trembling as she painted red across her mouth. But it didn't help. She could see how lifeless her eyes appeared, dull instead of radiant, and there was no shine to her face.

She forced herself to smile and pulled on her panty hose, the last pair she owned that weren't peppered with holes or ladders. Just because she was unhappy didn't mean she was going to let her standards drop. It was all that kept her going. Was the only reason she was able to brave the world each day with her chin tilted, head held high.

The sun shone with such intent outside that Alice wondered if it was trying to cheer her up. She decided it would, that she wouldn't feel sorry for herself any longer. They would get through this. Ralph would come right. She could get him help. It couldn't stay like this forever.

She straightened her skirt, wishing she had something slightly shorter to match the new fashions. But she looked good. The clothes she did have were expensive, tasteful, even if they weren't the latest designs. She heard the other girls snicker about her at work, whispering as she passed, refusing to let her become part of the group. But she didn't care. Women had gossiped about her, her entire life. Hated her because men turned their heads when she walked by.

She didn't need friends. Well, she didn't need new ones. The only friends she cared about were the girls from the ship. Girls who were probably having the time of their life as newlyweds, while she suffered through each day with her man.

Alice thrust her chin up and walked out of the bedroom. She grimaced at the mess in their tiny lounge but kept on moving. Walked past her husband, staring into space on the porch, his big frame dwarfing the rickety chair, and didn't even pause.

She cringed as she headed down the street, hating that she could leave home without him even acknowledging her, or caring,

but she didn't stop or give in to the tears. There was no room for emotion in her life, at least not in public.

It took her half an hour to walk to work, but it would do her good. The sunshine on her skin felt pleasant, uplifting almost, and it beat catching the bus.

Alice didn't so much hate her work as she hated having to work. She'd never expected to do more than cook and clean her home, care for children when the time came. But work? It hadn't really ever been part of her game plan.

And she especially hadn't ever considered that she'd be the only one working.

"Mrs Jones?"

She looked up, her fingers hovering over the typewriter.

"Mr Roberts has called a full staff meeting. We are to meet promptly at ten-thirty in the boardroom."

Alice nodded. Mrs Perkins, the old biddy who ran the office team, had never been particularly friendly. Hardly cracked a smile once since she'd started.

She went back to typing. Her fingers moved surely over the keys, not as fast as most of the others, but neatly and without error. Alice smiled as she tapped. Her teacher never would have believed that her worst student would end up typing for a living, but something about her classes must have stuck.

A whisper of cologne wafted past her, making her head snap up.

Oh.

Her eyes followed her nose and stayed fixed on a handsome man as he glided through the office. He smelt, and looked, expensive. His black hair was swept back, grey inching past his temple. He was tall, had a neatly trimmed moustache that followed his mouth, and the watch he looked at on his wrist was made from thick gold.

Alice darted her eyes back to her work as he looked her way.

Oh Lord! He'd caught her staring.

She didn't dare peek up again, but the heat creeping up her cheeks and flushing her face would have given her away if he was still watching.

He had to be Mr Roberts.

Her new boss.

Alice hadn't been invited into the boardroom before. Only the senior assistants were asked to sit in on meetings and take notes. Or listen to one of the men dictate letters.

It was elegant. Or as elegant as a meeting room could be. A large desk was flanked by numerous chairs, windows looking out over the city.

She hesitated by the door, then took her place alongside the far wall, leaving the chairs for those higher up the chain than her.

The room filled within minutes. A low hum descended as the employees spoke in hushed tones, but no one spoke to Alice. She was used to it.

Then one of the men cleared his throat. She looked up.

Their boss appeared, walking through the door and taking his position at the head of the table. She watched as he smiled, looking at ease with so many people's attention focused on him.

"Thank you all for gathering so promptly."

The room was silent now, every one's attention directed toward him.

"I wanted to take this opportunity to introduce myself, and let you all know that I anticipate the change of leadership will not cause any disruption."

Mr Roberts coughed. Loudly.

"Would someone be so kind as to fetch me a glass of water?"

Alice felt a painful stab in her ribs. Then heard Mrs Perkins' snappy voice in her ear.

"Get to it."

Alice glared at her and walked out, moving slowly through the crowd of women at the back who didn't seem interested in moving out of her way. She wasn't about to argue about jumping

to attention, not when she was the newest employee. If anyone was going to get the boot it would be her.

Alice hurried down the corridor, poured a glass, then walked back to the boardroom. She glared at those in her way this time, not wanting to spill the glass.

Her pace slowed when she neared her boss though. When he looked up and met her gaze.

It was like the whole room was watching her, or at least that's what it felt like. As if everyone was watching her staring at the boss, hand quivering as she set the glass down on the table before him.

"Thank you."

She smiled. "You're welcome."

He laughed. He actually laughed at her. She could have died right there on the spot.

"An English girl, huh? Fancy that. Your name?"

Alice swallowed. "Alice Jones, sir."

"Mrs Jones," he said. He held up the glass and downed half of the water. "Thank you."

Then he continued on, like nothing had passed between them. Like it had been only the two of them in the room and now they were surrounded by others.

She ignored her burning cheeks and took her place at the back of the room again, hoping it would be over fast. She didn't miss the scowls directed her way.

Alice didn't look up again until she realised the meeting was over. The women around her were already shuffling off, so she forced her feet to obey and follow them.

Until she heard a clear, deep male voice ring out across the room. Addressing her personally.

"Mrs Jones."

Oh no. She froze. Please don't fire me today. Please. He hadn't mentioned anything about employee cuts, had he? Had she missed it while she'd been daydreaming about him?

Alice waited until the remaining employees had left, then walked toward him. Her body felt numb, feet heavy as she met his stare.

"What can I do for you, sir?"

"Please take a seat," he beckoned for her to sit across from him with one hand. "And call me Matthew, at least when we're alone."

He winked at her. Her boss actually winked at her.

She just nodded. She couldn't make her tongue form words in her mouth. She'd forgotten what this felt like. About how talking to a man like this, being in a man's company, used to come so naturally to her.

"Alice. May I call you Alice?"

She nodded again.

"Well, Alice, I'm in need of a personal assistant, and I think you'd be perfect."

What? She shook her head. "What about Mrs Perkins?"

He laughed. Her boss actually laughed out aloud again.

"Mrs Perkins is, well, not exactly what I'd hoped for. You'd do the job much better, I'm sure."

He was attracted to her. This man was actually attracted to her. Why else would he ask her when he could have had any of the ladies in the office assisting him? He knew nothing about her.

"So, will you accept my offer?"

She took a deep breath and made her eyes match his. It would make the others only hate her more, but what did she care?

"I'd be honoured, Mr Roberts."

"Matthew," he reminded her, before giving her another wink.

Alice tried to keep the smile on her face, but inside she was in knots. The old her would have flirted and bantered with him, but it no longer came as second nature to her.

"When do I start?"

He grinned, folding his arms over his chest as he appraised her.

"Just let me offer Mrs Perkins an early retirement package first."

Alice stood, standing straight, shoulders back, smile firmly in place still.

“Until then, Matthew.”

He stood, eyes never leaving her face.

“Until then.”

Alice’s only regret was that he wore a wedding band.

She ignored the niggles of guilt as it trawled through her. She’d turned down a married man once before, and now she was married herself.

But he’d only asked her to be his assistant.

For now.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MADELINE SAT, BACK STRAIGHT, on the small couch outside a polished mahogany door. She couldn't stop squirming. Or trying not to.

Her palms felt damp, clammy, like she'd been out too long in the sun. But it wasn't the heat. This felt like her one opportunity to escape. The one place that she could seek refuge.

If they gave her the job.

After what seemed an age, she heard the creak of the door and jumped to her feet. A man appeared. Older than her own father, with a thick bushy moustache and small spectacles, but he looked kind. Almost friendly. Not like the stern man she had expected to encounter.

"Mrs Parker?"

She nodded and braved a smile. Extended her hand as she'd practised in the mirror at home.

"Yes. Pleased to meet you sir."

He nodded and ushered her into his office.

Madeline took a deep breath and walked forward. The office was neat. Orderly. A large desk, formidable chair seated behind it, in the centre of the room. She waited until he was standing in front of it, and only sat when he beckoned for her to do so.

Right now, her manners were the only thing she was sure of.

"So, Mrs Parker, you seem to have impressed my secretary."

Relief surged through her. "Mrs Ronson seems like a nice woman. It would be a pleasure to work with her."

He nodded and rubbed one hand over his moustache. As if in contemplation.

"We've had many applicants, however I like to keep my staff happy, and it is Mrs Ronson who you will be working alongside."

She just nodded and waited. Not wanting to ruin her chances by saying anything foolish. It wasn't like she'd ever applied for a job before. School and then her father's butcher shop was all she'd ever known.

"So why should I hire you, Mrs Parker. What makes you special?"

Madeline smiled and forced her hands to unfold. She placed them on her lap.

"Mr Curtis, I appreciate you have a tough decision to make, however I know you'd be very happy with me here. I managed my father's shop alongside him for many years, and assisted with all the accounts. I like to get a job done well."

He laughed.

Had she said something wrong? Something to make her appear a fool?

"Ah, I have heard that you British girls have a good work ethic. I think the rumours might well be true."

"Yes sir. I won't let you down. My father also liked to say that if you can't do a job well, you shouldn't do it at all, and I believe that statement to be true."

He studied her. Looked over her, then down to his notes. The words Mrs Ronson had penned in the first interview they'd had.

"Well, I think I've had enough time to make my decision."

Madeline hung her head. She wasn't good enough. He liked her, but there had been too many other candidates to select from. She should have known.

It wasn't as if she'd specifically trained for this type of role.

"Thank you for your time, sir. I certainly appreciate it."

She stood, handbag clasped between her fingers.

"Mrs Parker?"

She turned. "Yes?"

"Please don't make me change my mind."

He was smiling again. Was this American humour that she didn't understand?

"I beg your pardon?"

"What I was about to say was that I've made my decision and you may have the job, if you still want it, that is?"

He what?

"Oh, my. Golly. You do?"

He chuckled again. "We might need to get Mrs Ronson to work on some of the words you use, but yes, you have the job. Congratulations."

If she were braver she would have run around the desk and kissed his cheek. But she didn't. Instead she just let her insides squirm about, as she tried to contain herself.

"When shall I start?"

"How about Monday? Report in at eight-thirty, and your duties will be assigned then."

Madeline left the office walking on air. She had done it. She had actually secured a job, without any help. All on her own she'd impressed two people who wanted to hire her.

The first face she saw at the end of the corridor was Mrs Ronson.

"Well?"

The other girl had a worried look on her face.

“I’m to be here Monday morning!”

The smile she received in return seemed to mirror her own.

“Well you’d better call me Lauren then.”

“Madeline,” she replied.

They shook hands. Or more just lightly squeezed one another’s.

“I’ve waited a long time to have someone like you working here.”

Madeline smiled, so hard that her cheeks hurt. She had no one in her life here except for Roy and her in-laws, so Lauren was like a breath of fresh air on a sea breeze. It seemed like forever since she’d just grinned at another person from being happy.

Her concern was that Roy was still unemployed though. And now she only had five days to get them moved into town so she could start work on Monday.

“I don’t care, Roy. I’ve already taken the job.”

She’d never seen his face so red, so angry.

“You should have asked me first!” He bellowed out his frustration.

But she was not going to back down. Not now. She needed to get out of this house and earn some money of her own. Needed to do what she could before she found out for sure about the baby.

Deep down, she knew. She'd missed her courses twice and she was feeling queasy in the mornings, but right now that wasn't her focus. Moving out of here and forging a life, with her husband, was all she wanted to do. It was the only thing she could do.

"Madeline, I cannot do this to my family."

"Do what, Roy? Stand up to them? Be a man?" He glared at her, but it didn't slow the angry train of her thoughts. "You disgust me."

The words hissed from her mouth. She barely recognised her own voice.

"I've done my time here. You hear me? I'm done. Now you either come with me and look at the houses I've enquired about in the weekend, or I'll go on my own."

She had no doubt his family was listening on the other side of the door. There was no privacy in this place. But she was beyond caring. She might dislike him, but he was a pushover. He'd do what she asked so long as she made enough of a fuss.

"And what will I do? Huh? What work will I find in town?"

"My wage will keep us going for a short while. You'll find something, or else you can commute back here."

They stared at one another. Both angry. The only difference was that Madeline had made her mind up and she had no intention of changing it.

“You said you’ve made appointments?”

The slump of his shoulders and downturn of his mouth told her she’d won this first battle.

“Yes. Saturday morning.”

“And you won’t reconsider this job offer?”

“It is not an offer, Roy. I’ve accepted the position, they’ll pay me fortnightly, and I start first thing next week.”

He turned to leave the room. She stayed put.

It didn’t matter what she heard once he’d walked out, how much of a fuss his family made, she was going to let him deal with it.

Sometimes she felt sorry for him. Sometimes. But he’d made his own choice, bringing her here. He’d lied to her about what their life in America would hold, and he had refused to stand up for her, to protect her, to love her, as he’d promised.

Maybe he’d married her because he had loved her then. Or liked her. Maybe he’d thought the war would take his life, and that they’d never actually end up here. Maybe that’s why he’d pretended his life in America was something it wasn’t.

But whatever his reasons, she deserved better. And she wasn’t backing down.

Madeline placed a hand on her stomach and rubbed it, softly.

If she was pregnant, she wanted a real home for their child. Enough money to buy a crib, pretty clothes and a handful of toys.

She didn't want much, but she did want to be comfortable.

But more than anything, she wanted to be home.

Madeline was starving hungry. She had stayed in her room all night, except for sneaking out late to use the toilet, but she couldn't hide any longer.

She'd heard everyone else have breakfast, listened to the clang of the dishes, and heard the back door swing shut a handful of times.

Now, it seemed, the house was quiet.

How she was going to put up with four more days of it, she didn't know. Right now, all she wanted was some bread to fill her belly.

The coast was clear. She tiptoed out to the kitchen, scanned the room and the large window, and started to relax.

She picked up the butter knife and reached for the loaf. Then heard the creak of a floorboard.

Her heart leapt to her throat.

"You heartless little cow."

The words were laced with evil. Nasty.

Tiny hairs prickled on the back of Madeline's neck, but she continued to spread butter on the bread.

"Did you hear me?"

She almost wished it was her mother-in-law. Sarah was easier to deal with than Roy's sister.

"How dare you come here and ruin my family! You disgust me. Turning a man against his own flesh and blood."

She placed the knife down. Biting her tongue was no longer an option.

"I don't want to have this conversation, Carolyn. I have done no such thing and I think you need to apologise to me."

Carolyn's eyes flashed.

"Don't use your haughty words with me. We know you want to poison him against us, but you won't. You're no better than a stinking pig, you filthy English tart."

That was enough. A burning heat hit Madeline's chest.

"Had you made even a hint of effort, just tried, to accept me into this family, it never would have come to this. I came here expecting love, expecting a family to call my own, and look what I ended up with." She scowled at her sister-in-law with disgust. She'd kept her words to herself for long enough. "A bitter spinster with a nasty mother, and nothing to do except treat me like a human slave!"

For a moment she thought she was going to be slapped. Or clawed at by a wild woman. Instead Carolyn just glared at her, then stalked away.

It was then she saw Roy. Standing in the doorway that led outside. He looked stunned. He didn't say a word.

But Madeline was on a roll.

She turned to unleash her anger on him instead.

"It's true, Roy. Every word of it. You painted this beautiful picture of what it would be like here. Now I know why you resisted for so long when I used to ask you about home. You waited just long enough, until you'd concocted the story you thought I wanted to hear."

He hung his head. Finally, she hoped, he was ashamed. Finally he might realise what he'd done to her. How he'd robbed her of her family. Taken everything from her, on a lie.

"I loved you Roy. And I married you because I thought you loved me too. Because I thought you'd stick up for me, because I thought your family would love me as their own."

"I'm sorry."

For the first time since she'd arrived, his voice sounded like the man she'd met in London.

"So you should be." She wasn't letting him off the hook. She should have said this days ago. Weeks ago. Should have made him see from the very start. No matter how sincere he sounded,

he didn't deserve forgiveness, not yet. "You snatched me away from my family, pretended to be something you weren't. I won't ever forgive you, Roy. Not unless you make things right. Fast."

They stood, staring at one another. The look on his face almost made her think he cared.

She no longer wanted her breakfast. The growling of her stomach had gone, only to be replaced by a deep thud within. Her entire body felt like it was pulsing from the adrenalin of the arguments.

But she had to eat. Had to keep her strength up, so she covered the toast with jam, hand shaking, and turned to go back to their bedroom.

"Madeline?"

She looked over her shoulder. Saw that Roy had moved into the kitchen and had his cap folded in his hands.

"Yes?"

"I'll take a job in town."

She nodded. It felt like a win but she knew they had a long way to go before she'd ever respect or care deeply for him again.

She walked away. There were no words left to say. All he could do was prove to her through his actions.

"I'm sorry."

His words were mumbled but she heard him. Only she didn't stop. She was already crying and she didn't want him to see.

Maybe they did have a chance. Maybe they could make things work once they moved away.

She hoped so.

Because being sad, alone and miserable had not been part of her plan when she agreed to come here.

His words echoed in her mind.

I'm sorry.

Well, she was sorry too.

For ever thinking she could be happy in a country without her family. For ever coming here at all.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ALICE SLIPPED FROM the house with a spring to her stride. It was about to rain, the air thick with the muggy smell of a storm headed toward the city, but she didn't care.

Most mornings she escaped her house, happy in the knowledge that she wouldn't have to face her husband or the ugly, dimly lit interior of their home for at least eight hours. But today, she was starting her position as assistant.

Along with a pay rise, a small office of her own with a desk large enough to spread out at, and a window glimpsing the city below.

And she was going to be reporting direct to Matthew.

Matthew. Just saying his name made her tingle all over.

There was something between them. Something that she wished wasn't so forbidden.

Comparing him to her husband was like pairing a box of shiny apples beside a handful of rotting plums. Back in London, choosing between the men might have been hard. Now, her husband would be unlikely to appeal to any respectable woman.

But Matthew. Matthew was something else entirely.

And married, she reminded herself. A point mean-faced, old Mrs Perkins had been sure to emphasise as she'd strutted from the office last night.

But Alice didn't care. All she cared about was the extra money in her pay packet each week, and obeying the orders of a man who looked like a screen actor and smelled so wealthy it literally oozed from his skin.

Alice was trying hard to wipe the smile from her face. He'd already called her into his office twice. Twice. It shouldn't have, but it made her body sing. Made her want to dance about the office and bask in the delight of feeling wanted. Of knowing a man was interested in her.

Like she used to feel as a single girl in London. As a nurse who had been desired by her patients. A feeling she hadn't experienced in so long.

"Alice?"

She jumped. Her fingers hit the typewriter keys by mistake.

He'd caught her off guard.

“Yes?” She sat to attention.

Matthew was leaning around the door to his office, his mouth stretched into a smile. She couldn't help but grin back.

“I might need you to work late tonight. I have some clients coming in a five and I'll need you to sit in on the meeting.”

Alice nodded. “Of course.”

He winked. She loved that wink.

“That's my girl. Take a longer lunch break if you like to make up for it.”

He disappeared and closed the door behind him again. Alice felt her heart thud to a stop. Then start up again.

Staying late would mean Ralph wouldn't have any dinner, not until much later anyway, but she wasn't going to worry. If he was the husband she'd expected, hoped for, then she would have scurried home in her lunch break and told him. Hurried home to fix something basic.

But then if she was in the marriage she'd expected, she wouldn't be working. She'd be at home fluffing about, making their home beautiful, preparing delicious meals and preserving fruits. Shopping.

No, she wasn't going to feel guilty about working hard.

Besides, by the time she got home he'd either be asleep, so drunk he wouldn't care, or feeling so sorry for himself he wouldn't eat what she put in front of him anyway.

She pulled the piece of paper from her typewriter and let it fall into the trash can. She hated making mistakes.

Her fingers started to glide across the keys again as she worked on the letter.

The office was starting to empty out, and Alice was getting nervous. She was starting to wonder if the meeting was just a pretence to keep her here alone. And she didn't know if that was a good thing or not.

Thinking about being unfaithful was one thing. Wanting to fall into another man's arms and be swept away was passable. But actually acting on it? She wasn't so sure.

She rose from her seat, uncomfortable from sitting in the same position for so many hours, and glanced at her boss's door. Still firmly shut. She hadn't seen him since early afternoon.

Alice reached for her bag and moved quickly down the corridor. She didn't bother making eye contact with any of the others who were leaving, she just focused on the door to the rest room.

It was cool and silent in the ladies room. She listened to her heels as they clomped on the tiles, and made her way to the mirror. Alice dug around in her purse for a tissue, wiped her lipstick off, then powdered her face and started again with her lip brush. She swept some more mascara over her lashes then

fiddled with her hair. She had it in a soft roll, keeping her blonde hair from her face, and she wondered about letting it loose.

Would that be too obvious?

She didn't have time to wonder. The thud of approaching footfalls made her gather her things and head for the cubicle. The last thing she needed was to be caught out fixing her appearance when she ought to be on her way home like the others.

Alice straightened her skirt, fiddled with the buttons on her blouse, then dug out her tiny bottle of perfume and dabbed it to each wrist. Then on second thought to her neck.

She took a deep breath. And decided she was so nervous she did actually need to relieve herself.

Alice waited for the other toilet to flush before she let herself out. Then she washed her hands and took one last look at her complexion.

Guilty, she decided. She looked guilty. But she did look attractive too. More so than she'd felt since arriving here.

Alice hurried back down the hall, then stopped. The office had completely emptied out now, except for two men in suits who were standing talking to her boss.

Matthew seemed to sense her presence. He turned and smiled, before waving at her to join them.

Part of her was relieved, but a lot of her was disappointed. She'd hoped that it was her he wanted to see. That there was no meeting.

Now she just felt a fool for bothering with her appearance.

They'd been talking for an hour. Alice had diligently been taking notes, but her hand was starting to cramp. And now they'd stopped talking purely business and were chatting.

She had no formal training, so she didn't know if she should excuse herself, keep writing, or sit back and smile politely as they spoke.

"Well gents, I think it's time we called it a day."

Finally. Alice set her pen on the table and folded her hands in her lap.

"How about a drink?" one of the men suggested. His ruddy face and portly belly made Alice think he was probably always first to suggest alcohol or food. "How about a drink or two at the Club?"

Alice hadn't heard of the club before. She guessed it was a place for wealthy men to socialise, given the businessmen before her.

She watched Matthew nod. "Good idea. How about you two head over there and I'll catch you up shortly? I just need to make a phone call."

The man stood, hand on his stomach. "No need, we'll wait."

Alice stood too. Then wondered if she should sit. But they all followed suit.

"Don't let me hold you up," insisted Matthew, walking around the table to slap each man on the back. "I'll see you there before you've downed your first whisky."

That made them all laugh.

Alice stood still. She wasn't much enjoying the looks from either of the clients. She hoped they'd leave now instead of hanging around while she readied herself to go home.

And she was feeling rebuffed by Matthew. He hadn't so much as glanced at her the entire meeting, except to clarify a matter he wanted her to take down.

"See you there, then."

She watched as he escorted them out. Alice bent to gather her notes and Matthew's belongings. She moved back into the adjoining room, placing his things on his desk.

"Sorry to keep you so long."

Alice turned at his voice. Matthew was behind her, his hand hovering over the door handle.

She gulped. He was closing the door.

They were alone, no one else was in the office, and he was slowly but surely shutting the door.

“Ah, not a problem, Matthew.”

He smiled. Like a fox who had a hen within his sights. His lips parted, showing his white teeth, and she wondered if he was actually going to pounce upon her like she was his prey.

“Your husband must be wondering where you are?”

Alice shook her head. “I doubt he’ll even notice I’m late.”

That made him laugh. He stepped toward her, his movement predatory.

“I find that hard to believe.”

Alice wanted to reply but she couldn’t. She’d stuttered over her last words, now she was mute.

Matthew stopped a few feet away. Close enough to make her blush, to make her eyes flit across his, but far enough away that he wasn’t making an advance.

Yet.

“They’ll be expecting me shortly.”

She swallowed again. It felt like a stone had lodged itself in her throat and she couldn’t push it down.

“I’ll, ah, let you make that phone call then.”

He moved closer. Now he was in her space. Staring down at her. The heat from his body reaching out to her.

“There’s no phone call, Alice.”

Her heart pounded so fast then it almost burst apart.

The meeting might have been real, but his excuse for staying behind had been phoney. Deliberate.

Alice closed her eyes as his hand moved toward her face. She felt his fingertips graze her cheek, before stopping at her mouth.

“Alice?”

She opened her eyes and found his focused back at her. Let her pupils linger on his neatly clipped moustache, then trace back up to his eyes again.

“I’m going to kiss you.”

She nodded. She couldn’t speak.

Matthew’s mouth fell against hers. His moustache tickled her, his soft lips sweeping back and forth across hers.

Then he stopped. She moaned. She couldn’t help it. Why was he stopping?

“We’re both married, you realise that, don’t you?”

She nodded again, the only response she was capable of. His deep, husky voice did something to her senses, not to mention his touch.

This time he spoke low, in her ear.

“This is just for now. Just for here.”

She didn’t care. She should, but she didn’t.

This time when she nodded he took her with force and bent her over the desk. His lips crushed hers, his tongue made her legs buckle, hard body against hers.

It was the best kiss of her life.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

RAIN TAPPED ON THE roof with as much precision as a drummer in a marching band. But Madeline didn't care.

It could snow, hail, or howl with wind. So long as she was here, in her own home, and not with her in-laws, she was happy.

She was exhausted from working every day, but she'd rather be exhausted from working where she was appreciated than being on the farm. At least she was being paid. And soon, once they received Roy's first pay check, she would have money enough of her own to start saving.

For the baby, or for her fare home. So long as she had an emergency fund to fall back on, for whatever reason, she'd feel more secure.

Roy hated working at the grocery store - unloading boxes and carting produce, but she didn't care.

Not that they hardly had a penny to rub together, not that they had only a bed, an old couch and an upside down wooden grocery crate as a coffee table. Not that they had only one pot and a few mismatched plates and cups.

All she cared about was that they weren't on the farm any longer. That she was never going to have to even visit again if she didn't want to.

Roy was glum, often depressed and dull, but it was worth it. Surely he would come around to the idea soon? If he had wanted to stay on the farm that badly, if he cared that much about it, why had he lied to her before they'd married? Why had he even wanted to marry her?

They were questions she couldn't answer. Questions that continued to circle in her mind, but they were fading.

The only thing that wasn't fading was her stomach. It was still small, but had a slightly rounded edge to it. A hint of a curve where before it had been flat, or maybe she'd just been eating more than usual.

Next month she was going to the doctor. For now, she just wanted to enjoy having a place of her own, her job, and the fact that she wasn't feeling such a deep dislike for her husband any longer.

She heard a shuffle at the door. Roy.

What would he be doing home early? She'd had the day off, in lieu of the overtime she'd done for Lauren earlier in the week. But Roy?

She listened to the noise of him jangling his keys on the porch, but she didn't go to open it for him. Instead she went back into the kitchen and put the kettle on. Ordinarily, or at least when her father had arrived home from work, either she or her sister had poured him a drink. Usually a small brandy, to help him unwind, but alcohol wasn't a privilege they had enough money to accommodate for yet. Besides, she hadn't noticed Roy or his family drink a drop since they'd arrived.

"Madeline?"

She turned at the sound of her name. He hadn't called out to her like that since before they'd married.

"Madeline?"

"In here," she called back.

Her husband appeared. He held a modest bunch of flowers in one hand.

"Oh my, are they for me?"

Roy smiled at her and set them on the bench.

"Sure are."

She didn't want to point out that they couldn't afford them. But he'd bought them now, so what good was moaning to do?

"We don't have a vase but a glass will suffice."

She smiled at him before turning away and taking their only not-chipped glass from the cupboard.

“I was promoted today.”

She spun around. Promoted? He’d only had the job two weeks.

“Promoted?”

He grinned at her as she picked up the flowers and put them in the glass.

“The produce manager had a heart attack this morning at work. Can you believe it?”

The man had been pretty old, so she didn’t find that so unbelievable. The fact they’d chosen Roy for the promotion so quick was a different story. And as manager?

“They just asked you? Like that?”

“Yep.”

Madeline poured them coffee and walked both cups into the tiny lounge.

“Does it mean more pay?”

“More money, same hours, more responsibility.”

“That’s great, Roy. I’m really very proud of you.” She smiled politely at him, as if talking to a colleague instead of to a man who was her husband. A man whose bed she shared every night. “And thank you for the flowers.”

“I got to thinking, Madeline.” He looked down at his coffee cup, then back at her. As if he were shy. “When we were in

England, I had so many dreams. So many hopes. Thought we'd be so happy. Then I realised I hadn't ever even bought you flowers before."

His words touched her. Things had been different between them back then, but it wasn't she who had changed. It was he who had pretended to be something she wasn't.

"I'm sorry, Madeline. I wanted you to marry me, and I thought if I told you the truth you wouldn't be interested."

She gulped a lump of sadness. It wasn't that she wouldn't have been interested in him. But he was right. She never would have considered leaving her family to trade for this. Not if he'd said they had a home with no indoor lavatory, only a tiny room to themselves with no intention of building a new house, or renting somewhere, for just them. And certainly not if he'd said how much his family would resent a foreign wife. Not to mention want to work her to the bone.

"Can we try to make it work, Madeline? Really try?"

She smiled at him. The first real, genuine smile she had wanted to send his way since she'd arrived.

"I hope so, Roy. I hope so."

Since the day she'd made up her mind that it was either her go home or him agree to move them out, she'd refused him night after night. Unlike when they were first married and he'd as

good as demanded his right to her body. Maybe it was time she stopped resisting him, stopped pushing him away.

“Why don’t we have a meal out to celebrate?”

“Can we afford it?” She hated being the practical money counter, but finances were the one thing she couldn’t turn a blind eye to.

“Just this once. I get paid tomorrow.”

He stood up and took a hesitant step, then another, toward her. She was almost nervous.

Roy stopped in front of her. Held out his hands and smiled, inviting her to stand up. She did.

They stood like that, so close, staring at one another. Madeline felt a closeness to her husband that she’d hoped for so many times.

He bent down, slowly, and touched his lips over hers. Just briefly. A press of his lips that made her sigh.

“I want to make it up to you, Madeline.”

When he put his arms around her it was like all the bad memories faded away. Trickled down her spine and disappeared.

She couldn’t hold it inside any longer. Couldn’t keep the secret to herself.

“Roy, I think I’m pregnant.”

She blurted it out. The words just tumbled from her mouth.

He took a step back, arms still around her, then forward again. And blinked a few times in fast succession.

“Pregnant?”

“I don’t know for sure but I’d say there’s a fairly good chance.”

“All the more reason to celebrate. How about a steak dinner?”

She laughed. Laughed like she hadn’t in a long time.

“I’d like that.”

He let her go and she walked toward their bedroom to get changed. Roy followed.

“When will we know for sure?”

She shrugged. “Soon as we have enough money for a doctor’s appointment.”

He grinned at her. She grinned back.

Maybe this baby was exactly what they needed to make things right between them.

Now she’d told Roy she had to write and tell her family. They would be so excited for her.

Being pregnant finally felt real.

All she needed now was to find her friends and then life might start to feel like normal. Maybe seeing them again, being with them, would help her to settle. They’d hardly believe she’d

fallen pregnant almost the moment they'd landed on American soil.

“Will you be long?”

She looked up to find Roy watching her as she slipped into a dress.

Madeline shook her head.

“Great, 'cos I'm starving.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE BED WAS SOFT, luxurious. There was no noise, except the odd scratch of a bird on the roof. William hadn't made a noise since before midnight. And she still couldn't sleep.

Closing her eyes made her see Charlie. Keeping them open made her think of Charlie. Everything about where she was, the house she was in, the reason she was here. It was all Charlie.

She had so many questions. How had he died? Why had he died? Would she be able to stay here long term? Would Charlie want her to stay here, to be with his family? There was still so much she didn't know. So many questions she'd been too afraid to ask for fear of the answer. But now she needed to know.

When she'd lost her parents, she'd thought it was the worst thing imaginable. But now . . . she only had to look at William to see all they had both lost.

Betty rose. She padded into the adjoining nursery and watched William in the half-light as he slept. His tiny mouth was puckered, head turned slightly to the side. He looked so tiny, so vulnerable. She resisted the urge to pick him up.

William was all she had now. The only reason she had for living. For staying. Would Luke have even welcomed her into his home had William not been born?

She tiptoed out of the nursery and pulled her shawl around her. The house felt coolish as she stepped into the hall. It felt almost wrong, creeping through the house, but she couldn't lie in bed again. She needed to do something, drink something, to calm her mind.

Her mother's camomile tea haunted her memories. The aromatic scent of it as it had sat in a pot on a table. Watching as her mother sipped at it so delicately. Taking the first sip for herself and feeling how it calmed her with every tip of the tea cup. It was so long ago, yet being here had brought back so many memories of her mother.

"Are you all right, my dear?"

Betty's hand flew to her chest. "Ivy!"

The other woman smiled at her, standing near the foot of the stairs. Her grey hair was like a loose halo, skin pale in the half-light.

"You scared me half to death," she whispered. "I didn't expect any one to be up."

Ivy smiled and rubbed at her eyes. "I'm a light sleeper, always have been. I heard you."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I . . ."

"You've nothing to be sorry for. I don't sleep well. You need a hot drink?"

Betty nodded. Then followed Ivy.

"Chocolate or coffee?"

She tried her hardest to smile. She was in America now. The land of coffee, not tea.

They both walked into the kitchen and Ivy flicked a light.

"While I'm here I'll have to teach you how to make a good cup of tea, you know."

"A cup of tay," mimicked Ivy, long hair falling over one shoulder as she laughed. She filled the jug and set it to boil.

Betty laughed too. She couldn't help it.

"Our Charlie wrote home and told me I'd have to learn to make a cup of tay, as he called it, before I'd win you over."

At the mention of his name Betty felt a frown tug her lips down. She fought to pull them up. She'd been moping around here too long, it wasn't doing anyone any good, least of all her.

"Charlie liked a good sweet cup of tea. Or at least he did a good job of pretending if he didn't."

Ivy placed the two cups down.

“From what he told me, there was nothing about you that he didn’t love, my dear.” Ivy spooned dark black granules into a fancy looking pot. “Now I’m going to make you a coffee just like he would have made you. Strong, with cream and sugar.”

Betty blinked back the tears and sat down at the table. It felt good, being here with Ivy. They might not have got off to the best start, when she’d broken the news to her, but she had shown herself to be a kind, caring woman. The type Betty could trust. Confide in even. She’d been there at her side to help her with William since day one, it was only now that her deep grieving was over that she’d realised how impossible it would have been to cope alone, without Ivy.

“Ivy, I need to know how, well . . .” she gulped in a big breath. She’d been waiting to ask this for weeks now, trying to figure out how to bring the subject up. “I need to know how Charlie died.”

“Did Luke not tell you?”

Betty shook her head.

“Charlie always was the talker of the family.”

Ivy poured the coffee, spooned in sugar, then reached for the cream. Betty watched her.

"From what I gather, and I'm only going from the details I know, Charlie was asked to fly for a company near where he'd been stationed."

Betty wrapped both hands around the mug Ivy passed her.

"You see, Luke has always been the successful one, in a monetary way, and he told his brother that he wanted to save enough money to make a deposit on a house. Said he wanted to make you proud. Have a home for you and the baby."

Betty sipped at the coffee. Even though it was sweet the taste was strong, unfamiliar to her. Nothing like the calming brews of tea she was used to.

"And something went wrong?" her voice wobbled, had a weak edge to it, but Ivy just continued.

"He had a contract to work for a month. Said that would mean he could save money and still get back around the same time as you were due to arrive. If they let you on the boat pregnant, that was."

Betty nodded, it was all she could do. She didn't trust her voice again.

"He had a week left on the job, and it seems there were complications. There was a fault, with the engine they think, and his plane went down."

"Where?" She felt numb, empty inside.

"Over the ocean. His body was never retrieved, but they received a mayday, and they found the wreckage."

Betty gulped, nodded some more. Forced the burning hot coffee down her throat. It wasn't until Ivy reached for her hand that the tears fell. Like a wave that couldn't be stopped, thudding down her cheeks like an angry beat of rain. She' thought the worst of her grieving was over, but this was hard. Knowing was harder than wondering, made it so final.

"I'm sorry, Betty, I truly am. I've known these boys since they were in diapers. Charlie was like a son to me. He would have been a great father, I just know it."

"He was a great husband." Betty choked out the words.

"All you can do is make him proud, my dear." Ivy scooted her chair around and placed an arm about Betty. The weight of it comforted her. Settled her. Helped ease the tears.

"You need to be the best mother you can be. Honour his memory and enjoy living here. It's what he would have wanted."

"Really?"

"I've no doubt he loved you, Betty. And I can see why. Now come on back up to bed and let's see if you can get some sleep before Master William starts to fuss."

Betty let herself be led back to the bedroom. She was still exhausted, drained, but at least she finally knew.

Charlie had died wanting to be the best father and husband he could be. He'd died trying to please her. Being the Charlie she'd fallen in love with.

Her mother had always said, when her father had died, just before she'd passed away herself, that it was better to have loved once and lost, than to never have loved at all.

She didn't feel it now, but she knew one day, some time in the future, she'd probably agree.

But she'd never stop wishing he was still with her.

The morning dawned bright and sunny. Betty had slept late, much later than she'd expected. She stretched, lazily got out of bed and strolled into the nursery. William wasn't there.

She smiled. Ivy to the rescue again. She'd gone to bed feeling numb, sad, but this morning she'd woken feeling refreshed. There was a dull ache deep within her, still yearning for her Charlie, but she was almost glad that she hadn't known until now.

She dressed quickly and ran a brush through her hair.

Betty heard William before she saw him. He was making the little whimper that she knew so well. Hungry. Ivy looked up gratefully but kept walking him, William slung over her shoulder as she patted firmly on his back.

"I wanted to let you sleep but this little beggar wasn't going to take a bottle!"

Betty reached for him, cooing as his little mouth formed a smile at seeing her.

"Hello little one." She kissed his forehead. "I've missed you."

Ivy touched the small of her back and propelled her forward.

"You come and feed him in here and I'll fix you your breakfast."

"Sorry I slept so long, I must have been exhausted."

"You had a lot to take in last night." Ivy set about boiling the jug and cracking eggs. "You've missed Luke for the morning, but you'll be seeing him tonight."

Betty was almost pleased to have missed him. The last few weeks had been awkward, tense even. She wasn't really up for company, except for Ivy's. He'd been away on business the first month or so after she'd arrived, and it had given her time to settle in.

"You like them poached or easy over?"

Betty laughed. "I would have said fried if you'd given me the option. What in the lord's name is easy over?"

Ivy's entire body shook. The laughter rumbled deep from her belly, and when she turned her eyes were twinkling.

"Believe me, if the Lord was eating eggs for breakfast he'd choose easy over, I'm sure of it."

Betty settled William in for his feed and enjoyed being in this woman's kitchen, laughing over breakfast. "Easy over it is then."

"Betty?"

She looked up from watching William suckle.

"We're going to get on fine, you and me. Just fine."

Betty forced herself to smile. She was not going to allow herself to wallow in any self-pity or sadness any longer.

"You're right Ivy. We are."

"So how about you and I head into town and get you some pretty dresses today, huh? Just what you need as a pick me up, now that you look ready to brave the world again."

"Sounds good to me." She had to make an effort, there was no other way forward.

Charlie's smiling face passed through her mind, like a willowy dream that was fading into the distance. He wanted her to be happy. She knew that he wouldn't want anything else.

She was going to make a go of life in America. She was going to make him proud.

Besides, it was the only choice she had.

"I learnt a lot of funny American words on my trip over here Ivy, but I'm thinking I might need some lessons."

“Why don’t you start by telling me the words you do know,” said Ivy, putting a full plate in front of her and sitting down herself with a mug of coffee, “and I’ll tell you what sounds funny.”

Betty passed William to her so she could eat.

“Well, what I do know is that what we call the lavatory you unofficially call the John.”

Ivy nodded, laughter shining in her eyes again.

“Don’t think I’ll get used to that one though. My uncle was called John and he’d be mighty offended.”

Both women started to laugh again and William joined in, squealing with all his might.

“Let’s just stick with lavatory then and move on to the next word.”

New York City was nothing like she’d imagined. The hustle and bustle reminded her of London, but it was so much more exciting.

“This way.”

Betty kept her eyes trained on Ivy. She had a feeling that if she so much as blinked she could lose her. She held William close, tucked tight against her chest.

A beautiful store seemed to appear before them. The windows shone with beautiful clothes, dresses elegantly placed on

stationary models, shoes beneath them, hats fashionably hanging nearby.

“Are you sure?”

Ivy just gave her a flabbergasted look and dragged her by the elbow.

A bell tinkled overhead to announce their presence. Betty felt like a fraud. Her scruffy, over-worn dress showing her to be less than their usual clientele. It wasn't that she was poor, but after losing her family, saving and scrimping for baby items and paying her own way before she set sail, she hadn't had time to worry too much about her appearance. And they had only been allowed to bring such a small amount of items with them on the ship.

A beautifully groomed woman appeared. Her stockinged legs, polished leather shoes and sweep of red lipstick reminded her of Alice. Darling Alice who had kept them all entertained every day of their journey. Alice who was no doubt living in the lap of luxury with her husband.

Betty was relieved when the assistant didn't so much as sweep her eyes over her shabby attire. But she was pleased that she directed her questions at Ivy. She wouldn't have known what to say.

“How may I help you today, ladies?”

Ivy stood tall, proud. Betty wished she could do the same, but she simply didn't have the energy.

"We would like a collection of new dresses for Mrs Olliver here."

Betty was sure she detected a raised eyebrow. No doubt the gossip would start about who she was married to, why she was here. The thought made her feel nauseas.

"Any particular occasion?"

This time the question was sent her way.

Ivy stepped in again. "Just a nice collection of day dresses, every day wear, to start with please. Along with suitable footwear."

"Of course. Come this way."

Betty felt way over her head, but she just followed. Ivy had made it very clear before they left home that she was not to make a fuss, to just try the clothes on and select some new outfits. She hadn't known what to expect.

"Do you like pastels or more neutral tones?"

She couldn't help but think she should be wearing black. Widow's black. But she didn't dare say it.

"Whatever colours you think would suit me."

The shop assistant smiled. "Well, if it were up to me I'd make the most of those lovely blue eyes and go for pastels."

Ivy gave her a prod in the back and reached for William.

Betty reluctantly passed him over and let herself be ushered.

They left with bags full to overflowing. Betty was nervous more than embarrassed. It didn't seem right, pretending like nothing had happened, like she was meant to be here. Would others think she was the new wife of Luke Olliver? Surely not, when she had a baby in tow.

"You all right, my dear?"

She braved a smile at Ivy. "Just thinking."

"Of Charlie?"

She nodded. When wasn't she thinking about Charlie?

"He would have wanted you to be happy. For Luke to look after you?"

Would he? "It just doesn't feel right, carrying on, shopping, like nothing has happened. Like he is just going to arrive one day and things will be normal."

Ivy took her elbow and steered her across the road. It was busy, too many people for Betty's liking. It even smelt busy.

"Come on, let's get back home and you can have a lie down. Or take William for a walk around the gardens."

That sounded better than being in town. She was getting that terrible feeling like she couldn't breath, just like when

Ivy had told her the news. Like a hand at her throat, slowly squeezing all the air from her lungs.

They got in the car. She smiled gratefully as their driver put the bags in the trunk and closed her door.

“Do you wish you were back home?”

Betty shook her head and let her eyes focus on William. On his round little face, fists balled, one in front of his mouth.

“You don’t wish you were back with your family?”

She turned to Ivy. “I don’t have any family, Ivy. That’s why I had to come. Why I couldn’t wait and risk having my baby alone. I’d long since overstayed my welcome at my friend’s house.”

Ivy moved closer, put an arm around her, and held her tight.

“I’ve a daughter your age. I think you’d like her. She has some little ones too.”

Betty snuffled, trying to stop the heave of her chest as tears found her again.

“Whenever she was feeling down, or something bad had happened, we always cooked. Baked up a storm, we did. Would you have done that with your mother, do you think?”

It sounded perfect. “I think that’s just what I need.”

“I also used to say that baking wasn’t a cure for a broken heart, but it sure was a good start.”

Betty settled William against her and let her head rest on the back of the seat. Whatever would she have done without Ivy?

“Is it proper, for me to be in the kitchen with you? In England it can cause a fuss.”

Ivy patted her hand. “We don’t fuss so much here. Besides, when Luke was a boy he spent hours in the kitchen with me, he and Charlie both did, always under my feet or standing on a stool to help. He’s not going to mind. His mother might, but not Luke.”

That relieved her. As much as she wanted Ivy’s support, she didn’t want to upset Luke. Not yet. She didn’t know him well enough to cause a stir.

“Do you think he likes me, Ivy?”

“Who?”

She closed her eyes and focused on the movement of the car.
“Luke.”

“Luke’s a good man. He’ll like you just fine.”

But how long could he be expected to provide for his sister-in-law and nephew? It was fine while there was no lady of the house, but she wasn’t so sure what would happen then. If there ever was one.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“So is it different here?”

Madeline sat with Lauren on the back steps of their office building. It was flooded with sun, and they had their legs stretched out as they ate sandwiches.

“You mean aside from the funny accents and names for things?”

Lauren gave her a nudge with her shoulder and rolled her eyes skyward.

“You know what I mean.”

Madeline thought about it. There were ways in which it was different that she had no idea how to describe.

“It’s not really different.” She didn’t know how else to answer. “I mean, American’s talk more, you know about things and to one another than we do back home. More forthright, I think that’s what the book said.”

“What book?” Lauren took a bite of her sandwich and then leaned back heavily on her hands to turn her face to the sun.

“Good Housekeeping. They made a book for foreign brides, to, well, to teach us how to be good American wives.”

Lauren laughed. “Maybe they should have given Roy’s parents a copy to help them be good in-laws.”

Madeline liked that she could talk to Lauren. She still hadn’t heard from her friends from the voyage, so it was nice having someone. They ate lunch together most days, and got their work load completed fast between them.

“When are you going to tell Mr Curtis that you’re pregnant?”

Her hand fell to her stomach. “I guess soon. I just don’t want him to fire me.”

“He won’t fire you, silly. You’re far too good.”

A shiver shook her body. “I don’t want to upset him. It’s not like I’ve been here long.”

“You won’t tell him, will you?”

Lauren rolled her eyes before scanning her watch. “You don’t even have to ask me that. But he’ll fire us both first anyway if we don’t get back now. It’s already five past one.”

They both stood up and walked back inside.

“Why don’t you and Roy come for dinner this weekend? Unless you already have plans?”

“That would be great.’

They hadn’t been to a friends house for dinner since they’d been married. It felt like a huge step. A step forward in the right direction.

“Should I bring dessert?”

Lauren grabbed her hand and squeezed it. “Oh, yes! Do one of those cream cake things you told me about. You know, the ones you said you mother does.”

Madeline nodded and retrieved her hand. She didn’t want Lauren to see the tears in her eyes.

What she wouldn’t give right now to sit down for a cup of tea with her mother and ask her how to make the dessert properly. To smell the morning’s baking still lingering in the kitchen, to watch her father peck her mother on the cheek and drop his cup into the sink as he passed. To hear the squeal of her nieces as her sister chased them about the house and threatened punishment.

“You all right?”

Lauren had noticed. She wiped at her tears, gave her friend a smile and walked back off to her office. Missing her family never got any easier. And she doubted it ever would.

* * *

Being in Lauren's kitchen was like being in her eldest sister's back in London. It was clean and tidy, but tiny. And well loved.

She got the same feeling about her new friend. Her husband seemed to dote on her.

"The lads seem to be getting on well."

Lauren looked at her as if she was speaking another language. "The who?"

Madeline laughed. "Lads. That's we call men back home."

"You and your funny sayings."

"Believe me, there's plenty more where that came from."

Sam, Lauren's husband, burst through the kitchen door then and made a beeline for the fridge.

"Two more beers for the boys."

He dropped a kiss to his wife's cheek before reaching into the refrigerator for the drinks. Lauren watched him, and Madeline watched them. Saw the way they looked at one another. Laughed along with them when Sam nibbled at Lauren's neck, before pressing the cold bottles against the bare skin of her arms to make her squeal.

Madeline hated to admit it, but it made her jealous. She and Roy had been getting on fine together, been companionable, ever since he'd got the promotion, but it was nothing like this.

"Let's get this food on the table so we can sit down."

Madeline helped her carry the plates, straight from the warming drawer, then the main dish. She had only tasted meat loaf once before, and this looked great.

The men were seated as soon as they inhaled the smell of it.

Roy sat next to her and she smiled at him. Really smiled.

Maybe she needed to make more of an effort. Seeing Lauren and Sam together had made her want that, too.

"Need to make the most of nice quiet dinners like these before children come along and take over, huh?"

Madeline smiled at Sam's words. It was so true.

"You two want children, then?" she asked.

"Whenever the good Lord decides we're ready." Lauren looked embarrassed at the topic but Madeline noticed how Sam's hand brushed her own when she spoke. "We've been hoping for a while now."

"I suppose Madeline's told you our good news?" asked Roy.

She turned wild eyes on him. Inappropriate given Lauren's words, and it was supposed to be a secret!

"Roy, I don't think we need to . . ."

"You're pregnant?" Sam was sending a huge smile their way. "That's great news."

She appreciated that Lauren had kept it to herself, but Roy?

"Honey, who else have you told?"

"No one, but we're with friends here. What's the problem?"

Lauren looked sympathetic, but she could tell that Roy genuinely couldn't see what the problem was. She wasn't going to cause a scene. Not here.

"It's fine, I'm just not sure about telling everybody yet. You know, until I'm a little further along." She hesitated.

"Until my boss knows at least."

"So Roy, tell us about your family's farm?"

Lauren threw her an apologetic glance. Madeline wasn't sure what for. The whole pregnancy discussion or bringing up the farm. At least the subject had been changed.

"We have mostly crops. Run some cattle there too."

"Sounds nice."

She watched Roy as he nodded. "It is. Great place."

"Roy, Madeline tells me you're enjoying your job."

Sam smiled at his wife, but he wasn't about to let the topic change yet. "Honey, Roy was just telling me about his farm."

Madeline started to feel clammy. Her palms, the back of her neck, even her face. Just talking about the place, as if it were some pretty, happy ranch, made her feel sick. As if it was in fact the fairy tale she'd been promised.

"You visit there often?"

She heard Sam's question despite the ringing in her ears.

"Ah, no." She didn't look up when she felt Roy's gaze sweep over her. Watching her. She concentrated on pushing meat on to her fork and then forcing it to her mouth. "Not since we moved into town."

"I have thought about us moving back there once the baby is born. Great place to grow up."

Madeline almost spat her mouthful out on to the table. Her entire body felt cold. Dead even.

Move back there? There wasn't a chance. No!

She started to cough. To choke.

"Are you okay? Do you want a glass of water?" Lauren looked concerned.

She rose to her feet, unable to look at Roy, and hurried into the kitchen. Lauren was hot on her heels.

"It's okay. Here, have this."

Lauren passed her the water. She drank it down, quickly.

"I need to go to the bathroom. Where is it?"

She held the kitchen bench for strength, wanting nothing more than to double over. This couldn't be happening. She must have misheard him.

"I'm sure he didn't mean it, Mads. It was just conversation. You know, him thinking out aloud."

She knew better. Last weekend he'd gone to visit them, without her. He must have told them they were expecting. Now they wanted the baby. Not her, she knew that already. But the baby. They wanted her baby!

"Bathroom?" Now she was in danger of fainting.

"Down the hall, first door on your right."

She ran. Just made the bathroom before she started vomiting, over and over, into the toilet.

She wasn't going back there. She couldn't.

"It was just an idea, Madeline."

She was on the verge of hysteria. After managing to get through the rest of dinner, making small talk, and then finally leaving, they were back home.

"It is not an idea, Roy. Because for it to be an idea there would actually have to be a possibility of it happening."

He sighed and pulled back the blankets, before getting into bed.

"Would it be that bad, really?"

"Do you not remember how they treated me? What it was like for me there? Do you not recall why and how we left?"

He sat up, propped by the pillows. She stood, bewildered, in the centre of the room.

"It would be different if we had a child."

"Different?" Now she was feeling like a nut case.

"Different because they'd not only have me to be awful to but a child too? I'd be stuck in the house day after day, Roy.

Absolutely not."

He sighed. Right now, she didn't know how serious he was. Whether it was just him testing the waters or if he actually intended on pushing the point.

"How are we going to get on once you stop working? It's not exactly cheap living here, and we need to get more furniture, things for the baby . . ."

"We'll cope, Roy. Lots of couples have to do without. We'll just be the same."

He shook his head. "I just don't see why we can't give it another go. That's all I'm saying."

"So long as we're married, we won't be living in that house again. Ever."

His reaction was to lie down as if to go to sleep. "I'm tired, we can talk about this another day."

She wasn't even remotely sleepy.

"Aren't you coming to bed?"

"No."

Madeline went to the kitchen, flicked the switch on, and picked up her pen. She needed to write to her family. She had tried so hard not to burden them with her problems, even thrown

letters out she had penned before making it to the store to post them.

But tonight she needed to talk to someone. And she was alone. She should have searched for Betty, Alice and June as soon as they'd moved into town. At least then she'd have someone to confide in. Why had they not realised how hard it would be to get in touch? They should have named somewhere to meet, set a date, instead of all these months passing without contact.

Madeline started to write to her mother. About her fears for the future. About her mixed feelings for her husband. About her concern for her job, money, and her unborn baby.

But mostly she described why she missed them. Why she would do anything to be back home, as part of her family, instead of on the other side of the world. This time she didn't try to gloss over what was wrong.

She remembered the way her father had looked at her when she'd been torn about accepting Roy's offer of marriage. The kindness in his eyes when he'd promised to bring her home if it was that bad in America. She didn't want to tell him, not yet, that it was worse than the most hideous nightmare a child could have, or more correctly that it would be if she had to move back to the farm.

But she did tell them that she missed them. That she would do anything to come home.

She'd wait until after the baby was born. See what happened then. If Roy insisted on going back to the farm.

Just when they'd been getting on, when things had seemed okay, it was like he'd thrown a grenade at her.

If she couldn't stand it any longer, if he forced her to move, she was going to run. Going to send a telegram to her father and beg him to help her.

Not yet. But she would do it if she had to.

"I hope Sam didn't upset you last night." Lauren looked worried.

Madeline tried to be brave, when all she wanted was to curl up into a ball and cry. She didn't trust her own voice so she just attempted to smile.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Lauren put her arm around her. "I knew it upset you. I should have told him off then and there."

"It wasn't Sam's fault. It was Roy." She started to cry. Just tiny tears that couldn't be stopped. "I just can't believe he actually suggested us going back there."

She'd told Lauren bits and pieces about what it had been like for her on the farm. Not the complete truth, but enough for her to paint a fairly vivid picture.

It had been . . . a long, long time since she'd let anybody see her cry. Since she'd been this honest about her feelings.

“It’ll be all right, I promise.” Lauren still had an arm slung over her shoulders. “Once the baby comes you’ll be just fine. You’ll see.”

She hoped so.

But something told her she was going to need to a lot more than hope to get through what her future held.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

JUNE SUCKED IN A deep breath and focused on the ceiling. She was not going to cry.

Each month that passed without her falling pregnant was like a knife being plunged into her organs, each one pierced and slowly dying. It made her feel so incapable, so pathetic. So barren.

She forced the thoughts from her mind as she listened to Eddie's cheerful whistle. The clop of his shoes up the staircase made her feel better, but she knew he'd be disappointed too.

"Where are you darling?"

June cleared her throat and flushed the toilet.

"Just a moment."

He continued to whistle the tune. When she opened the door and walked to their bedroom, he was sitting on the bed, waiting.

"Ready to go?"

June smiled, but when her eyes met his she lost control. A sob escaped from her mouth, her body shaking. Eddie was by her side in less than a heartbeat.

"June, sweetheart." He pulled her tight into his arms, rocking her back and forth. "June what is it?"

She squeezed her eyes shut and wished the tears away, before pushing away from him, ever so, so she could look up at him.

"Why can't we have a baby, Eddie? What have we done to deserve this?"

He sighed, before pulling her tight again and dropping a kiss to her head.

"We have to be patient," he whispered, his voice soothing in her ear. "You are going to be a wonderful mother one day."

That only made her want to cry more.

"You've given me this beautiful home, you're so kind and wonderful and . . ." her voice was like a muffled choke.

"Sssshhhhh," he whispered. "Don't say that."

"But it's true!" This time she pushed hard away from him. "You've given me so much and I can't even manage to fall pregnant."

Eddie shook his head, a smile twisting his mouth. "Well I'm pleased I'm kind and wonderful, but you're not exactly a bad catch yourself."

June tried to keep her mouth straight but she couldn't help the smile that started tugging at her lips. He always managed to do this to her, make her feel good when she should be miserable.

"I just really want a baby, Eddie. Is that so much to ask?"

He closed the distance between them again and kissed her forehead this time, then her cheek, then her mouth.

"I'm enjoying just having you, there's no rush. When the time's right, it will happen. Okay?"

She leant into him, his tall frame bracing hers.

"Okay, June?" he asked.

"Okay."

She didn't want to wait, she wanted to be pregnant now, but when he put it like that. It wasn't like there was any great hurry. They were having a lovely time together. She couldn't have asked for more in a husband. It was silly to get so upset when they were still only in their first year of marriage.

"Shall we go?"

June smiled up at him, stood on tiptoe to kiss him again, then walked back to the bathroom.

"I don't know what I did to deserve you, Eddie West"

She grinned as his laugh echoed out behind her.

"My family's still trying to figure out how I tricked you into marrying me. They think I'm the luckiest guy around these parts."

"Oh really?" She suddenly felt lighter, happier. Her always seemed able to joke her from a mood. It was right to share her concerns with him, he'd made her feel better in no time. "And what do you think?"

June jumped as he appeared in the mirror behind her, arms wrapping around her waist as she tried to fix her lipstick.

"I think," he said, lifting her hair to kiss the back of her neck, "that I'm the luckiest guy in the world."

She wriggled but he held tight.

"Anything else?"

"Yeah. I think we should skip dinner and stay home."

She gave him a soft shove with one hand.

"Absolutely not."

He pouted. Like a puppy that had been locked out in the rain.

"Why not?"

She powered her nose one last time then twirled around to face him.

"Because, Eddie, we spend every night home alone together. Your family are starting to think we're weird."

Every single time June set foot inside her in-laws home, she smiled. Not just a polite smile - the kind of wide, hurt your

cheeks, show your teeth kind of grin that could only come with great pleasure.

Patty wiggled her fingers from her spot on the sofa, while her mother-in-law rushed over to kiss her on the cheek.

"How's my favourite daughter-in-law?"

June kissed her back. "Great."

Eddie leant over to kiss his mother too, before disappearing over by his father who was opening a bottle of sherry.

"Sorry we're late."

She knew they wouldn't mind. It was like walking into a stage for the perfect home. It was so warm, even at night when the sun had tucked away for the day. Large rugs adorned the floors, over-size sofas and chairs were tucked into order, and a large table was set for dinner, without looking austere. It was a real home. The kind of home she could imagine Eddie and Patty growing up in. With parents who were relaxed and happy.

"Glass of sherry, June?"

She snapped out of her dream. "Love one."

Eddie walked a glass over to her. She smiled at him, trying not to giggle at his wink. He looked humorous doing things like that, he wasn't exactly the suave ladies man that he would like to pretend he was.

"We've got some gossip," Patty declared proudly, stretching then standing as her father brought her drink over.

"Patty, that's enough!" June laughed as her sister-in-law was scolded. "You shouldn't talk like that about people behind their backs. Not to mention finding entertainment in the misfortune of others."

Now she was dying to know.

Patty grinned and skipped over, almost spilling her drink.

"Do you remember the posh lady we saw in town a few weeks back? The one who was making a fuss about the food in the restaurant?"

Oh yes, she remembered her. Women like that always stood out.

"What about her?"

Patty leaned closer, as if she was about to divulge something of the greatest importance.

"Well, her unmarried sixteen year old daughter is pregnant. Pregnant!"

Suddenly June didn't feel like laughing along with Patty. It just wasn't fair! How could a young girl who had no interest in falling pregnant do so with ease, and here she was still trying with no success.

"Did you hear me? Sixteen," Patty hissed.

“The poor girl,” said June, starting to feel hot all over. “It’s just not fair.”

“Not fair!” her sister-in-law scoffed. “She should have thought about that before she started having it off with the butcher’s son.”

“Patricia! That’s enough.”

June dropped her head. She shouldn’t have encouraged her. Patty bit her lip and looked apologetic as her father glared at her.

“What will she do,” June whispered.

Patty snuggled in closer against her. June liked it, this sense of comradeship.

“They’ll probably send her away then arrange for the child to be adopted. You know, some nice couple who can’t have their own will take the baby.”

June nodded. That’s what she and Eddie were, wasn’t it? A nice couple with no children of their own.

“Come on, dinner’s on the table.”

June turned as Eddie’s hand took her elbow. She let him steer her over to the table.

Adopt. Was that something they could do? Were they eligible?

“Sweetheart, are you okay?”

Eddie’s concerned voice shook her from her thoughts.

"Oh, of course!" She smiled at the anxious faces directed her way. "Never felt better. Just day dreaming."

Eddie didn't look convinced but she squeezed his thigh gently beneath the table and leant into him.

If they couldn't have a baby, they could adopt one.

She would love any child, whether it was hers or not. So if they couldn't conceive all was not lost. There was still hope.

"June, we've been thinking about your family."

So had she. Every day without fail.

"I would love you to meet them one day," she beamed at her father-in-law. "They'd just love you. All of you."

June passed her plate over and watched as roast beef, potatoes and vegetables were piled high.

"Well, that's what we've been talking about."

She wasn't quite sure she understood.

"I doubt they'll be visiting anytime soon, unfortunately."

She watched as the three of them all looked at one another and smiled. Like they knew something she didn't.

"We're going to bring them out here to stay."

Eddie must have noticed her mouth gaping open. To stay? They would actually do that for her?

"I told you we'd consider it, didn't I June?"

This definitely made her in-laws the best.

"You shouldn't feel obligated, I mean . . ."

“Nonsense!” Now it was her mother-in-law speaking. “You’re part of our family, June. It won’t be for a little while, maybe in six months, but we’d like to start making some arrangements.”

She shook her head. June couldn’t even pick up her knife and fork. Tears filled her eyes, happy tears that she managed to smile through.

“You all mean so much to me. I’ll never be able to thank you enough.”

Eddie put his arm around her and kissed her cheek, while his father raised his glass in a toast.

“To June, our newest and most treasured family member.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"We just can't stay here."

Madeline was determined not to cry. One hand fell to her stomach. Found comfort there. Some days, it was all she had. The feeling of her palm connecting with her belly.

She certainly found no comfort in her husband's arms.

"I am not going back there."

He glared at her. "We're not having this conversation again."

"No, Roy, we're not."

She looked around at their home. Still bare, sparse, but it was hers. Every day she loved the fact that it was her own space, that it was their own house.

It held hope.

Moving back to the farm held nothing. Unhappiness maybe. But no future. Nothing for her to look forward to. And no where she wanted to be with her baby.

Here, she could hold onto a dream that they might one day be a real family. That her husband would be more like the man she'd met in England, more like the man she'd seen glimpses of when they'd first moved into town.

"Roy," her voice was strong, firm. "I'm not moving back to the farm."

He didn't look impressed. "I've already handed my notice in."

It was like her mind was hit by a heat wave. Only her mind felt flooded.

She sat down. No. No, no, no!

"You what?" Her voice lost its strength. It sounded like that of a child's.

He smiled at her. Was she imagining the evil flash of his eyes?

"I'm your husband, Madeline, and I have made the decision that we are moving back to live with my family. I've given a long notice, they might not find a replacement for me for months."

"You can't . . ." the words choked in her mouth, "you can't just make that kind of decision on your own."

She knew now. His mother had been working on him. Forcing him. Telling him what to do. She groaned. Each week when he'd gone there for dinner, when she'd stayed home so she didn't have to see them, they'd been figuring it out. Waiting until she was helpless.

"And where will we live there?" Her words were stuttered.

He smiled again. It disturbed her. "In the room we shared last time. It's plenty big enough for the baby too, until I build an extra room on the house."

She was numb. Her entire body felt cold. She started to rub her stomach again, trying to draw strength again.

"I'm not going, Roy. I told you before, I will not live in that house again."

He smirked. Like he had known what she was going to say. Like he had prepared, planned, on how to answer her.

"You're not going to leave me."

His tone was cool.

She gulped. Air seemed to be in short supply.

"I will."

"How?"

She was not going to have this conversation with him. Not now. Not when they could make things better, could stay together. She at least wanted to give their child a chance at a

family. At a mother and father who loved him. Who had tried to make it work.

“Madeline, you have no money to leave me. I won’t let you go.” He paused. “And you won’t be taking our child anywhere.”

“We don’t have to be like this, Roy. Please, let’s just give this a go. Being here.”

He gave her that cold look again. “It’s all been organised. I’ll be giving notice on the lease once as my job is filled.”

Tears started a steady pelt down her face. Her body started to shake. This could not be happening. Surely not now. Not when she was pregnant. Not when she had no options until after the baby was born.

“I will leave you, Roy. I will. One message back home and I’m gone.”

“We’ll see.”

It was like he knew something she didn’t. Somehow.

Roy walked out, left her sitting there, rocking in her chair. She felt her baby move inside her belly, but she couldn’t focus on it.

All she knew was that she wasn’t going back there. She just couldn’t.

It was time to ask her father.

It was time to go home.

CHAPTER TWENTY

ALICE STOOD IN THE doorway and watched her husband. She had spent so many weeks, months, hating him, but now she just felt sorry for him.

She didn't know what to do. What she could have done differently, if there was anything she could do to help anyway?

His mother obviously felt differently, but she wasn't going to dwell on that. At least she lived half way across the country, it wasn't like Alice had to deal with her on a regular basis. The odd phone call at least, and that was hard enough. But then his mother knew what had happened and she didn't. All she knew was that they were broke and the man she knew, had known, had disappeared.

"Where are you going?"

Alice turned. It was the first time he'd taken notice of her in as long as she could remember.

"Just a work thing, I won't be long."

Ralph studied her. Despite the drunken haze over his eyes, he was watching her, considering her.

She should have felt guilty, but she didn't.

"What about my dinner?" He slurred the words and it made her body snarl.

Just listening to him like that, hearing his voice and seeing him so slovenly, it made her sick. All he cared about was filling his belly with food and alcohol.

"Casserole in the oven, take it out when you want it."

She could hear the clipped tone of her voice as she acted out the part she wanted to play. She'd given up trying to change him. Trying to make him into the man she remembered.

He had a distant look back on his face, eyes glazed over as he stared at the wall. He wasn't even listening to the wireless. Wasn't even looking out the window.

"Goodbye Ralph," she said the words but they held no meaning.

She wished she was saying goodbye for good.

Alice collected her purse and slipped out the door. She only had to walk a block before she saw the car she was looking for.

He didn't get out. But then she hadn't expected him to. It was risky enough him picking her up, she didn't need anybody seeing them together, not so close to home.

"Hello darling." Matthew seemed to purr the words at her.

She snuggled deeper into the seat and enjoyed the feel of his hand on her thigh. Alice wanted to press close to him and kiss him, but she knew he liked to be discreet.

"Hard to slip out?"

She shook her head. "No."

"Good."

Alice looked ahead and wondered where they were headed to.

"I hope we're eating, I'm starving."

Matthew responded by taking his eyes off the road to grin at her, and throw her one of his winks. "I was expecting you to have an appetite."

Alice suddenly wasn't hungry any longer. She was terrified.

They'd kissed passionately, got close to going further, but they hadn't been that intimate yet. No wonder he'd been so insistent about tonight.

He'd planned it.

This was the night she was to become her boss's lover.

After tonight, they weren't just playing, they would be having a full blown affair. She would be the other woman. She would be committing the most serious act of adultery.

But she couldn't say no. They'd been secretly seeing each other after hours in the office and on lunch date for weeks now.

Alice looked at Matthew. Took in the smooth fall of his hair, the strong jaw, his immaculate clothes. She never tired of the sight of him.

"I've got a present in the back for you."

"For me?"

He nodded. "Reach over and take a look."

The lid had fallen off a large black box. Alice wriggled to push it off further.

"Oh my!"

She wanted to squeal with delight.

Matthew just kept smiling.

"You like it?"

Alice let her fingers trace over the soft, luxurious fur. Her own fur coat! She'd longed for one all her life, imagined her husband would buy her one when she'd arrived here.

Enough, she reminded herself. When she was with Matthew she was forbidden to even think about Ralph.

She made herself calm down. Pushed the bubbling worries aside. Her husband didn't care what she did or where she was, he was hardly going to notice a fur coat. And it was he would should be feeling guilty about his behaviour, not her.

"Alice, you haven't answered my question?" Matthew took his eyes off the road to watch her. "Do you like it?"

"You're the best, Matthew. Thank you so much!"

She leant over and pressed a kiss to his cheek, nearly bursting with the pleasure of his gift, her worries cast aside.

"I want you in that fur coat and nothing else."

A shiver of excitement tickled her skin.

He kept his eyes on the road now but his smile was wicked.

"Yes boss."

Alice slipped into the coat the moment she stepped from the car. It seemed to envelope her, caresses her, made her feel wanted. She'd imagined Ralph would want to treat her like this. Spoil her. Worship her.

How wrong she'd been.

Matthew's warm hand clasped hers. Firmly. Like they were meant to be connected.

"You look beautiful."

She smiled at his words.

Alice wiggled her fingers against his, then snatched them back.

"Alice?"

She shook the feeling away and forced her feet to keep moving, forced her mind to go back to happy place it had been before.

But the cool indent of his wedding band still grazed against her again as he reclaimed her hand, reminding her. Telling her that what she was doing was wrong. That he would never leave his wife for her. Never think of her as anything more than a good time. That he was betraying another woman to be here. The odd kiss and giggle and stolen moment before hadn't concerned her, but this felt different. More dangerous. More serious.

"You do realise I'm going to peel your clothes off and kiss every inch of your body tonight, don't you?"

His smile was infectious. She was nervous, yes, but excited too. She just wanted to feel wanted. Wanted to be his for the night. Wasn't that enough? If he didn't want to think about his wife then why did she have to?

"I might play hard to get," she murmured, trying to fall back into role again.

He chuckled, before grabbing her wrist tight and raising her hand to kiss it, his lips wet as they trailed across her skin.

"But I like to play."

Part of Alice's brain told her to run. To scurry back home to her husband before she ruined her marriage completely.

But the other part? That part was making her press tighter into Matthew and wish they could stay out all night.

Alice tried her hardest to smile, when all she really wanted was to hide her face, her body, in shame. To cover her nakedness and curl into a ball like she had as a little girl. To cry and cry until she had no more tears left to shed.

"You need anything?"

Alice shook her head. Like what? A second chance? If she'd known it would feel like this, so dirty and distasteful, she would never have gone through with it. What they'd done went way beyond the heated kisses and whispers of affection of their affair to date.

"I'm fine, Matthew. Thank you."

He leant over her, his undone belt buckle falling against her skin, cold to the touch. She tried so hard not to grimace as his moustache brushed her face, his wet lips over hers.

"I'm thinking lunch tomorrow? What do you say?" he asked, hands falling to her hair then to casually cup her breast.

She wanted to scream. To slap his hand away and tell him not to be so improper. But she couldn't.

"Alice?" he asked, groping her now. "Another rendezvous like this when we should be drinking coffee and eating lunch?"

Alice felt like a cheap whore. Revolting. Betrayed.

"Darling, I need a few moments to tidy up. Do you mind awfully?"

She did her best to purr, but it no longer felt natural. Hadn't from the moment he'd pulled her clothes off and flopped down on top of her. It had taken him a minute or so to find pleasure, with no thought to her needs. To making her feel good too.

"Of course." He finished buttoning his trousers and pulled on his shirt. "I'll have a drink in the foyer while I wait."

Alice watched him go. She waited for the final click of the door, then stood, naked in front of the mirror. She looked at herself, eyes touching over every inch of her reflection.

She was trim. Curvaceous. Attractive.

Only her face looked like a painted doll, make-up hiding the girl beneath. Hair so bright and brassy she no longer recognised it.

The girl she saw looking back wasn't the girl she'd known all her life. That girl had morals. That girl had turned down a married man when she was single herself. That girl would have made an effort to make her marriage work. She had been fun, yes, but she'd known right from wrong.

This girl was cheap. She'd just given herself to her boss like some sort of tramp. And for what? She could never be anything more than a mistress to him. One gift and a handful of flattering words and she'd fallen at his feet.

Alice turned away and reached for her clothes.

The only thing she knew right now was that she was never, ever going to do this again.

She was never going to feel like this, so disgusted in her own behaviour, ever again.

She was going to give her marriage one more chance. If she could live with this guilt, the weight of it pressing down on her chest, then she would try her best to make amends with Ralph. Otherwise she'd leave him, but she wasn't going to be anyone's mistress, not now, not ever again. Not now she knew how it felt.

Could she ever make her marriage work now though? Because she knew men. And no man would ever forgive his wife this type of sin.

If he ever found out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

MADELINE'S HAND SHOOK as she reached over the counter. Her boss had relayed the message, that there was a telegram waiting for her, and she had that sinking feeling it was bad news.

Would her family send a telegram if her sister had had her baby? To celebrate a milestone? Was this why she hadn't been able to contact them? Why they hadn't replied to her letters?

She could think of no good reason other than tragedy. Goose pimples tickled her forearms. She needed her family right now. Had been trying to get in touch with them, frantically, since Roy had made his announcement.

The lady behind the counter smiled. A soft smile. But it only made her feel worse.

There was a bench outside the store and she sunk to it with relief. Her feet ached, from standing in the bank, filling in for a teller all morning. Sitting seemed a luxury.

The paper was folded. Crispily. She slipped her finger in between the fold and pushed it open, but shut her eyes all the same.

She had been waiting to send a telegram herself. Ready to tell her family that she wanted to come home. Ready to give in. To renounce her marriage and flee. She'd been saving for weeks to get the money together.

Madeline gulped. Her eyes opened. Then scanned the page.

Her entire body halted. She felt her heart stop, her organs fail, her brain falter.

No! Please, no!

This was worse than moving back to the farm. This was . . . it couldn't be true!

"No!" she wailed. "Please Lord, no."

Madeline ripped the paper into pieces, over and over and over. It couldn't be.

Not him. Not her father.

But no matter how hard she tore, the printed words remained in her brain. Imprinted, ingrained in her memory.

MY DARLING MADELINE. STOP. YOUR FATHER HAS DIED. STOP. HE SUFFERED A HEART ATTACK IN THE SHOP. STOP. PLEASE KNOW HE LOVED YOU AND MISSED YOU. STOP.

Her father was gone.

And so was any chance of her leaving this hell hole.

She was going back to the farm.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

ALICE HAD THAT strange feeling like she was being watched. Like eyes were travelling over her skin, even though she hadn't opened her own yet.

She kept them shut. And listened.

This morning, for the first morning since she'd arrived, she wasn't greeted by snoring. Only silence. Like she was alone.

She knew how dreadful she must look. She'd cried for hours before coming to bed, then bathed, over and over again, trying to rid her skin and hair of the smell of Matthew. It was like a poison that she couldn't eliminate from her body, couldn't get rid of no matter how hard she tried.

Something touched her face. Something feather-light and warm.

She opened her eyes.

Ralph was staring at her. Watching her.

The first thing she noticed was that he wasn't drunk. His eyes were focused on her. Alert. And his hand was hovering above her face, hesitant, like he wasn't sure whether he should have touched her or not.

Alice didn't know where to look.

"Hi."

She swallowed and just kept staring back.

"Alice." He said her name slowly, like he wasn't quite sure what came next. "Alice, I'm sorry."

She could have died. Could have closed her eyes and never opened them again. He was sorry? Why now? Why not yesterday before she'd committed the worst sin there was.

Infidelity. It was all she could think as she looked back at him.

She had been unfaithful. She had committed adultery.

"Did you hear me, Alice?" he placed his hand against her face, softly cupping her cheek. "I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

Tears escaped at the corners of her eyes. Tears that she had thought she'd never be able to shed in the company of her husband. Tears that stung with pain, with raw hurt. With disappointment and guilt all packaged into one.

“Don’t cry, love. Please don’t cry.”

Ralph pulled her against him and she couldn’t resist. She let her body be cocooned into his, just like she’d wanted all these weeks. For months.

“I love you, Alice. You deserve so much better than me.”

But she didn’t. She didn’t deserve better, not after what she’d done last night.

“Alice?”

She shook her head, slowly. “I’m sorry too, Ralph.”

“You’ve got nothing to be sorry for.”

His words were firm, commanding almost. Like they had been back in England when he’d been someone important. When she’d fallen in love with him.

“Ralph, I . . .”

He touched his fingers over her lips.

“Sssh.”

Something within her, something deep inside told her that he’d guessed what she’d done. Maybe not the full extent of it, but he knew she’d been out with a man. That she had been drifting further and further away from him.

“I haven’t been a husband to you, Alice. I’ve been a fool.”

She tried to smile up at him but her mouth just wouldn’t cooperate.

“Ralph, I’ve got things to be sorry for too.”

He shook his head. Gave her a look she hadn't seen in all the time she'd been here with him.

"Whatever you've done, or think you've done Alice, I forgive you." His words were strong and sincere. "If you will give me another chance, just one chance to prove myself to you, I will forgive you anything."

Anything? She didn't know if he would still think that if he knew. Could she keep it to herself? Could she really move on and pretend like nothing had happened? Forever?

"Alice?"

She made herself meet his eyes. It looked like him again. More dishevelled, rumped around the edges, but not the bleary eyed, vacant man he'd been since she'd arrived.

"What happened to you, Ralph?" Her words came out as a whisper. "Where did you go?"

He pulled away from her, wiped at his eyes.

He was crying. Her husband was actually crying.

"I don't know, Alice," his voice cracked as he said her name. "I don't know how everything went so wrong, but I need help."

She stayed silent. Seeing him like this, so fragile, it nearly broke her heart.

"Will you help me?"

"I'll help you, Ralph. But you need to let me in."

He reached for her hands. Squeezed them both between his own.

"I think you should call in sick to work." He took a deep breath but didn't let her go. "I need you today, we need to be together."

She didn't need convincing about doing that. She had no idea how she was going to face Matthew again today anyway. Just thinking about his lunch comments made her skin flush then chill.

"Are we going to spend the day, just the two of us, like this?"

He smiled. The real smile she'd been waiting for. The smile that told her that maybe, just maybe, she had a chance at seeing her Ralph again. That he might come back to her.

"I need you to help me talk. I've been watching you this morning, fighting the need to drink, to lose myself to that dark hole again, but I don't want to."

Alice could feel the tears building again. She couldn't help it.

"I am here for you, Ralph. I'm here."

She just wished she'd been here for him last night. Or maybe her leaving for the evening had forced him to see what he'd become.

“I need to tell you what went wrong. What happened to me. I need you to give me a second chance.”

Alice needed time to herself. She needed a chance to breathe. To tell herself it was okay.

“Ralph, could you go next door and ask to use the telephone? Tell my work I’m not feeling well today, and I’ll stay here.”

He smiled and dropped a kiss to her forehead.

“I won’t be long.”

She watched as he dressed, trying not to compare watching him to how she’d felt as Matthew put his clothes on.

Alice had to get rid of the coat. Forget what she’d done and believe in her husband.

Today, she was going to make her marriage work.

If anything, what she’d done last night had made her realise how badly she wanted Ralph. Not the Ralph she’d lived with, the Ralph she’d married.

If that man was back, if he’d let her help him, she’d suffer through anything. If her Ralph was back, it would be worth it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

BETTY HEARD LUKE arrive home. Late. She'd already eaten her dinner, with Ivy, and now she was in bed. The rumble of the car as it had pulled up the gravel driveway, the depth of his footfalls, the bang of the door.

Part of her was intrigued by him. Desperate to find out more about him and understand what about him was like her Charlie. To give him another chance.

She'd been trying so hard to fit in and be discreet, that she still didn't know him well. But between his travels away for business and the hours he spent at work, she hardly saw him. Charlie was his brother, but he was nothing like him, or not that she'd seen anyway.

William was sound asleep beside her. She had felt sad, lonely tonight, and when he'd fallen into a deep slumber in her

arms, she hadn't the heart to put him in the nursery. Instead, she'd tucked him into the crook of her arm and snuggled up beside him.

She inhaled the smell of him. The sweet, tangy soap from his bath, the sweetness of his little breath as he exhaled.

She might have lost Charlie, but she was not going to lose this wee man. He was her future. Everything she did from this step forward was as his mother. She had to keep Charlie in her heart, and in her memory, and be strong.

She heard the muffled call of Luke's words to Ivy. It soothed her, knowing she wasn't alone in the house, even if it felt like it sometimes. It was almost like Luke was an irregular visitor here, and she and Ivy were the only residents of the house.

Talking to Ivy, spending time in the kitchen with her each day, had made her think differently about Luke, even if she'd rarely seen him. He was the serious brother, had made a financial success of himself, and who had somehow skipped out of his duty to serve. She never had asked Charlie why. She also knew now that it was Luke who had insisted his home was made available indefinitely for her, despite other family members advising him otherwise. Family members she still hadn't met.

She was going to make a life for herself here. she could see that now.

She would make Luke proud, make him pleased to have offered her a roof over her head. And she'd make sure William always knew who to be grateful to.

Betty closed her eyes and conjured an image of Charlie. Of dancing in his arms, of kissing him, of lying on the grass and gazing up at the sky.

Charlie. She would never forget him.

There was something about Luke that was starting to remind her of Charlie, finally, after all this time. She couldn't put her finger on it, but somewhere, lurking beneath the surface, there was something. Something she hadn't seen before, but that she could see now. Now that he was suddenly spending a lot more time at home.

He turned to face her. Smiled. Or gave her half of a smile.

"What are your plans for the day, Betty?"

She put her cup down and turned her body to face him. He was sitting at the morning table, paper spread out in front of him, the remnants of yesterday's paper spilling across the wooden top.

"Nothing planned." She never had anything planned. Aside from the girls she'd met on her way over, she knew nobody. Had no one. So her days were filled with caring for William, talking to and helping Ivy to keep herself occupied, and making her way

through the books in the library. What she needed to do was find her friends. She could use their support. But for some reason she still hadn't tried to make contact with them and neither had they found her.

"I thought we'd make a trip to see my parents."

She felt slightly light-headed. His parents?

"I didn't know they wanted to meet me."

He took a sip of his coffee and started to fold the paper back together. "Quite the opposite. They've been telling me how inappropriate it is to have you locked away here in the house of a bachelor, when they could accommodate for you in their home."

He must have seen the ashen shade of her face. It was like all the blood had drained straight through her skin.

"Relax." It was one of the few times she'd seen him direct a full smile her way. "I'm not going to drive you there and leave you. I just feel like I've neglected you, work has been so busy, that's all."

She let out a slow breath. It had taken all her efforts to settle here, but without Ivy, she'd be a mess. Even talking to Luke sometimes took it out of her, on the rare occasions she'd spent time with him. He was usually up and gone by the time she rose, and home only once she'd already taken herself off to bed.

Ivy entered the room then to clear the breakfast dishes.

"I was just telling Betty that today might be a good day to introduce her to my mother and father."

Ivy exchanged a quick smile with Betty. Luke didn't miss it.

"And I've no doubt she's heard all about them from you," he said in a dry tone.

"Not I."

But Ivy didn't do a very good job of disguising her feelings.

"They're not all bad, despite what you might have heard."

"That why you moved away so quick, Master Luke?"

He swatted with a hand in Ivy's direction. "Enough with the Master Luke and enough with the analysis."

Betty giggled. She couldn't help it. Up until now, she'd wondered if Luke was even capable of humour. Wondered if they would ever just enjoy the simplicity of one another's company. Or if he'd manage to keep avoiding her forever.

"Enough from you, too." He pointed his finger and laughed back. "I don't need two women ganging up on me."

Ivy tutted and left the room, dishes piled in her hands.

"So?"

"It would be lovely to meet them." Betty smiled. "But promise you'll bring me straight back here afterward. I don't want to stay with them."

Luke rose and stopped to talk to William. That was a first too.

Her little boy was lying on the large sofa, swaddled in a soft blanket and cocooned by pillows so he wouldn't fall off. He had been busy gurgling and talking to himself the entire time they'd had breakfast.

"You want to meet your grandparents, little guy?"

Betty moved to stand beside him. William had his little hands fisted, thrust into the air, and he was verging on smiling.

"Smile for your uncle, go on now?"

She leant forward and tickled under his chin. His bottom lip started to quiver.

"Come on, William."

He swapped his gaze from Betty back to Luke. She could see Luke smiling back at him from the corner of her eye.

"Oh, look!" She laughed as William performed a series of smiles and funny expressions.

Luke laughed too. He reached out one finger for William to grab hold of.

"I think he likes you."

Luke looked at her. They were standing close, both hovering over the baby. Too close.

He jerked back, releasing William's hold. The baby started to cry.

"I'm sorry, I . . ."

She reached for William. He started to smile again as she pulled him into her arms.

"He's a big sook, that's all." She kissed his forehead and turned her back so he could look over her shoulder at Luke again.

"I think we should leave in an hour, if that suits you. I'll advise them we're coming."

Betty turned around, only to see Luke's back. Had she said something wrong for him to be so abrupt?

Ivy appeared, her eyebrows pulled close, as if asking her a question.

"I'm not sure if I upset Luke. I . . ."

"He's just a bit confused. You know, not used to babies."

Betty shrugged.

"Or women."

She found that hard to believe. He wasn't Charlie, but he was handsome. Thick dark hair, brown eyes, tall. And he owned a beautiful home and what must be a successful business. Why would he not have experience with women?

Ivy read her expression.

"I'll tell you one day. Mind you, after today, you might figure it out yourself."

She didn't have time to interrogate her.

"What should I take? Do I need to get dressed up? Take an overnight bag?"

Ivy shook her head. "No to the overnight bag. Luke will be sick of them from the moment you arrive. Smart dress, but be comfortable. It'll take you an hour even in that fast car of his."

"And William?"

"Do you want to leave him here?"

"No! I mean, it's not that I don't trust you, I just . . ."

"No offence taken. Just be sure to take a warm blanket for the car and you'll be fine."

She felt a sudden rush of affection toward Ivy. There was something about this woman that she had grown to love over a very short span of time.

Betty walked forward and planted a kiss on Ivy's cheek.

"What was that for?"

"For just being you."

Betty was thankful William had fallen asleep so fast. The motion of the car had seemed to lull him, and he was tucked against her, his little body rising and falling ever-so in slumber.

Luke had been quiet yet pleasant. She just wasn't sure what to talk about. Or how to start a conversation with him. Even after all this time, it felt odd not having Charlie here too.

She watched out the window, as the landscape changed from city to country. It was pretty here, but it was so different from her home.

"Did any of your friends marry soldiers?"

The sound of his voice took her by surprise. She changed position to face him as he glanced sideways at her.

"A few of my friends dated soldiers, Americans, but I was the only one to marry."

He nodded, eyes fixed firmly on the road.

"Charlie told me you two met at a dance."

She closed her eyes for a moment. Seeing Charlie, watching her from across the room, then making his way over. "We sure did."

"He also wrote to say that he knew from the moment he saw you that he was going to marry you."

She liked that Luke was smiling as he spoke. Made it easier for her just to talk to him, candidly.

"I thought it was just a line, told him so, but he was pretty determined."

They fell into silence again. This time it felt comfortable though. She didn't mind the quiet, time to think about Charlie,

and it was nice being able to talk with Luke about him. Ivy was great, but she had a desperation to be accepted by Luke. For him to like her, rather than just feel she was his burden now his brother was gone.

“Betty, you never did tell me how the trip was.”

He’d never asked her. In fact, they’d hardly talked before, except for the odd exchange of pleasantries, so of course she hadn’t told him.

“Ah, it was interesting.”

He glanced over at her again. “How so?”

“Well, the fact that I hid my pregnancy to get on the ship, then ended up having William during the voyage. That made it interesting in itself.”

He laughed. “I’m sure it did.”

“But I met some wonderful girls, and we had a lot of fun.”

She was watching him, saw as the expression on his face changed. “Would you still have come if you’d got my message?”

Betty stared out the window. She’d asked herself that question over and over again, so many times. Truth was, she didn’t know the answer.

“Honestly, Luke, I don’t know. I had nothing in London, no family, but I wouldn’t have asked you to take me in.”

“It’s not that I don’t want you here, Betty. Please don’t feel like you’re a burden to me. Don’t ever think that.”

She nodded. Sometimes she worried about that. Often. It was hard not to.

“Charlie and I were very close. We had our arguments, but I loved my brother. You meant a lot to him, I know that. But I wasn’t sure when you got here if it was just about the money or”

“I didn’t even know Charlie came from money.” She said the words firmly. Loud. “Other girls came here with big dreams, I came here for Charlie. Nothing else. I loved your brother, even if that’s hard for you to understand.”

She saw the clamp of his jaw. A twitch, which she took as anger. He slowed down, until they came to a complete stop, pulled just off the road onto the verge.

He kept his hands on the steering wheel, even as he looked at her.

“I thought Charlie had just fallen in love with some foreign girl, you know, taken it into his head some broad loved him.”

She felt anger starting to pulse deep inside. Until she heard Luke’s voice soften.

“But after that first night, when I saw you with William. Every day when I come home and Ivy tells me how much she’s enjoying your company, I see what Charlie saw. I know you didn’t come looking for a lifestyle and money.”

Relief washed through her, down every inch of her body.

He looked uncomfortable, but she was so relieved they'd had this talk.

"You'll both always be welcome in my home, Betty. I want you to know that."

"And I'm grateful, Luke. Truly I am."

He put the car in gear again, cleared his throat, and then pulled out onto the road. Conversation over.

"So tell me about these friends you made on the ship."

Betty smiled. He was as good at changing the subject as Charlie had been.

"Funny you should ask, because I might need your help."

"My help?"

It felt good, being able to talk like this. It was like they'd gotten the heavy stuff that needed to be said out of the way, and now they could just get on with trying to be friends.

"There were four of us, all sailing for New York, although I think Madeline ended up a bit further away on a farm. We just clicked from day one, they were like sisters to me."

"Who were the other two?"

"June and Alice."

"Have you made plans to see them again?"

She would do anything to see the girls again. Needed to see them. So badly.

"June's husband gave me his card, but I don't know where the other girls are. I just know roughly where they are geographically, and their married names."

"And you want me to help you find them?"

She wriggled in her seat, eyes lighting up at the idea. She hadn't been ready to tell anyone about Charlie, not to start with, but now she wished she'd called June straight away, instead of letting all these months pass for her to come to terms with things.

"If there's anything you can do to help me, any way we could find them?"

Luke smiled over at her.

"We said we'd stay in touch and never forget the time we shared together. But I hadn't realised New York would be so big, or really thought that far ahead about how to stay in contact."

"How about you call into my office on Monday morning? My secretary can spend the afternoon helping you locate them. Maybe start with calling the man whose card you already have."

"Oh, thank you, Luke! Thank you so much."

"Thank my secretary once you find them. If she was fighting for us it mightn't have taken so long to win the war. Mrs Efficient we call her."

Betty sat back deep in the seat and couldn't help but smile. Seeing June, Madeline and Alice again would be like a

dream come true. They wouldn't believe her when she told them about Charlie. Had they faced tragedy too, or were they all living the dream lives they had imagined? She hoped so.

"Don't smile too much yet, we still have to make it through this visit."

Somehow, this visit seemed a lot less worrisome with the prospect of tracking her friends down the day after next.

She had possibly spoken too soon. Meeting her in-laws was not as easy as she'd hoped it would be. Neither was William proving to be a great distraction. He'd started crying the moment his grandmother had poked one of her long nails at him, trying to get a smile, and the look on his face still hadn't changed.

"Shall I get a maid to take him?"

She could see Mrs Olliver was getting sick of his squawking.

"I had a wet nurse for you boys." She directed her words to Luke, then Betty. "No need for a mother to amuse a child all day."

Betty bit her tongue. If it wasn't the mother's job, then who's was it? Some poor maid who ended up with a better bond with the child than its own flesh and blood? Not from where she came from.

Was that why Luke was so close to Ivy?

"I've hardly heard William cry since they arrived, mother. He obviously doesn't like his surroundings here."

Betty tried not to laugh at Luke's dry tone.

"I can take him inside, if you like? I don't know what's wrong with him."

Mrs Olliver flapped her hand and went back to drinking her bourbon. Her second since they'd arrived.

"Perhaps he'd like something to eat, you know, to keep him occupied. Lunch should be served within minutes."

Did the woman have no idea? "He's only just started on solids, as in pureed vegetables, Ma'am, so just milk for him while we're here."

"Oh."

She had clearly been less than involved in the upbringing of her two sons.

"So Mother, any news? What's been happening in your world?"

"I'd rather know about yours? Any special ladies?"

Betty watched anger take hold of his face, frown lines appearing around his eyes.

"Really Mother, you must have better things to think of than my love life."

She shrugged, turning to glare at two young maids as they rushed out with plates of food.

"Where is Father?"

Luke shrugged at his mother. She stood and marched toward the house, sending the maids scurrying forward to place the food on the table. The setting was glorious, the outdoor table tucked away from the bright sunshine, overlooking a pretty, manicured garden. Like an over-sized version of Luke's own home.

Betty jumped when he caught her by the wrist, his fingers closing over her skin.

It was the first time they'd touched, aside from the handshake the night she'd arrived and bumping into one another this morning.

"As soon as lunch is over, if I make it that far, I want you to pretend you have a headache. Feel faint or something." His words were so low they were like a quick hiss. "I'll take William, you hold my arm and we'll make a get away."

"I thought you wanted to spend the day here?" She kept the smirk off her face as she recalled Ivy's prediction.

"Play along or I leave you here."

He quickly released her wrist as his parents appeared.

She nodded, trying not to laugh.

"What are you two whispering about?"

That mother of his didn't miss a thing. She hadn't exactly taken a liking to the woman, but it was nice starting to think of Luke as a friend. "Luke was just telling me what fun he had growing up here as a boy."

Her face lit up and she reached across to pat her son on the hand, like he was still a little boy.

“Of course he did. It’s a wonder he ever wanted to leave.”

Betty smiled sweetly over at Luke, who glowered back. She could understand precisely why he’d preferred boarding school, not to mention leaving home at such a young age. She would have run a mile too, no matter how beautiful the surrounds.

He stood as his father approached and held out his hand.

“Father, good to see you.”

“And you,” his father looked less than interested, vacant.

“This here is Betty.”

She received a polite nod and smile. Maybe he didn’t even know who she was?

Betty juggled William on her knee to keep him quiet.

“So Mr Olliver, Luke tells me you have recently retired?”

He had a kind enough face, but he looked like there was no soul behind his eyes. She guessed his wife did most of the talking and he just stayed quiet to keep the peace.

Well, she didn’t care. It was his father who Charlie had talked about the most to her, and it was he who she wanted to get to know. Who knew when Luke would bring her here next? The way his mother carried on she was lucky to ever see her son.

Her father-in-law didn't answer, just smiled. She was about to ask another question but a sharp kick from Luke made her gasp.

"Betty, are you all right?" Luke's face was the picture of concern.

"Ah, Mrs Olliver, I'm dreadfully sorry, but I'm all of a sudden not feeling so good."

Her mother-in-law looked alarmed.

"I shall call someone over. Do you need to lie down?"

"I, I . . ." She put her hand to her forehead for effect.

"Mother, I think I'd best take Betty home."

"Nonsense! The best thing for the girl is to stay here a while. We'd love to have her."

Betty tried to swipe the stunned look off her face. She could almost feel her mouth gaping open in horror.

"No, Betty is settled at my house. Besides, she doesn't have any of the baby's, ah, things."

"Richard. Richard!"

Her father-in-law woke with a start. He'd fallen asleep in his chair.

"Yes?"

"Luke here wants to take Betty back to town. She's feeling unwell."

He looked like he couldn't be bothered what happened.

"Honestly, Mrs Olliver, please. I do think it would best for us to just . . ."

She stood, hands on hips. The stance worried Betty. It looked far too, well, determined.

It seemed Luke had the same feeling.

"Mother, we're off. I need to get back to town. Betty is settled already there. Okay?"

It was clear she didn't think it was okay at all.

"Luke! Don't you dare boss me about. It's Betty's choice."

She did not want to make a choice. She was starting to wish she'd never even agreed to meeting them. They'd barely touched lunch, and now they were leaving.

Luke swept from his seat and around the table, plucking William from her arms and tucking him into the crook of his arm.

"Come on Betty."

He reached for her hand, which she placed alongside his elbow.

"Oh my, yes I do feel faint." She was barely lying now.

"I'm going to get Betty to the car. Mother? Do you care to see us off?"

She didn't look impressed, but she followed. Clicking her fingers at her husband.

Betty followed beside Luke, keeping up with his long stride. She felt naughty, pretending to be ill, but she was

feeling peculiar now. This whole meet the family business without having Charlie with her was unsettling. Uncomfortable. But at least it had brought her closer to Luke.

William stayed silent. She admired the way he looked in the arms of a man. Of his uncle.

He led her around the side of the house, avoiding walking through. She was relieved. There might have been a battle again over where she should be staying.

"Honestly, Luke. I do think it's improper, Betty staying in the home of an unmarried man."

"She has Ivy to care for her, and I am her brother-in-law." He said the words through gritted teeth. Dismissed his mother.

He opened the car door for her with his free hand, then passed her William once she was settled.

"Thank you for a lovely lunch. I'm sorry we've had to cut it short."

Mrs Olliver smiled tightly. Her husband gave a more enthusiastic wave.

Luke turned and kissed his mother on the cheek. Then shook his father's hand.

"Betty, did you bring anything?"

"Oh! My handbag. I left it in the sitting room."

He turned to get it, his mother hot on his heels. But it didn't stop Betty hearing the words she said as they walked away.

"She's a nice girl, Luke. You'd make a fine couple if I do say so. Please tell me you've at least considered the idea?"

Betty found it hard to breathe. It caught in little bubbles in her throat. How could she say that! Charlie was hardly cold in the grave and she was trying to marry her living son to her other son's widow?

Luke appeared to ignore her. He stormed into the house, emerging moments later with her bag. He jumped behind the wheel, raised his hand in a wave, then hit the accelerator.

But he never looked at her once. They didn't even talk.

She didn't want to move on. Never. Especially not with Charlie's brother. But had the thought of it disturbed him that much? Did he think she was that unattractive? Not good enough for him?

She shouldn't have let it worry her, but it did. On the way here, they'd seemed to develop a friendship. Now it was like the first day when they'd met. And she didn't like it one bit.

"Well? How was it?"

Betty flopped down in the chair, holding William out for Ivy to take. She could see the woman was itching to get her hands on the baby.

"Dreadful. I need a cup of tea."

"Funny you should ask for a cup of tay."

Betty glared at her. She wasn't in the mood for being teased.

"Enough of the sour face, miss. Just so happens I finally managed to get a container of tea in for you. I went to the shop while you were out and it had arrived in."

"Really?" She felt energy slowly drip back into her bones. "You mean proper English tea."

"Come see for yourself."

She jumped to her feet and danced into the kitchen. The package stood proud on the counter. English breakfast tea. Oh, yes! After the day she'd had it was exactly what she needed.

"We need a tea pot."

"Check." Ivy pointed toward the far cupboard.

Betty opened it and found the most pretty tea pot she'd even seen. Made from china, it was the palest cream, with a fine spout, as if to be used for high tea.

"Ivy, it's gorgeous!"

"Just a little something I wanted to get for you."

She moved around to hug Ivy, kissed her cheek, then set the kettle to boil.

"Now you're going to have a real cuppa with me, Ivy. We can pretend we're in London."

"Did something happen today, Betty? Luke looked mighty cross when he came in."

Ivy was leaning back, William lying still in her arms, gurgling up at her, fist in his mouth.

Betty spooned tea into the pot, filled it with water, then placed it on the table. Then she found two cups and saucers and popped them down too. Before sitting herself.

"Betty?"

"We really need some scones, or white bread sandwiches with butter and sliced cucumber."

"Betty, there's something you're not telling me."

She sighed. Poured the tea then pushed one cup toward Ivy.

"That woman is awful."

Ivy raised her eyebrows in question.

"Here, you need a spoon of sugar."

Ivy did as she was told and stirred it in.

"How so?"

"Well, first of all she couldn't understand why I didn't want to let anyone else look after my baby, or that he didn't

eat the same meal as we did. Then she wanted me to stay, she had a go at Luke, his father hardly said a word, and then she . . .”

“What?”

“I still can’t believe she let someone else bring up her children.”

“I can.”

“You can?” Did Ivy not believe in caring for her own babies either? Surely not?

“I can believe it because it was me who brought those babies up. It was me they called for when they were hurt, or if they were upset. I took them from little babies into boys ready for college. She wasn’t interested until they were able to attend her parties and hold their own in an adult conversation.”

Betty just stared at her. Tea cup suspended mid-air.

“You did?”

“Why else do you think it was me that Charlie wrote to. I knew he’d married you before his own parents did. It’s why Luke wanted me here. I love those boys like I love my own daughter.”

Betty went back to sipping her own tea.

“So what was it you were going to say before?”

“When?”

Ivy gave her a look that she took as serious. Her don’t pull the wool over my eyes look.

She sighed. "When we left, she didn't think I could hear . . ."

"By 'she' you mean Mrs Olliver?"

Betty nodded. "It was just that she said Luke and I made an attractive couple and had he considered the idea. Or something like that." She tried not to mumble. "She didn't know I could hear, but I did, and then Luke wouldn't talk to me the entire trip home."

Ivy made a noise in her throat, but didn't say anything. She sipped at her tea. Thoughtfully.

"Not bad, you know. I could get used to this."

"Ivy?"

Now it was her doing the avoiding.

"Betty, one thing you need to know about Luke is that he's a sensitive type. Comes across all brave and strong, but his mother messed him up. Made him cautious of women." She paused. "He could have his pick, you know, but it was Charlie who we always knew would marry. His mother didn't affect him quite the same. Luke, well, maybe."

"So you think he'll talk to me again?"

"Of course he will. Don't be daft. He's just annoyed with his mother. And maybe he's embarrassed because he's already thought the same thing himself."

"Ivy!"

Betty felt her cheeks flood with burning hot colour.

"You're a pretty girl. Just because you were married to his brother doesn't mean he can't look at you that way. He's a man after all. It wasn't like he knew you two as a couple."

Betty poured herself another cup of tea.

"He did say that he'd help me find my friends. The girls from the ship I told you about. You don't think he'd go back on his word, do you? I'm so desperate to find them."

"What Luke says he'll do he does. Now stop fussing about him and enjoy your tea. All this sitting around and gas bagging means I'm running behind. Fancy helping me with dinner?"

"Love too."

"Maybe another cup first, though."

"I knew you'd love it. Who couldn't like a cuppa, huh?"

They both laughed.

Betty was a mix of emotions. Excited, worried, sad, stressed, happy. She switched from one to the other so darn fast she didn't know what she was, but right now, with Ivy, it was the latter. Hands down.

"Let's put this boy down so he can crawl. He's getting far too heavy for us to keep lugging around," suggested Ivy. "Maybe he just needs some time on his stomach for encouragement."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

IT WAS LIKE SHE'D suddenly emerged from a dark and disastrous nightmare. Every time Alice raised her head, looked at her husband, walked into her house, it seemed to have no resemblance to the past months since she'd arrived. The home that had once felt small, cold and unloved now had an energy about it she relished. She rose early to fling the drapes wide open, letting sun fill the rooms with warmth. She was gathering flowers from their tiny garden for the table, baking for the joy of the aroma it sent through the house.

And Ralph. Oh Ralph! Her man was back and she loved him so much all over again that it made her heart melt.

There were so many things that still needed to be said, things they needed to do to set things right, but they would make it. She just knew they would.

And he was due home any moment. She checked the oven and set the timer to alert her in a few more minutes. She was making Ralph a savoury pie, chicken and vegetable, like he used to love in London.

"Honey, you home?"

Alice felt her heart thud as she heard Ralph's voice. In a week she'd gone from resenting his every movement to aching to hold him near.

"In the kitchen," she called back.

She turned the timer off and swept the pie from the oven. If she didn't take it out now she'd only have to interrupt her husband, and she wanted to hear everything about his day.

He hadn't touched alcohol since the morning they'd lain in bed together talking, but it had been hard. So hard on him to not touch the bottle again. Which meant she wanted to give him all her love and undivided attention to help him through.

"Hi sweetheart."

Ralph reached for her face and kissed her on the lips. She closed her eyes and just breathed in the smell of him. He was wearing the cologne she remembered.

When he released her they just watched one another, before she stepped back, face flushed.

"How was your day?"

He grinned before flopping down in a chair at their tiny kitchen table.

“He’s going to let me know by the end of the week.”

Alice nodded. “Well, that sounds promising, right?”

Ralph smiled back at her. “He knew my father, so I think that’ll help.”

She didn’t say anything. After what he’d told her about his family, she wasn’t sure what to say.

“I know, I said I wanted to make it on my own, but if my family name helps me to get a foot in the door, I’d be a fool to turn it down.” He undid his tie and put his feet up on the other chair. “His son had a similar post to mine in Europe during the war, so who knows? That might help more than anything.”

Alice held her tongue. She could see he was trying to be brave but was worried about getting it, and they needed the money so bad. But he was doing his best, and she knew it was going to happen for him. It just had to.

“Darling, I’m not sure if this is good news for you or not, but there was a message from our neighbours that your mother phoned. She’s coming to stay in a month’s time.”

Ralph’s face crumpled. “Oh.”

Alice walked around the table to him and touched his shoulder. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to . . .”

He grabbed her waist and made her fall into his lap.

She sighed at the smile on his face.

"I know you're wanting everything to be perfect, that you're worried about me, but I'm fine Alice. You don't have to act like I'm broken."

She braved a look into his eyes. That's exactly what she thought, that he could break if she said the wrong thing. That this perfect little bubble could shatter as fast as it had formed.

"I'm not going back, Alice. I was in a bad place."

"I know, Ralph, I know, it's just."

"What?"

He watched her and she didn't say a thing.

"What, Alice?"

"I know you've been through hard times, but I don't understand how a man like you, the man I know you to be, could have fallen like that. I mean, I just don't understand."

There, she'd said it. It was like a gust of wind had been expelled from her lungs, relieving her of keeping it captive.

He looked down at her, took a deep breath, then kissed her forehead.

"Why don't you serve dinner up while I get changed, then I'll explain what happened."

Alice felt numb. She nodded and rose, walking over on stiff legs to cut the pie.

When she looked back he'd already disappeared. He'd sounded genuine enough, like he didn't mind what she'd said, but it was the glass theory again. Had she pushed too hard and made it crack?

"Honey, this pie is fantastic."

Alice smiled up at Ralph and placed a forkful in her mouth. It was good, but the pie was not what she wanted to be talking about.

Maybe she needed to start things, talk about what she'd decided today. Might help him open up. Besides, if she didn't address the fact that she'd called in sick every day over the past week to work, he was going to start to wonder.

"Ralph, I've been doing a lot of thinking the past few days and . . ."

"No!" He dropped his fork with a clatter. "I know I've been difficult Alice, but I'll get a job soon, we're going to be okay, please don't go back. Not yet."

What? "Go back where, to work?"

Now he looked confused. "Home, Alice. I don't want you to leave me to go back home."

A smile lit her face. "Ralph, I'm not leaving you, silly."

Relief filled his eyes. "You're not?"

She picked up his fork and put it back in his hand with a chuckle. "What I was going to say was that I want to hand my notice in at work. As soon as you find out whether you have the job you applied for today, I want to leave."

He nodded. He probably would have agreed to anything right now so long as she didn't ask his permission to leave the country!

"I know you didn't ever expect to work like this, Alice. I'm sorry, I truly am. Once I'm working there's no need for you to continue."

She flapped her hand at him. "It's not that I don't want to work, Ralph, it's just that I want to enjoy what I do."

"So you want to keep working?" He looked confused.

"I want to start nursing again, Ralph." She smiled, shyly. "I know it will mean retraining over here, but I want to help people. I want to do something worthwhile."

He finished his mouthful and put down his knife and fork, gently this time. "That's a great idea."

She watched his face, saw that he meant it.

"If you hadn't been nursing in London, I never would have met you. You were great at it then and I'm sure you'll make a great nurse over here."

"Are you sure?"

He reached for her hand and squeezed it. "You'll make a fine nurse, here, Alice. I'm so proud of you."

Her heart swelled from his words but her mind betrayed her. She could see Matthew sneering at her, could see his face swirling in her thoughts. See what they'd done together, and it made her sick.

She did want to nurse again, but she also wanted to run as far from her boss as possible. And that meant handing her notice in, making up an excuse, and never looking back. Leaving that world behind her, and her affair in her past too. Burning the fur coat or smuggling it back to him. So she didn't owe him anything.

"Alice?"

She looked up to see Ralph watching her.

"Did I tell you about my family's publishing company before we got married?"

She wasn't sure exactly what he'd told her, but he'd mentioned bits and pieces about it. "Why don't you start at the beginning?"

He squeezed her hand again then sat back in his chair.

"All my life we've had money. Been well off."

Alice placed her own utensils down and settled in her chair to listen. She'd been waiting a long time to hear this story, she wasn't going to miss a word.

“My grandfather started a publishing company here in New York, but my father never wanted to join the family business. To cut a long story short, a manager was appointed, and my family lived off a trust fund.”

He leaned further back, his chair on two legs, eyes on the table. Alice wished he'd look at her, but he seemed to find it easier avoiding her eyes.

“I wasn't my father's son. My mother always said I was just like my granddad, but he died when I was a boy.” He took a deep breath. “I spent all my life, right through school, wanting to join the family business. I didn't want to live off the funds, I wanted to run the place, build on what my grandfather had started.”

“So what happened?”

“I spent every summer working in the company, doing anything and everything, learning whatever I could. When the manager handed in his resignation, a meeting was held, and I was given a probationary management position.” Ralph paused. “I know what you're thinking, I was young, but I did well. The company did well.”

Alice didn't know what to say. When had things gone wrong?

“When war was declared, I thought I was going to be safe. Well, you know, that my job meant that I wouldn't be called up, but my father was having none of it. He told me that I had to

fight, that choosing my job over volunteering was turning my back on my country.”

It was a story Alice had heard before, from other young men, from the wives of her mother’s friends. A story that usually ended up with a heartbroken wife or mother and a dead young man.

“So I resisted, then eventually gave in. The board of trustees appointed a new manager, and I went off to war.”

“You seemed so confident in your position, like you were destined to be a success in the army.” Alice’s words were true, when she’d met him he seemed to fit the role with ease.

Ralph agreed. “I was good, I got on with the other men and I proved myself. I was the first of my age to be promoted.”

Alice smiled at him.

“And I met you, so who’s complaining?”

The pain, the torture making his face crack told her otherwise. He’d lost, a lot, something he’d wished for his entire life, because of the war. And something had gone wrong, seriously wrong, because she’d never heard him even speak about the company since her arrival. And they certainly didn’t have a trust fund to live off now.

“I survived the war, Alice, and I found you, but what had kept me going from the start was knowing what I had to come home

to. I didn't blame my father, he was no different than plenty of other fathers out there."

"But?"

"But when I got home, the life I'd known, the life that had kept me going all that time, over the years, it had disappeared."

They sat in silence. Alice wanted to hear more but Ralph was just staring into space, like he was seeing it all over again in his mind.

"What happened to the business, Ralph?"

He laughed. A cold, sad laugh that gave her goose pimples.

"I came home to an empty trust fund, a business run into the ground and facing bankruptcy due to bad management, and a father on his death bed."

Alice kept her eyes down and swallowed. There was more, she could hear it in his voice.

"I did everything I could, but nothing could save the business. I was home in time to see the notice put on the door, announcing the foreclosure. There was so much debt owing that the building was sold to pay our creditors, it hadn't turned a profit in over a year, and there was nothing left in the accounts.

"The worst thing was knowing I could have prevented it. My father was a kind man, he never did me wrong, but he wasn't a

business man, that was my grandfather. When I got home, he just shook his head and blamed the recession, but he was wrong. I know I could have made it work, I could have kept the place going for my own sons. But I never got that chance.”

“And then things got worse?” Alice’s voice was soft, low. She didn’t know if there was anything else left to say.

“My father died the same week the business closed, Alice, and after the funeral my mother left to live with her sister. It was like I lost my future, my family, my destiny, all in that first week home.”

He made a fist and hit the table, enough to make a bang but restrained enough not to scare her.

“I didn’t know when you were coming, where we were going to live, how I was even going to provide for you. I had it in my head that you’d take one look at me, the loser with nothing to his name, and turn around. Go back the way you’d come and I’d never see you again. That you’d think I’d lied to you, lived a lie while I was with you in London.”

She didn’t know what to say. All she knew was that she hadn’t been able to turn her back on him, not completely, even when she’d wished she could.

“But you didn’t leave me, Alice,” he whispered. “I know you wanted to, I know I disappointed you, but you didn’t leave me.”

She reached for him across the table and smiled as his big hands clasped her wrists.

"I just wish you'd told me all this from the start. I would have understood, Ralph. I would have tried to help you."

"If I hadn't started drinking, if I'd just kept trying to get a job, to make something of myself, maybe it wouldn't have been so hard on you."

"What matters is what we do now. We can make this work."

"I know we can, Alice. Because I love you, and I'm not going to disappoint you again."

She closed her eyes for a heartbeat and smiled up at him.

"I think half my problem is not having anyone else here, no one to talk to. No friends."

"I lost touch with all my school buddies when I enlisted, and half my soldier friends either didn't make it home or live in different states." He shook his head. "I never meant for you to feel so lonely here. I never meant to drink. I . . ."

"Let's not talk about what we could have done, Ralph, let's just think about the future, okay? I met some wonderful girls on the ship here, and I just need to find them."

"You're going to make a wonderful nurse here, Alice, you know that?"

"And you are going to make your granddad proud and start a

publishing company of your own one day. Promise me that, Ralph Jones.”

He winked at her. A kind, trusting, loving wink. Not the smart, knowing wink her boss and one time lover had liked to throw her way. This one made her feel loved.

“Whatever happened in the past is going to stay there. We have a future together Alice, a future and a family to look forward to one day.”

She grinned at him.

“Are we starting over?”

“Let’s just say we’re going to do our best to forget the past few months. I wouldn’t forget the time we spent together in London for anything.”

He pulled her in for a kiss across the table, but his finger reached for her necklace before he kissed her.

“You’re wearing the necklace again.”

She smiled.

“You remember the day I gave this to you?”

Of course she did. That’s why she’d put it on again this morning.

“I could never forget that day, Ralph. Not for as long as I live.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THERE WAS NO longer anything about Roy that Madeline liked. Nothing she could find about him that made her want to love him.

Her fingers fell to her belly, to touch the roundness of it, feel the soft movement of the baby. As a girl, she had hoped that as a pregnant woman, she would have a husband who would place his hand over the stretched skin, wanting to feel the life they had created as it grew inside her. But now, even the thought of Roy touching her, of his skin on hers, made her nauseous.

It had been better in a way when they'd moved into their own place, even if was the size of a shoebox with drafts that she could imagine would chill to the bone in winter. Were they intending on staying, things may have stayed good. The future may have been a bright one.

They had little, but at least what they had here was theirs.

Only it wouldn't be much longer.

She heard footsteps on the timber deck, then the door as it creaked. Madeline went back to stirring the stew, one hand rubbing gently at her back. Easing the soft ache that seemed to plague her in the evening.

"Hi."

She looked up to see Roy as he hovered at the doorway. It still shocked her, seeing him like this. Nothing like he'd been in London. But then perhaps she just hadn't looked deep enough. Was so taken by the tales of a foreign country, by the shiny buttons on his jacket and the gifts he presented her. She'd never thought herself shallow, but maybe she was. Maybe she had been.

"Dinner won't be far away."

He nodded and went down the hall to change his clothes.

There were times she didn't even want to talk to him. Wanted to think about the baby, lose herself in work. Dream of seeing her parents.

But now . . . she still hadn't told him about the telegram. But he'd find out soon enough. And then he'd guess that she was stuck here.

But then she thought maybe he already knew. Was that why he'd been so cold? Insisting that he knew she wouldn't be able to leave him all that time ago? It was silly, but she did wonder.

But she wasn't stuck here. She might have to go back to the farm, but it wasn't going to be for long.

Madeline only had two more days of work before she was forced to finish, but she'd been putting money away, just small amounts. And once they were down to one wage, once they were back at the farm, she was going to be as frugal as a squirrel. Hide what was hers and never say a word of the money she'd tucked away.

She was going to save enough to sail back to London.

There was no way this baby was going to live here. Not with grandparents who would try to poison the child against it's own mother. Not when she could offer it a life with cousins and aunties who would love the child in England. Even if it did mean shaming herself.

She no longer cared.

Somehow, she was going to leave. Going to run from this place and never look back.

Then what would Roy say? His little plan to keep her against her will, to ruin their marriage and force her to live with his family, was not going to exist.

She almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

But she knew she'd never regret leaving him.

Never.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

BETTY CLEARED HER THROAT.

“Luke, I’m, ah, sorry to bother you.”

He looked up. Placed his cup down and stared at her.

She was in danger of losing her confidence. Fast.

“Is your secretary back at work yet?”

He looked up. “Oh yes. She’s been so busy since she got back. I completely forgot.”

“So the offer still stands, then? For her to assist me?”

Luke stood, folded the paper, and swallowed the last of his coffee. He watched her, studied her, cup back in his hand.

“She’s at your disposal. Come past later.”

“Should I come with you now instead?”

He shook his head and shrugged on the jacket cast over the back of his chair. She’d been so disappointed when his secretary

had taken unexpected leave off work for an illness, finding her friends was all she'd thought about.

"Not necessary. Have Ivy bring you past later today."

Betty nodded. Then twisted her hands together, trying not to fidget. He walked toward her, smiled curtly, then went straight out the door.

She let out a whoosh of air. Asking him had been harder than she'd expected. Much harder.

She went through to the kitchen.

"Did you ask him?"

"Yes."

"Well? What did he say?"

Betty reached for an apple and let it roll about in her palm.

"He said to come past later."

Ivy threw her hands in the air and rolled her eyes.

"So why the long face?"

"He wasn't friendly." She plopped down at the table and let her head fall gently against the cool of the timber.

She could feel Ivy standing behind her.

"Any one else would think you were wishing for him to be sweet on you."

She said the words with kindness but the very thought of them made Betty feel sick. Made her insides curdle.

“You’re wrong.”

She sat up straight.

“I’m just saying you seem awfully worried about how he looks at you, what he says, that sort of thing. Luke takes a while to trust. Give him time.”

Ivy was right. She did need to give him time.

But was she right about her feelings toward him? She loved Charlie. Didn’t she? Charlie had been the best man she’d ever met. Charlie had lit up the room that first night she’d met him. Swept her off her feet.

But Charlie was gone.

And she did like Luke. Even if she didn’t really want to. Not like that.

Betty thumped her head down on the table into her hands.

“Don’t carry on like a fool. Now go get that baby up, and I’ll take him to for a play date with my daughter and her youngest. You can call past the office and start searching for these friends of yours, without William making a fuss and distracting you.”

She almost felt as excited as the day before they’d all arrived in America. That sense of adrenalin, of anticipation. Today, she was going to find her friends.

“Is this it?”

The driver nodded. "The large grey building here on the left."

Betty suddenly realised she had no idea at all what Luke did. How had he made his money? She'd just presumed it was in a family business. Charlie had never said anything about what his brother did, except that his brother made him look like the black sheep.

"What line of work is it that Mr Olliver is involved in?"

The car slowed and pulled into a vacant space.

The driver turned around to look at her.

"Mr Olliver is a State Senator, Ma'am."

Oh. It was as if an entire fleet of bricks had landed on her shoulders. A Senator? That was important, right? Wasn't he a little young? It did explain why he never served though. His job was obviously important enough to keep him here. But a Senator?

"So I just go in this building here?"

"You can't miss the entrance, see the flags up there?"

She smiled and stepped out onto the pavement.

"I'll be waiting here."

"Thank you."

She clutched her hat with one hand to battle the wind, the other hand touching her skirt. She'd gone from excited about the task at hand, to suddenly terrified at even stepping foot in the office.

The building looked ominous. Two large doors, both appearing too heavy to push.

Should she just go back to the car?

A hand to the small of her back stopped her. She spun around, and straight into Luke.

"Oh! I'm sorry, I just . . ."

"I remember my first day working here." His hand had dropped away, but he still stood close. "I know what it's like to be afraid to walk through those doors."

She couldn't look at him. So handsome, so imposing in his tailored suit. So . . . not her Charlie, she scolded herself.

He beckoned for her to follow, held one door open for her to pass through.

"William is with Ivy?"

"Yes."

"I'm glad she's able to help you. I don't keep her very busy most of the time so having you here must be a treat."

"I don't know about a treat, but I'm sure pleased to have her."

She followed Luke as he strode down the passageway. It even smelt important in here.

"Come and meet my assistant, Jean. I'm certain she'll find these friends of yours."

"I hope so."

"What do you say we go out for dinner tonight?"

Luke had stopped in the doorway. He leant against it, watching her. She didn't know what to say.

"I'm not sure I can leave William that long." She also wasn't sure she could look at him again.

"I'll phone Ivy and let her know. Let's make it an early dinner, just around the corner."

Betty nodded. What else could she do.

"I'd like to hear more about your family, how you met Charlie. And hopefully you'll know more about your friends whereabouts by then."

He disappeared through the door then, and she was left to wait for Jean.

She'd found her. She'd actually found June.

Well, more correctly, she'd found June's husband.

"Yes, I'm still here."

"Where shall I tell her to meet you?"

She gave him Luke's address and tried to contain a squeal of delight as she hung up the phone.

"Good news?"

Luke was in the room. She hadn't even seen him walk in.

"The card I had, my friend's husband, well, I just got in touch.'

“Good.”

“No luck with the others yet, but Jean said she’d try again in the morning for me, to locate Alice.”

“Shall we go?”

She’d almost forgotten about dinner. She ached to hold William, to feed him, but she didn’t want to be rude.

“I won’t keep you away from the little man for long.”

Was it that obvious?

“Come on.”

He held her coat out and she reached her arms back to slip it on. He watched her. For a heartbeat, he watched her, and she watched him back.

Then he turned away and offered her his arm.

She took it.

He was so unlike Charlie. Her man would have clasped her hand, been cheeky and put his arm around her waist. Tugged her in tighter, just as he had on their very first date.

Luke wasn’t like that. He never would be. He was proper, more reserved.

She liked that they were talking again. That they had that easiness back between them.

But now, she almost wished he had taken her hand, even though she hated herself for even thinking it.

"I can see you're anxious."

Betty made her hand relax as it held the glass stem.

"I'm sorry."

"You want to get back to William. I understand."

She liked that he was polite about it, but did he really understand? With a mother like the one he'd grown up with, playing the part of a doting parent probably wasn't something he thought was normal.

"I take it Ivy's filled you in on my mother. Or should I say lack of mother."

She nodded. "I'm starting to feel like you can read me as easily as a child's book." What was with him and guessing her thoughts?

Luke laughed. "You're honest, Betty. I like that."

Had he ever thought less of her? That she wasn't going to be honest?

He beckoned the waiter over. "Two steaks, cooked medium."

The waiter nodded and took the menus.

"I hope you don't mind my ordering for us. We can eat and then get straight home."

It was years since she'd had a steak at a restaurant. In fact, had she ever? The war had reduced everything in her world to coupon rations. The food since she'd arrived had been wonderful, but this felt special.

“Betty, I wanted to bring you out for dinner to apologise.”

“For what?” She took a nervous sip of wine.

“I know you heard what mother said that day. I should have brought it up earlier.”

She gulped, spluttering her mouthful. Her skin burned with embarrassment.

“I, ah . . .”

“I don’t mean to upset you, Betty. It just needed to be said.”

She sat still. Statue like.

“I don’t enjoy my mother’s company at the best of times. Charlie was more patient with her, which is why I wanted you to meet them. They would have visited sooner or later, but I digress.”

She took another delicate sip. It was starting to make her feel mildly giddy, but it was better than staring back at Luke. She’d never tried wine before.

“What I’m trying to say is that my mother is desperate for me to take a wife. Quite frankly, I’d rather be alone than end up with a woman like her. I don’t mean to sound rude, but she is, well, how can I put this? Everything that a woman like you is not.”

Should she be insulted or flattered?

"I'm not sure if you meant that as a compliment or not."

Betty surprised herself by finding her lost tongue.

"Oh, a compliment, Betty. Of course it was a compliment!"

She was embarrassed all over again. And confused.

"The way you are with William, your patience, the way you enjoy Ivy's company, those are all things that Charlie would have loved to see. You're a wonderful mother, Betty. I just don't want my mother to lure you to their country house, to turn you into something you're not. That's why I want to keep you with me. You and William, well, I've grown attached to you both since you arrived. More than you could ever realise."

Now Betty had tears in her eyes. She couldn't have asked him to open up more than he had. It meant a lot to her. And she could tell that talking like this didn't come naturally to him.

"I won't ever want to stay with your mother, Luke. No disrespect, but I didn't exactly warm to her."

He stopped, took a long sip of his wine, and then sat back as two plates were placed in front of them. Betty eyed the steak with delight. It was huge. A slice of beef beside tiny potatoes and mushrooms, with a red sauce just visible, drizzled over everything.

"This looks incredible."

He gestured for her to start.

"Before Ivy came to live with me, I ate here almost every night."

Betty smiled up at him before taking her first mouthful. The meat was like marshmallow on her tongue.

"Ivy cooks wonderful meals, but this is good."

Luke sat back for a moment.

"You know, Betty, you've dealt with Charlie's death extremely well."

She hesitated. Was this a trick question? Had he buttered her up just now so he could show his true feelings?

"I'm not so sure about that."

He raised one eyebrow, as if in question, before cutting into his steak again.

"If you mean the brave face I put on every day, then I guess you're right. But the real me? She's the one crying every night into her pillow, holding her baby tight and whispering his father's name, so he never forgets it."

Luke looked pleased. Was that what he'd wanted to hear?

"I like you Betty. Please don't take my words the wrong way. I'm prone to saying the wrong thing to women."

It was like riding a wave with this man. One minute she was attracted to him almost, enamoured by his company. The next he seemed to question her intentions, to artfully interrogate her.

"I loved Charlie dearly, Luke. But he's gone, and I can either live in the past and wallow, or move forward." She matched his stare. "For the record, I choose the future."

"Good." He acted as if nothing untoward had been said between them. "To friendship"

Luke raised his glass. She swallowed her mouthful and did the same.

"To family," she said.

They clinked glasses, eyes locked.

"I'm pleased you're here, Betty. Truly I am."

Her feelings were unknown, but she was grateful. And pleased that at least she wasn't alone.

The beat in her stomach that often hit when she was close to Luke had started to thump again, but she ignored it. He wasn't interested in her like that. And neither was she in him. They shared family, and friendship. Nothing more.

"So tell me about the plan to locate the rest of your friends?"

She smiled at his words. Finally, a safe topic.

"Well, I'm hoping to see June in a few weeks time. She and her husband are going on vacation until then. I guess the search starts all over again for the other two."

Luke finished his meal, dabbed at his mouth with a napkin and sat back in his chair, wine glass in hand.

“I look forward to meeting this June. Perhaps we could have her over to dinner one night with her husband? After you girls have had a chance to catch up with one another.”

She nodded. Perhaps. But for now, she just wanted to see June again herself. Talk with her about what had happened, confide in her, hear about her own life here in America.

For now, her friendship with the other girls was something she craved, so much it hurt.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

THE DRIVE TO THE farm was worse than she'd imagined. Even with her little girl tucked against her chest.

Almost three weeks early, which meant she'd had three days in their old house, as a mother, before they'd had to pack the last of their belongings and go.

She was torn.

Her heart still felt shattered. Torn into a thousand pieces when she so much as thought about her father. About the funeral she'd missed, the chance to say goodbye to him alongside their family and friends, and that she'd left it too late to ask him for help.

But most of all, she regretted ever coming here. She loved her father. How could she have ever thought it possible to live in a foreign country, with no family, and expect to be happy?

And then she was faced with her heart mending, each piece fitting back into place, every time she looked at her child.

Charlotte's tiny hands, dark blue eyes, smattering of hair and elfin features made her fall even deeper in love every day. With every gaze, every smile.

Only to break all over again when she thought of her father.

It was a vicious cycle, only made worse by the hatred she developed every day when she thought about her husband. About what he had done, behind her back, and the life he was trying to force upon her.

She hated him.

There was no longer room for pity in her heart. No longer even room for sadness. Only an anger that grew hour upon hour, that made her so bitter she wanted to scream from the cruelty of it all.

* * *

"Well, look who we have here."

Madeline tried to ignore the cruel taunt. There was a bitterness in her mother-in-law's face that she didn't want to see. Not when she was still trying to hold on to the life she'd just given up.

“Not so high and mighty now you haven’t got your father, are we?”

Alice swallowed the lump in her throat. Why would she be so cruel? How? What would possess a woman to be so heartless?

Madeline kept her head held high. It was obvious, from his silence; Roy wasn’t going to stick up for her.

She held Charlotte tight, not letting Roy’s family so much as glimpse her. They hadn’t met their granddaughter before, and Madeline wished they’d never been given the opportunity to.

The sneer from behind her almost stopped her in her steps. Almost.

“Did you hear me girl?” Her mother-in-law called. “He’s gone now, so you’ll never get back on that ship. You hear me!”

Her feet did stop then. Shoes like glue, stuck on the tatty brown grass.

How did she know that?

Madeline turned, Charlotte still cradled firmly in her arms. As if she could somehow draw strength from her.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Her voice shook. She could feel the tremble of her lower lip.

Roy stood still, watching. Her mother-in-law glared at her, eyes shining, enjoying the scene, and her sister-in-law just smirked.

“Ah, that got your attention, did it?”

Madeline focused on the cool exhale of her breath, in and out, as her lungs worked. Just keep breathing, she told herself. Stay calm. The silly old woman couldn't know. Could she?

"I read every letter, you know. Every one," she crowed.

"Mother!" Roy's voice hit out like a bad musical note through the air.

She felt like she was being dragged beneath water. Drowning slowly, blackness all around her. It couldn't be. No. Please, Lord, no.

Madeline shut her eyes, tried to control her fear. Her anger.

"I said I don't know what you're talking about."

She could hear herself, the weakness of her tone, the raspy whisper of her voice that sounded like it was being dragged over gravel.

"He wrote to you. I even knew he was sick. But you missed your chance. And now he's gone."

Madeline ran. She couldn't do anything else. She ran into the house, through the kitchen, into their old bedroom. She didn't know where else to go.

The crow of laughter from outside still seemed to find her. The cruel, indecent tune of her mother-in-law, knowing that she'd succeeded in keeping her here.

She looked down at Charlotte. At her sweet, innocent face.

Had she not fallen pregnant, maybe they would have been pleased to see the back of her. But now? She was under no illusions what they wanted. Their son, and their grandchild.

Well they could have Roy, but they weren't getting their hands on her little girl.

Not while she still had air in her lungs and fight in her body.

She wouldn't let them so much as touch her.

But she would find the letters. If the old biddy hadn't burnt them yet, she was going to find them. Devour them.

And then she was going to figure out just how she was going to get back home.

Because she would. And no one, not her husband, and certainly not her mother-in-law, was going to stop her.

All this time she'd thought her family hadn't wanted to write to her. Had been too busy, were annoyed at her for leaving them. She'd never even guessed her father could be sick, he'd been the picture of health when she'd left.

What she'd also never considered was the lengths a bitter old lady could go to, to ruin her daughter-in-laws life.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

SHE HADN'T EXPECTED there to be so many. Letter upon letter, all addressed to her in either her father's spidery hand, or her mother's even, perfect prose. Even her sister had written to her.

Asking why she never responded to their questions. Wondering why she acted like she'd never received mail from them when they'd written to her week after week.

It made her feel cold. Dead.

Charlotte started to snuffle and make a feeble cry, but she couldn't rise. How could she do anything when she now knew that her father had died, hoping to see her again one last time. Wanting to see her before he passed.

And perhaps worse of all; telling her he would bring her home before he died. That if something was wrong, if she wanted to come back, for whatever reason, he would bring her.

Her in-laws had known her father was on his sickbed. That he'd been unwell for months, and they hadn't bothered to tell her. Had purposely kept it from her.

They'd passed her the odd letter, early on, just to stop her from being suspicious, but now she realised how stupid she'd been. Between her job, the pregnancy, the stress of moving house and then life as a mother, she'd worried herself sick but not really thought it through.

In hindsight, she should have known.

But it was all very well being able to wish on something passed.

She walked over to scoop Charlotte up in one arm, still holding one of the letters in her other.

It only made her more determined to go. To leave this god forsaken place, but she just didn't have enough money. No where near enough. Not after buying all the things they'd needed for the baby.

And it wasn't like she could go and get a job somewhere. Not living all the way out here.

It was probably one of the reasons they'd wanted her back here. To keep her under lock and key, away from the world.

It also explained why Roy had become so cold.

They'd obviously waited, until the time was right. Waited until they knew their marriage was almost on track. To make sure that when they told him, that his wife had the option to return home and wanted to leave him, it would hurt him the most. That he'd agree to this plan.

She sat back in the old rocking chair in their room to feed Charlotte. The letter fell to the floor and she didn't bother to retrieve it. Her eyes followed it though, thinking, knowing there was something she could do.

Betty.

Maybe Betty could help her.

She knew what it was like to be alone and with a child. She would help her, wouldn't she?

She could go into town tomorrow, use the telephone at the post office and find Betty.

Madeline had probably missed other get togethers. But if she could track her down, find Betty, maybe it would be her salvation.

They would all understand, Betty especially. All those girls would be there for her. Why hadn't she just tried to find them from the start? Instead of wishing to see them, thinking about her friends, and doing nothing about it. Lauren had been a great friend when she'd needed someone, but only another war

bride, one of the girls who had come over here and gone through what she had, could ever truly understand.

She could see if Betty was able to help her arrange transport, stay with her, and try to work out a plan.

Roy would hate it. But so long as she had the right excuse to go into town for an excursion, perhaps to purchase something necessary for Charlotte, then there wouldn't be any fuss.

They needn't know she was going to stay with Betty. Not until she'd gone. She could leave a note, disappear while no one was about, and take time to clear her head.

If only Betty was prepared to help.

* * *

Her plan had been easier to execute than she'd expected. Aside from a sneer from her mother-in-law, she'd managed to slip out of the house easily enough. Thankfully she'd learnt to drive while working at the bank, so she chugged away in the old car, making her way into town.

She hadn't considered taking the car and driving to Betty's, and it probably wasn't a good idea. She could disappear with Charlotte and just be a mother vacationing with a friend. Taking the car would be stealing. Theft.

She parked and went into the post office, carrying Charlotte. The lady behind the counter was friendly and helped her to find the right number for an Olliver living in the city. It was almost too easy.

If it wasn't Betty, if this number didn't get her in touch with her friend, there would be nothing left for her to do. No hope. Nothing. The man's initials were wrong, but it was the only Olliver with two L's, and she'd always remembered the spelling.

The phone rang five times. Five slow, painful rings. She was sure no one was going to answer. After driving all the way in, desperate to talk to Betty, and no one was going to be there. She wouldn't even know if it was the right number if no one answered.

On the eighth ring, she'd lost hope. One more, she whispered to herself. Just one more ring . . .

"Olliver residence."

A breathless voice belted down the line.

It wasn't Betty.

Madeline started to sob. She couldn't help it.

"Hello? Who's there?"

"Madeline. It's Madeline Walker here."

"Madeline! Oh, I've heard all about you. What's wrong?"

It didn't help her crying any to have this kind voice acknowledge her. Months, weeks of holding it in, and now she was like a blubbering child.

"My dear, I'm Ivy. I run the household here."

"Ivy, I need to talk to Betty. Please."

"Are you sure you're all right?"

"I need Betty."

She listened as Ivy hollered out to Betty.

"She's coming dear."

Ivy had that lovely, soft motherly toned. It only made Madeline want to cry more.

Betty's breathless voice came across the line. "Mads? Madeline, is that you? What's wrong?"

That made her cry all over again.

"Honey, tell me?"

"I need to come and stay. Please." Her words were no more than a whisper. "I need help Betty."

"Of course. When? What's happened?"

"I just need to get away. Away from Roy. Away from them all." She took a deep breath. "My father died, we've moved back in with his parents. Please Betty, I need your help. I've got a baby now."

"A baby? Oh Madeline, a baby!"

She held Charlotte tight but she didn't want to talk about her, not yet. Not here.

"I need you to help me get out of here," she whispered.
"Please."

"Can you get here?"

Madeline shook her head. Then realised Betty couldn't see her. "No."

"I'll send a car. When can you be ready?"

"Any day," she mumbled.

"The day after tomorrow then?"

"It'll need to be early in the morning, or late. I need to get out without them knowing."

Betty asked for the address and wrote it down.

"It's going to be all right, Madeline. I promise.
Everything will be fine once you're here. I can do this for you."

The teller was waving to her. It was time to hang up.

"I have to go, Betty." She hesitate. "But thank you. Thank you so much. I really need you."

Betty's tone made her want to cry all over again.

"I know what it's like, Mads. Believe me. I'm here for you.
I'll have a car waiting early in the morning, day after next.
Quick, give me the address."

“Okay.” Relief made her shoulders sink, like she could hardly hold them up. She gave her the details.

“Oh Mads?”

She was listening.

“I’ve found June. She might even be here before you arrive.”

The phone line went dead, but it didn’t matter. She was going to be with her friends again. They would help her, look after her.

Help her to escape.

She was going to take all the money from her account, just in case she needed it. Tomorrow night, she would pack her bag and hide it under the bed. She couldn’t take much, they didn’t have many large bags, but it was the least of her worries.

If Betty could help her, could help her figure out what she needed to do, then she might never come back here.

She hoped not.

But then she had that little problem of not having enough money.

Maybe Betty could come up with a plan to get around that.

She hoped so.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

IT WAS HELL. Pure hell. There was no other way to describe it.

But it was about to end.

Charlotte was unhappy, her crying earlier had told her the baby wasn't happy, but now wasn't the time for her to worry about a little unhappiness.

Now was the time to plot her escape.

She quickly put pen to paper.

Roy.

Please don't be alarmed, but I had to get out of the house. My friend Betty has kindly agreed to take me to her home, for some rest and recovery.

I will be home within a few days.

Love always,

Madeline.

The few days apart and the loving were exaggerated, but she wanted him to be at ease. Annoyed, yes. There was little way to get around that, because if she asked his permission he would outright refuse, but so long as he didn't come chasing her, looking for her, she could deal with him.

It could take months, if not longer, before she could secure passage back home. Now she just needed some breathing space, to try and figure out what she was going to do.

Headlights flooded the front yard.

The car was early.

Madeline reached for her single bag, slung it over her shoulder, Charlotte in the other arm, and hurried as fast as she could.

She dropped the letter on to the kitchen table and tripped her way out the door and across the porch.

The driver opened the door for her and went to take her bag.

"Quick! Just throw it in with me."

She could see a light on back at the house now. Someone was up.

The driver gave her a peculiar look but didn't argue. He thrust the bag onto the seat beside her, shut the door and got behind the wheel.

"I'm sorry, we just need to get out of here. Fast."

He nodded and turned the car around.

Madeline looked back and saw a figure appear on the porch.

A light hanging showed the silhouette to be a woman's.

A gurgle of relief escaped from her throat and she felt the wet stain of tears on her cheeks.

She never, ever wanted to come back here.

She closed her eyes, held her baby tight, and prayed.

Please God, take me home. Take me back to my family.

If only he could hear her.

CHAPTER THIRTY

ANY MINUTE NOW.

Betty couldn't stop herself, she had to keep pacing. Eyes locked on the window.

Any minute now and her friends would be arriving.

She hadn't spoken to June on the phone, only Madeline. But she had received a message from her husband to say that he'd hardly been able to contain his wife, and that she would be there before noon.

It was half past eleven already. Madeline should be here by now with June right behind her.

Nine months since she'd seen them. Nine months! How had that much time passed since they'd been together?

She heard a noise. A definite noise.

Then a car appeared at the end of the driveway, winding slowly up toward the house. It wasn't the car she'd sent to fetch Madeline so it could only be one person.

June was here!

"Ivy, Ivy! She's here!"

"Well what are you waiting for? Get out there."

Betty ran through the hall and to the front door. She swung it open. Desperate to set eyes upon her again.

"Betty!"

She almost fainted on the spot. June hurtled toward her, disregarding the gravel and running as fast as her low heels would allow.

"Oh, Betty."

They threw their arms around one another. June felt warm, soft, happy.

"Look at you, huh? You look wonderful."

June grinned and linked arms with her. It felt so good, shoulder-to-shoulder with a friend from back home.

"This place is beautiful. You never told me Charlie was so well off."

Betty just turned them both around to face the door and walked her friend inside. She'd never known Charlie was this well off, but then she'd have given up all the money to have him here instead.

"Fancy a cuppa?"

June gave her a gentle push away. "Don't I wish? A real cuppa from back home."

"Ivy!"

She appeared from the kitchen, tea towel in hand and a big smile on her face.

"Ready for your cup of tay, girls?"

Betty giggled and tugged June along.

"How did you teach an American to speak like that?"

"Ivy, meet my friend June."

"Pleased to finally meet you."

Betty linked arms with June again.

"We'll take it out in the garden, if that's okay with you?"

Ivy gave them a wink and disappeared again.

"You have got it good, girl."

She didn't want to burst the bubble. To tell June the truth. But she needed to confide in her, needed to talk to her about what had happened. And she wanted her tell her before Madeline arrived, now that they had a few moments together.

"How's your husband, June? He sounded lovely on the phone. So kind. And that day when we arrived and he offered to help me . . ."

"Oh, Betty, he is divine. So brilliant." June's eyes shone brightly. "I just love it here. I miss home, but he's just the best. His whole family are the best."

Betty led her to the little outdoor table in the garden and pulled out two seats. She knew how this must look, idyllic. It almost seemed a shame to ruin the moment.

"So how about you? Could you be any happier? And where was your Charlie that day? Naughty boy keeping you waiting like that."

Betty looked down. Didn't know quite how to say it. What to say to her.

"June, that day, when I was waiting for Charlie . . ."

Ivy appeared then with a tray of tea and cookies.

"Here we go, girls. Tea, cookies and even scones." Ivy laughed. "Did I say it right?"

"Oooh, can I take her home with me?"

Ivy swatted at them and left them be, but she walked away laughing to herself.

"Ivy has been my saviour," she told June. "Seriously, I don't know what I would have done without her."

June bit into a scone and closed her eyes. "This is so good. She is priceless."

"June, I had some bad news that day."

June swallowed her mouthful and leant forward. "You mean the day we arrived, when Charlie was late? You're not still angry at him about that are you?"

Betty felt tears cloud her eyes. Emotion like she hadn't felt since that day when their ship had docked bubbled up in her throat, clouded her mind. Why was it so hard to say it? To admit that Charlie was gone even after all this time?

"He wasn't late, June." She tried to keep her voice steady.

June reached out to hold her hand. "What, honey? Was it William? Where is he?"

"It's Charlie. He's dead, June." Her voice reduced to a whisper. "Charlie's dead. He was gone before I even arrived here."

June fled to her side of the table. Threw her arms about her as she sobbed.

"He can't be. Betty, no!"

She nodded as June gulped and hiccuped. Seeing her friend so upset made her stronger, made her keep calm.

"He was dead before I even left London. His family had tried to send me a message, to tell me, but I'd left already."

Betty held her, until the tears had started to fall less regularly, and June straightened herself.

"Is this his parents' home?"

Betty shook her head. "His brother's, actually. Luke."

"Well that's nice, isn't it? I mean, it's not nice, it's awful, but, well you know what I mean. Don't you?"

"I think I'm falling in love with him." Betty sobbed out the words.

Her whole body started shaking. She'd said it. She'd actually come out with it and admitted it for the first time. She didn't just like him, she wasn't just attracted to him, she loved him.

"Oh, darling. You're just confused. With Charlie gone, and little William to care for . . ."

Betty squeezed her eyes shut and leant deep into June's embrace. "I'm sorry, I thought I'd be all right telling you. I guess it's just all caught up on me. I shouldn't have said it."

June stood, patted her back and returned to her chair.

"I always thought you were the one who would be happy. I was so worried about my own marriage, what my new family would be like, but from your stories, I thought it was you and Charlie who would be truly happy. I'm sorry, Betty, I am."

When they'd been travelling here, Betty would have said the same. She had been so confident about her marriage. If anyone was going to have a life-long love, it would have been her and Charlie. And now, here she was a widow, with her mind and heart filled with love for her dead husband's brother.

What she needed was to take her mind off Luke and hear more about June.

"As long as you're happy, June. Tell me he's wonderful, please tell me he hasn't let you down?"

A dreamy look crossed June's face, like no matter how hard she tried her eyes had to light up just at the mention of her husband's name. "Eddie's the best. More than I could ever have hoped for. I'm so lucky."

"I'm happy for you, June, I really am." She couldn't stop the fresh flood of tears that filled her eyes though. "It's just, well, things didn't exactly work out as I'd planned, and seeing you again has made me feel a little emotional."

"Did you mean what you said before? About your brother-in-law?" June whispered.

Betty nodded solemnly.

"Worse things could happen, Betty. Don't feel bad. You deserve to be happy, no one is going to judge you."

She suddenly didn't want to talk about it.

"I can't believe I forgot to tell you."

June bent forward. "Tell me what?"

"I found Madeline." She watched as a smile lit June's face. "She's not in a good way, but she's got a baby, can you believe it?"

June's face seemed sad, before it brightened again.

"A baby, already?"

"And we're going to be seeing them both soon I hope. She was meant to get here before you."

"What about Alice? Or do you think she's forgotten all about us by now?"

"I hope not."

"Betty, I think your other friend is here!"

She jumped to her feet as Ivy walked toward them, William on her hip.

"Coming?"

June shook her head. "I'll stay here with William I think," she said as Ivy placed him down on the rug. "He's such a darling boy, I need to soak up my time with him."

Betty watched as he crawled around. So fast as he moved over the lawn then tried to pull himself up to stand, so close to walking now.

"I'll be back soon."

Betty hadn't prepared for being reunited with the girls, not now that she was faced with it. Seeing June was one thing, hugging her and chatting away, but seeing Madeline too had her legs shaking like gelatine.

"Mads!" She called out her name, holding up her skirt so she could run to the car. "Madeline!"

Madeline turned, slowly, her body angled toward Betty. The sight made Betty stop in her tracks, her shoes skidding on the gravel, before forcing herself to propel forward again.

It wasn't the Madeline she remembered.

Not the round faced, proud girl who'd befriended her all those months ago on the ship. Not the chatty, confident young woman who had made her feel like her best friend in the world when she was pregnant. Had done so much for her and been the one to bring them all together as friends. Helped to deliver William.

She was a shell. A fragile, skinny shell of the woman she had been. Her cheeks were hollow, dark, deep half-circles under her eyes creating no illusion about what she'd been through. That something dreadful had happened to her that she was so desperate to escape from.

The quiet, content baby girl in her arms was asleep. Without her, holding on to her tight, Betty wondered if Madeline could even stand upright. She was like a balloon with no air to keep her afloat.

"Oh my love, what's happened to you?"

Betty scooped the baby from her friend's arms and pulled her into a firm hug. Madeline's body was so small, but she held on, pressing into her, sobbing into her shoulder. She had known

something was wrong, but she'd never imagined Madeline would look like this.

"There, there. It's okay, you're safe here."

Madeline still didn't let go, not until Betty prised her away so she could inspect the baby, worried they were going to crush her.

"Tell me who we have here? Who's this gorgeous wee girl?"

The baby was tucked tight into a fluffy pink and white checked blanket.

"Char-Charlotte," Madeline hiccuped. "This is my Charlotte."

"Well, Charlotte, let's get you and your mother inside. You can meet my William and your Aunty June."

"June's here already?"

Betty nodded, holding the baby in one arm and slinging her other around Madeline. Her friend tucked into her, like a child needing comfort.

"She's here. No word from Alice, but June's well. And she's looking forward to seeing you."

"And Charlie? Please tell me your Charlie is as nice as he was back home?" Madeline's eyes were pleading. "Roy, he's, he's . . ."

Tears stopped her from saying anymore.

“Shhh, now. You’re okay. We don’t have to talk about anything you don’t want to. You’re safe here.”

Madeline looked up at her, still waiting for an answer about Charlie, but Betty didn’t want to burden her with her own loss. Not now. She’d gotten it off her chest telling June and her focus now was on helping Madeline, even if she didn’t know what needed fixing yet.

“I’ve got a story of my own, Mads, but let’s just get you inside and with a cup of tea in your hand first, all right?”

Madeline looked grateful, a smile trying to show itself as her face relaxed.

“I’ve already discussed what I know of your circumstances with, ah, Mr Olliver, and you are welcome here for as long as you need somewhere to stay. Our house is your house if you need it to be.”

Madeline looked confused. “Mr Olliver? That’s a bit formal. I thought his name was Charlie.”

Betty hoisted the baby up and tickled her chin, smiling down at her.

She wasn’t going to lie, but she could avoid the topic completely. She’d tell Madeline about her circumstances soon enough. Right now, they needed to do what they could for Madeline, because what ever had happened to her wasn’t allowed to happen again. Not if she could help it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

ALICE FOUGHT THE quiver in her chin and thrust it skyward instead. There was no point in acting like a child, but turning up her was making her doubt herself all over again. She'd chosen Betty because she'd been the easiest to find, and because she'd probably be the most sympathetic. And she needed someone to confide in and just be herself around. Not that the other girls wouldn't be there for her, it was just that Betty was the one with the biggest heart.

There was only one Olliver residence listed in the public records, and she was certain it was the one. It was something she'd remembered, Betty telling her that it was Olliver with a double 'L' in the middle. Something they'd probably all remembered her saying.

Alice coached herself every step of the way. Up the long driveway, toward the door and then standing on the wide porch.

The house was impressive. She tried not to let the negative thoughts creep into her head but it was hard. This was the type of home she'd expected. The type of entrance that she thought she'd be arriving home to. The type of home that deep down she still yearned to have.

But thinking like that wasn't useful. It certainly didn't do her any good moping about what should have or could have been. She and Ralph were going to make it. They were both going to succeed, make something of themselves, and they would have a home like this one day.

They were going to make their marriage work, and that was the only thing that mattered now. It was the only thing she could think about, that she should feel fortunate not to be marked an adulteress and banished back to London.

The only other thing she cared about was finding her friends. Something she should have done months ago. What had happened to their whispered promises of staying in touch forever?

Alice raised her hand and forced her knuckles to bang on the door. It was now or never.

No answer.

She stood, waited some more, then hit the door harder, trying to make more noise.

The door swung open.

Alice dropped her hand. It wasn't Betty.

"Can I help you?"

A woman stood, looking her over, smiling.

"Well, yes. I hope so. I was hoping to find a Mrs Betty Olliver and I don't know if I'm at the right house."

The woman's smile deepened.

"You've got the right house, dear. You're not one of her friends from the ship are you?"

Alice nodded. "Yes. How did you know?"

"Oh my, Betty is going to make a fuss when she sees you."

Alice followed the woman and shut the door behind her. She hadn't answered her question but she wasn't going to wait around for an answer, not if Betty was here.

"So she's home then?"

"Oh yes." This time the lady's eyes shone. "She's home, and the other girls are here too. This is your lucky day."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

JUNE'S CUP DROPPED from her hands like it had a mind of its own. Her ears almost fell off, the shriek was so loud, and her hands were still shaking.

Only the cry of Madeline's baby made her snap out of the daydream.

"Betty, what the . . ."

Her mouth fell open.

Oh my. It couldn't be, not today?

"Alice!" Betty was squealing again. "Alice, it's Alice!"

June watched as Alice walked across the lawn, on tip-toe so her heels didn't get lost in the turf as Ivy flapped her hands from the back door. Alice looked the same, blond hair perfectly manicured, red lips painted on, but she was older perhaps, more mature. Or maybe she was just exhausted. Like poor Madeline.

"Alice Jones, what on earth are you doing here?"

June was surprised to see Alice blush at Betty's question. She jumped up to greet their friend, although she couldn't help but notice that Madeline stayed seated. Like she lacked the energy to even move.

"I hope I'm not interrupting," Alice sounded unsure of herself, not the bold girl from the ship June remembered. "I wasn't expecting to find you all here."

Betty grabbed hold of Alice and held her tight, feet stomping with excitement.

"You've got the best timing, Alice. June and Madeline have just arrived."

June stepped forward and hugged her too. When she pulled back she saw the confusion in Alice's eyes.

"Oh Alice, don't go thinking we've been meeting without you."

Betty looked confused, then seemed to realise what was going on.

"Oh gosh, no!" Betty took Alice by the hand and led her over to the table. "We only just got back in touch, this is the first time we've met since we got here, can you believe it? Nine months it's taken us."

Alice looked relieved, like she'd thought she had been left out of whatever fun they'd been having.

"Hi Madeline."

Madeline looked up, a blank look on her face, then seemed to register what was going on.

"Alice," her voice was flat but she smiled. "How are you? I'm sorry I didn't get up."

Alice swapped a look with June, but she just smiled back at her. She knew as much as Alice did, it seemed Madeline had only confided in Betty so far.

"So what's been happening, Alice? How did you find me?"

Alice raised her eyebrows at the tea being poured from the pretty teapot. "Something about that double L spelling."

Even Madeline laughed at that.

"So maybe teaching you how to spell my married name correctly wasn't so loathsome?"

They all nodded their heads.

"How's your man? Ralph, wasn't it?"

Alice looked up at June. "Let's just say moving here wasn't as easy as I'd expected."

June didn't know what to say to that. Was she the only one who had found happiness here? Was it wrong for her to want to tell them how wonderful Eddie was?

"Please tell me your husband is a dish?"

"Oh yes!" Betty answered for her. "I met him at the dock. He was divine."

June had to agree. "He's a wonderful man, I'm so lucky."

But even as she said it, knowing that she was so fortunate, she was envious of the two children amongst them. What she wouldn't give to have one of her own here.

"And you, Betty? Is that Charlie of yours coming out to join us? Or is he scared of a group of women?"

Alice was laughing, so June gave a tight smile back, not wanting to say anything. It was Betty's place to tell them.

Betty looked from Madeline to Alice, then to June.

"Did I say something wrong?" Alice's eyes flickered between them.

"I don't want to ruin the mood, but I may as well come out and tell you. Since we're all here now."

June wasn't going to let herself cry. She had to be strong for Betty. She'd been a blubbering mess before but she wasn't going to let it happen again.

"Charlie took a contract after the war, flying for a supplies company. His plane went down on his last flight, and he didn't make it home."

June heard Alice gasp. Even Madeline seemed roused from her trance, blinking furiously like she was trying to decide if she was awake or not.

"Are you saying that Charlie's dead?"

Betty nodded, hands folded tightly together on her lap. "I only found out after I arrived. His brother Luke took me in,

this is his home." She paused." He's a lovely man and I'm very fortunate."

June kept her eyes downcast. She guessed Betty wasn't planning on sharing everything with the others.

"Oh sweetheart, I'm so sorry." Alice moved her chair closer so she could put her arm around Betty's shoulders.

They all froze when Madeline started snuffling.

"I'm sorry Betty, I'm sorry. You don't need me here with my problems too."

Madeline stood with Charlotte in her arms, eyes wild, filled with terror.

June jumped to her feet first. "Mads? What are you saying? Don't be silly. We're all here for one another."

She looked like she was about to run. To take flight and run away. Something had happened to their friend, something serious, something that she needed to get off of her chest.

June walked slowly over to her, taking her by the arm and walking her back over to her seat. She hoped her touch helped to calm her, to let her know she didn't have to run, didn't have to keep her problems bottled up inside like a disease.

"Tell us what's happened to you, Madeline. Tell us what's wrong."

It was like they were all holding their breaths, waiting to hear. Wanting to know what had traumatised her. Waiting to see how they could help, what they could do.

“I hate it here. I hate it. I want to go home.”

Her words were so low, spoken so softly, they were barely audible. But June heard them; heard them for what they were. This wasn't just a case of not liking it here, of pining for home and missing family. Madeline was desperate.

“Has he hurt you? Did your husband do something?” June lowered her voice. “You can tell us, Madeline, you're safe here. We're not going to let anyone hurt you or your baby.”

Madeline's response was to shut her eyes, tight. Like she was trying to force the memories away.

Betty and Alice fell to their knees in front of her, leaning into her, holding Madeline's hands. June reached for the baby and put her over her shoulder.

She tried to ignore the feeling of the soft, tiny child in her arms. The pang in her chest wasn't fair. She needed to help Madeline. Nothing else mattered right now.

“What did he do, honey? Is your husband okay?”

Madeline looked up, her eyes like glass. It was as if she'd died behind them, like she wasn't there anymore. “My father died, my husband's family kept every letter from me, and now

they want me prisoner in their house again. I have to go home, please. Please help me get home.”

They all looked at Madeline and then at one another.

“Please, Betty. June. Alice. Please.” She started to sob.
“I need to go home.”

* * *

Madeline felt like a fool. It wasn't that she wished she'd kept it to herself, but she felt like an idiot for putting up with her new family for so long.

She'd thought that maybe she wasn't being strong enough. That she needed to try toughening up. That maybe she was doing something wrong. But the look on her friends' faces had told her she was right, that she should have trusted her instincts from day one.

“Why did we take so long to find each other?”

Madeline's voice was hoarse from crying, her eyes were burning, but she felt happier than she had in a long time.

“We're fools, all of us.”

They laughed at Alice.

“So am I the only one who's marriage was a failure?”

Betty smiled and Madeline's heart dropped.

“Oh, sweetheart, I'm sorry! I didn't mean . . .”

Betty raised her hand. "Don't apologise, no offence taken."

Madeline bit her tongue. She wasn't saying another word.

They were quiet, all sitting on the blanket now, spread out on the grass. Charlotte was asleep in June's arms, and William was curled up against a cushion like an exhausted puppy, like he'd been crawling one moment and fallen over asleep the next.

"Marriage has had its ups and downs for me."

Madeline looked up at Alice. She watched her, saw the tired expression on her face as she stared up at the blue sky.

"How so?"

Alice sighed.

"My Ralph wasn't exactly how I remembered him, but we're getting there now."

No one asked any questions. They just sat. Alice would speak when she was ready.

Madeline, well, she was just happy to have her mind off her problems. For now. Tonight, she'd start worrying all over again, but now she just needed to shake it off and enjoy the company. It seemed like forever since she'd just relaxed and been happy.

"I had stars in my eyes, you know? Ralph was so confident and strong, gave me everything I could dream of back in London. When he came home he'd lost everything, and I didn't cope very well."

"But you're okay now?" It was June who asked the question.

Alice stopped playing with the edge of the rug and raised her eyes. "We're going to be fine. Deep down, I know we will be."

Madeline watched June. She could sense she was holding something back.

"How about you, June? Tell me about your Eddie?"

The smile that broke out on her friend's face said it all before she'd even spoken a word.

"Eddie's wonderful. I'm very lucky."

That made them all look up.

"Do tell!" Betty sounded excited again, like she had been when they'd all first sat down together. "No holding back here. Especially not with good news."

June looked nervous but Betty gave her a sharp nudge with her elbow.

"I don't know what to say?" June was blushing furiously.

"Just tell us what he's like," insisted Alice.

She rolled her eyes but June couldn't keep her feelings to herself.

"Eddie's incredible," she finally gushed. "Like the man of my dreams. He's so kind, his family are almost as good as my own, and he built us a house. A real home, with his own hands."

Madeline leaned back, her hands out to support her weight. Good on her. Thank goodness one of them at least had the man they'd been expecting.

"You're head over heels in love, aren't you?" It was Betty prodding again.

"In love would be an understatement."

June was bright red, the flush extending all the way down her neck.

"Is anything about your life here not perfect?" Alice sounded like she was joking but it made Madeline feel awkward for June.

"I wouldn't say it's perfect, but I'm happy with my husband, if that's what you're asking. Life here is even better than I'd ever imagined it to be."

"More tea?" asked Betty, jumping to her feet. "Anyone hungry?"

Madeline shook her head then wished that'd she said yes. Betty was trying to get them off topic and she hadn't realised until too late. It wasn't fair to interrogate June like this, not when they'd all had trauma, experienced something bad here. They couldn't make her feel uncomfortable just because she'd had everything turn out well for her.

"Oh my."

Madeline turned. What the fuss was about? Alice looked like she'd seen a ghost.

Oh.

An attractive ghost.

"I'm guessing that's your brother-in-law?"

Madeline heard June's words but she couldn't tear her eyes away from the figure walking toward them. He had dark hair falling ever so slightly over his forehead. He was tall, strong, confident as he moved toward them.

"No wonder you're in love with him," June whispered.

"What!" squealed Alice.

"June!" Betty hissed. "Quiet!"

Madeline forced herself to turn away. The others were less demure. More like the American ladies they claimed to be so unlike.

"Hello ladies."

Even his voice was divine, smooth and commanding all at once.

"Luke, I'd like you to meet my friends." Betty's composure had returned. "This is Alice Jones, June West and Madeline Parker. Oh, and little Charlotte here too."

He nodded, arms crossed as he stood before them. His eyes swept over William, asleep, but Madeline saw something there.

Love. There was no other word for it. Like a father looking out for his son.

“Well, it’s lovely to meet you all.”

They all smiled up at him. Like love-sick puppies, thought Madeline, turning to liquid as they watched him.

“Madeline?”

She looked up at her name being called, then realised Luke was speaking to her.

“Madeline, Betty has told me you might be in need of somewhere to stay.”

She gulped. What did she say to him? What would he think of her? Did he want to know why?

“Please feel free to stay here with Betty for as long as you need, I’m sure she’ll enjoy your company.”

She could see even more so why Betty liked the man. To invite her to stay with no questions asked? He obviously trusted his sister-in-law.

“Thank you Luke, thank you so much.”

“No need to thank me. Enjoy your afternoon.”

He smiled at them all, but Madeline didn’t miss the way his eyes hovered a little too long over Betty. Like there was something more between them than a bachelor and a young widower.

All Madeline wanted was to get home, back to London. But she hoped for her sake that Betty could find happiness here with

Luke. Could stay here and make something of her life. Losing Charlie must have been hard on her, but she had a chance to make a life here, with another man, and she deserved it. She'd lost her family before the war, hadn't she? Happiness here was the least she could ask for.

"Luke, I'll come in with you. I think we might need some more sustenance out here."

That made Madeline giggle. It was Betty who had always needed sustenance on the ship. She'd always claimed that it was eating for two that made her so ravenous, but maybe she just liked her food.

Madeline watched them walk off. Close but not touching. Heads bent in toward one another, like they didn't even know they were doing it.

"They'd make a gorgeous couple," June said with a sigh.

"Is she seriously in love with him?" Alice asked.

Madeline rolled her eyes. "Do you even need to ask? Look at them."

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

“Thanks for being so understanding, Luke.”

Betty kept her eyes on the path ahead. Now that she'd admitted it to June, it was all she could think about. Seeing him, walking with him, hearing his voice, watching how at ease he was talking with her friends, it made her more in love with him by the moment.

It was no longer something she could control. Like a beast with its own mind, taking her over and not letting her think of anything else.

“I don't want to get caught up in any problems, Betty, but if she's having trouble you do what you need to help her.”

Betty sighed.

“It's pretty bad for her Luke. I think she wants to get back home.”

He slowed his stride. Without even looking at him she knew his brows would be knotted. She'd watched his face, studied his expressions, so many times that she knew what every sigh and movement meant.

"Do you mean to say she wants to run away with her child back to London?"

Betty chewed at the inside of her mouth. Did that mean he didn't agree?

"I'll tell you all the details once I've spoken to her alone, later." She would, she wasn't lying. Whatever Madeline told her would have to be repeated to Luke if he was going to assist her in any way. "I promise I'll keep you informed."

He relaxed, she could sense his body loosening.

"I know you will."

Betty went to look up at him but her eyes froze. His hand skimmed hers, ever-so, a brush of his skin against hers, indenting against the palm of her hand with his fingers.

She held her breath. Then slowly let her eyes travel toward his.

He was watching her, waiting for her reaction, and she slowly clasped her hand around his fingers, for a moment, before she let go.

They kept walking, moving, not saying anything. But Betty's heart sung like a bird calling out to the world, chirping so

frantically she was sure Luke would see it drumming out of her chest.

“Come and see me later once Madeline’s settled.”

She liked how his voice had softened, changed, as he spoke to her this time.

“I’ll see you soon.”

When he turned away to walk to his office, she could have squealed. But she didn’t. Betty skipped into the kitchen and almost bowled straight into Ivy.

“Betty! What on earth are you doing?”

She shrugged. “Just looking for more cookies.”

“What’s put that silly smile on your face?”

Betty pulled her lips down, trying to keep her mouth straight.

“Nothing. Just having my friends here, that’s all.”

Ivy looked suspicious but she didn’t question her further.

“I’ve made a cherry pie for you girls, you take the cream and plates out and I’ll be out in a moment with it.”

It took all Betty’s composure to walk demurely from the kitchen. Her heart was still fluttering, banging, in her chest like it was about to explode.

She loved Charlie. She always would. But this was different.

Charlie was gone, and the way she felt about Luke was real. It hadn't been the head over heels, love at first sight like kind of attraction that it had been with Charlie, but this was every bit as good. She trusted Luke, she admired him, and she respected him.

It might have been a slow-burn attraction, but the way she felt for him now was more love than she could ever have imagined feeling again. Ever.

* * *

Madeline was calm. She felt safe. Happy even.

It seemed like she'd be unhappy and upset for so long that this was a new feeling, but it wasn't. It was less than a year ago that they were all sailing here, full of anticipation.

She looked around at the three women seated in a half-circle. It was like heaven being here with them. Knowing she could just be herself, not worrying about what she was meant to be doing, how she would be judged, what she could do to get away.

Madeline still didn't know quite how she was going to get back home, but she would find a way. It seemed possible now, as if her future was filled with possibilities.

"I guess I'd better be on my way home."

Madeline looked over at June. She didn't want to say goodbye to her friends, but the air was becoming cool, the sun disappearing for the day behind a bank of night time clouds.

Alice stood and gave June a tug to her feet.

"How are you getting home?"

June laughed. "Would you believe Eddie's taught me to drive? I've got his car out the front if you trust me to get you home safely?"

Alice shook her head. "You? Driving a car?"

Madeline tried to ignore the tears in her eyes as her friends chattered. Betty was looking on too, but she seemed happy. It was different for Madeline.

She had a feeling that this would be the last time she'd ever see June and Alice again. The last time she'd ever be in their company.

If Betty was prepared to help her, she would be home before they even met up again.

"Mads?"

June was standing in front of her.

"Daydreaming. Sorry, what did I miss?"

"I was just saying that I'd love you all to come and visit me. We could have lunch? Eddie is dying to meet you and I could show you our home."

Madeline smiled. It was all she could do. She wasn't going to go making promises when she wasn't going to be here. It was like only Betty understood how deadly serious she was about leaving for London.

"I'm going to miss you girls." She had tears in her eyes again. "I'd love to see your house, June, if I can. We'll just have to see."

Alice stepped forward and threw her arms about her.

"You're serious, aren't you?" Alice looked her straight in the eyes, held out at arms length. "You're really going home."

Madeline shut her eyes and took a deep breath. "I hate it here, Alice. I hate it. If I can get home, I'm going."

Understanding crossed Alice's face. "I wish I could help you but we're only just getting by. Things have been, well, difficult."

She was hiding something, that much was obvious, but Madeline wasn't going to ask her. She didn't want to pry. They all had their secrets.

"I'll figure it out, Alice, you just concentrate on your own happiness. All right?"

Alice stepped back so June could hug her too.

"I know it's sounds silly, we haven't seen in each other in so long, but I'm going to miss you, Mads. I truly am. It's like

we've finally found each other and it's too late. Maybe we could have helped sooner you if we'd known."

She doubted that. But she felt the same. "How can you miss someone you only knew a couple of weeks, and haven't seen in months, right?"

Betty elbowed her in the side. "That sound like anyone's marriage?"

They all laughed.

"Point taken," said June. "So it means I'm not just being all sentimental then?"

Madeline shook her head. So did the other two.

"If you don't mind I might just take Charlotte up to the house." Madeline scooped her baby up from the carry-basinet and stroked her cheek. "I'm not great with goodbyes."

June touched her shoulder and walked past. Alice just smiled up at her and Betty pointed up toward her home.

"Just call out to Ivy, she'll show you to your room. Help you settle in."

"Bye," she said, squeezing her breath in to stop herself from sobbing as they walked away.

"We'll never forget you Madeline."

She turned and headed to the house, Charlotte clutched to her chest. Tears fell down her cheeks, her breath came out in ragged sobs, but she made herself walk.

I'll miss you too, she thought.

They were the best and most real friends she'd ever had. If it wasn't for them, maybe she would have just given up.

But the weight of her baby in her arms told her different. Betty might be the one to help her escape, but she was doing this for herself and for her child.

It was time to go home.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

BETTY KNOCKED LIGHTLY on the door.

“It’s open.”

She pushed it open and walked in. After all the time she’d been here, living in this house, this was the first time Betty had ever stepped foot in Luke’s office. An over-size antique desk looked out over the grounds, and two of the four walls were lined with shelves, books literally heaving to escape.

“I didn’t mean to disturb you.”

Luke continued scribbling, his hand moving fast as he made notes, before he put the pen down and instead pressed his palms to the desk and stood.

“You’re not disturbing me.” He moved out and took a couple of steps toward her, before leaning on the edge of the desk.

“It’s nice to be distracted.”

She didn't know what to say. It hadn't been awkward between them like this for weeks, and now she was unsure of herself, nervous of what to do and how to behave.

"I just, ah, wanted to let you know that Madeline's settled in one of the guest rooms. She'll be staying until we can figure out exactly what to do with her."

Luke didn't seem to care. "What is it she wants to do?"

"Go back to London, for sure," Betty blurted. "She wants to take Charlotte and go back to her parents."

"I see." Luke leaned back into the desk. "And what does her husband have to say about this as soon as possible?"

She had to tell him the truth. She'd never been any good at lying and now didn't seem like the best time to start.

"Her husband and his family have been awful to her. It's a long story but they didn't even let know her own father was dying. She needs to get away. It's very abusive by all accounts."

She expected him to rebuff her. To tell her that Madeline's duty was to her husband, that she couldn't abandon him and take off with his child. But he didn't.

"What do you think?"

What?

"What do you think she should do? Do you think we should help her? Assist her in returning to London?"

Betty was confused.

“You would help her get back to her family?”

He shook his head. “I asked what you thought.”

Her eyes followed him as he walked to a side cabinet and reached for two small glasses. He poured a small nip of liquid into one and a larger amount into the other.

He walked back toward her, eyes meeting hers and not giving her the chance to look away.

Luke offered her the smaller glass. She wanted to say no, but the way he held it out to her, the promise in his smile, stopped her from saying anything.

“If it were you, what would you do?” His voice was soft now, like he was asking her something deeply personal.

She took the glass, the aroma of the alcohol filling her nostrils.

“If you’d heard what he’d done to her, Luke, you wouldn’t think ill of her.” She watched as he drained at least a third of his glass. “If it were me I’d want to go too.”

He raised his glass and inclined for her to do the same. She tipped it to her mouth, letting a drop touch her tongue. Even the tiny amount burned her throat as she swallowed it. Was it whisky? Bourbon? She didn’t know, but it wasn’t helping her. Even the smell was enough to make her light-headed.

“And how do you feel now?” It felt like he’d moved closer to her, his body too near for comfort. “Do you want to leave?”

No. She never wanted to leave him.

She just let her head shake from side to side.

“Are you sure?”

His hand reached out to her, tilting her chin up toward him, forcing her to look at him.

“Yes,” she breathed out the word. “I’m sure.”

She wanted him to kiss her. Was so sure he was about to, but as soon as he’d touched her he stopped, his hand falling away.

“Tell Madeline we’ll offer her all the financial assistant she needs.” Luke tipped back his glass and swallowed the remainder of his drink. “Make whatever arrangements you need to, to get her on a ship back home. Phone Jean at home, tell her to make the arrangements first thing in the morning.”

Betty couldn’t believe it. The fact that something had almost happened between them, and that he was prepared to help a friend of hers, one whom he’d never met before in his life until today.

“Thank you Luke. Thank you so much.”

He stopped, watched her. Like there was something left to say that he hadn’t said already. Something he wanted to tell her.

“Goodnight Betty.”

He took another step, leant forward, and kissed her cheek. His lips hovered, slow, lingering over her skin, but it went no further. Heat burnt in her cheeks but she stayed still. Wishing he would kiss her, that they could just admit to what they felt for one another.

But he pulled away.

“Goodnight,” she whispered.

They watched one another, until he smiled, almost sadly, before walking back around to be seated at his desk. Betty wished the blush would leave her cheeks, and turned to leave the room.

“Betty?”

She stopped and looked back at him.

“I’m glad you had a nice day with your friends.”

She waited.

“Have them here as often as you like. I want this to feel like your home too.”

She gave him a tight smile.

It did feel like home to her. She just wished he understood how she felt for him too.

* * *

Strangely enough, Betty was more worried about tapping on Madeline's door than she had been Luke's. She didn't want to say goodbye to her friend, not when they'd only just found each other, but she was going to help her.

Betty had spent so long feeling upset and down about her life without Charlie, she knew what it was like to lose hope. But Luke had been there for her, even when they hadn't connected. He was her ally. Her protector. And now he was going out of his way to help her friend too.

Something inside told her he was doing it for her, because he knew what it would mean to her. But she also knew that it took a certain type of man to agree to what they were doing anyway. To essentially aiding a woman to escape her husband. She was grateful. Whatever his reasons.

"Madeline? Are you awake?"

It wasn't late but they'd all had a big day.

"Come in."

She opened the door to find Madeline sitting on the bed, nursing her little girl.

"It's so special, don't you think? Just spending time with them alone when they're feeding."

Madeline looked happy, content there. Earlier today she'd gone from wild-eyed, sad and then frightened looking. Now she looked at peace.

"I love her so much, Betty. Is that how you feel with William? Like you couldn't love him any harder if you tried?"

Betty sat on the edge of the bed. "Like you couldn't ever have imagined loving anything or anyone like you do your baby?"

Madeline looked relieved that she understood how she was feeling.

"I knew I wanted to go, to escape from here, but as soon as I knew I was carrying a child, and then after she was born, it just made me more determined."

Betty knew exactly how that felt, just in a different way.

"Without William, I wouldn't have survived losing Charlie." She admitted. "I would have had to move on, but part of me would have died, been broken, forever."

"And Luke?" Madeline lowered her voice. "Something's already happened with him, hasn't it?"

Betty didn't know what to say. "I don't know what's happened, if anything has, but I think it will." She paused. "I hope it will."

"If you love him don't hold back, Betty. Promise me that, will you?" Madeline's eyes swung between her baby suckling to Betty, her expression serious. "If it will make you and William happy, if it's the right thing to do, don't make yourself feel bad about it. Just be thankful that you've been given a second chance at love. At happiness."

It had taken months of soul searching, of trying to make herself believe that she wasn't forgetting Charlie, but she agreed with Madeline. Luke wasn't just anybody. He was Charlie's brother. He was William's uncle. She was still being true to Charlie, he'd want her to be happy, and Luke understood how much she'd loved his brother. She'd never lied to him about that.

But it was time to talk about Madeline. About what she could do to help her.

"I have good news for you Mads. Tonight is about your second chance, not mine."

"You're not just trying to change the subject, are you?"

Madeline was trying to joke but Betty could see the hope in her eyes. The flare of longing that she might be able to get home after all.

"I've just finished speaking to Luke's secretary. She has been able to find out about a ship leaving for England in five days time."

Madeline was holding her breath. Betty spoke quickly.

"If you want to go, we'll send you with a driver to the train station tomorrow, then you can take the short trip to just near the port and stay at a lodge there while Jean makes the arrangements for you. She thinks it will be best if you are nearby as soon as possible, because we aren't sure who you need to see or what the visa requirements are. That will give you

enough time to organise yourself and your finalise the necessary paperwork before the ship sails.”

She watched as Betty’s face fell. Of course. She’d omitted to tell her about Luke’s aid.

“I’ve spoken with Luke and he will cover your fare back to England, and your accommodation.”

Madeline started to cry. Her body shook, hands quivering, as she took her sleeping baby from her breast and placed her in the crib.

Betty gave her a moment before stepping forward to hold her. She stayed silent, still, her arms wrapped around her friend. Her body was tiny, so thin, but there was a strength there that could not be extinguished.

“I know you feel bad about Luke helping you, but he’s doing it for me, Madeline. I think he’s trying to show me that he cares, that he trusts me.”

Madeline just held her tighter.

“Don’t feel like you owe us anything, except friendship. I know you would do the same for me if you had to.”

Madeline pulled back, her eyes red, skin blotchy.

“I’m going to miss you so much, Betty. You are a true friend.”

Betty pulled her back in for another hug.

"I was a frightened young pregnant woman once, and I met three friends who saw me through the hard times, and helped to deliver my baby." She wiped away her own tears with one hand, but hers weren't sad tears. They were just a reflection of a memory she would never forget. "I know what a true friend is, June, and you've already been one to me."

"Does that make it okay that I'm leaving you then?" asked Madeline.

"We've all got to leave one another to lead our own lives, but a friend understands that."

Madeline's brave little smile told her she understood.

"Now you get a good night's sleep. Tomorrow you're off and you need all the strength you have to travel with a little one."

"Thank you Betty. Thank you so much."

"Goodnight, Madeline. Sweet dreams."

Betty pulled the door shut and stood in the hallway, back to the wall, eyes shut. Madeline was going to be okay, and so was she.

If Luke wanted to be part of her future, wanted her as a man wanted a woman, then she'd say yes. She would tell him she felt the same. Because she did deserve happiness. She still loved Charlie, but there was room enough in her heart for Luke too.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

SHE WAS PREPARED for the worst, but it wasn't helping her nerves any.

June sat, cross-legged, waiting for the doctor to return to the room. She'd told Eddie that he had no reason to come, that it was women's business, but maybe she shouldn't have been so proud. Maybe she should have asked Betty to come with her. Just for support. She would have been the person to ask.

"Mrs West?"

She looked up. Her stomach was in knots, if that were even possible.

"Yes, that's me."

The doctor smiled at her, but it did little to ease her nerves. He was middle-aged, wore glasses, hardly any hair on his bald head. Not exactly the type of person she wanted inspecting her private parts, if that's what he had to do.

She shuddered. Maybe she shouldn't have come. She should have kept it to herself and just kept on trying. Hadn't Eddie told her she was being too impatient?

"What can I help you with today?"

She squirmed in her seat.

"This is a rather, er, delicate matter." She looked up and saw that his expression hadn't changed. "It's, well, my husband and I would like a family and we have not had any success."

June could feel the burn in her cheeks. They must be flaming red.

"We can run a blood test and check your general health, Mrs West, but sometimes these things just take time."

She nodded.

"I understand. It's just, I wasn't sure if . . ."

The doctor smiled and shuffled his chair closer.

"You seem like a fit, healthy young woman, and I'm sure you have nothing to worry about. How long have you been hoping for a baby?"

"I've been here ten months now. We were married in England, during the war."

He nodded. "Give it time, my dear. If you are still without a child in another year or so, then we'll look into what can be done."

Another year. A whole year or more? She wanted a family now. Wanted children filling the bedrooms and playing in their home, spilling out into the fields and waiting eagerly in the kitchen for baking to come out of the oven.

She wanted a baby now!

"Thank you for your time, doctor. I'll take your advice and come back if we're still having trouble."

"The blood tests, Mrs West? We can at least conduct those now."

"No." She shook her head and gathered up her things. "I feel very healthy, I probably shouldn't have come."

He looked confused, but saw her to the door anyway.

June knew what she had to do.

If she wanted a family, she needed to act now. Being a mother was the most important thing to her in all the world, and she wasn't going to sit around and wait for it to happen. Not when, deep down, she had a feeling that something was wrong. That she wasn't going to be pregnant any time soon.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

IT HAD BECOME a routine. Betty came downstairs while Luke was part way through his breakfast. He passed her a section of the paper, same small flicker of a smile as he looked at her. Ivy brought her two slices of toast and a coffee, she sat, pretended to read the paper, and instead secretly studied Luke.

That first time she met him, he'd come across as cold. His gaze judging her, questioning her. Now, there was something there. Something neither of them had even close to admitted to.

Well, she'd admitted it to herself, to Madeline too, but since her friend had left nothing had happened between them. Nothing at all.

They always sat in silence. A comfortable lack of talking that didn't bother her. If William was awake, she usually had him in the playpen in the morning room. Luke would look over at the his nephew, who always smiled and flapped his arms up at

him, and he'd say goodbye. Sometimes he'd scoop him up or ruffle his hair, or comment on how close he was to walking, but that was it.

Today when he rose, he stopped to drop a kiss to William's forehead as he sat playing with blocks. It made Betty happy. Seeing William loved like that. Especially from his father's brother. There was a connection between them that she hoped would only grow stronger.

"Why don't you meet me for lunch today, Betty?"

She recovered before her cup fell to the table.

"Oh, of course. That would be lovely."

He slung his jacket over one shoulder. His eyes scanned her, smiled at her, before he turned away.

"Meet me at twelve."

She nodded. Her tongue felt swollen, like a bee had stung it over and over.

He wanted to take her for lunch? Was there something he wanted to tell her? There was something about the way he'd looked at, at how relaxed he'd been. Like something had changed or was about to.

He wasn't getting married, was he? Did he have a secret sweetheart that he'd kept quiet? Was that the reason he'd never made his feelings known for her? Maybe he'd had a promotion? She

chastised herself. If he was getting a promotion the entire country would know about it. He was already a State Senator.

She heard a shuffle and turned to find Ivy leaning against the open door to the kitchen.

“Anyone would think that boy was sweet on you.”

“Ivy!”

The other woman just shrugged. “All I know is that before you arrived, he’d eat his breakfast in a flash and be out the door.” She paused and threw Betty a knowing look. “Now he takes his time, waits ‘till you’re downstairs, then takes even longer finishing his coffee than he’d usually take on finishing an entire dinner.”

Betty went to pick William up. He was heavy now but she still loved lifting him. “Hello my darling. Don’t you listen to that silly Aunt Ivy.”

William smiled and reached out to pull her hair. “Mama. Mama. No!”

“Would it be so bad?”

She held William tight, inhaled the sweet smell of his hair before putting his him back down and looked over her shoulder at Ivy.

“I’m not ready for that, Ivy. I still love Charlie.” She said it, but she was lying to herself. She did still love

Charlie, but she was ready. Ready for something to happen with Luke.

“Charlie’s gone, love. Luke’s here. What you two can’t see I can, and you’re perfect for each other.”

She went to interrupt her but was stopped by a raised hand.

“I lost my husband thirty years ago. My daughter was older than your William at the time, but I know what it’s like to be alone. To mourn.”

Betty turned around to face her. Why had Ivy never told her this before?

“How long were you married?”

“Five years. But let me tell you, there were men I could have fancied at the time, men who would have been proud to have me, but I let my grief stop me from being happy.”

Betty gulped. She didn’t want to hear this, and yet she did. She needed to.

“By the time I realised I’d rather not be alone, I was too old. Past my best.”

They stood there, watching one another.

“All I’m saying is that if Luke has taken a fancy to you, and you like him back, don’t let memories of Charlie stop you from being happy. Don’t let yourself care a hoot what others might say, because you’re good people. You would make a lovely family.”

Betty walked across the room and put her arms about Ivy. She hugged her back, her deep bosom pressed against her, just like she remembered her mother's doing. Comforting her. All those years ago before her parents had passed away, hugs like this had meant the world to her.

She only pulled away because William started calling her.

"Mama! Mama!"

"Come on little one, time for your nap."

This time he was reaching his arm up, like he'd changed his mind and wanted a cuddle.

"Just enjoy yourself, Betty. That's all you need to do. And if something happens, let it. You are allowed to want happiness, you know?"

She nodded but didn't look back. She didn't want Ivy to see the confusion in her eyes.

She did love Luke. She'd been ready to admit it when something had almost happened between them, that night in his office, but now she was scared.

Could she love both of them? Could she still love Charlie and give Luke her heart too?

Her eyes fell on her son, looking back up at her so innocently.

William deserved to have a father, and Luke did adore him.

But was it right to fall for one brother, when she didn't know if she could ever feel as strongly about him as she had about the other? Or did she already know that she did, that she could? Maybe that was the part that was scaring her.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

MADELINE SAT ON the deck with Charlotte in her arms and let the breeze brush past her bare arms. It was cool, but the fresh air was divine.

“We’re almost there, darling. We’re almost home.”

Charlotte gazed up at her. She hardly ever made a noise, besides the odd gurgle or half-hearted cry. An angel of a child, even at sea.

She came up here every day, sitting on the deck so long as it wasn’t raining, but it wasn’t the same. On her way here she’d always had someone to talk to. A friend to lean on and talk to, something they were setting off to do or something to laugh about.

There were plenty of people aboard the ship, but she wasn’t interested in talking or making friends. She didn’t want to

explain why she was travelling home, be truthful about what she had thought of America, or discuss why there was no husband on board accompanying her. Madeline was content to hold her baby and sing her lullabies, close her eyes and dream of her family, and think about what Betty had done for her. How she'd helped her.

But it was the picture of her family home with its tiny lounge and roaring fire, the mantle piece covered in her mother's little figurines and the hustle and bustle of her nieces that really made her smile.

"We are really going home Charlotte. To your grandma and your aunties and a home where you will be loved and prodded and squeezed every day by a family who love you."

Charlotte just kept gazing back up at her. Madeline thought her heart might actually break from watching her.

Her marriage had been a complete failure. But she was a great mother.

And she finally knew what true love was.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Today was the third day she'd met Luke for lunch. Betty sat in an over-size leather chair, hands clasped in her lap as she waited. There was a newspaper on the stand but she didn't want to read.

"Are you sure I can't get you something to drink?"

Betty smiled at Luke's assistant. "I'll be fine, thank you for asking, Jean."

"He shouldn't be long."

Betty went back to waiting. It was silly to have nerves, to want to run out the door one moment and jump up and down the next with excitement. But she didn't know what to think. What it meant, him asking her to meet him like this.

Was it just a friendly gesture? Wanting to make her feel comfortable?

He hadn't touched her again like that night in his office, not once. She almost wondered if she'd imagined it.

"Betty, I'm so sorry."

She looked up. Luke.

There was nothing she could do but grin at him. His hair was dishevelled, probably from running his hand through it like he did when he was stressed. He looked tired, and his tie was slightly too loose and off centre.

She rose and reached to adjust it, pushing the knot higher and wriggling it into place.

"That's better." She spoke the words low, more to herself than to him.

Then she looked up. Betty hadn't realised how close she was standing to him. Her hands dropped from his tie and her eyes fell to the ground as she stumbled a step backward.

Luke caught her around the elbow with his hand.

They stared at one another, like two deer caught in the headlights of the other's gaze.

"Shall we go?"

Betty couldn't answer until his hand dropped, until his fingers fell from her skin.

It was as if no one else existed, as if they were the only two people in the room.

"Betty?"

His voice was gruff, gravely, different than usual.

“Yes,” she snapped out of it. “Lunch, yes, of course.”

She spun around but as his hand touched the small of her back to guide her, she wondered if everything had changed all over again.

As if the rules had been altered. Or maybe they were playing a new game now entirely.

Luke escorted her out the door and onto the street. The restaurant they went to was the one they'd first dined at together and it was only a walk away.

Betty had a feeling that something was about to change forever between them today.

Today, maybe she'd know what it was between them. Maybe they'd both find out.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

JUNE HAD NEVER felt so exhilarated. All these months of learning to ride a horse and now she knew what all the fuss was about. She loved animals, all animals, but actually climbing on the back of one had never seemed that appealing to her. Riding here was something else entirely. She'd finally mastered the art of cantering, and she'd ridden alongside Eddie all the way down the valley, high up into the hills.

Now they were looking down over the farm, their house a speck in the distance.

"This is beautiful."

It truly was. So beautiful that it almost stole her breath away.

"Almost as beautiful as you."

Eddie rode up beside her and reached for her hand. Even after all this time his words made her blush. She didn't believe him, she never did. Not when he told her how lovely she looked or how much he loved her, because for some reason it still seemed too good to be true. Especially after everything her friends had gone through. Why was she the lucky one? Why had her new life here turned out so wonderful?

"Are you happy here, June? Truly happy?"

She adjusted her weight in the saddle so she could face her husband.

"Eddie I love it here, you know I do."

He lifted her hand to kiss it. "Good. I want you to be happy here, darlin', whatever it takes I want to make you happy."

She wanted so desperately to talk about children. To bring up the fact that she still wasn't pregnant, but she didn't want to ruin this. He was so patient with her, each month that she hadn't fallen pregnant he'd been there for her, but she didn't want to ruin this.

And she wasn't going to bring up the adoption. Not yet. Not until she'd found out more about it.

"When I was at war, I thought about this view." He told her, looking down over the land. "And when I married you I couldn't wait for you to be here, to see this with me."

“Imagine our children growing up here, Eddie. Riding on the land, running up to see their grandparents every day.”

He took her hand again, his smile making his eyes crinkle in the corners.

“Speaking of family, I have a surprise for you.”

“What is it?”

He made a face at her. “If I told you how would it be a secret?”

She hated secrets. And what could it have to do with family?

“When do I get to find out?”

He gathered up his reins and his horse backed up a few steps before turning around.

“It’s waiting for you at home. Let’s go.”

June’s legs were killing her. Her calves were already starting to ache and her backside was numb, but she was desperate to find out what this surprise was about.

“Slow down!”

She looked back. Eddie was running behind her. He pushed her to the side and stood in front of the door.

“Wait here a minute.”

She stomped her foot but she was finding it difficult to act angry.

He dropped a kiss to her lips, open in protest, and she kissed him back hungrily. But he wasn't falling for her seduction. Eddie placed his hand on her chest and pushed her back an inch.

"Wait here."

"Fine," she mumbled.

June waited. And grumbled to herself.

Then she heard a shuffle of feet and a noise that she couldn't place. A high pitched noise and then a curse from Eddie.

"Honey, what's going on?" she called out.

Eddie reappeared, a blanket in his arms.

"What the . . . oh gosh!"

Eddie's arms were moving, the blanket half fell away. In his arms, wriggling with all its might, was a pint-sized puppy. A ball of golden fluff that was itching to escape.

"Eddie!"

Her husband had a grin on his face that stretched from ear to ear.

"I know you want a family June, and I thought this was a great place to start."

Her eyes filled with tears. She reached forward to take the puppy. Its wet nose stroked her cheek, tongue flapping to lick her chin.

“I love him. Oh, I love him!”

She cuddled the puppy tight against her and leant forward to kiss Eddie. The puppy clambered between them, trying to nip them as their lips met.

“He is actually a she. A golden retriever.”

Betty snuggled the puppy against her face again, inhaling its sweet baby smell.

“A girl,” she said aloud, more to the puppy than to Eddie.
“A wee girl.”

Eddie put his arm around her shoulders.

“I thought we’d call her Ruby.”

“Ruby,” she repeated, holding the pup up so she could inspect her. “I think Ruby suits you just fine.”

CHAPTER FORTY

Betty placed her knife and fork together on the plate and used her napkin to dab at the corners of her mouth. They had eaten rather fast, not talking a great deal, other than to cover the weather and talk about an important policy that Luke was putting together.

She wasn't quite sure what was going on.

"Do you care for dessert?"

Betty patted her stomach. "Oh no, I couldn't fit another thing in her."

She smiled as he laughed. Like the ice had finally been broken. They'd both been awkward since that moment earlier in his office, but the barrier was finally falling away.

"We could always share something?" he suggested, pushing his chair back from the table slightly. "Or coffee perhaps?"

Betty shook her head again. "Lunch was lovely, Luke, but no sweets for me. Just coffee, if you're having one."

He raised his hand to beckon for the waiter. "Two coffees with cream please."

Betty studied him as his face was turned, drank in the profile of his jaw, the sweep of his hair. Everything about him.

She dropped her eyes as he looked back. He'd known she was watching him, of course he had, but she didn't care. She was feeling brave, braver than normal at least, and it was empowering.

"Betty, I've been meaning to say this for the last few days, but we always get so busy talking that I never get around to it."

She pressed her lips together. What was it? What did he have to tell her? That first time they'd had lunch she was sure it was in aid of something, but he'd never said. Now she was sure he was worried about something, had words he needed to get off his chest.

"Betty, it's been so wonderful having you and William to stay. Having you in my life."

Oh. This was his way of telling her it was time to move on. He'd brought her to lunch more than once, to tell her, and he hadn't known how to say it.

“Luke please, there’s no need for you to continue. If you want your home to yourself again I will arrange somewhere else to go.”

He looked confused. Then angry.

“Want you gone?”

There was no point in kidding herself. Just because she had certain feelings didn’t mean he shared them.

“Isn’t that what you wanted to tell me?”

“No.” He looked dejected. Deflated even. “No, I don’t.”

She waited. Confused.

“Betty, this is very difficult to say, in fact I’m not entirely sure what I’m saying, but.”

She held her breath.

“I feel like something inappropriate is developing between us. Something that I’m not comfortable with.” He pulled at his tie, the same tie she’d so carefully put into place for him, and loosened the knot. Like he couldn’t breath. “I want you and William to feel at home in my house, but to jeopardise our relationship would be, well, foolish and irresponsible of me.”

What did that mean? Was he trying to tell her he had feelings for her? She didn’t understand why he was saying this, why he’d even brought it up.

Betty forced her chin up, made herself look him straight in the eye.

"I think I feel the same Luke. I mean, I know it wasn't long ago that I lost Charlie, but the way I feel for you, well."

He pushed his chair back with such force the table shuddered, cutting her off.

"I have to go."

Betty looked up at him, humiliated. The look on his face said it all. That he was disgusted in her. That she should have kept her words to herself. That he'd known how she felt and he didn't feel the same."

"Luke." She reached out her hand but he pulled away. "Luke please," she whispered, "I'm sorry, I thought you felt the same?"

She didn't know what his face was telling her, but his eyes were flashing wildly.

"I will be away on business for the next week or so. Take the car home, I'm going back to the office."

No. No! What had she done? What had just happened?

The waiter arrived at their table and placed her coffee in front of her, but she couldn't even bring herself to acknowledge it. Instead she turned to watch Luke hurry through the restaurant, pausing only to pay the bill.

He didn't even look over his shoulder.

She'd just ruined any chance she'd had of something developing between them.

It was over. For good.

Now she might not even have a home to live in.

He was gone.

Betty stood, squared her shoulders and left her coffee untouched. Her heart might have been broken twice now, but she still had her dignity. The love of a child who was waiting for her. Wasn't that all that mattered?

And she still had Ivy. For now.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

HER FEET WERE ACHING, the woollen stockings itched rough against her skin, but Alice couldn't recall smiling so much in a single day. She'd finally got back into the swing of nursing, finished her two-day course, and now she was walking home from her shift.

When she'd arrived here, all she had wanted was a life that involved parties and lunches and money. Now, she just wanted to be happy. And she was.

There was also the added bonus of knowing her husband was waiting for her at home. Probably anxiously waiting for her, desperate to show her the new premises.

Alice rounded the corner and started walking more briskly. Her eyes strained until she could make out their house, and then her husband. Ralph was standing on the veranda, handed raised in a wave.

She started to run. Desperate to see him. Desperate to make sure this was real, that the way she looked forward to seeing him all day was actually reciprocal.

“Hi darling.”

Ralph jumped down the three steps and opened his arms for her. She fell into them, face raised for the kiss she’d been waiting for.

“Hi.” She bent to collect her bag from the sidewalk as he released her.

“Shall we go?”

Alice skipped up the steps and called over her shoulder. “Let me change. I’ll be two minutes.”

She went into their bedroom, inhaled the smell of her husband’s cologne, and slipped from her uniform. Alice reached for a pair of slacks, then a jersey, and dressed quickly.

“Come on honey, we need to get there before dark.”

She spritzed herself with perfume and hurried back out.

“Ready.”

Ralph offered her his arm and she looped hers through.

“So this is really happening?”

“Yes.”

He looked so happy. She was so pleased for him, so excited about their future, about what was going to happen for them both.

"Did you sign the lease today?"

He grinned at her. "It's ours."

She squeezed his arm tighter.

"The finances were approved today, the bank were very forthcoming."

She nodded.

"Of course they were always going to say yes, you know, because of the contract I secured with the New York Post and a new book publisher."

Alice stopped in the middle of the street. Ralph spun around to face her.

"What?"

He scooped her up and twirled her around.

"It's happening, Alice, we're going to be a great success."

She couldn't believe it. "You got the contracts? As in the ones you told me were on your dream list?"

He put her down and pulled her along.

"You'll have to keep nursing for a while, until the business is more established, but we're going to make it. I just know it."

They walked along in silence. She didn't know what to say, and it didn't matter. They didn't need to talk. They were both happy, their marriage was going to work, and their future was bright.

“We’re almost here.”

“Where is it?”

Ralph held her back, leant in close and pointed across the street.

“The building with the striped awning out front.”

Alice’s pulse started to race. It was beautiful. Needed new paint, and the inside was probably run down, but she loved it.

It signalled their future. Their success.

“I love it.” The words sighed from her mouth like a breath of wind.

There’s no where else she wanted to be. No where else in the world.

The very thought struck her like a bolt of lightening to her skin.

She was happy. Truly, incredibly, without doubt happy.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

BETTY PUSHED ASIDE the heavy drape and let her fingers curl around the fabric. The glass was ever so slightly fogged over, and she rubbed her hand in a circular motion to better see outside.

It was a surreal experience, being here. The dread that had descended over her when she'd been told of Charlie's death - it still sent a spasm of pain down her spine. But the insistent throb of grief had slowly started to fade, replaced by a longing that she couldn't quite describe. A longing she hadn't even felt that first night she'd spent with her husband. A longing that she didn't want to admit to any longer, but one that was still there, constantly reminding her of what she'd lost.

Every time she thought of him, she wanted to be closer to him. To hold him. For him to admit that he felt it too.

But he was gone. As if it was her fault that something was happening between them. As if he was never coming back.

A tiny gurgle was replaced by a cry, and Betty turned to see William wriggling in the cot. She let the drape fall back into place and pulled her nightdress tighter around her body. Trying to warm a chill that she knew wasn't caused by the cold.

She was trying to pretend she wasn't waiting for him, but the truth was she was anxious for him to return. She had thought of little else since he'd left. Where had he gone? He'd told her it was a business trip, told Ivy he could be gone for a week or two. But she wasn't so sure. It felt like he'd gone and he wasn't coming back.

Maybe he was waiting for her to leave.

William cried again, the wail more insistent this time.

"I'm coming," she cooed, eyes on her little boy. "Mama's coming."

He was sitting up, ruffled from bed and flushed in the face, but he smiled as he saw her, his mouth breaking out in to a grin that she was still excited to see. That still warmed her heart every time she looked at him.

"Hello wee man." Betty scooped him up and cradled him against her, even though he was getting heavy. "Hello."

He smiled up at her and she felt a familiar flutter of happiness.

“Mama.” He kept smiling. “Ma-ma.” He touched her face and giggled.

She smiled back. “What are you doing awake, mister?”

The pleasure he brought her was indescribable. Unimaginable to any one who hadn’t yet been blessed with a child, but real to her every single day.

Without her son, she would never have travelled here, would never have met Luke. And even though she still felt a touch of guilt, at the thoughts and feelings she had for him, there was no way she could forget them. No way she could ignore them any longer, and push away the longing in her belly that beat like a constant drum. Even if he’d already turned her down.

Betty heard the crunch of gravel as footfalls echoed outside. She dared not hope it was him, that he could be home already, but the way the door opened, with such a bang, made her sure it was. Had he come home to be with her? Returned early because he couldn’t wait to be back in her company?

Or had he returned to tell her to leave? That she’d overstayed her welcome? That he couldn’t forgive her for what she’d said at lunch the other day.

The slam of an internal door made her jump. She looked down at the alarmed eyes of her son and held him tighter, not having meant to frighten him.

From what she'd heard so far, it was definitely Luke; no one else had the authority to slam a door in this house. Ivy certainly wouldn't, neither would one of the maids.

And who else would be arriving at this time of night?

It wasn't like Luke to be angry, but there was a seriousness about his arrival that she wasn't looking forward to confronting. They hadn't exactly parted on good terms.

Something was about to happen, something that would define her future, and it scared her.

Betty heard the hammer of feet stomping up the stairs. She quickly rose and turned the key in her door, locking it.

"Sssh, baby. Shoosh now." She sat him on her bed, pressed against her pillows, and passed him the stuffed rabbit June had given him when she'd been to visit.

William started to jump the toy about, smiling, and she scooted over to the mirror. She was a mess. Luke couldn't see her looking like this.

If it was in fact Luke and not an intruder.

There was a knock at her door. Followed by a few more. Then the handle turned.

The lock stopped it from being opened.

"Betty? Betty open this door now."

It was Luke. Oh my.

It was Luke!

His voice was urgent.

“Just a moment,” she called.

She brushed her hair up and pinned it off her neck. Pulled it softly off her face.

“Betty!”

She was nervous. Actually hand-shakingly nervous.

“One minute, Luke.”

“Now!”

He growled out the word.

She had wanted to get changed first, to be presentable when she opened the door, but if she didn't comply he was going to have the entire household coming up to see what was going on, or possibly bash the door down.

She stood up. Colour flushed her neck, curling gently up to her face. She turned from the mirror and crossed the room. William was starting to whimper, his bottom lip quivering.

“It's okay darling,” she whispered to him.

“Luke, I . . .”

The door was pushed open when she unlocked it with such fury that it almost knocked her over.

“Luke!”

His eyes stopped her. They looked hungry, wild. Not their normal pale shade of brown. His cheeks were stubbled, so unlike his usual clean-shaven self.

He still hadn't said a word.

"If you'd just let me finish dressing we could have been a little more civilised." She was trying to be strong but her words, her voice, was weak.

He took two strides, two long slow strides, until he was standing close enough to push her over with his chest. So close that she could have fallen into him just to feel his body against hers.

He reached toward the back of her head then. She couldn't breathe, couldn't think. He cupped his hand to her hair and bent slowly, so slowly, until his lips touched hers.

She wanted to resist. To pull away and tell him no. After the way he'd run, the way he'd turned her down when she'd tried to be honest with him, he had some explaining to do. But she couldn't. Instead she responded the only way she could, kissing him back, arching into him as he pulled her even closer.

William began to cry, but she forced the sound away. All she wanted was to stay like this, tucked into Luke's frame, lost to the feeling of his lips touching hers. Knowing that he felt the same way she did, that they could ignore it no longer.

He pulled away. Left her feeling confused. Cold. Upset.

"Betty, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

She scanned his face. Gone was the fury, the wildness of before. The wild-man who'd been pounding on her door was

replaced with the Luke she'd come to love. With the kind, tortured man who only wanted to do the right thing. Who wanted her but was afraid what it would mean to admit it.

And he'd kissed her! Kissed her like she'd never imagined he ever would.

"I thought you were going to tell me to leave."

He took a step to the side, then another, before dropping to the bed. His long legs folded as he sat on the edge of it.

"I didn't know what to do. I . . . I never should have run out on you like that."

She moved closer to him, reaching past to pull William into her arms as he flapped his hands at her.

"Can I?"

She passed him to Luke. Tucked him into his outstretched arms, even though he was growing too big to be handled like a baby any more. He wriggled to sit up on his Uncle's lap, hands on his jacket, pulling at his buttons.

"I've missed you, little man."

William smiled up at him.

"I've been a fool, Betty. A bloody fool."

He transferred William to one arm and reached into his trouser pocket.

Betty sat down beside them, her eyes on William. She was too scared to look at Luke. Too worried about what they'd done. How she had responded. What it meant.

Now he knew exactly how she felt. There was no going back from that.

"Luke, we missed you too. Both of us." Her voice was so quiet, so low, that she barely recognised it.

He pulled out a ring from his pocket and held it toward her.

She nearly fell off the bed. Her head was starting to pound like she'd just run up a flight of stairs. Why did he have a ring? What he doing?

"Betty, this was my grandmother's ring. If Charlie had still been alive when you'd arrived, he would have given it to you."

"No." She couldn't stop it, the word just came out. "No, no, no."

"Yes." Now it was his voice that had dropped. "Charlie's not here anymore, I know that, but I still want you to have it."

She didn't understand.

What was he saying?

"Betty?" He passed William to her and knelt beside the bed, in front of her. "Betty, will you marry me?"

PART III

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

THE SUN SHONE from high above, without a cloud to hinder the rays as they fell over the long stretch of lawn. The grass had been mowed in stripes, falling away toward the white flowers adorning the magnolia trees.

Betty had never felt so happy. So nostalgic. So at peace with her life.

“Are you ready, darling?”

She turned from the upstairs window to face Luke. He slid his arms around her waist, pulling her in tight.

“Is he here?”

Luke dropped a kiss to her forehead, eyes crinkled at the corners as he smiled down at her.

“He will be soon.”

Betty watched as he walked away. There was nothing about him she didn't love. He wasn't Charlie, but that's why she loved him. Because even though he was different, so different from his brother, he was a strong enough man to let her love Charlie too. No one could ever take away how she'd felt for Charlie, she saw him in their son every day, but Luke meant the world to her too.

She stole one last look out the window, down toward the white rose they had planted at the base of the garden. A simple white cross stood behind it, for the rose to grow up and around. A marker to ensure they never forgot Charlie.

And the exact spot she and Luke were to be married upon.

Betty took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. She stopped only to look at her silhouette in the full-length mirror. Her dress was simple. A dusky-pink chiffon that fell just below her calf. She had pinned her hair up, a flower pulling it gently off her forehead.

Today was her wedding day, and she felt wonderful. Pretty, confident and happy.

Betty had expected her nerves to start fluttering as she walked toward Luke, but her only problem was trying to stop smiling. The priest stood, bible in hand, waiting for her. Standing beside Luke.

"Are you ready?"

She nodded. "Yes," Betty whispered.

Luke took her hands into his. She was aware of Ivy and their gardener standing nearby, their only witnesses to the ceremony, but she was barely conscious of anything other than Luke before her.

They hadn't wanted a fuss, nor any guests. They were going to celebrate tonight. This was about them. This was about pledging their love for one another before God, with Charlie still in their memories.

This was about the future.

"I love you, Betty."

She blinked away her tears. "And I love you, Luke. More than you'll ever know."

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

The only emotion in Betty's body right now was happiness. She squeezed Luke's hand as it lay on her knee beneath the table. It was unreal. After making her think they were going out for a simple dinner he'd turned their wedding evening into a night she'd never forget.

Fairy lights hung from the branches above them, sending spidery shadows over the table, with paper lanterns swinging softly in the breeze. They had only five guests, despite the extravagance, but there was no one else Betty would have invited, even if she'd organised the party herself.

Laughter filled the otherwise silent night air.

"Betty?"

She turned to face June. Her friend sat beside her husband, with Ivy at the head of the table and Alice and Ralph on the other side.

“Sorry, drifting off again.”

“Do you remember how much you ate on the ship? Seriously? I don’t think I had even one conversation with you that didn’t include the word chocolate.”

“Or chip!” announced Alice with a laugh. “As in chocolate chip.”

Betty laughed along with them. “Well I was eating for two then. It wasn’t like I was obsessed with food without good reason.”

Luke touched her cheek and she turned her face into his palm. It felt right, being here with him in the company of her friends. So right.

“I would like to propose a toast,” announced Luke, taking his eyes off her to face the table.

He stood, one hand extending his glass in the air, the other pulling her up beside him.

“No one is more surprised than me that I managed to convince Betty to become my wife.” They all laughed, Betty included. “I saw something in Betty the day she walked into my home, and although I didn’t want to admit it, I loved her for a long time before I managed to say it out aloud.”

Everyone was quiet now. Listening. Waiting to hear what he was going to say.

"You girls all came a long way to get here, put faith in the men you loved about the life that was waiting for you." He paused, holding her hand tighter. "I guess what I'm trying to say is that I'm so pleased Betty came here. I'm so pleased she married my brother, that he was able to bring this wonderful woman into my life. Today I became a husband and a father, and I couldn't be happier."

"To the newly married couple," declared Ralph, glass high in the air.

"And to Madeline," said Betty, holding her own glass before her. "For the friend we made at sea."

They all clinked glasses and sipped. A waiter appeared from with dessert, and they all took their seats. All except Betty. She'd been waiting for the right moment, and it felt like now.

"Before we tuck into the sweet treats," she said, "I have a letter from Madeline that she wanted me to read today, she had hoped we'd all be together to celebrate."

She glanced at Alice and June. They were both nodding, desperate to have news of her.

Betty reached beneath her napkin, where the folded letter lay, and held it up to the closest light. She had read it so many times over herself that she almost knew it by heart, but she didn't want to miss a word.

'To my darling friends and to Betty, on your wedding day. Well, I couldn't say a bad word about your choice in husband Betty if I tried. Not many men would offer the assistance that your good husband gave me, although I have my suspicions that he was only trying to impress you."

She smiled and looked at Luke. He just shrugged, still grinning.

"But what I can say with all my heart is that I want you to be happy, and darling William too. I am so pleased that I came home. It's like I was asleep for almost a year and now I'm awake. The sound of my mother's voice, the smell of tea brewing on the stove, even walking down our street, it is everything I missed while I was in America. I may never come to terms with my father's passing, but I feel close to him here and that is what matters.

I don't know how I ever thought I could live away from here, but alas I tried. What I don't regret is meeting you girls though, and of course I would be lost without my beautiful daughter. I tell her often of the special aunties she has living on the other side of the world in big sky country."

Betty dabbed at her eyes. She didn't dare look at her friends for fear of seeing them crying. It was hard enough reading Madeline's words without seeing their reaction too.

"Have a wonderful wedding day, I wish I could be there, and promise never to forget me, because I will never forget you. My love and kisses, Madeline."

Luke put his arm around her shoulders as she sat back down. Even Ivy looked teary when she finally braved a look around the table.

"To Madeline," said Alice, standing with her glass raised, toasting their friend again, only with more gusto this time.

"To Madeline," affirmed June, catching Betty's eye with her smile as she rose too.

"And to us girls, for surviving that god-awful trip here by sea," said Alice.

The music swirled around them like it had a personality of its own. Luke was fiddling with the sound as Ralph swung Alice to her feet and started twirling her around. They'd all kicked their shoes off to dance on the lawn, and June was waiting for Eddie to untie his shoelaces to join her.

"I still don't see why I have to take mine off too," he grumbled.

June gave him a playful shove. "You could break my little toes with those big clod-hoppers."

"Clod what?"

She shook her head. "Never mind, come on!"

She might have liked teasing him, but June would have danced with Eddie even if he had to stand on stilts to do so. There was nothing she liked better than being in his arms.

"So have you told them yet?"

She shrugged. "Told them what?"

"About the baby?"

June pulled him closer. "This is Betty's big day. We can tell them about the adoption another time. Besides, until I have the baby in my arms it doesn't feel real."

They'd signed the adoption papers only yesterday. The young girl had been so excited they'd found her, when they'd offered her unborn child the kind of home and family that any mother would dream of for their baby.

"Can you believe we'll have a baby in our home in less than a month?"

June grinned as he squeezed her. "We might need to make two nurseries though."

Eddie stopped, his feet immobile. "You think she's having twins?"

That made June laugh. She had known he wouldn't guess, but she hadn't thought of that possibility.

"I don't think so."

She tried to keep a straight face.

“Then what?”

June leaned in to her husband, mouth hovering over his ear.

“We’re going to need two nurseries because I’m pregnant, Eddie,” she whispered.

He still didn’t move.

“Did you hear me?” she spoke louder this time.

“Pregnant?”

She pulled him around in a circle, laughing at the look on his face.

“Pregnant,” June affirmed. “We’re going to have two babies, Eddie. Two babies!”

He shook his head, in disbelief, but she saw the smirk of his mouth as he watched her.

“What?”

Eddie laughed. “I thought I was going to be the one surprising you tonight.”

This time it was she who stopped moving.

“Edward West, you tell me right this minute what you’re hiding from me.”

“Your parents arrive tomorrow. It was supposed to be a secret but it turns out I’m not that good at keeping things from you.”

“Tomorrow!” she squealed.

He laughed and scooped her up into his arms.

"Tomorrow. They'll be waiting at the house by the time we arrive home."

Alice let her head fall on Ralph's shoulder as they walked. It had been a long night, but an enjoyable one. Being around Betty and June again was good for her. They shared a bond that could never be broken, something that would keep pulling them together forever.

"Are you happy, Alice?"

She stopped and took her husband's hands. There was nothing she could say in answer to his question other than yes. They'd had their hard times, they'd struggled through a time that she hadn't thought would be possible to survive. And she'd acted in a way that was unforgivable. But they'd survived it. They'd made it. They had a future, and a happy one at that.

"I don't know how to tell you how happy I am, Ralph. But yes, the answer is yes."

He bent to kiss her.

"Even after you've had my mother staying for another two weeks."

She kissed him back, lips not leaving his.

"Mmmm-hmmm," she murmured.

"We'll see. She might drive you back home across the ocean yet."

“Never,” said Alice, wrapping her arms tight around her man. “I’ll never, ever leave you Ralph. I promise.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

MADELINE SURVEYED THE ROOM. She did her best to inhale a quiet lungful of air but worried it came out more as a gasp.

She wasn't used to crowds. Especially not crowds gathered to see her.

The room was alive. Voices mingled to an almost deafening level, assaulting her ears as she did her best to push them out. She wished for her own home. To be back with her family, tucked up in her chair by the fire, shawl about her arms, instead of preparing to speak. At least now home was only a train ride away. There was no longer an ocean to separate her from where she wanted to be.

She felt a tap on her shoulder.

"Mrs Parker, it's time."

Her pulse started racing again. Her face flooded with heat, burning a fiery flush down her neck.

"Mrs Parker?"

She nodded. Perhaps a little too vigorously. "Yes. Yes, of course."

"Come this way then."

She cleared her throat and tried to avoid looking at anyone's face in particular. Madeline focused on a spot on the back wall, trying to keep the nerves from rearing into her mind again.

The flash of a camera made her blink, but she kept her focus. She had a speech to read, just like she'd rehearsed. If she lost her way she could read her notes. If her wet, sweaty palms didn't let the paper slip away first.

They were waiting for her to speak.

"My time as a foreign bride in America taught me many things." She took another gulp of air and tried to settle into a rhythm. "First of all, it made me realise that to live without your family, in a foreign country, is almost impossible. Or at least it is when the family you have changed your life to live with considers you a foreign alien."

Madeline tried to slow herself down. She needed to be calm, to portray what it had been like for her over there. She needed to speak from her heart.

The crowd was silent, even as she took a sip of water, but she didn't make eye contact still. Not yet. She wasn't confident

enough to do that yet. A cough made her jump, but she forced herself to continue.

“I left my country with a heart full of love. Prepared to give everything up for my husband, but now I find myself asking what the sacrifice of a woman should be? Should a new wife accept being lied to? Should she accept a home with no indoor plumbing, a home with no love, a home where she is treated like a slave?”

A murmur started amongst the women then, but she didn't stop. Only enough to catch her breath and let her eyes trace the words on the page. If she faltered now she wouldn't be able to start over again.

“Many of you may be wondering how bad it could be. How I could leave my husband behind. But my answer is to look at me and put yourself in my position. I married a man who told me he loved me, who promised me things that I had no reason to doubt. I ask you, would your child deserve to live in a home with no love, when a family who could provide that love were waiting here in London? Could you imagine what it's like to be a stranger, a foreigner, and be alone?”

Madeline knew that would get the crowd going, but then this was what they wanted. The newspaper publisher had wanted controversy, and she needed the money, so it was worth it. And

she wanted to tell her story. This was the truth, not some fabricated novel. It was the truth and she wanted to tell it.

“I don’t regret my time in America. Despite the hardships I faced, I have a beautiful child whom I will treasure forever. And I made friends that will be in my heart until my dying days. It is an experience I will never forget, a time in my life that I will treasure, and that will haunt me, but it is something I am pleased to have lived through.”

Her voice choked but she pushed through. Had to. She could cry later, but right now she needed to tell the last of her story. Every time she thought of how she’d left, what had made her finally give up, it made her angry. But losing her father was something she couldn’t ever recover from, and something she couldn’t ever forget.

“The women I met on my way to America became my closest friends. Their stories are different, although not without their own hardships, but those women got me through the hard times and made me see a way to escape my unhappiness. To them, I will be eternally grateful.

“If I had the opportunity to live the life I dreamed of, I wouldn’t have said no when my husband asked for my hand in marriage. Maybe it would have been worth the sacrifice, maybe if I had the husband I deserved, then it would have been worth it. But all I know now, all I can think, is that walking away from

your own family for a chance at love, is a chance that has too many risks to take." She paused. "Thank you."

Madeline missed her friends so much. She would do anything to see Betty, June and Alice again, but she knew she'd never see them. Not unless one of them took a trip home. For now, she had to be content with writing letters and receiving them. And telling her story.

"If you would like to know more about Mrs Parker's time in America, I encourage you to buy her memoir, which she will sign for you should you wish. We will also be publishing a series of articles starting Monday of next week in the Herald."

"Mrs Parker!"

"Madeline!"

"Mrs Parker will not be taking questions."

"But is it true? What they say about our English girls and their unrealistic dreams?"

Madeline stopped. Her heart started to race.

She didn't have to answer. She didn't have to.

But she wanted to.

Madeline turned around and walked back to the makeshift stage.

"I am well aware that there has been many reports in newspapers here and in America, about disillusioned war brides."

She let out a nervous chuckle. "My own mother cut out many such pieces and I've looked over every one since my return."

The room was quiet again.

"I'm sure there were many disillusioned brides, or maybe there wasn't, but all I can say for sure, is that I wasn't one of them. When my husband told me he lived on a farm and had a family who would love me, I believed him. I didn't dream of money and a lavish lifestyle, all I wanted was a home and love. This wasn't about a romantic notion or rebelling against working hard alongside my man, this was about me being a woman and expecting a real husband, a real family, and a real chance at a happy life."

Madeline stepped aside as her publisher took centre stage. Her eyes did rove then, over the many faces, and she saw a mixed result. Sadness in some, understanding in others, and disgust in the remainder, or perhaps they just couldn't understand what she'd gone through.

But right now, all she cared about was the opinion of her family. Of her child. Of the friends who'd helped her escape.

"Mrs Parker will take a moment to refresh herself, then see you all in the lobby for any signings."

She let herself be lead.

For the first time since she'd left, she truly wished she were back in America.

Just for an afternoon. So she could sit in the sun at Betty's place again, all four of them, and talk. Laugh. Cry.

Because she'd never forget their little war bride club. And she bet they'd never forget her either.

Madeline looked back at the crowd, unsure of how she felt about sharing her story. It meant a degree of financial security for their little family of two, so it was worth it, but . . . There was always a but when it came to divulging your personal life.

Her eyes stopped on a face that seemed familiar. She looked away.

It couldn't be. Not here. Not when he'd never even bothered to try to contact her since she'd left.

Madeline looked back. She couldn't help herself, it was like a pull against gravity that she couldn't defy.

The face was familiar. Was it him, or was it her imagination? She'd seen him before, or thought she had, but here? It was different. In a room full of women, except for the odd reporter and her husband, this man that looked like him, was standing at the rear, whereas almost every other person was seated.

He had a neat beard, cut short against his skin. His hair was brushed back neatly, shirt tucked in. But his eyes. The eyes were holding her there, not letting her turn away.

She tried to swallow but it was like her throat was blocked. Her mind was blank, only one word repeating over and over.

Roy.

Madeline didn't know what to feel. If it was him, did it mean he was here to try to claim Charlotte? Or had he come back for her?

Or maybe, maybe she was hallucinating. Maybe tonight had been too much of a walk down memory lane. She was tired. She just needed to get home.

And then he raised his hand. Only just. A half-wave.

It was him.

Madeline couldn't see the rest of the crowd any longer. The drone of her publisher speaking fell away. All she could see was Roy. Her husband.

She forced her eyes away, fighting the pull to look back at him, and glanced at her wristwatch.

There was another fifteen minutes until she was needed in the lobby.

Madeline put her head down and walked toward the door. Away from Roy. If it was even him.

If he'd come to see her, he would follow.

She kept walking, heels clicking on the floor and then cushioned as the tiles were replaced by carpet. She didn't stop

until she found a seat near the window, looking out over the entrance to the hotel.

Madeline heard footsteps on the tiles, tracing the same path as she herself had just walked. She shut her eyes. Would it be best to get this over with, whatever it was about, or run? Run away, take Charlotte, and go somewhere he could never find them?

“Madeline?”

She kept her eyes shut, stayed in her own little world for a heartbeat, then slowly allowed them to open. She could feel him behind her.

“Madeline?”

She turned.

“Roy.”

She hadn't said his name in so long that it felt foreign on her tongue.

He looked awkward. Perhaps as unsure as she was, but he had the upper hand. He'd come here looking for her and she was taken unawares.

“You did well up there tonight.”

She wanted to close her eyes again, to block him out. What was he doing here? What was her estranged American husband even doing in the same room as her?

“Eddie, why are you here? How did you find me?”

He smiled. She didn't remember it. In all the time she'd lived in America with him, she'd never seen his eyes crinkle at the sides in a genuine smile, never seen his eyes shine like that. Not since they'd been together here, in London, more than two years ago, had she seen a grin like that from Roy.

"I've been here two weeks."

What?

She didn't say anything.

"I came here looking for you, Madeline. I needed to tell you sorry, I need to make things right. And then I saw the posters pinned up around town, advertising your speaking engagement."

Madeline kept her thoughts to herself. Now wasn't the place for a scene. There was no way he could make things right and there was no way he was taking her daughter away from her or making them return to America.

If he'd listened to her speech tonight he'd understand that already.

"Roy, I don't know why you're here, but I'm not going back."

He sat down in the chair opposite her. His hands hovered, like he wanted to touch her, but she just stared at him. They feel to his lap as he watched her.

"Madeline, what I did to you, what I put you through, it was unforgivable. I don't know how I can say sorry. What I can do to show you I regret everything that happened."

She wanted to laugh. But even more than that she wanted to cry. And scream. And yell.

Then send him back to wherever it was he'd come from.

But she didn't.

"If you're looking for forgiveness, you're not going to find it here. A divorce? Consider it granted. But not forgiveness."

She was proud of the strength in her voice. She was a different woman now, more mature, and she wasn't going to back down.

"I don't want a divorce."

Madeline sighed. So he did want her baby girl.

"I have to go, Roy. I don't know what you want from me, but whatever it is the answer's no, unless you decide on the divorce."

He grabbed her wrist then. Then dropped it just as fast as she glared at him and snatched it back.

She was not going to be controlled, not ever, not by him.

"I'm sorry, Madeline, can't you see I mean it?" He sat back in the chair then leapt forward again. "I've found a place to live because I want to be with you and Charlotte. I want to

prove to you that I can be the husband I should have been. I want to be her father.”

Madeline shook her head. “No. You’re not going to fool me into taking you back, Roy. Never.” She tried to control her voice but she was starting to feel vulnerable. Unsure.

Here she was talking to a man who was meant to be on the other side of the ocean. Who she was never meant to see ever again. The father of her child.

Her husband!

“Madeline, I don’t think you understand.” His voice was soft again. “I’m not proud of what I did or what my family did, but I’m prepared to leave it all behind. If you’ll give me another chance, I want to stay here, in London, with you.”

It was as if the room was spinning, like she couldn’t get enough oxygen into her lungs.

What was he saying? How could he ask her to take him back? After all he’d done?

“I don’t believe you.” But she almost did.

He knelt before her, taking her hands into his own.

“I’ll do anything, Madeline. Please give me another chance?”

She couldn’t answer him. She didn’t know what she felt, what she could say.

“What makes you think you can be happy here? Without your family? What makes you think you could live on the other side of the world and leave everything you know behind? What makes you think I’d even consider taking you back after what you did to me?”

Had he not listened to anything she’d said in there? Did he not understand what it was like? How it felt to be alone in a foreign country? How it had felt to be her.

“But I wouldn’t be alone here, Madeline. I would be with my family.” His entire face broke out into a hopeful smile again. “Because my family is here. It’s you and Charlotte. I want you to give me one last chance.”

Madeline’s body started to shake. Her face was burning hot.

“I, I don’t know.” She stuttered out the words. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Just say you’ll think about it,” he asked her. “What I did to you was wrong, but please say you’ll think about it. For Charlotte’s sake.”

Madeline found herself nodding even though all she wanted to do was run away from him. To hide in the bad memories and say no.

“Madeline?”

“You may visit your daughter Roy, but that’s it. I won’t ever take you back.”

His eyebrows arched as he watched her face.

“Just tell me you’ll think about it. That you’ll let me try to prove myself to you.”

“You may be a father to our daughter, that’s all I’ll agree to. It would take years for me to ever forget or forgive, Roy. If ever.”

“I love you, Madeline Parker.” He dropped a gentle kiss to the hand he held. “I love you, and I’m so sorry that I disappointed you.”

Madeline shut her eyes again.

Maybe he did love her. Maybe he was sorry.

If he wanted to prove himself then she’d let him. Not as a husband but as a father. Maybe one day he’d prove himself enough as a man, but she wasn’t ready for that, not yet.

June had found love in her soldier husband. Betty had fallen in love in America. And Alice had made her marriage work.

Maybe one day she would fall in love again. Maybe it would be with Roy. Or maybe not.

She was happy just to be back home with her daughter.

Only the future would tell if she’d ever find happiness again with Roy.

The End.