

Buried Past, Hidden Secrets

By
Anna Champney

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to the following:

To my late husband for his support; to my friends at work, who had to put up with me discussing it while it was in progress; and to Pam, for all the hard work she put into proofreading it for me.

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PART ONE — ALEX

Chapter 1

“But why do I have to go? I want to stay here,” protested Alex, as his mother continued packing the battered brown leather suitcase that had been a part of family holidays for as long as he could remember.

“You know why,” replied his mother distractedly. She stood up straight, brushing her hair back off her forehead. She passed one harried glance around the room, looking for anything else that would need to be sent with her children.

“After the bombing last night, do you really want to stay here?” she asked. She pulled aside the curtains and the black out curtain, and gestured towards the street. “Next time that could be us,” she continued, indicating the rows of flattened houses, with smoke and dust still rising forlornly from the ruins.

People were standing in the street, staring hopelessly at what had, until the day before, been their homes. On a large lump of rubble just opposite, an old woman sat, wrapped to shapelessness in an old coat. Tears were streaming down her face, but she seemed to be quite unaware of the fact. Just behind her, patting her shoulder absently, stood someone Rosie took to be her husband. They were looking helplessly at a pile of rubble which had obviously been their home. You could still see pictures, a bed frame, two arm chairs, and an aspidistra (remarkably the bowl was still intact) in the rubble. Further up the street air raid wardens, police, and ambulance men were digging other things

out of the debris. There were several still bodies lined up on the road, wrapped in whatever the men could find. One was covered with an incongruously brightly colored curtain, with an end idly flapping in the early morning breeze which stirred the smoke and dust into lazy spirals, alternately obscuring and revealing both the work which was going on, and those working.

Rosie fastened the suitcase with a deftness born of long practice, and stood up straight again, absently brushing her hair back with an impatient gesture.

“You’re going, and that’s an end to it,” she said. “I want to know that you’ll be safe – it’s bad enough I have to stay here and wait for your father, without being worried the whole time about what you’re getting up to all day. And Frank and Elsie have said you can stay with them in Halifax, so that’s that.” And with that, she picked the suitcase up from the bed, and gestured for him to leave the room in front of her.

“But I’ll be sixteen in two years – can’t I stay here until then? I want to join up and be a sailor like Dad.”

“No you can’t,” snapped Rosie. “As if I didn’t have enough to worry about, now you want to add to it. And you’ll be too young at sixteen – you can’t join up until you’re eighteen, and by then hopefully this wretched war will be over. For heaven’s sake, just do this for me, please.”

Looking at his mother’s face, Alex decided to say nothing further. He could read the signs in her face, and realized he had already pushed his luck about as far as it could go for today.

“What about Suzie?” he asked, referring to his younger sister. “Will she be staying here?”

His mother looked at him in amazement. “Are you daft?” she said. “Do you think I would send you away and have Suzie here? No, she’s going with you. You’ll have to look after her for me.”

“Aw, mum, you can’t expect me to look after her. She’s only a baby, and a real pest besides.”

“Pest she may be, but she’s your sister, and I expect you to do what you can for her,” his mother snapped back. “Now

let that be an end to your whining, Alex. You're both going. End of story." And with that she dumped the suitcase in the hall, and took Alex's coat down from the hook where it usually hung. She passed him the coat together with his scarf and cap, and indicated that he should put them on. She took down Suzie's coat and scarf, and went down the passage into the kitchen to fetch Suzie.

Five minutes later, she returned with Suzie well wrapped up against the cold day, carrying a small haversack slung over one shoulder together with Suzie's gas mask.

"Where's your gas mask?" she asked Alex as she went to the front door.

"I left it upstairs," he replied, "I'll go and fetch it," he added quickly, as his mother opened her mouth to tell him off. He ran up the stairs into his room, and took the gas mask off the end of the bed. He stood for a minute, silently staring around the room which had been his for as long as he could remember. His eye lit on the model Hurricane which decorated his dressing table, and the Lancaster bomber along side it. On the other side of the room was a model of a destroyer, the same type of ship his father was currently serving on, somewhere in the South Atlantic.

He heard his mother moving impatiently in the hall, and ran out of the room, and back down the stairs. "Got it," he said, showing his mother the gas mask.

"And about time too," she replied. "Come on, we'll miss the train if we don't hurry up."

"Are they running today," Alex asked, "after all the bombing last night?"

"Mrs. Avery at No. 22 says they are, and she should know, her husband's a driver," his mother replied. She turned and pulled the door shut behind her, and locked it.

They set off down the street, Alex carrying the suit case and his gas mask, and his mother carrying Suzie on one hip, with her haversack and gas mask case over the other shoulder and her hand bag clutched under one arm. They carefully picked their

way down the street over the piles of rubble, moving slowly in the direction of the nearest cab stand.

“I hope there’ll be a cab today,” Rosie muttered. “I hope we don’t have to walk all the way to the station.”

Alex said nothing. He was in too much mental turmoil to reply. He was excited about travelling all the way to Yorkshire on his own, but was also upset about leaving the only home he’d ever known. On top of that, he was expected to look after Suzie. It wasn’t that he didn’t like his sister. She could be absolutely adorable—especially when she wanted something. It was just that firstly she was a girl, and therefore by definition a nuisance, and she was so young! What did he know about looking after a baby? Suppose she needed to go to the toilet? What was he supposed to do about that? He decided to ask his mum.

“Mum,” he began tentatively. “What am I supposed to do if Suzie needs the toilet? I mean, do I take her or what?”

Rosie stopped and looked at him. “What do you mean, are you supposed to take her? Alex, she’s only three! You can’t expect her to go on her own! You’ll have to take her and sort her out.”

“Oh great,” he said. He looked at his mother’s face, which gave all the signs of her getting ready to give him a right good talking to, and quickly added “all right, I’ll do it!”

“Good,” said his mother, setting off down the street again. “I’m glad that’s settled.”

They walked along in silence for a while, and Alex started to look at the landscape that had changed irrevocably over night. Street after street of houses had been flattened, literally blasted out of existence. In the distance, Alex could see plumes of thick, black smoke rising into the air, where fire crews were still battling to put out fires caused by incendiary bombs. Closer to home, swirls of smoke and dust were continually being whipped up by the breeze that seemed to be building itself up into something more. Alex stared at the changed landscape as he walked along beside his mother, and as the reality of what had happened began to sink in, he started to feel better about being sent away

from all this. Then it hit him – he *was* being sent away ... from home, from his school, from his friends ... from everything familiar that he had known all his life.

Suddenly, with an exclamation, he stopped dead in the street. “Mum,” he said urgently.

Rosie stopped and turned round to face him. “What now?” she asked irritably.

“What about school? What about all my friends? I’ll never see them again!” he exclaimed.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” his mother replied. “Of course you’ll see them again. And as for school, Frank said that he would arrange that when I spoke to him this morning. And I’m sure you’ll make lots of new friends when you get to Yorkshire. Now hurry up, or we’ll miss the train.” And she turned round and carried on walking down the street.

Alex followed, his mind in turmoil. A new school. New people. Would they like him? Would he be able to fit in? What if they didn’t like him? Would he get bullied? Would his mum come and fetch him home if he was miserable?

“Mum,” he began again, tentatively.

“What?” she asked, whirling round so fast that Suzie gave a cry of protest at being swung around in her mother’s arms.

“Can I come home if I don’t like it?”

“Don’t be silly, of course you’ll like it. Why wouldn’t you?”

“But I’ll miss you.”

Rosie’s eyes softened for a minute, and then she replied, in a softer voice, “And I’ll miss you pumpkin, but you must see you can’t stay here. It’s not good for kids around here now. And I’m sure you’ll love it in Yorkshire. Come on now, buck up and be a rabbit.”

At the phrase that he had heard all his life Alex smiled, and they walked along together to the corner. There they found that the road had been blocked by fallen buildings, and they had to make a long detour around streets that were no longer famil-

iar. Landmarks that they had relied on were not there, or were strangely changed by the bombing; transformed from solid buildings into a tangled lacework of partial walls, missing windows, and lost roofs. They trudged along for another half hour, until they came to a place which was mostly undamaged. The Germans had obviously missed this bit of the city. Just around the corner they found a taxi, and Rosie hailed it with relief.

“Where to love?” asked the cabbie, as Rosie opened the door, and Alex climbed in, taking Suzie from his mother.

“I need to get to the station,” she replied. “We’re supposed to be catching a train north.”

“Could be tricky,” said the cabbie. “There’s lots of streets blocked after last night. And I’m not even sure if the trains are running today.”

“My neighbor’s husband is a train driver, and he said the trains were running. I’m sure if we can just get to the station, everything will be all right.”

“OK love,” the cabbie replied. “If you’re sure that’s where you want to go, hop in and we’ll see what we can do.”

Rosie settled into her seat as the cab progressed slowly down the street, moving from side to side to avoid large chunks of fallen masonry that were scattered here and there like giant building blocks.

“Is it like this all over?” Rosie asked. “How bad is it?”

“Well,” replied the cabbie, partly turning his head to speak to her. “The Cathedral’s pretty bad, they say. And lots of areas really copped it. I did hear a rumor that the Government knew the raid was going to happen, but didn’t tell anyone because of some code cracking machine they’re working on, and not wanting to give it away. But I don’t know about that.”

“Wherever did you hear that?” exclaimed Rosie. “Surely it can’t be true.”

The cabbie turned his head and winked. “You’d be amazed at what you hear in a cab,” he replied. “I’ve had some right hot shots in this cab over the last couple of days. You wouldn’t believe it.”

Rosie sat back and thought no, she wouldn't believe it. Didn't all the hot shots have their own cars and drivers? She couldn't see those important folk taking a common cab, and talking in front of the driver. She sat back and closed her eyes. Alex was holding Suzie, and she could relax for five minutes or so. She sat back and let her mind wander over what she was doing. She was sure it was for the best. Air raid shelters were only so good, and going to the local church hadn't done those people in Radford any good, had it? The whole street had gone, including the church. She'd heard people in the street talking about it first thing. But the Cathedral! She couldn't believe that the cathedral would have been hit. One thing was for certain, nothing in Coventry was going to be the same after this.

She only opened her eyes when the cab slowed down, and the cabbie said "This is as close as I can get today love. The street's blocked further down. You'll have to walk from here."

Rosie opened the door, and paid the cabbie his fare. Alex handed her Suzie, and then passed the suitcase over, before turning round and getting the haversack and the gas mask cases out of the car.

"Thanks very much," she said as she shut the door.

"You're welcome," replied the cabbie, before turning round and heading back the way he had come.

Rosie bent and picked up Suzie, and gestured for Alex to follow her. They picked their way along the street and finally made their way into the railway station. The old building had suffered a certain amount of damage, but was still standing. However, it was obvious that they wouldn't be going anywhere by train today. The station staff were there, all helping to clear away debris which had been shaken loose by the raid. One of the men clearing up saw Rosie standing there with Alex and Suzie and came over.

"There's no trains today love," he said. "The lines are all up and we can't get a thing in or out."

Rosie stood there, looking uncertain. She looked at the man and asked “What about the other stations? Can I get a train anywhere? What about a bus?”

The man removed his cap, and scratched his head. “Where you off to anyway?” he asked.

“I’ve got to get the children to Yorkshire by tonight. My cousin’s expecting them in Halifax.”

“Hmmm, that could be tricky,” responded the railway worker. “Tell you what, we’ve got a charabanc with a load of relief workers from Birmingham coming over, They should be here soon. I can ask the driver to take you to Birmingham on his return trip, and you should be able to get a train from there.”

“Thank you,” said Rosie, her eyes starting to brim over. “That will be wonderful.”

“Right, well then,” said the man, shuffling his feet in embarrassment at Rosie’s thanks. “You sit yourself down over there with the kids, and I’ll make sure the driver picks you up.”

Rosie smiled at him, and walked over to where he indicated. Incongruously amongst all the rubble, one of the railway benches still stood. Although covered in dust it was otherwise intact and Rosie, after brushing the dust off it, sat down. Alex sat next to her, and Suzie sat on her lap. As they waited, they watched the clean up efforts of the railway staff. After a few minutes, there was the sound of a car horn, and about twenty men suddenly streamed into the station. The man who had been so helpful to Rosie came over and, after a lot of arm-waving and intense discussion, they moved off along the platforms to go and help the clean up crews. Rosie’s helper came over and said “Right then, missus, the chara’s out the front. The driver’ll take you back to Birmingham. He says the trains are running from there. It might take a bit longer than usual if there’s a lot of troops trains running, as the trains will have to be moved off the lines to make way for them, but you should get there tonight.”

“Thank you so much,” said Rosie. “I don’t know what I’d have done with out you.” She smiled at the man, and turned and

walked back out of the station with Suzie and Alex. Just outside, as promised, was a large charabanc. Rosie walked over to it, and the driver hopped out.

“Are you the party for Birmingham?” he asked.

“Yes, that’s us,” replied Rosie.

“Well hop in then love,” said the driver. “I’ve got to pick up a few more for Birmingham along the way, but there should be room for everyone.”

“Will it take long?” asked Rosie. “To get to Birmingham, I mean,” she added.

“No, shouldn’t take that long. We should be there in about an hour.”

Rosie settled Suzie onto one of the large bench seats, and indicated Alex should sit next to her. She pushed the case under the seat, and then sat down herself. The driver started the engine, and swung the large vehicle round, and set off down the street, deftly steering around the piles of rubble that were being cleared.

As they drove through the city, stopping at various points along the way to pick people up, Rosie could see that the city as she had known it was gone forever. So many beautiful old buildings had been destroyed it was hard to see how the city could ever come back to life, and be what it had once been.

“Look mum, there’s that new cinema that got bombed out,” Alex suddenly said. “You’ll not get to see ‘Gone with the Wind’ there now.”

“No, I don’t suppose I will,” she replied. Worn out with the alarms of the previous night, and her exertions, Rosie leant back in her seat and closed her eyes. She didn’t expect to sleep – images of bombed buildings, and the dreadful sights she had seen kept flashing before her – but eventually, worn out, she did drop off. She didn’t wake up again until Alex shook her arm.

“Mum, we’re here. We’re in Birmingham.”

Rosie sat up and looked around her. Alex was sitting with Suzie on his knee, fast asleep. Rosie looked at Alex and smiled.

“Thanks love,” she said. “I needed that. You’ve been wonderful, keeping her quiet like that.”

Alex grinned at her. “I thought I’d better get in practice for later,” he said.

Rosie put her hand up and brushed his hair out of his eyes. “You’re a good lad really, aren’t you?” she said. Alex blushed and looked away, but she could tell he was pleased. Rosie bent down and picked up Suzie and the haversack, and Alex picked up the case and the gas masks. Together they walked over the road to the station, and went in.

Rosie soon found the ticket office, and after a short argument with the ticket clerk, managed to buy two single tickets to Halifax, via Leeds. She checked the timetable with the clerk, to make sure she had it straight, and then collected Alex and Suzie and led them onto the platform.

“Not long now,” she said to Alex. Alex, who was once again feeling nervous and uncertain, nodded. Eventually, they heard the whistle of the engine, and with a great clanking noise, the train pulled onto the platform. Rosie walked down until she found the guard, and spoke to him, turning round to point to Alex and Suzie. The guard nodded and smiled, and Rosie beckoned to Alex to come to the guard.

As he approached, he heard the guard say “Don’t you worry about a thing Missus, I’ll look after them properly and no mistake.”

“Alex,” she said as he approached, “this is Mr. Davies, the train guard. He’ll keep an eye on you, and make sure you listen to what he tells you. He’ll let you know where to get off the train.”

Mr. Davies looked at Alex, and winked. Alex, who had been starting to feel as much of a baby as Suzie, looked relieved and relaxed a little.

“You come along in here with the little one, my lad,” said Mr. Davies, “and make yourself comfortable in here.”

‘In here’ turned out to be a small compartment just in front of the guard’s van. There were three bench seats arranged

around three sides, with small windows. A door opened in the far wall, splitting one of the seats in half, and the fourth side, where they stood looking in, had a tool box and a ladder fastened to it with straps.

“You won’t be bothered in here,” said Mr. Davies. “This is where the relief guard usually sits, but we don’t have those anymore, what with the war.”

Alex put the case down under one of the seats, put the gas masks alongside it, and Rosie sat Suzie on the seat above them. She stood up, and looked at Alex. She put her arms out and pulled him close, giving him a big hug. He returned it, suddenly feeling as if everything he’d known before was going, and that things would never be the same again.

“Look after Suzie for me,” he heard his mother say. “And don’t forget, whatever happens, I love you Alex. When it’s safe, I’ll let you know and you can come back home again.”

“Promise?” replied Alex.

“I promise. I’m going to miss you so much.”

“And I’m going to miss you as well Mum.”

Rosie pulled out of his embrace, and walked away. She turned in the doorway, and smiled at him. Bravely, he smiled back.

“That’s my boy,” said Rosie, then turned and was gone. Distantly Alex could hear the whistles blowing, and then with a great roar and whoosh of steam, the train got underway.

Alex turned and walked over to where Suzie was sitting, staring at him with big brown eyes.

“Well kiddo,” he said, copying one of his favorite movie heroes, “guess it’s just you and me now.” He sat down next to Suzie, and she cuddled up against him. Sitting together, they felt the train accelerate out of the station and into the unknown.

Alex tried to look out of the windows, but they were too small and too dirty to be of much use. After a while, lulled by the rocking of the train, Alex felt Suzie fall asleep. Making himself a little more comfortable, Alex sat with his eyes shut, wondering what was waiting for them in Halifax. Comforted by the small

warm body next to his, and worn out with the exertions of the day, Alex too fell asleep as the train sped on through the countryside, carrying them away from everything they knew, towards an unknown future.

Chapter 2

“Come on lad, wake up. We’re here.”

Alex blinked, and slowly woke up. Mr. Davies was standing in front of him, shaking him by the shoulder. Suzie was slumped against him, and she was just waking up again.

“Where are we?” he asked.

“We’re in Leeds, lad,” replied Mr. Davies. “You’ve got about five minutes to get off this train and find your connection. Come on, stir your stumps.”

Alex rose to his feet, and picked up the suitcase in one hand, slung the haversack across his shoulders, and held his arms out for Suzie. She came to him, and he picked her up.

“Where do we go?” he asked.

“You want platform four,” replied Mr. Davies. “Out onto the platform, turn right, take the stairs and across to the right. If you get lost, just ask, there’s plenty of people around.”

Alex followed him out of the carriage and onto the platform. Mr. Davies took him by the arm, and turned him in the right direction.

“That’s the way lad. Down there and up the stairs, across to platform four. You’ve got about five minutes.”

“Thank you,” said Alex.

“Don’t thank me lad, just doing what I’m supposed to. You’ve been no trouble, you and the little lass.”

Alex turned and started to walk up the platform. Behind him, he heard Mr. Davies start to shout “all aboard.” As he trudged up

the platform, he heard the train start to move alongside him, and was momentarily enveloped in a big cloud of steam. He looked up in time to see Mr. Davies waving at him from the guard's van and, unable to wave, he nodded his head in reply.

Alex found the stairs, and started up. Suzie and the suitcase were heavier than he remembered, and he had to keep hitching the little girl up to ensure he didn't drop her. He found the stairs down to platform four, and started down. There was a train already on the platform, and the guard was walking up and down calling the names of the stations it would be stopping at. Alex didn't recognize a single name, and went up to the guard.

"Excuse me," he said. "Is this the train for Halifax?"

"Certainly is, son," replied the guard. "Climb aboard and make yourself comfortable. We'll be leaving in a couple of minutes."

Alex climbed aboard, and found an empty compartment. He put Suzie down on the seat, and she promptly curled up in the corner, and went back to sleep. He picked up the case and put it into the luggage rack, and sat down beside Suzie. He felt absolutely exhausted, and was feeling light-headed from lack of food. It occurred to him that he hadn't eaten anything since before he got on the train at Birmingham. He thought Suzie must be even hungrier than he was. With a jerk, he felt the train start to move out of the station. He looked out of the window, and saw that they were travelling alongside a canal. Then the canal turned away, and it was just railway embankments. The train rocked backwards and forwards, and he felt himself starting to fall asleep again. He jerked himself upright – he couldn't afford to fall asleep on this train, he might miss the stop in Halifax. Just then the compartment door slid open.

"Tickets please," said the guard.

Alex fumbled in his pocket, and produced the tickets for himself and Suzie.

"Halifax is it?" asked the guard looking at the tickets. That's the next stop after Bradford. It's quite close, so you'd be best getting ready as soon as we leave Bradford."

“Thank you,” said Alex, taking back the tickets.

“You’re welcome,” said the guard, leaving the compartment and shutting the door.

Alex sat back on his seat, and continued looking out of the window. It was now full dark, and there was precious little light in the compartment. Idly Alex wondered about pulling down the black out curtains, but decided that, with so little light around, it wouldn’t matter this once. Just as he had decided this, the guard came back in.

“Just going to pull down the black out lad,” he announced, and proceeded to do just that.

“How will I know when we get to Bradford?” he asked.

“Don’t worry lad,” replied the guard. “I know where you need to get off, if I don’t see you on the platform in Halifax, I’ll come and get you. Just relax.”

Alex smiled and thanked him. The guard winked at him and left, leaving Alex to his thoughts. He thought he’d never been so tired. The emotional stress of the air raid, the trip to the station, and the trip up to Yorkshire, had drained his resources. Everything seemed to be completely unreal. He was in this compartment, he had always been in this compartment, he always would be. There was a feeling that the world was this compartment—the outside world had ceased to exist.

Beside him, Suzie stirred in her sleep, and nestled closer to him. He smiled down at her and it struck him that he was actually very fond of her. He had never really had much to do with her, as she was so much younger than he was. He hadn’t realized his mother had even been pregnant until one night when he was woken from a sound sleep, told to go next door to Mrs. Hepton, and to stay there until his mother came home. Mrs. Hepton had not told him anything, but had folded her lips tightly together when he asked where his mother had gone. Three days later, she had come home in a cab, clutching a little bundle to her. When he had returned home she had shown him the little bundle, and told him she was called Suzie. He had never really taken

much notice of her—she was just in the corner of the room in her cradle, or upstairs asleep. He had only really been aware of her when he made a racket in the house, and his mother scolded him for making too much noise when she'd just got the baby off to sleep.

And now she was curled up on the seat next to him, and she was his responsibility. For the first time he started to regard her as being a person in her own right, instead of just an adjunct to his mother. He studied her as she slept.

Her hair was a lovely reddish-brown, and her skin was very clear, very fresh although it was a little smudged now with the journey. Her lashes were long and curled on her cheeks. One hand was under her cheek, and the other was tucked under the opposite arm. Alex wondered idly where her coloring came from. He took after his father, with black hair and blue eyes (“from the Irish,” his father used to joke). His mother was brown—brown hair, brown eyes, with a slight brownish cast to her skin. Suzie, on the other hand, didn't seem to take after either parent. It was just one of those things, he supposed, and didn't think anything further of it.

Stations came and went, and still nothing from the guard. At last, as the train slowed down again, he heard the guard shouting “Bradford, this is Bradford.” He pushed himself up from the seat, and stood up. He reached up and took down the suitcase, and put it on the floor between the seats. He leant down and gently shook Suzie.

“Suzie, wake up. We're nearly there.”

Suzie sat up, blinking and rubbing her eyes. She looked at him solemnly.

“I'm hungry” she said.

“I know,” he replied. “Me too. It won't be long now though.”

The train drew to a stop, and there was the sound of doors opening and closing. Then came the sound of someone walking down the length of the train, slamming doors left open. The guard's whistle blew, the train jerked, and they were off again.

“Last little bit now,” Alex said to Suzie. She looked back at him, and nodded. Alex noticed that there seemed to be a lot of tunnels on this stretch of track. Eventually they went through one last, much longer, tunnel and the train started to slow down.

“This is it,” said Alex. He slung the haversack and gas masks around his shoulders, picked Suzie up from the seat, and picked up the suitcase. He made his way out into the corridor, and along towards the door. The train was definitely slowing down now—he could hear the ‘chuff chuff’ of the engine suddenly change to a quicker note as the driver put the engine in reverse, and applied the brake. With a wheezy judder, the train came to a halt.

“Halifax, this is Halifax,” called the guard. Alex put down the case, opened the window and leant forward to open the door. When it opened, he picked the case up and descended gingerly onto the platform.

Alex stood there in the dark, with Suzie holding him fast round the neck, and wondered what on earth he should do next. The guard bustled past.

“Are you lost?” he asked cheerily. Alex nodded.

“Just go up them stairs, and turn left at the top. That will take you out of the station.”

Alex was by now so tired he merely nodded in response, and plodded up the stairs. At the top he found a bridge leading out of the station, and followed it outside. Outside the station was a large yard, which appeared, as well as Alex could see, totally empty. His heart sank. Now what was he supposed to do? He put the case down by his feet, and felt tears prickling at the back of his eyes. Suddenly he heard the sound of a motor, and saw two small slits of light approaching. They swung into the yard, and drew to a halt just in front of where he was waiting. The door opened, and a large figure appeared. It walked over to Alex, and he realized it was a man wearing a heavy outdoor coat.

“Are you Alex?” came a deep bass voice. Alex nodded.

“I’m Frank. Tha’d best get in’t car lad. Tha looks fair nithered to deeth. I’ll get tha case.”

Alex carried Suzie to the car and sat her in the back seat. He walked around to the front of the car and got into the front seat. A rocking of the car announced that Frank had put the case in the back of the car, then door opened and he got in to the driving seat.

They set off through the darkened streets with Frank taking turns seemingly by instinct, because he certainly couldn't have seen where he was going. After a few minutes Alex was aware that they had left the town, and were heading out into open country.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"We're off to t' farm, lad," Frank replied.

"Farm? I didn't know you lived on a farm. Mum never told me that."

"Aye, well, happen she thought you being safe was important, and you can't get much safer than where we are."

Alex thought that over. "Are there any other houses around?" he asked.

"Aye lad, there's a couple not so far away."

Alex wanted to ask more questions, but he was far too tired to be bothered. He could feel himself falling asleep again, and just the thought of rousing himself again was exhausting. He slumped in his seat and watched through the windscreen as they travelled across open country. Next thing he knew, he was being shaken awake.

"Come on, lad, we're here," said Frank. "Get thee sen in t'house. I'll get tha sister and tha bags."

Alex climbed out of the car, and stood looking around. He spotted a door across the yard, with a warm welcoming light spilling out onto the cobbles. He walked towards the light, cautiously pushed the door further open and peered in. He went inside, blinking in the unaccustomed brightness.

Inside the door was a room which was the archetypal farmhouse kitchen. A large range was on the far wall, with a kettle and stockpot at the back. The ceiling was beamed, and there was an amazing array of items hanging from the beams, most of which

Alex was quite unable to identify. A large scrubbed pine table occupied the centre of the room, and beyond that Alex could see a large china sink under the window, with scrubbed wooden draining boards on either side of it. Before he had chance to take in any more, he was suddenly aware of someone else.

“Come on in lad,” said a warm voice. “Get thee sen sat down, and have a cuppa.”

A lovely, motherly-looking woman came forward and, taking Alex by the arm, led him over to the table and sat him down in one of the wooden chairs there.

“You must be nithered to death,” she said, bustling back over to the range and moving the kettle to the front. She reached up to a shelf at the side of the range and took down four mugs and a large brown tea pot.

Alex had just sat down at the table when Frank brought Suzie into the kitchen, and put her down. Seeing Alex, she walked over to him and tugged his coat. He turned round to her and she held her arms out to him. Without thinking, he picked her up and sat her on his knee. She promptly snuggled up against him and fell asleep again.

“Poor lamb, she must be completely tired out after all that travelling.” On the range, the kettle began to whistle. She turned back to the range, and poured some water into the tea pot. She swirled it around, and then emptied it down the sink. She added tea leaves, then topped the pot up with boiling water, and placed it on the table. Alex didn’t see where the milk and sugar came from, but they were suddenly there in front of him, together with a mug of hot, steaming tea.

“Help thee sen lad,” she said.

Alex reached out for one of the mugs, awkwardly because of Suzie lying in his lap. He added milk and sugar, and started to drink the tea. He could feel its warmth spreading through his body as he drank, and the warmth from the kitchen warmed him from without. When he had put his empty mug down on the table, his hostess rose to her feet.

“That’s enough for tonight,” she said briskly. “Let’s get these two into bed. Time enough for introductions in the morning.”

She was moving as she spoke and produced a lamp, which she lit with a spill from the range. Alex stood up with Suzie in his arms, and followed her as she moved across the kitchen to a door which he hadn’t noticed before. Opening the door, she waited for Alex to move through into the hall beyond. The lamplight showed a quick glimpse of polished floor boards and polished wooden furniture, with sudden sparkles indicating the existence of either china or silver ornaments hidden by the general darkness. Alex followed her up the stairs without noticing any further details. He was aware of a door being opened, and of following the woman through into a large bedroom. He could see two beds with the covers turned down.

“Put the little lass in this one,” she said. “I thought she’d better stay with you for now, seeing as it’s a strange place.”

“Thank you,” said Alex.

“The bathroom is just down the hall to the left, the second door. There’s no hot water until the morning, and if you can’t wait, there’s a pot under the bed.”

Alex put Suzie down, still asleep, on to one of the beds.

“No need to wake her,” said the woman. “We’ll just leave her for tonight.” As she spoke, she was taking Suzie’s coat and shoes off, but then just pulled the covers over her and tucked them in.

“I’ll leave you to it now,” she said. “Have your sleep out, and come down to the kitchen in the morning when you’re ready. See you in the morning.” She smiled, and put the lamp down on the table between the beds.

Alex was by now so tired he couldn’t speak. He watched the door close, took his clothes off, and crawled into the bed without bothering to look for his pajamas in the suitcase. He pulled the lavender scented sheets up round his neck, and before he knew it, found himself falling into a deep sleep. His last thought was about putting out the lamp, but the effort involved in reaching out and

turning down the lamp seemed Herculean. "It'll be all right," he thought, and that was the last thing he knew until morning.

* * * * *

When he woke up, sunshine was streaming through the large window at the end of the room. He sat up, not quite sure where he was for a minute. The room came into view as he blinked his eyes, and he saw unfamiliar surroundings. The two beds were against the same wall, with a polished wooden table, almost black with age, between them. The floorboards were also polished, and had that dark, deep shine that spoke of great age and great care. There was a hooked rag rug on the floor, but no carpet. Along the further wall, opposite the two beds, was a washstand with a bowl and pitcher, with two fresh white towels hanging on the rails. The window took up nearly the whole of the wall to his right, with bright leaded panes between stone mullions. Heavy red brocade curtains, lined with linen gone yellow with age, were pulled open and held back with straps of the same material. The walls were whitewashed, and the ceiling the same between the heavy oak beams. Trying to remember the directions to the bathroom, Alex pulled on his under pants and cautiously exited the bedroom. Heading down the landing, he could hear a cheerful noise coming up the stairs from the kitchen.

After a couple of false starts, Alex found the bathroom. He was relieved to see that there was a proper bath and toilet; from the furniture in his room, he had been afraid of what he would find. Returning to the bedroom, he saw that Suzie was also awake. Getting her out of bed, he took her along to the bathroom for what was necessary, and then took her back to the bedroom. Looking around he saw that the suitcase and haversack had been unpacked and placed on top of the large wardrobe in the corner. Opening the wardrobe, he found all their clothes had been hung up or placed on the shelves. He quickly found clothes for himself and Suzie, and got them both dressed.

“Want some breakfast?” he asked her. She nodded vigorously, so taking her by the hand, he led her out of the room, carefully shutting the door behind him, and down the stairs. Opening the door he thought was the right one, he found himself looking into the kitchen he had seen last night.

Their hostess was cooking at the range, and the warm and comforting smells of frying bacon and porridge dominated the kitchen. Hearing them come in, she turned round and smiled at them.

“Sit yourselves down at the table,” she said. “Breakfast won’t be long.” She turned back to the range. Alex sat Suzie at the table, and then sat next to her.

Alex found himself looking closely at her, noticing things he had been too tired to take notice of the previous night. As he looked round, the woman by the range turned round and spoke.

“I forgot to introduce myself last night. I’m your cousin Elsie, Frank’s sister.”

Elsie was what would probably be called a ‘well found woman’, tall, graceful and, whilst not in any way overweight, not noticeably skinny either. She had lovely black hair, which though styled was not overly fashionable. She exuded calm, and gave the impression that she would be quite capable of dealing with anything from a disaster in the kitchen to an emergency on the farm. Alex found it hard to guess her age, but had the feeling she was quite a bit younger than his mother. Alex felt obscurely comforted as he watched her moving gracefully around the kitchen preparing breakfast, and started to feel that things wouldn’t be too bad here once he got used to the place.

“What should I call you?” he asked awkwardly.

“Call me Elsie and Frank, Frank,” Elsie replied, twinkling at him, as if she had been able to read his mind. She turned back to the range. “Would you like an egg with this?” she asked.

“Egg?” said Alex. “Have you got enough—with the rationing and everything?”

Elsie laughed. “You’re forgetting lad,” she said. “This is a farm. Of course we’ve got enough eggs!”

Alex blushed. Elsie noticed and said “Don’t worry lad, it’s a natural enough mistake to make when you’ve never been out of town. We produce food for the ministry, but we don’t have to let them have everything we produce.”

Alex frowned. “I think this is going to take a bit of getting used to,” he said.

“Don’t worry, you’ll soon settle down.” Elsie brought two plates of food to the table. Alex had a full fried breakfast, the sort he hadn’t seen for ages. Bacon, eggs, sausages, fresh bread, butter and a cup of tea. Suzie had a bowl of porridge and a glass of fresh milk.

“You tuck into that, lad,” Elsie said. “I’ll sort Suzie out.” She sat down next to Suzie and started to feed the little girl. After a moment, when Suzie was obviously surprised, she started to eat. Once she had got used to the taste, Elsie gave her the spoon and she started to feed herself, albeit slowly.

“She’s a pretty child,” Elsie said. “Does she take after your mother, with her coloring?”

“I don’t think so,” said Alex. “Mum’s got brown hair and brown eyes. I take after my dad. I don’t know who Suzie looks like. It’s a bit difficult to tell.”

“It often is at her age,” Elsie agreed. “But you’ve definitely got the family coloring, with your black hair and blue eyes.”

Alex looked at Elsie, and noticed that she had the same coloring as himself. He had always thought it looked silly, but on Elsie it somehow looked right. Maybe it’s because she’s a woman, he thought. Perhaps it looks better on them.

“Frank will be back in soon,” Elsie said. “He’s out looking after the animals, and checking the garden for vegetables. He’ll be in for his breakfast though.”

Alex continued his breakfast, savoring every mouthful. The bacon was cooked perfectly, nice and crisp around the edges, just as he liked it, and the eggs had been cooked in the bacon fat, and were still runny in the middle. The sausages were unlike anything he’d ever eaten before, stuffed full of rich, savory

meat, with a hint of flavoring which he couldn't identify, but knew that he liked. The bread was obviously home made, and equally obviously fresh. The butter was also unlike anything he was used to, but was wonderful. The milk was creamy, and combined with the tea, tasted unlike any tea he'd had before. He ate steadily until he'd cleared his plate, and then put his knife and fork together and pushed his plate away.

"Enjoy that, did you?" asked Elsie.

"Oh yes," said Alex. "That was wonderful. I've never had a breakfast like that before."

"I'd be surprised if you had," replied Elsie. "The bacon and sausages came from our own pigs, and the eggs from our own hens. The milk came from our cow, and the butter came from our own milk. I made the bread."

"It was fantastic," said Alex.

At that moment, the kitchen door opened, and Frank came in. He kicked off his boots, and walked over to the table in his stockinged feet. He eyed Alex's empty plate, and a slow smile crossed his face.

"Ah, see you've enjoyed breakfast then lad," he said. "And now Elsie, I'm ready for mine."

"And here it is ready for you," said Elsie, coming to the table with a big bowl of porridge, and a jug of cream. "There, get started with that while I cook the rest."

Frank wasted no time, and after pouring a large helping of cream on to his porridge, fell to with a will. Elsie bustled about the range, cooking more bacon and sausages, and Alex sat at the table with another mug of tea and felt, in some strange way, as if he'd come home. Suzie was still eating her porridge, and managing to get most of it in her mouth with the small spoon Elsie had given her. He picked up a smaller cup and poured her a milky tea, and held it for her while she drank. He took the time to have a look at Frank as he did so.

Frank had much the same coloring as Elsie, but was obviously quite a lot older. He had the weather-beaten look which

people who work outdoors most of the time acquire, but his eyes were still blue and his hair (what Alex could see of it for his cap) was still raven black. He was taller than Elsie, and moved with a quiet, confident air, giving the impression that he could tackle just about anything that came his way. Alex decided that Frank was certainly someone he could trust.

“She’s a quiet one,” commented Elsie from the range. “I’ve heard nowt out of her so far.”

“She’s always been quiet,” said Alex. “She’s a bit of a pest sometimes, but usually you don’t even know she’s there. Unless she’s just gone to sleep and you wake her up,” he added quickly.

“Well, a quiet one’s a blessing sometimes,” said Elsie. “I just hope she makes a noise when something’s wrong, otherwise we’d never know. We don’t know much about children.”

Frank grunted an agreement to this as he finished his porridge. He put the spoon in the bowl and pushed it to one side. He looked at Alex for a second.

“How do you feel about earning thy keep lad,” he asked Alex.

“Me?” said Alex. “What do you mean? How could I do that?”

“Well,” continued Frank. “Tha’s a grown lad, and I could do wi’ a bit o’ help around the place now and then. Evenings and weekends like.”

“What sort of help?” asked Alex. “I’ve never been on a farm before. I’ve never been out in the country before. What could I do?”

“I’d not ask thee to do summat tha couldn’t do, lad, never fear. I can show thee what thee’d need to know. And tha’d get pocket money for helping out, I wouldn’t ask thee to do it for nowt.”

Alex sat and looked at Frank, considering what he’d said. He could see the justice of it, after all he and Suzie had just been landed on Frank and Elsie at short notice, with never a mention of paying for anything.

“If you don’t think I’d just be a nuisance, I’d like to help out,” he said. “It doesn’t seem fair to ask you to feed and house us without us doing something for you.”

A broad grin spread across Frank's face as he sat sipping a mug of tea.

"See Elsie," he said. "I told thee the lad would help out."

"Well, you were right," she admitted. She turned to Alex. "It's not that I thought you'd not want to help," she said, "but I know that everything's strange to you here, and I thought it might take you a bit of a time to get used to things. But if you're please to help, we're pleased to have you help."

She brought a plate of bacon, sausage and egg over to Frank, along with two slices of bread and butter. She sat down at the table next to Suzie, and helped her finish her porridge and tea. Alex sat sipping his tea, and wondered at how much at home he felt, considering he'd only been here for less than a day.

Frank finished his meal, and drank another cup of tea. He pushed his chair away from the table, and stood up.

"Right then lad," he said. "If'n tha's finished tha breakfast, we can get started. There's plenty that tha can be getting on with that don't need much teaching. Let's get you a pair of boo-its first. Can't be getting your best shoes dirty."

Alex stood up, and went over to the door, where several pairs of old boots were neatly laid out.

"I reckon this pair'll fit thee," said Frank, picking up a pair. "Put them on and we'll gan outside."

Alex took off his own shoes, and put on the boots. They weren't a bad fit, and he tried a couple of experimental steps. Frank nodded in approval, and opened the door.

"Here we go then," he said, and Alex stepped out into his new world.

Chapter 3

Alex straightened up, rubbing his sweaty forehead as he did so. He didn't mind most of the work on the farm, but weeding the vegetable plot was definitely not his favorite way of spending time. Unfortunately, now that spring had arrived the weeds were growing faster than the vegetables, and it seemed as if he had no sooner weeded from one end of the garden to the other than he had to start all over again before the weeds took over.

Frank would normally be helping him but one of the pigs was farrowing and he was needed elsewhere. Alex wondered briefly how many of the piglets would be declared to the Ministry, and how many would simply not exist. The checks made by the Ministry were fairly stringent, but by no means exhaustive, and it was easy enough to hide things away to make sure the local people had sufficient. It wasn't just Frank and Elsie who were doing this, Alex had found. Over the last few months Alex had met all the local farmers, and realized that there was a very close circle of people who were ensuring that the Ministry didn't get all the produce from the area. Everyone was holding things back, or hiding them, and everyone was enjoying the results. After all, if a farmer was allowed to keep one pig for his own use, it was easy enough for a whole litter of pigs to vanish amongst the surrounding farms before the Ministry had even heard about it. And if a couple of dozen chickens were declared as being eaten by foxes, who could

tell if those chickens were the same ones that appeared on a neighboring farm a few days later?

Alex didn't mind this style of things; it meant life had an element of fun, and he felt that life definitely needed to have some fun in it. He enjoyed living with Frank and Elsie, although he missed his mother. He had tried to contact her several times by telephone, phoning the corner shop near to where they lived, but he couldn't get an answer. He was afraid that the shop had been demolished, either in a raid or as a result of damage afterwards, and although he'd written several times he'd never had a letter back. He was just hoping that his mother was all right, although he had faith that someone would let him know if anything had happened. He felt that life, with one major exception, was just about as good as it could get. Unfortunately that exception was a big one.

Frank had taken him into Halifax to his old school, and introduced him to the head master. The head master had given him some tests, and decided which class he should go into, and had then taken him along to the class to introduce him.

The teacher, Mr. Harris, had welcomed him, and told him to sit down and make himself comfortable. He had chosen a seat to the rear of the class, and settled down. The lesson was math, which was one of his best subjects, and he had enjoyed the rest of the lesson. It was during the mid-morning break, however, that things had started to go wrong. He had followed the rest of the class outside, and had wandered into the play ground. He had been standing staring at the outside of the building when he had become aware that he was being surrounded by a crowd of other boys. With a sinking heart, he realized that he was about to be tested by the class's group of bully boys, and he hoped he was up to it.

"Well, what do we have here?" a voice came from behind. "Where do you suppose he came from?" The other boys sniggered.

"Don't you just love that color on him?" the voice continued.

Alex had expected something like this. He had put on his own school uniform that morning, and it had been designed by

someone who liked bright blue and yellow. Unfortunately, that made him stand out like a jay in a field full of crows, as the uniform at his new school was black. Alex turned round to face the boy who had spoken.

“What do you want?” he asked wearily. “Are we going to fight? Or do you just want to trade insults?”

The other boy looked a bit taken aback, but soon recovered. “I thought we might just have a friendly game of some description,” he replied. Alex could tell from his expression that whatever they decided, it was not going to be friendly. Alex realized he had two choices; he could fight now, or he could give in. He didn’t really want to do the first, but to do the second went very much against the grain.

“What do you suggest?” he asked mildly, whilst sizing up his opponent.

“How about some fisticuffs?” replied the boy.

“OK,” said Alex. “I can box. Where do you want to do it?”

“How about lunchtime, behind the gym?” suggested his opponent.

“No, let’s do it properly,” said Alex. “Lunchtime is fine, but we’ll do it *in* the gym. I don’t like getting cold.”

The other boys looked a little worried at this, but decided he couldn’t back down now in front of the other boys.

“OK then, lunchtime in the gym. We’ll be waiting for you.”

The group all walked back into the school, many of them managing to bump into Alex on the way past, making jeering noises under their breath.

Alex smiled as he remembered what had happened that lunchtime. He had indeed met the boys in the gym, but he had taken the opportunity to find the sports master beforehand, and had asked him to referee the bout. As he had expected, the sports master (an ex-soldier who had taken the job when invalidated out of the army) had been enthusiastic about the whole idea, so when the boys turned up expecting a down and dirty fight, they had been confounded to find the sports master, some

of the other teachers, and two pairs of boxing gloves all waiting for them. His opponent (whom Alex had found was called Charlie Duckett), had looked as if he wanted to withdraw, but realized he couldn't, given the circumstances. He and Alex had walked over to the sports master when summoned, to have their gloves tied on.

"Think you're smart do you, City Boy?" asked Charlie. "Think you're going to get away with this?"

"This time, yes," replied Alex.

"Well think again. I'm not going to let you get away with this. I'm going to get you, City Boy, and you're not going to like it."

"I'll look forward to it," replied Alex. Further conversation was cut short as they reached Mr. Henderson, the sports master.

"Now then boys," he said, as he tied their gloves. "Nice clean fight and all that. I'll be watching, so make sure it is clean, and break when you hear my whistle. Out you go now."

They walked over to the designated area in the gym, and stood at opposite corners.

"OK, shake hands" said Mr. Henderson. The two of them walked into the centre of the area, and briefly touched gloves.

"And fight!" said Mr. Henderson, jumping back out of the way.

Alex enjoyed the next few minutes. Charlie, however did not. Alex had been the boxing champion at his school for three years running, often beating opponents three and four years older than he was. It took him precisely thirty seconds to floor Charlie the first time. The whistle went, and they retired to their respective corners after Charlie had managed to get back to his feet.

"Come up," called Mr. Henderson, and they came back to the middle. "And fight!"

Alex didn't take as long this time. He had taken the measure of Charlie almost immediately, and realized that he was not so much a boxer as a brawler. He would swing roundhouse punches which Alex easily avoided, and leave himself wide open to retaliation. Alex took every opportunity to make his punches count,

and by the end of the second round, Charlie was definitely the worse for wear.

“One more round and that’s it boys,” said Mr. Henderson. “I think you’ll have had enough by then.”

They came together for the last time, and Alex decided to make it quick. Charlie swung wide again, and Alex caught him a beauty, an upper cut right to the jaw. Charlie went down like a sack of potatoes, and lay there glaring up at Alex.

“Lovely fight, Alex, lovely. I can tell you’ve done this before,” said Mr. Henderson as he came over. He gave a hand to Charlie, and hauled him to his feet.

“I think you’ve met your match there, Charlie,” he said. “Never seen you go down so fast.”

Charlie said nothing, but glared at Alex all the time. After they had had their gloves removed, and tidied themselves up, they walked back to the class room.

“You might think you’ve won this time, City Boy, but I’ll get you if it’s the last thing I do.”

Alex just looked at him and shrugged. After that, Charlie had mostly left him alone, but it was obviously that Alex was not going to be accepted as part of their group. He didn’t particularly want to be in the other group in the class, which consisted of the weak, and those who came under the heading of ‘swat’ or ‘teacher’s pet’. He knew he was going to have to sort this problem out sooner or later, but he was at a loss to know what to do about it.

As he walked back to the farmhouse for his evening meal, he decided he would ask Frank about it. After all, Frank had gone to the same school, so he must know something about how to get on there. Feeling better about having made this decision, Alex took his boots off by the door, and went in.

“Hello there,” said Elsie as he crossed to the table. “I was just about to dish up. I reckon you must have a sixth sense that tells you when dinner’s on the table.”

Alex smiled, and made to sit down at what had become his place at table.

“Not before you wash up,” said Elsie, nodding toward the sink. Alex blushed as he got up to go and wash. He didn’t usually forget, but looking at his hands he realized it was obvious that he’d been digging in the dirt. He ran some water into the sink and set to. Having removed a respectable amount of dirt, he went back to the table where Elsie was just dishing up a wonderful meal of smoked fish pie. Alex didn’t bother asking her where she’d got the fish; it would be one of the things that ‘did the rounds’ amongst the farming folk. She had probably swapped it for a dozen eggs, or perhaps some bacon, or maybe some of her wonderful home-made sausages. Suzie came running into the kitchen, her little legs pumping with enthusiasm.

“Here’s another one who can hear a dish rattle from upstairs,” said Elsie with a laugh. “Sit yourself down, poppet, and we’ll get you fed.”

Suzie climbed into her chair, and sat there beaming. Alex once again was struck by just how much she had changed since coming to the farm. Always a quiet child, she was now as talkative as she had previously been silent. The farm had agreed with her. She spent her days with Elsie, either with her in the kitchen, or ‘helping’ in the dairy, or with the chickens. She trotted about with a permanent smile on her face, and chattered nineteen to the dozen to Elsie, and anyone else who would stop and listen. Elsie clearly delighted in having the little girl around, and talked to her pretty much as she would to an adult, discussing things heard on the news, and asking her opinion. Suzie responded to this treatment by expanding her vocabulary, and by talking like a much older child. Although only just three and a half, she now spoke like a child of five.

“Hello Alex,” she now said, “have you had a good day at school?”

“Yes thanks,” he replied. “What have you been up to?”

“I’ve been helping Elsie in the dairy, skimming the milk,” she replied. “And then I had an apple pie with some of the cream.”

“That sounds nice. Where did you get the apple pie?”

“Elsie made it. It was lovely.”

Elsie looked up and smiled. “Don’t worry, Alex,” she said. “There’s plenty left for you. I know it’s one of your favorites.”

Alex smiled back. It hadn’t taken Elsie long to find out all Alex’s favorite foods, and she made sure that he had them regularly. It was lucky that he was working so hard on the farm, and in the garden, otherwise he would have put on so much weight he wouldn’t be able to cycle the six miles to school and back every day. However, all the exercise and good food were having the effect of turning him into an extremely fit young man.

“I’ll have to get you some more shirts,” Elsie commented as she came to the table with a plate of bread and butter. “You’re starting to grow out of the ones you brought with you.”

The door opened, and Frank came in. He left his boots by the door, but kept his cap on. Alex was fascinated by Frank’s cap. He couldn’t remember ever seeing Frank take it off. He did wonder whether Frank actually slept in it. He certainly came down with it on in the morning. The most Alex had seen of what was under Frank’s cap was when he was working, and he lifted the front to wipe his forehead.

“How’s tha doing lad?” asked Frank. “Not hoed up any cabbages by mistake today then?”

Alex laughed. This was now becoming an old joke. When he had first started working in the garden, he had not been able to tell the difference between a weed and a plant, and had hoed up a whole row of cabbages, carefully leaving all the weeds in place. When Frank had seen what he’d done, he’d laughed so hard he had ended up doubled up, and it was now one of his favorite stories when he went to the pub on a Friday night. Alex had at first been mortified by the laughter his mistake had produced, but by now he could see the funny side. Frank had never told him off for his mistake, which Alex appreciated, and that had made him all the more determined to learn so as not to make the same mistake again. He could now identify all the young plants in the garden in their neat rows, and Frank was leaving him more and

more in charge of the plot that provided not only the bulk of their vegetables, but also produced enough for Elsie to run a market stall in Halifax on a Saturday morning. The extra income was used to provide Alex and Suzie with clothes and other essentials, and Alex felt that he was making a useful contribution towards their keep. Frank paid him what he called ‘pocket money’ for his work, and Alex was saving this in a tin on the wash stand in what was now his room. Suzie had graduated to a room of her own within six weeks of their arrival, and had settled down to sleeping on her own without protest.

Alex had a reason to save his money; he was determined to join up when he reached his sixteenth birthday. He knew that officially he was too young, but all the work on the farm had given him the look of a boy of at least sixteen now. He wanted to join the Navy, and he knew that if he waited to be conscripted he would have no choice about where he was sent, or into which service. His father was a sailor, and Alex had decided that nothing less would do for him. He had discussed it with Frank (although not mentioning his idea of joining two years early), and Frank had agreed that the Navy was probably the best way for him to go, but said he couldn’t give his consent, it would have to come from his mother. Alex could see the logic (and the justice) of that, but as his mother had not replied to any of the letters he had sent, and he had not been able to speak to her on the telephone, he couldn’t see her giving her consent at all. That meant either conscription, or joining up at sixteen and forging her signature on the documents.

Alex worried about his mother sometimes. He could remember the last time he had seen her, when they had left her behind on the platform at Birmingham station. She had seemed so small and alone when the train had chugged away from her, and Alex still wished he had stayed behind to look after her—even though, he was honest enough to admit to himself, the boot would probably have been on the other foot. He could understand why she had sent them away—not having to worry about them must have

made life easier for her—but he still wished he was back in the surroundings he had known all his life. And that thought brought him right back to the problem he'd been struggling with whilst working in the garden. What on earth was he going to do about Charlie Ducket?

“Frank,” he began. “Can I ask your advice about something?”

“Course you can, lad. Any time. What's tha problem?”

“There's this boy at school. He's always threatening to beat me up, him and his gang. It's not that I can't handle him, but it would be better if I could find a way round it. I don't like fighting unless it's proper boxing, and I want to know if I can settle this another way, but I can't think of anything.”

Alex paused. It had all come out in a rush, and he felt better for telling Frank. He didn't want Frank to think he was a pansy, or afraid to fight, but he did want his advice.

Frank gave him a shrewd look. “Having problems with Charlie Ducket are you?” he said.

Alex started. “I never said it was Charlie Ducket,” he replied.

“You didn't have to, lad,” said Frank. “I know his pa, and it's the talk of the pub how you got round Charlie by fighting him in the gym. I was reet proud of you when I heard that tale. It's not often you can get one over on a Ducket.”

Alex blushed. He had forgotten that Frank would discuss things with his friends in the pub, but now Frank had mentioned it it was obvious that it would be a topic of conversation.

“Have you any ideas, then? About how I can get him to back off, if not become friends?”

“Well, you could try really giving him a pasting. That would get him to leave you alone, but wouldn't go a long way towards making friends with him. Let me think on't lad, and I'll talk to you about it later.”

At this precise moment, Elsie arrived with two steaming plates of fish pie, and both Alex and Frank were too busy eating to resume their discussions.

After supper, when Alex had helped Elsie with the washing up, he and Frank sat by the fire. Frank was obviously thinking, and Alex didn't want to disturb his train of thought. Finally Frank looked up and said "We'll have to get you two to be friends."

Alex blinked in surprise. "Well, yes, that's what I'd like," he said. "But how are we going to it?"

Frank thought for a minute. "I'll have a word with his father," he announced. "We don't usually get involved in fratching between bairns, but in this case it needs to be sorted out. Leave it with me."

Alex nodded. He felt relieved that it would be sorted out without him having to get involved, and hopefully this would solve the problem. He sat quietly by the fire until nine o'clock, and then said 'good night' and went to bed.

His bedroom had changed a little in the six months he had been there. The furniture was still the same, but the beams were now adorned with a selection of model aircraft, which he had made in what little spare time he had. There was a Spitfire, a Hurricane, a Halifax and a Lancaster bomber, all twirling gently in the draft made by opening the door. On the window sill was the model of a destroyer he had made over the Christmas holidays. On an additional table, which had been brought in by Frank, were the makings of a further model ship, this time a flower-class corvette. Alex was tired tonight, though, so he just undressed and went straight to bed, where the exertions of the day, on top of school, soon sent him to sleep.

* * * * *

Two days later, Frank made an announcement at tea.

"We'll need an extra place at table on Wednesday night Elsie," he said. "Young Charlie Ducket's coming for the evening."

Alex and Elsie looked at him in amazement.

"Charlie Ducket's coming here?" said Alex, feeling that he must have misheard Frank's statement. "What for?"

“For his tea of course,” said Frank, with a twinkle in his eye.

“That’ll be the first time a Ducket’s set foot on this farm since you belted his Dad good and proper over me,” said Elsie. “What’s brought this on?”

Alex, still digesting the fact that Charlie Ducket was going to coming to the farm, missed most of Elsie’s comment. He did see though that Frank was starting to blush, a deep crimson tide spreading from his neck slowly up his face to his hairline.

“Yes, well, that’s all in the past Elsie,” he replied.

“It most certainly is,” replied Elsie. “So why’s he coming then?”

Frank had recovered his composure. “The lad here was having a bit of trouble with Charlie at school. I spoke to his dad, and suggested the two of them should get to know each other a bit better. We agreed they should spend some evenings together, and I thought it would be better for Charlie to come here first off, and then Alex can go down to his place next week.”

“I hope you’ve got the petrol,” replied Elsie.

“Of course I have Elsie,” said Frank. “I wouldn’t have suggested it else.”

Alex was now recovering from his surprise. When he thought about it, the idea actually seemed to be quite good.

“What time is he coming over?” he asked.

“I’m picking both of you up from school,” Frank said, “and I’ll be dropping you back to school on Thursday morning.”

“Sounds great!” said Alex.

Elsie looked a bit skeptical, but said nothing further. When Alex got to school the next day, Charlie Ducket was there waiting for him.

“What’ve you done now, City Boy,” said Charlie, lounging by the door into the school. “Was this your bright idea? I don’t want to come to your crummy farm.”

“As a matter of fact, it was Frank and your dad who came up with it,” replied Alex. “They’ve obviously heard that we’re not getting on, and they want to sort it out.”

“I don’t think it’s a problem, City Boy. I could lick you with one hand behind my back, in spite of the fact you think you beat me in the gym that day.”

Alex made no response to this other than a brief smile, and went into the school. Charlie’s blustering had confirmed that he was as unsure about the impending visit as Alex, and Alex found this strangely reassuring.

That day and the next passed without any major incidents, and four o’clock on Wednesday found the two boys waiting outside the school. Frank’s trusty old Ford pulled up outside, and the two boys climbed in.

“All reet, lads?” asked Frank as they settled down.

“All right Frank,” replied Alex.

“Fine thank you Mr. Linthwaite,” muttered Charlie.

“That’s gradely then,” said Frank, putting the car in gear and setting off.

Conversation on the way to the farm was non-existent and they arrived half an hour later. They alighted in the cobbled yard and Frank led the way into the house.

“Here we are then, Elsie,” he said cheerily as they entered the warm, scented kitchen.

“Well, sit yerselves down and have a cup of tea, then,” responded Elsie, turning from the range with a broad smile. She looked at Charlie, and said “Eeh, lad, you do look like your dad was at your age.”

Charlie didn’t know how to respond to this, and after a couple of seconds he muttered “thank you” as he sat down at the kitchen table. Elsie served up cups of tea and slices of bread and butter ‘to keep them going until dinner was ready’, and then shooed them out of the kitchen.

“Why don’t you take Charlie upstairs and show him your room?” suggested Elsie.

“OK,” agreed Alex and, opening the door to the hall and ushering Charlie through.

They went upstairs, and Alex led the way into his room.

Charlie walked through the door and then stopped dead, staring up at the ceiling where the planes, disturbed by the opening of the door, started their usual dance.

“Oh wow,” he breathed quietly.

“What’s up?” asked Alex, giving him a tug into the room so he could shut the door.

“Those,” replied Charlie, pointing up at the planes.

“Why?” asked Alex. “They’re only some models I’ve made to pass the time. There’s not much else to do here in the winter, apart from listen to the radio, and even that gets boring after a while.”

“They’re brilliant,” whispered Charlie. “I’ve never seen such good models.”

Alex felt obscurely pleased by Charlie’s reaction. “Thanks,” he said sincerely. “Come and look at this one, I’m still building this one.” He led Charlie over to the part-completed model of the corvette. “Do you want to give me a hand?”

“Oh yes,” said Charlie fervently. “If you don’t think I’ll mess it up.”

Alex laughed and said “Oh, I don’t think you’ll do that!”

The two boys sat down at the table, and were soon deep in conversation about the models, why Alex was building this particular model, and how Charlie could make one himself. They were so engrossed that Frank had to come upstairs and call them down to dinner. Over dinner they were still chatting about anything and everything under the sun, and Frank looked over at Elsie and winked. Elsie smiled back, and the rest of the evening was spent harmoniously together round the fire, listening to the radio until it was time for bed.

Chapter 4

Life continued on the farm pretty much undisturbed by outside influences for the next eighteen months. Alex learnt the cycle and rhythm of the farming world, and Suzie continued to grow and to develop into a loving little girl, albeit a slightly precocious one.

Once having started, the friendship between Charlie and Alex had grown, and continued to flourish. Alex had cemented their relationship by presenting Charlie with a model Spitfire on his fifteenth birthday, which Charlie had been thrilled with. The regular weekly visits to each other's houses had continued (petrol rationing permitting), although once the evenings drew out and the weather improved, they tended to cycle rather than rely on Frank or Mr. Duckett to provide them with transport.

Alex had continue to flourish, and now, at just short of his sixteenth birthday, could easily pass for eighteen. This, of course, was just what he wanted, as he was still determined to leave the farm at sixteen and join up. The only cloud on Alex's horizon was that, despite all his efforts, he still hadn't heard anything from his mother. This was now proving to be a deep worry. He and Suzie had been at the farm for nearly two years, and during all that time they had heard nothing from her. He knew that Frank and Elsie were worried because he had heard them discussing the situation after he'd gone to bed one night. He'd been coming down stairs for a drink of water, and had heard their voices through the

kitchen door. Elsie had been talking about how she'd tried to ring his mother from the Post Office in the village, and that she'd sent several letters as well, none of which had been answered. Frank, in his rumbling voice, had been reassuring.

"The lad said the bombing had been bad, Elsie. It's quite probable that the house isn't there any more. They've had it bad in Coventry, they've been reet copping it."

"I know that Frank, but you'd think she'd have written to the bairns. Not a letter, not a note, not even a birthday card. What are we supposed to do if there's a problem that needs a legal guardian? I'm beginning to wonder whether she's even told their father where they are. I know sailors are notoriously difficult to get in touch with, even when there's not a war on, but does he know?"

"Now then Elsie," Frank replied. "Don't go borrowing trouble. The bairns are settled, we like having them here, their mother knows they're all reet, that's all that matters."

"And what about when the war is over?" said Elsie. "What do we do then? Send them packing back to Coventry wi'out an idea of where their mother is?"

"Don't talk so daft, Elsie," said Frank. "We'll keep them here. There's enough to go round, and young Alex is a fair hand on't farm. And that Suzie, she's a proper ray of sunshine to have here. I don't know what I'd do wi'out them, if truth be told."

"All well and good, Frank, but they have a family. How are we supposed to let the family know if there's anything wrong?"

There was a long pause. Alex could picture Frank staring into the fire in the way he had when considering something. Finally, Frank's voice could be heard.

"I tell thee what, Elsie," he said. "The Ministry of Defense will know where their faither is. I'll write to them and ask for a letter to be forwarded to him. I'll ask him to write back, and that way he'll know where they are, and we'll know that he knows. After all he's family, so I suppose it lies wi' me to get in touch. What he does then is up to him."

Elsie was obviously considering this. “That’s a grand idea Frank,” she said. “If we do it official like, then they’re bound to send the letter on.”

“Aye,” replied Frank. “That’s what I thought. I’ll do it in t’ morning. Reet then Elsie, I’m off to bed. See thee in’t morning lass.”

“Good night Frank.”

Alex had had to beat a hasty retreat back up to his bedroom, all thoughts of getting a glass of water forgotten. At least he wasn’t the only one thinking it was strange that his mother hadn’t been in touch.

He assumed Frank had written the letter to the Ministry of Defense, but as the weeks, and then months, went by it was also obvious that they hadn’t had a response. For once, though, Alex was content to let the matter be dealt with by the ‘grown ups’ rather than trying to do anything himself. Apart from anything else, it would be difficult to ask Frank if he’d had a reply from either the Ministry or his father without betraying the fact that he’d been eavesdropping on their private conversations, and he was reluctant to do that. He would just have to bide his time, and see what happened next.

What happened next was that Frank received a letter with an official-looking crest on it, post-marked London. Alex saw it on Frank’s plate when he came home from school one afternoon. Burning with curiosity, there was nothing he could but wait until Frank came in from work and opened it. Apart from bills, and letters from the Ministry of Food regarding farm inspections, they received remarkably little correspondence at the farm, but what there was was brought by George the Postman on his trusty bike. George would cycle from one end of the valley to the other, in all weathers, delivering letters, parcels and gossip. If you wanted someone to know something, the best way to get it delivered was to tell George, or the postmistress, Mrs. Thwaites, in the village post office. You could guarantee that between the two of them, news and rumor would travel faster than by any other

method. George was invariably given a cup of tea and either a slice of bread and dripping or cake at each stop he made, so that he would have time to pass on all the news from along the valley. If he heard anything really important (or a bit of gossip too good to withhold from his ‘regulars’), he might even call in on the way back to pass it on. Given the amount he must eat it was probably just as well he rode a bike, otherwise he would pile the weight on like nobody’s business. As it was he was a stick-thin man, with a shock of unruly black hair, and eyes which Alex had heard Elsie refer to as ‘spaniel’s eyes’, a phrase he hadn’t understood until he’d actually met George for the first time.

Frank came in for his tea, took his boots off, washed his hands and sat down at the table. Alex waited for him to open the letter, but he just picked it up, looked at the crest and the post mark, then grunted and put it down again on the table. Alex sat in a fume of impatience until Frank had finished his tea. However, he was doomed to disappointment. Elsie sent him off upstairs to his room to do his homework before Frank had even picked the letter up, let alone read it. Alex was burning with a need to know what was in the letter, and wrestled with his conscience, before creeping back downstairs to listen outside the kitchen door.

At first he couldn’t hear anything apart from the noise of Elsie clearing the table and doing the washing up. However, it was obvious that she was just as impatient to hear what was in the letter, because the next thing Alex heard was the noise of Elsie’s chair scraping across the floor as she pulled it closer to the fire.

“Well?” he heard her say.

“Give me time, lass, I need to think about what’s in this letter.”

“Well while you’re thinking, can I be reading it?”

“Aye, I don’t see why not. Happen you’ll be able to think about what to do better than I can.”

For the next few minutes, there was silence. Alex sat on the stairs in the draft from the hallway, in a fever of impatience to hear what would happen next.

Eventually Elsie said “Well, there’s a turn up for the books.”

“Aye, it is an all,” replied Frank.

“What should we do now?” asked Elsie.

“That’s where you’ve got me, lass,” confessed Frank. “I haven’t a clue.”

“Well, it changes things does this,” continued Elsie.

“Aye lass, that it does,” said Frank in his quiet way.

“Should we tell Alex?” asked Elsie.

“Happen it’s none of his business, lass,” replied Frank. “If his mother didn’t tell him, who are we to?”

“Aye, you’re reet enough there,” said Elsie. “So we say nowt about it then?”

“I don’t see how we can. It’s reetly not ours to tell. It’s up to his mother to tell him.”

“Well she’s not been in touch since they got here, so why do you think she’s likely to change that?”

“I don’t know lass,” said Frank. “I really don’t know.”

“Well at least we can tell Alex about his father.”

“Aye, we can do that reet enough. I’ll tell him tomorrow. Let him finish up today before we tell him.”

There was the sound of footsteps across the kitchen floor, and Alex fled up the stairs in case they were coming out into the hall. He reached his bedroom, and almost ran in and across to his desk, where he sat down, staring at what should be his math homework. His brain was on fire. What had Frank and Elsie had been discussing? It was obviously something to do with himself and Suzie, but what could it possibly be? Whatever it was, he wasn’t going to find out because Frank and Elsie had decided not to tell him. Staring at the page of his exercise book, Alex found that he was faced with a dilemma. He knew where Frank kept his letters—in one of the drawers of the big dresser in the kitchen—and he knew that once Frank and Elsie had gone to bed there was little chance of either of them coming back downstairs again. The question he was wrestling with was did he have the right to go and read that letter? It wasn’t his letter, it was manifestly addressed to Frank. On the other hand it did contain

information about him and, possibly, Suzie. If that was the case, he reasoned, he had the right to know what it was.

Alex made his mind up. When he was sure that Elsie and Frank had gone to bed he would sneak downstairs and try and find the letter. The decision made, he turned his attention back to his homework. However, the algebra on the page made as much sense to him at the moment as Greek would have done, and no matter how hard he tried to concentrate, the thought of reading the letter dominated his mind. Having struggled for nearly an hour to work through the problems, he eventually gave up the fight and went and lay down on his bed. He thought that if he lay down, he would hear Frank and Elsie come upstairs to bed, and he would know when the coast was clear.

Alas for such well-laid plans! The next thing Alex knew was that he was waking up, still dressed, in the pitch dark, with no idea what time it was. He reached for his torch (a birthday present from Frank), and switched it on. He shone it on the clock, which showed him that it was just after two o'clock in the morning. He sat up, and decided that now was as good a time as any for his attempt at espionage. He changed his shoes for his slippers, to make less noise going down the stairs, and walked over to the bedroom door. He eased it open, trying to make as little noise as possible, and crossed the landing. The whole house was still – apart from the rhythmic snoring noise coming from Frank's bedroom. A smaller, lighter noise came from Elsie's room, and nothing at all from Suzie's room.

Alex crept down the stairs, making sure his whole weight was on one stair before moving onto the next. He remembered that one of the stairs creaked, but for the life of him he couldn't remember which one. He had heard from someone that if you trod on stairs close to the wall they were less likely to make a noise. He didn't know if it was true or not, but it seemed sensible to try and take every precaution. He slipped noiselessly down, holding his breath in case of squeaks, but made it to the bottom without incident. He crossed the hall, and eased open the kitchen

door. A faint glow came from the front of the range, showing that Elsie had banked it well before going to bed. Moonlight shone through the un-curtained windows, bathing the whole room in a bright white light. Unfortunately this had the effect of making the shadows even darker. Alex crept stealthily over the flagged floor, and then wondered why; the flags weren't likely to creak, and he had his slippers on. Feeling a little foolish he straightened up and walked over to the dresser.

From this point on, he was committed. If he'd made a noise earlier he could have claimed he was just getting some water, but with the dresser being on the opposite side of the kitchen to the sink, that excuse would hold even less water than the non-existent glass he had in his hand. Reaching the dresser, he shone the torch over the front of it. There! That was the drawer he wanted. He set the torch down and took hold of the drawer handle. Using both hands, he eased the drawer open, blessing Elsie's attention to detail that included waxing the drawer runners to ensure they operated smoothly. With the drawer fully open, he picked up the torch once again and shone it on the contents. There, on the top, was the letter. Alex picked it up and went over to the table. Hand shaking slightly, he put the torch down, and pulled the letter out of the envelope. The first surprise was that there were actually two letters in the envelope. Picking up the torch, he checked the dates on the letters and picked up the one from the Ministry of Defense. Once he had unfolded it, he started to read the letter.

"Dear Mr. Linthwaite" it began:

"With regards to your enquiry regarding the whereabouts of Petty Officer Arthur Hennessy. As you obviously realize, we are unable to give out any details of Petty Officer Hennessy's current location. However, we do provide a service for relatives to get in touch with members of HM Forces.

If you would care to write to Petty Officer Hennessy, we will forward the letter on to him. Obviously it will then be up to him to decide whether to correspond directly with yourself.

Please forward any correspondence you wish to send to Petty Officer Hennessy to the address shown at the top of this letter.

Yours sincerely
etc. etc.”

Alex put the letter down. This was obviously the reply to the letter Frank had written to try and find his father’s whereabouts. Nothing surprising there. He picked up the second letter.

“Dear Mr. Linthwaite

We have received your letter which you wish to have redirected to Petty Officer Arthur Hennessy.

Unfortunately, we have received news that Petty Officer Hennessy was injured in action, and subsequently died from these injuries. He was buried at sea. However, we did hold on Petty Officer Hennessy’s file a letter from a solicitor giving us instructions to carry out in the event of his death.

As you are his closest living relative, we therefore enclose the document which has resulted from us carrying out these instructions.

Should you require any further information, please do not hesitate to get in touch with us. Should you wish us to furnish you with the direction of the firm of solicitors mentioned in the enclosed correspondence, please contact this department and we will be only too happy to furnish this information.

Once again, I remain
Yours sincerely
etc. etc.”

Alex sat there, stunned. His father was dead! His father, the sailor he had loved ever since he could remember, the provider of a hundred treats whenever he was home on leave, would no longer be able to provide him with anything. A desolate feeling stole over Alex. This was obviously what Frank and Elsie had been talking about when they said they had to tell him about his father. A single tear welled from his eye and made its lonely way down his cheek. He brushed it aside. Tears wouldn’t bring his father back. He put the letter down on the table.

Alex sat for a while, trying to absorb the fact that he was now, in effect, an orphan. He had to face the fact that to all intents and purposes he was now on his own. His mother had abandoned them, obviously happy that they were out of the way. His father would never be coming back, and he wouldn't even have a grave he could visit.

After a while, though, Alex remembered what had been said in the letter. He checked through the pages on the table—nothing there except the letters. He picked up both letters, and checked again. No, nothing there. Putting the letters back in the envelope in the same order he had found them, he got up and went back to the dresser. Putting the envelope down on the dresser surface, he shone the torch into the drawer. There, hidden underneath several brown envelopes, was another white one. He pulled it out, and looked at the address.

The letter was addressed 'To Whom it may Concern', with nothing further written. Alex took it back to the table, and checked the envelope. It was a heavy, expensive-looking envelope, and he could well believe it was the sort that a solicitor would use. He would be the first to admit he knew nothing about solicitors, but he had heard people talking and they always mentioned the fact that they were expensive. Pulling out the sheets, Alex unfolded the document and began to read once more:

"To Whom it May Concern

This is the last Will and Testament of Arthur Henry Hennessy, last of 47 Rochdale Road, Coventry. I declare that I am of sound mind. This will invalidates any previous wills made by myself.

Be it known that I leave one child, Alex Arthur Hennessy, by my wife Rosie.

(Alex had to read this again, before he started to understand what it was saying.)

However, I acknowledge that I have taken responsibility for a second child, Suzanne Henrietta Molyneux, a child adopted by myself and my wife. I hereby give direction that this

child is to be raised as if she were my own daughter, and that of my wife (the aforementioned Rosie Hennessy), having equal rights under the law to my estate as my natural son, the aforementioned Alex Arthur.

I therefore make the following disposition of all my worldly goods:”

Alex stopped reading. His brain was once again on fire, and he was totally bewildered by what he had read. Suzie wasn't his father's child! If he was understanding this right, she wasn't his mother's child either! She wasn't his sister!. What was going on here? Why would his parents take on a child that didn't belong to them? Who was Suzie?

Totally confused and bewildered, Alex put the will back into the envelope, and returned it to the bottom of the pile where he had found it. He also remembered to put the other envelope back into the drawer on top of the pile. He shut the drawer, and went back upstairs to bed.

He undressed and got into bed, but his mind was working furiously and he knew he wasn't going to fall asleep. He lay and listened to Frank snoring, and Elsie whistling, and turned over and over in his head everything he had read. The fact that his father was dead was there, like a bruise, but dominating every other thought was the will his father had written, and the information regarding Suzie.

He thought back to when Suzie had arrived in their lives. Although he knew that women got pregnant, along with most other eleven year old boys he had given no thought to the process, assuming that babies just arrived. Having worked on the farm for the last two years, though, he now had a much greater understanding of the process, and he realized now that his mother had never been pregnant before Suzie arrived. He remembered the night his mother had sent him round to Mrs. Hepton's, the next door neighbor, telling him to stay there until she got back. Remembering, he found he could clearly recall his mother's shape at the time; still her usual slim self, no bulge, no obvious

signs of pregnancy. And then there were the conversations he had overheard between his mother and Mrs. Hepton. He also remembered things he had paid no attention to at the time, but which now assumed a greater importance.

One particular conversation he remembered had taken place on a warm early summer's day when his mother was hanging the washing out in the back garden. Mrs. Hepton had been there, and once his mother had finished putting the washing on the line she had gone over to the fence and talked to Mrs. Hepton for several minutes, before going back into the house. Alex had been playing in the garden, and had overheard the conversation.

"Are you going to do it?" asked Mrs. Hepton.

"I am," replied his mother firmly. "She's asked me to, and I can't say no to her. She's in a right old state."

Mrs. Hepton had snorted. "I'm not surprised, not with her family," she said. "What possessed her in the first place?"

"She said she was in love," said his mother.

"Love!" exclaimed Mrs. Hepton. "I wish I had a farthing for every time someone thought they were in love, and let themselves be cozened into doing what they shouldn't."

"I know," said his mother wearily, "but we've all done stupid things at some time in our lives, Maggie."

"When's it due?" Mrs. Hepton had asked.

"Oh, she thinks about the end of September."

"Has she told anyone?"

"No, only me. And the doctor, of course, but she used a different doctor and gave him a false name, so no one else should know."

"Well, I've no objections to looking after the boy when you need to get away," said Mrs. Hepton. "Just knock on the door and send him round."

"I appreciate it, Maggie," said his mother.

"You know I think you're a fool don't you?"

"I know, Maggie, but what else could I do? There she is, my little bairn, all alone and in trouble."

“You’re too soft, that’s your trouble Rosie,” replied Mrs. Hepton. “But there, I’ve said my piece, and that’s an end to it. If you need any help, just let me know.”

“I will, Maggie, and thanks.”

After that both women had gone back into their houses, and Alex had thought no more of it. Looking back and remembering the conversation now, it had a whole new light shed on it. This was obviously connected with his mother in some way, but who was she talking about. If she wasn’t Suzie’s mother, who was?

Alex spent the rest of the night tossing and turning, with the information tumbling over and over in his head. When the alarm went off in the morning he got out of bed feeling completely unrested, and with gritty eyed for lack of sleep. The beginnings of a headache were there behind his left eye, and he felt generally pretty dreadful. The thought of going to school was distinctly unattractive, and he wondered if he could get away with not going. He dressed without much enthusiasm, and made his way downstairs. He entered the kitchen to find it unusually silent. Frank and Elsie were both sitting at the table looking grave, and for one minute he wondered what the matter was. Then he remembered, and realized that they were getting ready to tell him about his father. Alex realized that he was going to have to act as if the information was new to him, or else he would give the game away that he had read the letter. Bracing himself, he went and sat down at the table.

“Alex, love, we’ve got something to tell you,” began Elsie. Alex looked at her.

“We’ve had a letter from the Ministry of Defense. It’s about your father.” Alex just continued looking at her.

“I’m afraid it’s bad news, Alex,” Elsie went on. “He was injured, and he died later from his injuries. He’s been buried at sea.”

Alex just sat there. He thought he’d be all right, but hearing the news from someone else made it seem fresh again.

“Dad’s dead?” he said.

“Yes, love, I’m afraid so.”

“When did he die?”

“About four months ago,” said Elsie. “They wouldn’t give us many details, obviously, but they said it was during an encounter in the South Atlantic.”

Alex felt tears running down his face. He made no effort to wipe them away, and they just kept on coming.

“I’m sorry, love, it must be a terrible shock, hearing it like this.” Elsie moved up and put her arms around him, Alex buried his head in her comforting bosom, and sobbed.

“My dad’s dead, he’s never coming home again,” he wailed. Elsie made soothing noises, and Frank got up and made a cup of tea. After a while, when his sobs had changed to hiccups, Elsie took her arms from around him, and passed him his tea.

“Drink up, love, it will make you feel better,” she said.

After he had drunk his tea, Elsie said, “You don’t have to go to school today. Frank will run down there when he goes into market and let them know you won’t be in, and why. Why don’t you pop back upstairs to your room, and have a bit of time on your own. You can come back down when you’re ready.”

Alex nodded, and got up from the table. He looked at Elsie, and muttered “thanks” before making his way out of the kitchen, and upstairs to his room. He lay down on his bed, and began to cry again. Once started, he found himself quite unable to stop, and after his grief had run its course, he felt himself drifting off to sleep. As he fell, his eye wandered to his math homework, still on his desk from the night before. “At least I won’t have to hand that in until I’ve finished it” was his last, incongruous thought before sleep finally claimed him.

Chapter 5

When Alex awoke, he lay in his bed blinking for a few minutes. He felt groggy, as if he hadn't had enough sleep, with the beginnings of a headache behind his eyes. He couldn't remember at first why he was in bed when it was daylight. He turned over and then the remembrance came crashing in. To stop himself from crying again he got out of bed and got dressed.

He was surprised at how shocked and grief-stricken he felt. After all, he hadn't seen his father for nearly four years, since he had last been home on leave. His mother had spent a couple of weekends away visiting him in Plymouth when his ship came in, but had said it was too difficult to arrange for her and the children to all go, as well as being too expensive. He and Suzie had gone to stay with Mrs. Hepton next door, when his mother had gone down to Plymouth. But his father had been a good correspondent and had written regularly. His letters seemed to make his world come alive to Alex, and although Alex was sufficiently worldly wise to realize that his father had probably glossed over some of the less pleasant aspects of his life, enough of what he had written had been sufficiently descriptive for Alex to think it would be a good life. He had looked forward to joining up and possibly serving with his own father on the same ship. At the very least, they might have been able to swap stories with each when they were both in port, or both on leave.

And now that would never happen. Alex would never again see his father, and his dreams of serving with him had, quite literally, been blown apart. He would have to get on with his own life, without dreaming about what might have been. Alex realized that he was now even more determined to join up when he was sixteen—if not sooner. He could quite easily pass for eighteen, having the physique and look of an older boy after all his work on the farm. He bent down and took his old battered suitcase from under the bed. He put it on the bed and, opening it, took out his old leather wallet. He sat on the bed and pulled out the money it contained. He counted through it. There was just over thirty pounds in there. Not a fortune by any means, but enough to buy a train ticket to London where he could enlist. This was the money he had earned working on the farm with Frank, and by selling produce at the weekly market in Halifax. Stuffing the money back in his wallet, he returned it to the suitcase, and replaced the suitcase under the bed.

He got up, and went to the door and opened it. Stepping out on the landing, he could hear voices in the kitchen. At first not sure if he wanted to face anyone else yet, he decided he couldn't hide in his room for ever, and went down the stairs to the kitchen. Opening the kitchen door, he saw Elsie standing at the kitchen table rolling out pastry. Suzie was standing on the little wooden box Frank had made for her so that she could reach the table, and was 'helping' Elsie by rolling out the trimmings from whatever Elsie was making. Suzie was chattering nineteen to the dozen, and Elsie was replying in a slightly absent-minded fashion. When she heard the door open, Elsie looked up and saw Alex there.

"Fancy a cup of tea lad?" she asked.

"Yes please," replied Alex. He walked forward and sat at the table, at the opposite end from where Elsie and Suzie were working. Suzie looked at him with a quizzical expression on her face.

"What are you doing here?" she asked. "I thought you were at school today."

Elsie answered before Alex could.

“Alex isn’t feeling well,” she said quickly. “That’s why he’s here.”

“Oh,” responded Suzie. “What’s wrong?”

“He’s just a bit upset,” said Elsie. “He’s heard some bad news about his father.”

Alex looked at her sharply. Elsie had said ‘his father’, not ‘your father’. He saw that she was looking back at him steadily, her expression giving nothing away. He took the cup of tea she was holding out to him, and sat drinking it quietly.

“Did you find what you were looking for in the dresser?” Elsie suddenly said.

Taken by surprise, Alex nearly choked on his tea.

“What do you mean?” he asked, trying to look as innocent as possible.

“I know you read those letters,” she replied. “I also know you got a bit more than you bargained for.”

Alex didn’t know what to say. Eventually, he managed to reply. “How did you know I looked? I put everything back,” he muttered.

“I know you did, I saw you,” said Elsie.

“Saw me? There was no one else here,” exclaimed Alex.

“You didn’t hear me,” said Elsie. “You were too busy reading the letters. I woke up thinking I’d heard a noise, and saw your torch as you went into the kitchen. I came downstairs and opened the door. You were so busy reading the letters you never even heard me, so I stood watching you for a few minutes, and then decided to go back to bed.”

“Are you going to tell Frank?” he asked.

“Frank knows,” said Elsie. “I told him this morning when he got up, because I wanted to know what we should do about it. Frank said to leave it and to talk about it when you were ready, but I felt I should let you know that we both know what you’ve been up to. I have to say I’m disappointed in you Alex.”

Alex blushed. Suddenly he felt ashamed of his sneaking about, and wished (for more than one reason) that he'd never got out of bed last night.

"I didn't mean to do anything dishonest," he said. "I just wanted to know what was going on, that's all, and I didn't think you'd tell me anything."

Elsie's face softened. "I know you didn't, Alex," she said. "I just wish you'd waited a bit longer for me and Frank to talk to you about it. We discussed it yesterday while you were at school, and we'd decided that you were of an age to hear what was in your father's will, and of course we weren't going to hide the fact of your father's death."

Alex didn't know what to say. He felt really ashamed of himself, more so since Elsie's explanation made perfect sense. He should have realized that Elsie and Frank, as acting guardians, would talk it over before talking to him about it. If he'd just waited, he would have found out about things in a better way than the one he had chosen.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I should have waited. I don't know why I suddenly felt that I had to know. It's just that I saw Frank get that letter, and he never said anything about it. I thought you weren't going to tell me."

"So you thought you'd find out for yourself," Elsie finished for him.

Alex nodded, feeling really miserable.

"Well, I can't say that I approve," she said, "but I can understand why you did it." She carried on with the pastry for a few seconds. "But Alex," she continued, "you must learn to trust that people will tell you what you need to know. You don't have to sneak around and try and get that information for yourself."

Suzie was looking between Alex and Elsie. Whilst obviously confused as to what exactly they were talking about, one thing she had picked up on.

"Is Alex in trouble?" she asked, almost hopefully.

Elsie laughed. "No sweetheart," she replied. "He's not in trouble."

Suzie's face could only be called disappointed.

Alex looked at her over the rim of his tea cup. "Did you want me to be in trouble?" he asked.

"Oh no, but you've never been in trouble before and I wanted to see what it would be like," she replied.

Alex and Elsie looked at each other, and burst out laughing. Alex felt for an instant that laughing so soon after hearing of his father's death was somehow wrong, and had an momentary feeling of guilt, but he couldn't resist joining in.

"Well now," said Elsie. "Seeing as you're feeling a bit better, how about you give us a hand getting the evening meal ready?"

Alex nodded, putting down his tea cup. "What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"I could really do with some eggs. Would you be a love and fetch some from the barn?"

"Of course," he said. "How many do you want? Or shall I just keep looking for them?"

"Just get me a few, no more than a dozen," Elsie replied. "Suzie and I usually go out in the morning to look for them, and it would be a shame if there weren't any left for us to find."

Alex jumped to his feet, and went to the scullery to get the egg basket. Pulling on his jacket, he went out of the kitchen into the brisk afternoon. Collecting the eggs was the ideal job for the way he was feeling at the moment, he decided. Easy enough to do, it nevertheless required a fair amount of thought, as the hens were past masters of the art of hiding their nests. Alex supposed he could understand this; after all, they were trying to raise chicks, not have their eggs taken away. But enough of their eggs would escape detection that there was always a supply of new chicks coming through to swell the farm's chicken population. Even the male chicks were kept as capons and allowed to grow until they were of a suitable size for slaughter.

That had been one of the first things Alex had had to come to terms with after arriving at the farm. He had never seen an animal slaughtered before, and found the whole thing slightly upsetting at first. The thought that an animal he had raised and looked after would be killed and eaten was one he found very difficult to come to terms with. However, after talking it over with Frank, he had realized that this was the purpose of farm animals, and as he thoroughly enjoyed Elsie's cooking of the same animals, his objections were soon over-ruled by the innate practicality of his nature.

The first time he had helped the mobile slaughter man to deal with the pigs and chickens (under the watchful eye of 'the man from the Ministry'), he had felt faint and had to go outside for some fresh air, away from the smell of the blood. But he had gone back inside and after a while found the whole process fascinating. The butchering of the carcasses was also interesting, and after a few false starts and badly hacked about carcasses, he had become a dab hand at helping prepare the meat himself, with a bit of guidance from Frank. He had been wondering whether he should become a doctor at one point. Frank pointed out that it was easy to be a slaughter man because no one expected the patient to survive, but a doctor's patients had to live through the operation. After that the idea lost some of its appeal, especially since he had learnt he would have to study until he was old enough to go to university, and it was likely to take five years before he qualified. Alex had decided to stick with his original plan of joining up. The eggs collected, Alex made his way back to the kitchen. As he was crossing the yard, he saw Frank coming in from the fields, and waited for him. Frank came up to him and nodded.

"All right then lad?" he asked.

Alex nodded. "I want to apologize for not trusting you to tell me about what was in that letter," he said, meeting Frank's eyes as he spoke. "I shouldn't have gone through the dresser, it wasn't my business to do that."

Frank nodded gravely. "I see Elsie's been talking to you then," he said.

"Did you know about Suzie?" Alex asked. "Before you go the letter, I mean."

"Well we thought it was a bit odd," replied Frank. "We'd had a letter off your mam and dad when you was born, but not a whisper did we hear about a sister until your mam rang up asking if we'd take you in for the duration."

"I wonder who she is then," said Alex. "I wonder why mum and dad said they'd look after her."

"Well now," said Frank. "That's something you'll have to ask your mam when you see her again."

"Yes," said Alex, "but it doesn't look as if she's going to be there to speak to, if you know what I mean. She hasn't written, I can't telephone through to find out what's happened to her. I really don't understand it."

Frank put his hand on Alex's shoulder. "Well lad, it seems to me that your mam made sure that you and Suzie would be safe, and then went off to do something she had to do. I don't know what it could be, or when she'll be finished, but as sure as eggs is eggs," nodding at the basket Alex was holding, "eventually she'll be back in touch. There isn't a mother alive could abandon her bairns without wanting to know what happened to them. Just wait a while, lad, and you'll find answers to all your questions."

Alex nodded, and they went into the house. He walked into the pantry, and put the eggs on the racking, and returned the basket to its usual place. When he went back to the table, Elsie was just taking an enormous pie out of the oven, its crust beautifully golden brown, with just a hint of gravy bubbling round the edges.

"Here we go," she said. "Meat and potato. Just the thing for a day like this." She turned and took the plates off the warming rack and started to dish up.

"Come on Frank, it's on the table," she called through to the scullery, where Frank was just washing up before sitting down.

"Coming," he called back.

When Frank returned, all four of them sat down to a sumptuous meal of pie and vegetables with thick beef gravy, followed by a fruit crumble full of some of the summer fruits Alex had helped to grow in the old walled garden just behind the house. Tea and bread and butter finished off the meal. When it was over, and the table cleared and the washing up done, Suzie was virtually asleep where she sat, and Elsie took her upstairs to bed. Alex and Frank sat either side of the fireplace, Frank staring into the coals, and Alex thinking hard about what he should do. The idea of joining up was still foremost in his mind, and he had heard that he could join as a ‘boy seaman’, and serve in that way, gaining promotion through the ranks. He was sure he could lie about his age and get away with it, he knew he looked at least eighteen, and he was certain he’d be accepted. Maybe he could become an engineer? Alex glanced up and saw that Frank had switched his attention from the coals, and was now looking at him.

“Not thinking of leaving are you?” asked Frank in a conversational way.

Alex flushed. “What makes you say that?” he queried.

“Well lad, I know you want to join the Navy,” he replied. “And I know you can pass for eighteen. You’ve heard about your dad, you don’t know about your mam, and you’re wondering whether it’s worth going or not.”

Alex nodded. “Yes I am,” he responded honestly. “I don’t want to have to wait for another two years. It’s not that I’m not happy here, and I love helping on the farm, and in the garden, but I want to be doing more.”

Frank looked at him thoughtfully. “Well, as I’m not your legal guardian I can’t give my permission,” he said. “However, I can write a letter saying that you’re eighteen if you really want to go.”

Alex was astounded. “You mean you’d do that for me?” he asked.

Frank laughed. “I know you well enough to realize that if I didn’t do it, you’d be off anyway,” he said. “And if you have a

note from an adult, and one that's been looking after you, it'll make things quicker and easier for you."

"I was thinking of joining as a boy seaman," he said. "That would mean I wouldn't need to lie about my age."

"True," replied Frank, "but you'd still need permission from your parents, or guardians, so I'd still need to come with you. But if you say you're eighteen, you can go straight in as a seaman. Maybe you should try for an apprentice engineer—if those models you've been turning out over the last eighteen months are anything to go by, you'd be a dab hand at that. But it's up to you. Boy seaman or apprentice, take your choice, but if you want someone to stand up with you and say you're eighteen, then I'll come with you."

Alex didn't know what to say. The last thing he had expected from Frank was his support—he had expected to have to sneak off during the night, and to walk down to the station, hoping all the while not to be stopped. But if Frank was willing to do what he'd suggested, that would make things so much easier.

"What about Elsie?" he asked. "Does she approve of this?"

"You leave Elsie to me, lad," replied Frank. "She knows how I feel, and I know how you feel. We'll get something sorted out with her, never you mind. It's your birthday in a couple of weeks, and if you want to leave after that we'll get you packed up and down to the recruiting hall."

"Oh Frank, that's fantastic. I don't know what to say. 'Thank you' doesn't really seem to do the job."

"Now lad," said Frank. "Let's get it sorted, and you can thank me later. Why you would want to thank me at all is beyond me."

"What do you mean? Why wouldn't I thank you?" asked Alex, puzzled.

"Why lad, you're thanking me for putting you in danger, and perhaps getting you killed! You may live to regret this, you know."

"Yes, but then again it may be the chance of a lifetime," Alex riposted.

“Well, you’re right there I suppose,” said Frank. “But it all depends how long that life is going to be!” he continued with gallows humor. “Right, enough talk. We know what we’re going to do, so just hang on a couple of weeks and after your birthday we’ll take you down to the recruiting office and see what happens.”

“Thanks Frank,” said Alex. “I didn’t want to leave you without saying good bye, and this way I get to do what I want to do without feeling as if I’m abandoning you. Will you be able to manage on the farm without me?” He suddenly realized that his leaving would mean Frank doing all the farm work again.

“Don’t you worry about me lad,” Frank replied. “I knew which way the wind was blowing, and I’ve applied to the ministry for one of them Land Girls—or mebbe two given we’ve got the vegetables as well as the farm. We’ll get by all reet.”

Alex was relieved. The final obstacle to his leaving was solved, and he felt a great weight off his mind. He could leave the farm with Frank’s blessing, if not complete approval, Elsie would know what was happening, and the farm work would not suffer.

“Reet, well now that’s settled, I’m off to bed,” said Frank, getting up from his chair. “And I’d say it was high time you went to bed an’ all. You’ve had a big shock, and made some big decisions today. Get yersell up and off, lad, and I’ll see thee in the morning.”

* * * * *

Two weeks later, Alex and Frank were on the train to Leeds, Frank having decided it would be better for Alex to try and convince a complete stranger that he was eighteen, rather than run the risk of seeing someone he knew in the Halifax recruiting office. Frank had also done some investigation, and found that Alex who, after some considerable thought, had decided to try for engineering apprentice, would be required to go to Leeds at some stage in the process anyway, as medicals were not carried out in Halifax.

Alex was by turns apprehensive and excited. He had talked his decision over with Frank and Elsie, and they had warned

him not to tell anyone else what he was doing. He had agreed, but managed to get an exception made for Charlie. Alex knew that Charlie would never have forgiven him for just disappearing, especially when he learnt where Alex had gone. Frank was counting on Charlie's father to keep an eye on him, and to stop him doing anything similar.

The train clanked and rattled through the stations—Bradford, Stanningley, and Bramley went past. Leeds was the next stop. The train finally made its way into Leeds station, and shuddered to a halt.

“Right then lad,” said Frank. “Here we go!”

They exited the train and found themselves amongst the crowd on the platform. The noise was incredible. Steam engine whistles sounded, vast exhalations of steam from locomotives were accompanied by bellowing roars, people were shouting, children screaming and crying. The general hubbub of the station forcibly reminded Alex of a riot. Pushing their way through the crowd of humanity, Frank and Alex finally found themselves at the ticket barrier and, after showing their tickets, made their way out onto the street. There was a taxi rank just outside, and Frank determinedly made his way towards it.

“We’re not taking a taxi are we?” asked Alex in surprise.

“Nay lad,” replied Frank. “But if you want to know where somewhere is in a town you don’t know, allus ask a taxi!”

Alex smiled at this, and followed Frank to a cab half way down the line of waiting cabs. Frank had a brief discussion with the driver, and judging by the amount of arm-waving and gesturing taking place, was receiving detailed instructions as to how to find the recruiting office. Finally, after a quick shake of the hand, Frank came back to Alex.

“Right, off to Templar Street,” he said. “This way.”

Striking out along Boar Lane, Frank led the way with confidence, although Alex happened to know that Frank didn’t know Leeds any better than he did, which was to say not at all.

“How far is it?” he asked, as they made their way along the pavement.

“It’s a fair walk,” replied Frank, “but nothing you’re not used to after your work on the farm.”

Passing a shop which was selling ‘hot meat pies’ (although not specifying precisely what meat was in them, Alex noticed), he suddenly realized he was hungry. He’d been too wound up to eat much breakfast, despite Elsie’s urgings, and was now paying the price. His stomach grumbled, and he almost asked Frank to stop. However, Frank was plowing along with his distance-eating countryman’s stride, and Alex had to keep up or be lost.

From Boar Lane they turned up Briggate, and thence into the Headrow. Alex was amazed at the size and condition of the shops here. Apart from the fact that there were blackout curtains in all the shop windows, and tape across some of them, it hardly appeared that there was a war on. A more practiced, and most likely female, eye would have noticed that the goods for sale in the windows were woefully thin on the ground, but to Alex’s untutored eyes it seemed as if the government’s austerity measures had hardly touched the city. From the Headrow they turned into Vicar Lane, and from there into Templar Street. They found the recruiting office quite easily, and went inside.

“This is it, lad,” said Frank quietly. “This is your last chance to change your mind. Once you come out again, you won’t be able to. Sure this is what you want to do?”

Alex gulped, and then nodded. Suddenly it all seemed so final. They walked up to the desk, which was manned by a recruiting officer who looked managed to look harried and bored at the same time.

“Yes, what can I do for you today?” he snapped, looking the two of them up and down. “Got your papers?” he suddenly said to Alex.

“No,” replied Alex, after he realized the man must be referring to his call up papers. “I want to volunteer. For the Navy,” he added hurriedly.

“Ah, another volunteer,” said the man. “Age?”

“Eighteen,” replied Alex.

“Can you prove it?”

“I haven’t got a birth certificate, if that’s what you mean,” replied Alex. “I’ve been evacuated here from Coventry, and everything got lost in the bombing.”

“Not another one,” sighed the man. “OK, can anyone vouch for your age?”

“That’ll be me,” said Frank.

“And you might you be?”

“I’m the boy’s cousin. I can certainly vouch for the fact he’s eighteen.”

The recruiting officer peered at them closely and seemingly accepting Frank’s story at face value, turned to Alex.

“Right, into that room there and wait to be called,” he said. “You’ll be given a quick medical and then we’ll take it from there.”

Alex and Frank followed the officer’s directing finger to a smaller room off the hallway and sat down. Alex stared at the various posters around the room, reminding him that ‘careless talk cost lives’, and various other wartime slogans he had grown used to without realizing it. His favorite was ‘Keep Calm and Carry On.’ It reminded him of Frank’s attitude to everything that happened. The room was not the most salubrious place; the walls were painted in institution green, with brown gloss paint covering the section below the dado rail. The windows were taped with the usual crosses, and the ceiling appeared to be damp, judging by the patches which covered at least half the ceiling. Suddenly the other door in the room opened, and a bored looking doctor (at least, Alex assumed he was a doctor as he was wearing a stethoscope) said “Hennessy please.” Alex rose and followed the doctor into the other room.

“Strip off please, and pee into this jug.”

Alex did as requested, shivering slightly as the room appeared to be several degrees colder. After a brief check over, he

was told to dress and wait back in the hall. He rejoined Frank, and they went back to the main desk.

“OK, you can sit over there and wait.”

They sat back down, and waited.

Another door, another voice calling “Hennessy!” and Alex was ‘processed’. Finally, after nearly two hours in the recruiting office, he was told he had passed his medical, he was fit, capable of standing up, seeing lightning and hearing thunder, and issued with a rail warrant to Skegness, and travel orders telling him to report to HMS Royal Arthur no later than one week from today.

Alex and Frank left the recruiting office, and retraced their steps. Alex’s mind was in a whirl—he had done it! He was now officially a recruit of His Majesty’s Royal Navy, and if he didn’t turn up next week he would be a deserter. When he got to HMS Royal Arthur he would be assessed and, if judged suitable material for an engineering apprenticeship, would be sent on for training.

“Well, lad, how does tha feel?” asked Frank, and they re-crossed the Headrow and turned down Briggate.

“I don’t know,” replied Alex. “It all seems to have gone by so quickly.”

“Well, you’re committed now. You’ll have to turn up there in a week or else go on the run.”

“Yes, I know,” said Alex.

They walked back to the station, and caught the next train up to Halifax. By the time they got back to Halifax it was dark, and the trip back to the farm seemed to take forever. Elsie met them at the door.

“Well?” she asked.

“Yes,” replied Frank.

She sighed and then said “Come on in then and have a bite to eat.”

Elsie had put them up a cold supper of bread, cheese, ham and pickles, and Frank and Alex fell to with a will. After a couple of cups of tea and some food, Alex started to feel as if he was returning to the world again.

“So when do you leave?” asked Elsie.

“I’ve to report to Skegness one week from today,” Alex told her. “But I think I’d better leave a couple of days early, just to make sure I can get there in time.”

“That’s good thinking lad,” said Frank. “Tha doesn’t want to be late.”

“Well, I suppose we’d better get busy, and make sure that you’ve got everything,” Elsie said. “We’ll make sure you’re all packed up by the time you have to leave.”

Alex nodded. “Thank you,” he said. “I just want you to know I really appreciate everything you’ve done for me—taking me in like this, and helping me get into the Navy. You’ve been absolutely amazing, and I don’t know how to thank you.”

Elsie came over and gave him a great hug. “Now don’t you be talking like that,” she said. “We’ve been only too happy to have you both here, and you’ve helped us out on the farm, and more than earned your keep. So that’ll be enough of that sort of talk. And now,” she continued, “I think it’s time for bed. You’re going to have a busy few days ahead of you, and you’ll need your rest.”

Alex realized he suddenly felt extremely tired, so instead of arguing he stood up and went up to bed. The day seemed to have been a dream, and if it hadn’t been for the documents resting on the table at the side of his bed he would have doubted if it had ever happened.

* * * * *

Three days later, Alex, Elsie, Frank, Charlie and Mr. Ducket were standing on the platform in Halifax station waiting for the train which would take Alex on the first leg of his journey. They were chatting with the kind of desultory comments people make in these circumstances, just to pass the time. All the goodbyes had been said, and it only remained for Alex to get on the train.

Charlie had been forcibly dissuaded from following Alex’s example, and had thrown a tantrum of quite amazing propor-

tions, reminding Alex forcibly of the bully he had been just two years ago. Alex had promised to write to Charlie and tell him everything he could about life in the Navy, and Charlie had said he would follow Alex as soon as he could. Frank and Elsie said very little. They had all talked things through in the last few days, and there was nothing left to say. Suzie hadn't really taken in the fact that Alex was leaving, but had told him to make sure he wrote, and to come back soon. She had been left with a neighbor for the morning, as Frank and Elsie didn't think it would be good for her to come down to the station. Finally, just as everyone had run out of things to say, a train whistle sounded. Frank looked down the track, and saw the smoke of an engine approaching.

"Here we go then, lad," he said. "This'll be your train." He picked up Alex's suitcase, and they walked to the edge of the platform.

The train huffed and puffed its way into the station, and pulled up with a screech of brakes. Frank walked down until he found a spare seat and opened the compartment door. He went in and put Alex's case on the luggage rack. He came back out and held the door for Alex to get in. Alex climbed into the train, and then shut the door behind him, immediately opening the window. He hung out of the window.

"Bye lad," said Frank, shaking his hand. "Let us know how it goes, and don't forget to write."

"I won't," promised Alex.

Elsie came up and gave him a hug. "Look after yourself lad," she said.

"I will, I promise."

Next was Charlie. "See you later, City Boy," he said. Alex smiled at the old nickname, and called back "Don't go picking on anyone else now I'm not there," he said. "By the way, Frank's got something for you—I want you to look after it for me."

Charlie opened his mouth to ask what it was, but just then the whistle blew and his words were lost. The train jerked, nearly pitching Alex off his feet, and with an enormous groan pulled

away. Alex stood at the window, waving to everyone on the platform and seeing them wave back, until the train disappeared into the tunnel and he had to shut the window. He went to his seat, and sat down. This was it, he realized, this was the end of one chapter of his life, and the beginning of the next. What the future would bring he didn't know, but the train was carrying him towards it.

PART TWO — SUZIE

Chapter 6

I always think that knowing who you are is the most important thing in life. Knowing where you come from forms the basis for where you go—if you have no roots, you have no knowledge of what makes you what you are. Who your parents were has a bearing on what you become. Imagine the effect then, of having your identity taken from you not once, but twice. Suddenly you don't know who you are or where you came from.

* * * * *

I remember very little before I was three. I'm told this is usual for children. I wouldn't know—I can only describe what happened to me. My memories start in the farm kitchen with Frank and Elsie. I remember Alex, my brother, but not in any real way, not in a way where I can say for certain 'this is my brother'. He was there for a couple of years, and then he left to join the Navy. Frank and Elsie were the mainstays of my young life, and formed its foundation. As with all children, I took completely for granted the idea that there would always be a Frank, there would always be an Elsie, and there would always be a farm.

There were others who came and went through my childhood. The land girls that Frank had asked for to help with the farm when Alex left; friends from school; teachers; these also

circulated through my life and childhood, but as satellites to the main planet formed by Frank, Elsie and the farm.

I must have been about five when Alex left. Frank and Elsie decided that I was too young to go to the station, so I stayed at a neighbor's house. Mrs. Tipton was the total opposite to Elsie—she was tall, very thin, and dressed like her mother, whereas Elsie was slightly shorter and, whilst not plump, was comfortable, with a bosom like a pillow. Elsie liked to dress comfortably as well, and never followed fashion (such as it was in those years), and always wore her hair in a bun on the back of her head. The only time I ever saw her hair down was when she got out of bed for some reason during the night. The first time I saw her like this I didn't recognize her. She had a sweet face that always reminded me of an apple dumpling. She wasn't fat, just round. Her apron always smelt of three things—freshly washed laundry, home-made bread, and apple pie. It didn't matter whether it had just been washed, or whether she had worn it all week, it always smelt the same.

Frank, on the other hand, always made me prickle. This was due to his tweed jacket, which he wore all day, everyday, winter or summer. This was part of his uniform, like his flat cap which he also wore everyday. I can safely say I never ever saw Frank without his cap. Even when roused in the middle of the night (to see to a lambing ewe, or some other farming emergency), he came out of his room with his cap on. I saw him in his nightshirt over his trousers, with or without his wellington boots on, but I never saw him without his cap. Sitting on Frank's knee was to sit on two bony legs dressed in thick cotton twill trousers, with your face pressed into his hairy jacket and feeling the pickles from the threads tickling your cheek, smelling the outdoors, the fields, and the animals. Even when wearing overalls, he still had his jacket on over the top.

The kitchen was the focal point of the house. It was the first room you entered, and where people would congregate, sitting around Elsie's well-scrubbed pine table at one end of the room,

whilst the kettle boiled on the range at the other. A large Belfast sink was to the side, and the door to the scullery and store rooms was next to this. This layout meant that you could turn the tap on over the sink, go and get some vegetables for dinner, and by the time you got back there was just enough water in the sink to prepare them properly. When I was old enough to reach the sink whilst standing on a little wooden box, washing the vegetables was my job. I would stand there with a small scrubbing brush, and brush off the remaining soil into the water. I remember taking this duty very seriously, solemnly trying to ensure that not one vestige of mud remained on the vegetables I would pass to Elsie for chopping.

The range dominated the room. It was enormous—fully eight feet long. The heat it gave out in the winter was tremendous, and it kept the whole kitchen warm, and the bedrooms above. The delights that used to come out of that range; warm bread, great dishes of stew and dumplings, meat pies with pastry that would melt in the mouth, and cakes—singing hinnies, honey cake, Chelsea buns and, at Christmas, mince pies, roast goose, roast potatoes and all the trimmings. Even during the war with rationing in force, Elsie and Frank managed to swap sufficient produce with other farmers to make sure we had everything we needed. I don't ever remember being short of butter or sugar, or anything else for that matter. The only two things I never had, and never missed, were chocolate and bananas.

Frank managed to grow sufficient vegetables to not only fulfill the requirements of the food ministry, but also to provide a surplus for the market and for our own use. Then we always kept pigs, chickens and cows, so we always had bacon, eggs, milk and butter, and what we didn't have we used to barter for amongst the other local farmers and shop keepers. It was amazing what you could get for a side of bacon—sugar, marmalade, oranges, other fruits, or a dozen fresh eggs.

So, my early childhood was a happy time, I didn't feel deprived of anything, I was loved, and loved Elsie and Frank in return.

I really don't remember too much about Alex. He left the farm when I was just sort of my fifth birthday. He was sixteen then, and with Frank's help and support went to join the Navy. I can remember that he seemed to be really tall, and very grown up, and I can remember falling asleep against him in the train at some point, but it's all very vague and misty. I can far more easily remember helping Elsie collect the eggs, or helping Frank pick vegetables, than I can remember Alex. I do remember that he wrote frequently to start with; a letter would arrive about once a fortnight or so, and these would be read out by Elsie after dinner, when we were all sitting by the range. They were full of stories about his new life, and how much he was enjoying things. He did get accepted as an engineering apprentice, I remember, because quite a lot was made of this by Frank. His photograph in a silver frame stood on the mantelshelf over the range. He looked very much older in his uniform, and not at all like the brother I remembered.

There were big rejoicings when he announced that he had passed the selection for engineering officer, and would be sent for training when an opportunity presented itself, but in the meantime he was having a lot of fun and although hard, the life suited him down to the ground.

Alex's friend Charlie used to come round every couple of weeks, and he and Elsie would swap letters. Obviously Alex used to write very different letters to each one, and they used to have a good laugh over what he thought was 'suitable' to tell them. Charlie's letters were full of stories of 'runs ashore' (I thought this meant he was permanently on a ship—it wasn't until later that I realized he mean a night out) and girls, and engineering stories. Elsie's letters were full of information about the comforts (or otherwise) of the various barracks he was in, what the food was like, and how he was doing in his training.

And then suddenly, when I was about seven, the letters stopped coming. The first time the postman came round when a letter was due, Elsie asked if there were any other letters. But then

the next time came, and the next, and still no word from Alex. I knew that Frank and Elsie were worried sick, and I remember asking them if they'd had a letter. They always said no, but not to worry, they were sure there would be one along in a few days. And then came the day the telegram arrived. I was helping Elsie with the vegetables for dinner when there was a sudden knock at the door. Elsie stood stock still for a couple of seconds and then, wiping her hands on a towel, walked towards the kitchen door with such a look on her face; I had never seen her look like that before, she looked almost frightened. She hesitated when she got to the door, then suddenly put her hand out and jerked the door open. A telegraph office delivery boy stood there.

"Is this the Linthwaite farm?" he asked.

"Yes it is," said Elsie. "I'm Elsie Linthwaite."

"Telegraph for you Mrs. Linthwaite." He put his hand out and thrust the telegram at her.

Elsie didn't bother to correct him. She put her hand out, and took the telegram.

"Thank you ma'am," he said, then jumped on his bike and pedaled off. Elsie came back into the room. She sat down heavily at the table, and stared at the telegram.

"What is it Elsie?" I asked

"It's a telegram," she replied.

"Are you going to open it?"

"Yes, I suppose I must." She moved like someone in slow motion, splitting open the envelope and slowly taking out the telegram. She unfolded it like someone in a dream, and read it slowly. She turned to look at me.

"Please Suzie," she said. "Run and fetch Frank for me. He needs to see this."

I was frightened both by the look on her face, and by her voice. She seemed to be speaking from very far away. I got down off my box, and ran over to the door. I went out into the farmyard. Where should I look? Elsie hadn't told me where Frank was working, but I was so scared by her manner that I

didn't want to go back into the kitchen. I looked around, and then saw Verity the land girl coming out of the barn. I ran over to her.

"Verity, Verity," I shouted.

She turned round. "What's up poppet?" she said.

"It's Elsie, she's acting all strange. And she wants me to get Frank," I gasped out as I reached her.

"What do you mean, acting all strange?" Verity asked.

"She's sitting all quiet, and she's speaking odd," I said. "She wants Frank," I repeated.

"OK poppet," Verity said. "You go back to the house, and I'll go and fetch Frank."

She walked off to where the tractor stood in the corner, and started it up. I liked Verity. She was a big, hearty lass, with a face like Botticelli's Venus, and a body like an all-in wrestler. Farm work had given her strength and muscle, and the outdoor life had given her a complexion that Venus would have died rather than own up to. She was kind-hearted but practical, and had time to show a small girl what she was doing around the farm without finding her a nuisance. Verity trundled the tractor across the yard and started out across the fields.

I went back to the house, but stood outside the kitchen door, not wanting to go in and see Elsie – I didn't know what the matter was, and didn't know what to do about it. Eventually though I plucked up courage and went back into the kitchen. Elsie was still sitting where I'd left her, and her face looked grey. I wracked my brains about what to do, and saw the kettle sitting on the range, and that gave me an idea. I got all the things ready for making tea, and brewed a pot full, thinking that as Frank was coming in he would probably have a cup of tea before going back out.

I had just made the tea and was just stirring it in the brown pot, when I heard the 'chug chug' of the tractor coming back into the yard. I ran to the door and opened it, and there was Frank, just parking up and getting off. I ran over to him.

“Frank, Frank,” I called. “Come quick. I don’t know what’s the matter but Elsie’s being ever so strange.” I took his hand and started pulling him across the farm yard to the kitchen door.

“Hold on Suzie,” he said. “What’s all this about?”

“We’ve had a telegram, and Elsie’s gone all strange,” I said.

Frank suddenly stood stock still in the middle of the yard. “A telegram,” he repeated in a queer voice.

“Yes, it came this morning. Elsie read it and she’s gone all strange. She told me to fetch you.”

“Aw lass,” he said, and he set off again across the yard, so quickly it was all I could do to keep up with him. He went straight into the kitchen, and didn’t even bother to take his boots off. He went over to Elsie and said “What’s the news then, Elsie?”

“Oh Frank,” she cried. “It’s Alex. He’s missing.”

Frank suddenly sat down like a sack of potatoes on one of the kitchen chairs. “Oh no,” he said.

He covered his eyes with his hand, and I could see his shoulders shake. Elsie got up and went over to him. She put her hand on his shoulder and suddenly she started to cry. Frank stood up and enfolded her in his arms, and then they were both crying, leaning on each other. I stood there, not knowing what the problem was and not knowing what to do about it. The bedrock of my young life, my two sure anchors, were suddenly changed before my eyes into people who could cry. I was frozen with shock, and didn’t know what to make of it all. After a few minutes, Elsie moved slightly away from Frank, and wiped her eyes with her hand.

“Well this won’t solve anything,” she said. “I’ll put kettle on.”

Relieved that Elsie at least seemed to be returning to normal, I piped up.

“I’ve made the tea, Elsie. It’s all ready.”

Elsie turned round to me. “Has tha made the tea? What a good little lass you are.”

“I didn’t know what else to do,” I muttered.

“Well, it was the right thing to do,” she replied, and tried to smile at me. She checked the brew, then poured out three cups.

She put one on the table in front of Frank, and then gave me one. She stood by the range drinking hers, staring out of the window.

Frank seemed to recover slightly too. He picked up his cup and started to drink it. After a few minutes he looked at Elsie and said “Just missing? Not dead?”

Elsie shook her head. “No, it just says ‘missing in action after the loss of HMS Lightning.’”

“Well, it’s better than it could have been,” he said. “At least there’s some hope.”

Elsie nodded. “We’ll just have to wait and see I suppose. Hope there’s some more news.”

By this time I was thoroughly confused and upset. I didn’t understand completely what was happening, but I did understand it was something to do with Alex, and although I didn’t really remember Alex, I didn’t want anything bad to happen to him.

“What’s happening Elsie?” I asked. “I don’t understand. What’s the matter with Alex?”

Elsie looked at me, and then came and sat down at the table. She held her arms open, and I went over to her. She picked me up and sat me on her lap. She put her arms around me and cuddled me to her. I remember her apron smelt of fresh bread and clean washing as usual.

“Poor poppet,” she said. “We forgot all about you there.”

I wriggled round until I could see her face. “What’s happened?” I demanded.

“You know Alex went away to join the Navy,” she began. I nodded. “Well, we’ve just heard that something’s happened to the ship he was on, and they can’t find him.”

“Well why don’t they look for him then?” I replied with my child’s logic.

Elsie smiled. “I’m afraid it’s not quite as easy as that,” she said. She thought for a minute, and then continued. “You know Henrietta, your favorite hen.”

I nodded. Henrietta was my all time favorite chicken, as she had speckled feathers quite unlike the others.

“Well, imagine Henrietta got lost, and the only thing you knew was that she was somewhere on the farm. Where would you start to look?”

I thought about it. The farm, although not as large as some, was quite large enough to lose one chicken on it. “Well, couldn’t they start in one place and then move on to the next?” I asked.

“They could do, love, but now consider—there’s foxes out there, and Henrietta is going to move away from the foxes. How do you know where she’s going to be? She won’t be standing still, and the foxes could chase her into a part you’ve already looked in.”

I could picture this quite clearly. Like all farm children I knew all about foxes, and knew that they would chase and kill chickens, and also sickly lambs that couldn’t keep up with the flock. The image that Elsie had conjured up was clear in my mind, and I began to realize what the problem was.

“Does this mean I won’t see Alex again?” I asked.

“Well, we hope that’s not what happens,” said Elsie. “But it does mean you won’t see him for quite some time.”

I digested this. I wasn’t terribly upset, mostly because I didn’t really understand what it all meant. However, I was fond of Alex, and the thought of him being lost somewhere I did understand, and this was the image that remained with me for a long time afterwards. As for Elsie’s telling me I wouldn’t see him ‘for quite some time’, this turned out to be a massive understatement—it would be years before I saw Alex again. However, at the time I realized that it was a sad thing that Alex was lost. I didn’t cry, but for the next few days I kept asking Elsie and Frank questions about it that must have driven them mad, but they were always kind and patient with me, and tried their best to answer. Frank had to let Charlie Duckett know that Alex was missing, and he came back and told Elsie that Charlie had taken it badly, as he had expected him to.

I remember Elsie and Frank being very quiet for a day or two, but then they seemed to put the news behind them, and

got on with their lives. I was also quiet for a day or two, but not because I was missing Alex. He'd been gone long enough that I no longer missed him, and I still hadn't quite comprehended that I might never see him again. No, I was quiet because Elsie was quiet, and there was something in her manner which indicated that she wasn't in the mood for my usual childish prattling. I waited until she seemed to be more herself, and then recommenced my usual way of life.

Easter was the next big event. This Easter stuck in my memory because for the first time I could remember, the local church bells all rang. I had never heard church bells before, and I was frightened at the sheer volume of the noise. I think I cried when I first heard them, and had to be assured that it was all right, nothing was going to happen. After that, the bells would ring on important dates, and eventually I got used to the noise.

I had my fifth birthday in June of that year, and that meant that I would have to start school in the September. Elsie and Frank had been preparing me for that day, and yet I still had no idea what it would mean. Alex had gone to 'school', I remembered, and had appeared to thoroughly enjoy it, so I didn't feel too apprehensive about going to this strange place. I remember a conversation that took place one evening. I had been talking to some of the other local children about going to school, and I'd heard something I didn't understand.

"Elsie," I said after dinner. "How long do I have to stay at school for?"

"Well now," said Elsie. "That depends on what you want to do, but you'll have to stay there until you're at least fourteen years old."

On hearing this, I promptly burst into tears. Shocked by my sudden crying fit, Elsie picked me up and took me on her knee.

"Whatever's the matter poppet?" she asked.

"I don't want to go away," I sobbed. "I want to stay here."

"What do you mean, go away?" asked Elsie, quite perplexed. "You don't have to go anywhere."

“But you just said I had to stay at school until I was fourteen. I don’t want to stay away that long, I want to come home,” I wailed.

Elsie laughed. She started to laugh and she couldn’t stop. I was by now quite beside myself—Elsie thought it was funny. I began to cry even harder. Then I noticed Frank was laughing too! That was enough. I began to feel as if everyone wanted me to go.

“You don’t want me here,” I cried. “That’s why you don’t mind me going away until I’m old.”

Elsie wiped her eyes, and made an effort to stop laughing. “Now don’t be silly, poppet. You’ve got it all wrong. Come on now, calm down and I’ll explain.”

I eventually managed to stop crying, and when I was quiet, except for the occasional hiccup, she went on.

“When I said you had to stay at school until you were fourteen,” she began, “what I meant was that at fourteen you could finish your schooling. You’re not going to stay there all that time; you’ll come home every day, and you won’t have to go at all on Saturdays and Sundays.”

I heard this with relief. “I won’t have to go away?”

Elsie solemnly shook her head.

“Promise?” I persisted.

“I promise,” she repeated. I looked over at Frank, and he nodded his head as well.

“You’ll come home every night and sleep in your own bed, and you won’t have to go away,” Elsie repeated.

I relaxed back against her, tired out by my emotional turmoil.

“Better now?” she asked. I nodded.

“In that case I think you ought to go and have an early night,” she said. “Come on, and I’ll tuck you up in bed with a drink of hot milk and honey.”

I went with her willingly. Hot milk and honey was a treat which was reserved for very special occasions, or when I was ill.

The rest of the summer passed, as childhood summers do, in a golden haze. I already knew most of the children I would be

going to school with, thanks to Elsie and Frank making sure I had been introduced to them whilst in their care, so I discussed school with them when we met up. Most of them had older brothers or sisters, and they were better able to let me know what would happen at this mysterious place. Some of the things the older children passed down to us young ones were obviously not true, but some of the things they told us were enough to make even the bravest of us slightly apprehensive. The tales of being beaten with a stick were quite horrifying, and although we assured ourselves and each other that they weren't true, no one could do that to us, deep down we still had our doubts. I voiced these fears and doubts to Frank and Elsie in the evenings, and was reassured when they laughed them off. Frank did, however, tell me that I had to be a 'good girl', and not be cheeky with the teachers, otherwise I would be told off and might, if I went too far, not be allowed to take part in any of the school treats. Exactly what these treats were, and how they were to be apportioned out wasn't made clear, but it sounded to me that they were well worth being 'good' for.

Two incidents stood out for me that summer. The first was that Verity left us to get married. She had met and fallen in love with the man who collected the milk from the dairy, and she had decided to marry him when he asked her. In the event, he didn't ask her, but there was obviously something going on between them, and she forced his hand. I don't think he minded too much—he certainly seemed cheerful enough at the wedding, and didn't seem to be any different afterwards. Verity had her baby soon enough, and we all went to the christening. Elsie provided a lovely tea afterwards at the farm, as Verity didn't have any family she wanted to invite, and thereafter she would visit once a week with the baby.

The other incident was connected with Alex. Frank had written to the Ministry of Defense asking whether anything further had been heard about possibly survivors. Rather surprisingly they had written back and not only given slightly more detail

about what had happened, but also offered one ray of hope. There had been some survivors, and they had been picked up about two days after the sinking, but there had been no reports of who they were or where they had been taken. The ministry was quite unable to confirm whether Alex had or had not been one of these. However, this was enough of a lifeline for Frank and Elsie that they managed to convince themselves that Alex was alive, and would one day come home.

Finally the day dawned. It was time to start school. Elsie got me out of bed, and gave me my breakfast whilst she got Frank's breakfast sorted out.

"Well poppet," she said. "First day at school. You're really growing up now."

I nodded. I didn't think growing up was much to celebrate as it seemed to make everyone miserable at times, but I was excited about going to school. In no time at all Frank had finished his breakfast. He, Elsie and I all trooped out of the kitchen and across to the car. Frank drove, Elsie got in the front, and I climbed into the back seat. We set off down the track to the farm, bumping over the ruts, and generally being bounced around. We turned onto the road, and travelled the two miles to the school. I understood that I wouldn't be going into Halifax as Alex had done, because he'd been going to the senior school there. I would be attending the village primary school until it was time to move on.

When we arrived at the school, I was relieved to see most of my friends there, also with their parents. Frank parked up, and we got out and walked over. Whilst Elsie and Frank exchanged greetings with their friends and acquaintances in the group of parents, I wandered over to a group of my friends, and we stood in a huddle, with feelings of trepidation mixed with excitement. The stories their older brothers and sisters had told us over the summer now returned to haunt us, and as time went by we became more and more nervous. As the excitement rose to fever pitch, one of the teachers came out and rang the bell. Immediately all the children in the older classes went inside, leaving us

out in the playground. The parents moved towards the door as the teacher stood there.

“Welcome everyone to the first day of term. I hope that you will all enjoy yourselves here as much as we will enjoy having you here. Several of you have older brothers and sisters in classes here, and I hope you will soon feel as comfortable here as they do.” She paused, and then produced a list.

“As I call your name, please form a line here,” indicating with her arm, “and wait to be told to go inside.”

She started to call out names, and boys and girls left their parents and went and stood where indicated. Then she called out “Suzie Hennessy.”

No one moved. I didn’t move. She called again.

“Suzie Hennessy please.”

Elsie shook my shoulder. “That’s you,” she said.

“No it’s not,” I replied indignantly. “I’m not called Hennessy. I’m called Linthwaite, like you and Frank.”

Everyone had turned to look. Elsie and Frank looked a little flustered. Some of the other children sniggered. I could feel myself start to blush, and repeated “I’m not Suzie Hennessy.”

Elsie bent down and whispered in my ear. “You are, Suzie. Please don’t make a fuss. If you go and stand in line, I’ll explain it all to you when you get home tonight.”

I turned and looked at Elsie and Frank. They both looked a little uncomfortable, but I didn’t understand why.

“Promise?”

“Yes, I promise. Now please be a good girl and go and stand in line.”

I looked doubtfully at her, but then turned and walked over to my place in the line. The teacher looked relieved, and Elsie and Frank smiled and nodded at me when I looked back over towards them.

The teacher continued to read out names, and gradually the line formed up. When the last child had been called, the teacher turned to the parents and, with little waves goodbye, and a few

blown kisses, they turned and shuffled out of the play ground. A couple of the children looked upset at being abandoned in this strange place, but generally it was very quiet. A few of the children turned and looked at me where I stood, but I ignored them. I knew who I was, and that was that.

The teacher returned, and stood and looked at the line of children.

“Right then,” she said with a smile. “Now we’re all here, let’s go inside and I’ll show you to your class room.” She turned round and led us into the school. It was only small, with four classrooms, two changing areas and four toilets, but it seemed enormous as we walked in through the heavy wooden doors. We followed along in our crocodile to the second classroom on the left, at the back of the building, and went in.

The room seemed equally enormous to my child-sized eyes. It was one of those old Victorian era village schools, so the ceiling was extremely high and seemed to me to disappear into infinity. Radiators marched along the wall at intervals, and the windows above were the usual Victorian sash style, with black out blinds hanging in front of them. The room smelt of old chalk, dust, (very faintly) of urine, and sweaty feet. All this amalgamated into the universal smell associated with class rooms, which reminds me of school to this day.

Dominating one end of the room was the blackboard, with the board rubber sitting on its little wooden tray beneath. There were shelves crammed with books, and row upon row of individual wooden desks with stools behind. There was rattan matting on the floor, through which the worn linoleum showed in patches.

“Right then,” said the teacher, “first in line start in the back corner, and take one desk each.”

After a little confusion we got sorted out, and eventually everyone was seated at a desk.

“Lovely, well done!” said the teacher. “Now then, my name is Mrs. Granger, and I will be your teacher for this year. I hope

you all enjoy being here, because I'm certainly looking forward to having you here. Now then," she continued brightly "does everyone know everyone else?"

We all looked round at each other. One girl, sitting in the front, raised her hand. "Please Miss," she said.

Mrs. Granger looked at her. "Yes dear?"

"I don't know anyone Miss. I'm new here."

"And what's your name, dear?" said Mrs. Granger.

"I'm Helen Davies, Miss, and I've just come up here from London, 'cos of the bombing."

"Very well, Helen, we'll make sure you know everyone before we go home this afternoon."

Shortly after that it was time for milk. We all lined up, and were given a beaker. Mrs. Granger then solemnly ladled out a portion of milk into each beaker, and told us we had to drink it before we were allowed out to play. I hated the school milk right from the start. Used to drinking fresh milk on the farm, I hated the taste of the slightly warm milk which had been left outside in the churn since early morning. However, the prospect of getting outdoors was too inviting for me to refuse to drink it. Once I had shown my empty beaker to Mrs. Granger, I was told I could go outside.

When I got into the playground, I stood there for a minute looking around. The school was set in the middle of the playground, and this was roughly divided into four areas. These areas were not physically defined, nor marked on the asphalt—rather they were defined by who used them. The 'babies' class, which was us, were round the corner to the left of the entrance, where the sun didn't shine until late afternoon. The area immediately in front of the school entrance was for the oldest pupils. Girls and boys didn't stand together, they would separate into groups at opposite ends of their respective areas. As this was a primary school there were no bike sheds but at the far end of the playground, round behind the main school building, was a caretaker's hut with a locked door, where Mr. Finch kept all his gardening tools and other more mysterious implements.

I went and joined a group of my friends, and we stood together feeling a little forlorn. I saw Helen Davies standing by herself.

“Shall we ask her to play?” I asked.

“We’re not playing,” replied Nora.

“Well shall we just ask her over then?”

“You can if you like,” Nora said.

In the way that children have of determining status within a group, Nora was our leader, and what she said was what we did. All the previous summer she had bossed the rest of us around, and we had followed her lead, so it was natural that she should assume leadership in this different setting. Having gained her consent, I was allowed to go and talk to Helen.

I went up to where she was standing. “Hello Helen,” I said. “Do you want to come and play with us?”

She eyed me for a minute, wondering whether this was a genuine offer or not. Then she shrugged. “All right,” she said, and followed me back across to the group.

There were perhaps six of us in our ‘group’, all children from farms around the neighborhood, all of whom knew each other through their parents, and all of whom congregated at events such as markets, farm sales, and general community get-togethers. Nora was our leader, as such, and ruled our little group. Then there were Mary and Martha, who were twins. Jessica and Lily were cousins, and then there was me. I was definitely the outsider initially until I’d been around for a year, after which I was accepted as part of the group. There were others who joined in occasionally, such as Elizabeth and Annie whom we met infrequently, but who were welcome to join in with our pursuits when they were there.

Boys didn’t figure too much in our outlook. Most of us had brothers, but as they were invariably older and didn’t want anything to do with ‘silly girls’, they either treated us with lofty disdain or ignored us altogether. Any boys our own age (and there were a few) invariably went off to play their own games, only coming back when they wanted feeding. We knew them all, but

it was clear that we wouldn't be socializing at school any more than we did at home.

When Helen and I rejoined the group, there were a few 'Hellos' from the other girls. Helen and Nora eyed each other, determining whether they would be friends. After a couple of moments, Nora smiled. There was a subtle relaxation of tension through the group. Helen was accepted, she was all right.

Just then the bell rang, and it was time to go back into the classroom for the rest of the morning. We didn't really do much in the way of lessons, as I remember; we spent the rest of the day getting to know each other, and the teacher. She explained all about the school and what we would be doing, and what would be expected of us. We were shown, en masse, the toilets, the changing areas, and where to hang our coats, and we were told that we would be expected to keep our desks tidy at all times, and to have the relevant items for the day's lessons with us, including our PE kit. We were told what to do if we were poorly and couldn't go to school, and what times we would be expected at school. We were instructed in where we could, and couldn't, go; which areas were strictly out of bounds (including the tool shed, which most of us found disappointing). Eventually the time rolled around to three o'clock, and we were told that we could go, because our parents would be waiting. Mrs. Granger had told us that we were expected to be polite, and that we would not be allowed to run out of school 'like a herd of buffalo.' We were told to stand, and she said "good afternoon class," to which we replied "good afternoon Mrs. Granger." After that, we were allowed to leave the school. As promised, parents were waiting in the play ground. I looked around and saw Elsie, chatting with Mary's mother. I walked over to her and took her hand.

"Did you enjoy your first day?" she asked.

"Yes, it was very interesting," I replied.

"Well, come on then, it's time to go home and get some tea." She said goodbye to Mary's mother, and we walked over to the car. I was intrigued, because I had never seen Elsie drive before.

“Are you allowed to drive Frank’s car?” I asked.

Elsie laughed. “What a question,” she said. “Of course I’m allowed to drive it.”

We got in, and during the drive home, I chattered about the day I’d had, and what Mrs. Granger had told us, and who was in my class. We got home and Elsie provided me with a cup of tea and some bread and butter to keep me going until dinner time. Frank came in at his usual time, and he also asked me how my first day had gone. It was while he was asking me who I had sat next to that I remembered something from the day.

“Mrs. Granger is still getting my name wrong,” I announced. “She’s still calling me Suzie Hennessy, and she won’t change it. You’ll have to tell her she’s got it wrong,”

Elsie exchanged glances with Frank, and then came and sat down next to me.

“I think it’s time to have that little chat I mentioned this morning,” she said. I had a sudden feeling that I wasn’t going to like hearing what she was going to say, and I was quite right.

Chapter 7

“How much do you remember before coming here?” she asked me directly.

“What do you mean, before I came here?” I asked, feeling a bit confused.

“You haven’t always lived here,” she said. “Do you remember anything about where you were before you came here?”

I thought hard. I remembered loud noises, people shouting, and whistles blowing. “It was noisy,” I eventually said.

Elsie gave me a quick hug. “You were living with your mother in Coventry,” she went on. “Do you remember that?”

Now I really was confused. “But, you’re my mother, aren’t you?” I said.

“Oh, how I wish I was,” she said, “but I’m afraid I’m not your mum, poppet. Don’t you remember her at all?”

Once again I thought hard. I could vaguely remember someone else, but I didn’t remember anything much. Just a feeling that this person was always tired, and a remembrance of being stuck somewhere all the time.

“No, not really,” I said.

Elsie sighed. “Well, that person was your mother, and that’s why your name isn’t Linthwaite. You have the same name as your mother, and that’s Hennessy.”

“But I don’t want to be Suzie Hennessy,” I protested. “I want to belong here, I want to be Suzie Linthwaite.”

“I know sweetheart, we would love you to be Suzie Linthwaite, but your proper name, your real name, is Suzie Hennessy, and you have to get used to that.”

“Can I change it?” I asked.

“Maybe later,” Elsie said. “You can change it later on poppet, if you really want to.”

“How much later?” I demanded. I was used to grown ups telling me I could do things later, and I wanted to know how much later this would be.

“When you’re twenty one, you can change your name to Linthwaite if you want to,” said Elsie. “But by then you might be married, and you will have a different name anyway.”

“Why will I have a different name when I’m married?” I asked.

“Well, when a lady marries, she always takes the same name as her husband,” Elsie explained.

“I don’t think that’s fair,” I said. “Why would I want to have his name? I want to keep my own.”

“You just do,” said Elsie. “That’s the way it’s done.”

“Sounds silly to me,” I asserted.

Elsie laughed. “I dare say it does, poppet,” she said, “but that’s the way it happens.”

“This doesn’t mean I’ve got to go and live somewhere else, does it?” I asked suspiciously.

Elsie exchanged a look with Frank over the top of my head. Frank shook his head slightly.

“Not for a long time, sweetheart,” said Elsie. “You can stay here for as long as you need to.”

I felt comforted. Elsie had never lied to me, and I accepted what she said automatically. I still had one more question though.

“Even if I’m not called Suzie Linthwaite really, properly I mean, can I call myself that?”

Elsie looked at Frank. “What do you think? Would it really matter? Under the circumstances,” she added.

Frank looked grave. "It's not her name. We could get into trouble about this, when her mother comes back."

Elsie sniffed. "You mean if her mother comes back," she said. "We've had precious little contact with her over the last couple of years. She might as well be ours."

Frank still looked uncertain. "Best check into it legally," he said. "Don't want to be getting wrong for doing this."

Elsie nodded reluctantly. "I suppose that'd be best," she said.

"Well?" I demanded. "Can I call myself Suzie Linthwaite?"

"Not just yet, pet," said Elsie. "Wait a few days and we'll find out."

Not really satisfied, but picking up that it would be best not to push things, I nodded. The rest of the evening passed uneventfully, and I went up to bed as usual.

Looking back, I can't understand why I was so upset at finding out that I wasn't a Linthwaite. All I can think of is that I did remember being moved from Coventry, and had a need to feel that I belonged somewhere, and that belonging meant having the same name as Elsie and Frank. Considering what happened much later, it is ironic that I was demanding the security that belonging to Frank and Elsie would give.

Life continued unchanged for the next few weeks. I found I enjoyed school, and our little group continued as usual, with the addition of Helen. I felt sorry for Helen; she was so obviously an outsider, with her quick way of speaking which was totally different to the laconic Yorkshire speech I was used to. Having moved to Yorkshire at such a young age, and having spoken to Frank and Elsie since I came up here, I had picked up a Yorkshire accent, and now spoke the local dialect as if born to it. It was Helen's speech which marked her as an outsider, and had she not been accepted by the group, I think her experience of life in Yorkshire would have been miserable indeed. As it was she fitted in quickly, and we all soon became firm friends.

As a group, we had our little rituals. We all circulated around our various houses for tea on a Saturday, and parents took it in

turns to pick us up and take us to school. This was essential, as petrol rationing was still having an effect. As most of the parents concerned were farmers they had enough to run the farm equipment, but cars were starting to be regarded as luxury items, and no one had enough petrol to take single children to and from school every day so forming a pool helped everyone. We were still considered too young to go by ourselves, but we all knew that eventually we would have to walk or cycle to school. No one was the slightest bit worried about this as the roads were hardly busy, and those driving on them were used to looking out for various hazards; which included tractors, other farm vehicles, cows, chickens and children.

So weekdays it was school, but weekends were ours. We mostly had a few chores to do around the farm (mine was collecting the eggs for Elsie), but once that was done we would all gravitate to one house or another, usually by pre-arrangement, and spend the day. As rationing seemed to be something that happened to other people not to us, there was never any problem about feeding an extra five or six mouths, and no-one minded us staying.

When we congregated at our farm, we used to play in the old barn, which Frank had cleared of equipment and used to store extra supplies of straw and hay. How the animals felt about eating hay that had been regularly jumped on by several small girls none of us thought to ask. We would spend hours jumping from the upper floor of the barn into the sweet-smelling straw and hay below, raising clouds of dust which would sparkle in the sunshine. It took Helen some time to get used to this pastime; coming from the middle of London as she did, she had no experience of life in the country, and thought we were all very strange for wanting to play outdoors in the barn. Except on the very coldest and wettest days in the winter, we would spend most of the day out here and when tired of jumping, would curl up in our nest on the upper floor and, insulated from the cold draughts by the bales, would tell stories, play with our dolls, or make things out of the loose straw. It was here I was first shown

how to make a corn dolly, and here that I had my first kiss—but that happened a long time later.

I also remember the wonderful meals we used to have, and I also remember Helen's reaction to some of those meals. The first time Elsie gave us all a boiled egg for tea we found it hilarious that Helen didn't know what a boiled egg was. Elsie had to explain and show her how to eat it. Once she got used to the idea, boiled eggs with bread and butter became one of Helen's favorite meals.

Going to tea at Helen's was another experience entirely. Helen had been allotted to the village post mistress, a childless woman called Mrs. Thwaites. From what I learned from conversation amongst the adults, no one in the area could ever remember there being a Mr. Thwaites. However that may have been, Mrs. Thwaites ran the post office and the shop that went with it, standing behind the counter like a guard and keeping an eye on everything that went on—especially the boys when they came in for sweets. With sweet rationing in full swing, she felt it her stern duty to keep an eye on them to make sure they weren't pilfering anything.

As Mrs. Thwaites had a large flat over the shop where she lived alone, she had been assessed as having room for at least two evacuees; so far Helen was the only one. Initially envious because she had access to the sweet shop, we soon found out that Mrs. Thwaites was no keener on having Helen in her shop than she was on having the boys in there. Helen was expected to come and go to the flat by accessing it from the rear, and was only allowed in the shop for an hour after school to help serve customers. Mrs. Thwaites had also insisted that Helen should work in there on Saturday mornings as well, but after several of the parents had asked whether Helen could come for the day on a Saturday, she appeared to feel that having Helen absent all day was better than having Helen present all day, especially as she wouldn't have to feed her. In order to make sure that this good will continued, it was seldom that Helen went home without ei-

ther a dozen eggs, or some bacon, maybe some sausages, butter, or some freshly baked bread or cakes. This subtle form of bribery on the part of the other parents ensured that Helen did not miss out on the social life that she gained from going to school.

We never really enjoyed spending the day at Helen's place. Apart from the fact that the flat was a lot smaller than most of the farmhouses, there was the added disadvantage that it was above the shop. After the first Saturday when Mrs. Thwaites appeared like an avenging angel, rising from the floor below, and told us in no uncertain terms that she 'didn't need a set of rampaging elephants disturbing her customers', we had to either play quietly, or play outdoors. The teas weren't as sumptuous as Mrs. Thwaites' either, although she did her best; not having the advantages of the almost unlimited food we had at the farms, her teas leant heavily in the direction of bread and margarine (unless someone had been generous with the butter), tinned meat and fruit.

Looking back that first year at school seems to be constantly bathed in summer sunshine. Rain and sleet, although they happened, didn't seem to ever put a damper on our fun although they did limit our activities somewhat. Snow, on the other hand, gave us greater opportunities for play, although we did learn the hard way that not every adult either liked or tolerated being pelted with snowballs. Sliding down snow slides that the boys had made was one of our greatest amusements, as was sledging. I think that playing in the snow was one of the few amusements that the boys and girls actually shared.

Christmas at school was a revelation to me. Elsie and Frank had always celebrated Christmas, especially since Alex and I had come to live with them, but it had been fairly quiet. Boxing Day was a big day since we would meet up with some of the other families for the Boxing Day Bash in the village hall, and there was always Midnight Mass in the church on Christmas Eve, which always left me feeling excited and full of anticipation for the next day. But I had never celebrated Christmas as part of a large group before, and that was what we did at school.

The first event was when the caretaker brought in the Christmas trees. There was one for each classroom, and because of the height of the room they were all about six feet high. Each class was allowed to decorate the tree in their own way, with lots of home-made decorations. We would decorate the tree on the Friday afternoon—it took me a couple of years to realize that the teachers came in over the weekend and finished the job off for us. Then there was the school's carol concert which for me was another revelation, especially the actual singing. Taking part in group singing was a wonderful experience for me, and it remains to this day something which I really enjoy doing. We rehearsed our nativity play and our carols for a couple of weeks beforehand, and then we all walked to the church on the last day of term. The play was performed to all the parents, and most of the rest of the village turned up as well.

I remember Helen being chosen to play the Virgin Mary because of her amazing blue eyes and blonde hair, but the rest of the parts were played by children in the older classes. The rest of the school were in the choir, and we sang carols at the appropriate moments during the story. One boy really stood out with an amazing voice. His rendition of 'Once in Royal David's City' quite literally moved some people to tears. This was the one time of the year when he was in demand at school, as he lived up to the reputation you would expect from someone with red hair, green eyes and freckles. If there was any mischief happening at the school, you could put money on Jimmy Longbottom being involved in it up to his red eyebrows. However, he had a voice like an angel and was always in demand for the carol concert. My first year at school was going to be his last at the village school—after the summer break he would be going to the grammar school in Halifax. I thoroughly enjoyed my first school Christmas, and the rest of the celebrations that year.

Elsie's Christmas dinner was, of course, as excellent as the rest of her cooking. After lunch and after all the inevitable washing up had been done, we all sat by the range listening to the

radio. I was allowed to play with my presents, whilst Frank and Elsie dozed on opposite sides of the fireplace. This became the pattern for the rest of the Christmases whilst I was with Elsie and Frank, and it was one which I appreciate all the more now for its very simplicity.

* * * *

Life continued along this well charted course for the next few years. School carried on as you would expect, with very few interruptions. One major interruption was the loss of Helen from our circle. After she had been with us for two years her mother arrived in the summer holidays and took her back to London. We had all just finished celebrating the end of the war with various street parties, and parties at school at the end of the summer term. With the war being over and all danger from bombing being over, her mother had been able to concentrate on getting their house back into order without having Helen underfoot. She arrived one hot summer day in a taxi from Halifax. All of us children were out playing on one of the farms. We all went home at about five o'clock in the afternoon feeling hot, dusty and tired, and Helen came back to the farm with me for tea.

When we arrived back at the farm we wandered into the kitchen to wash up for tea. We walked in, and I stopped dead at the sight of a stranger sitting at the table. Helen peered over my shoulder to see what the matter was, and suddenly pushed past me.

“Mum, Mum,” she cried, running towards the stranger, who turned round and then stood up.

“Helen,” she said, and then opened her arms so that Helen could run into them. For a few minutes all you could hear was a muffled “Mummy,” from Helen, whilst she hugged her mother tightly, with her face buried in her dress.

After a few minutes they broke apart, and Mrs. Davies sat down at the table. Helen continued to stand by her, with her arm around her mother. Elsie had made the tea and now brought the

tea things, and also brought over a large plate of bread and butter and two of her special cakes on her best plates.

“There you go ducks,” she said. “Don’t stand on ceremony, tuck in.”

I came and sat down at the table, feeling unaccountably shy of this stranger. Helen sat down next to her and opposite me, so I had a good chance to study them. Helen was at once similar to, and totally different from, her mother. It was obvious that they were mother and daughter; their mannerisms were virtually identical, and Helen had her mother’s eyes and chin. However, these had combined with her other features (which I suppose came from her father) to give her face a totally different shape to her mother’s. Their hair was the same color but Helen wore hers long, whereas her mother’s was cut to just below her shoulders and tied back from her face. It was obvious that they had missed each other, and equally obvious that they were delighted to be reunited.

Elsie sat down at the table, and poured the tea. She served bread and butter and the cake, and she and Mrs. Davies made small talk. Frank came in towards the end of the meal and joined in the conversation. Helen and I just sat and listened. Helen was obviously overwhelmed at the thought of going home, and I was still feeling shy—which was not like me at all. I can only put this odd behavior down to the fact that I realized I was going to lose one of my friends—one of my best friends—and it was this, combined with the fact that Mrs. Davies had turned up so unexpectedly, that was causing these unfamiliar feelings. Consequently I had paid very little attention to what was being said, although certain things did catch my attention.

“What’s the rationing like now?” asked Elsie, passing over another slice of home-made cake.

“Well, it’s not as bad as it was, some things are coming back into the shops,” replied Mrs. Davies. “But it’s still hell on wheels trying to find stuff like you’ve got here.”

Elsie exchanged a glance with Frank, and Frank nodded. I might have missed this exchange altogether, except for the fact that I was watching Elsie and Frank rather than Mrs. Davies.

“Well, I should think we can do you some things to take back with you,” said Elsie.

“Oh, I didn’t mean to ask,” said Mrs. Davies in confusion, blushing bright red. “You mustn’t feel obliged ... I didn’t want to ... I’m sure it will be all right,” she stammered.

“Now don’t you take on so, love,” said Elsie soothingly. “I know you didn’t ask, and you weren’t hinting. But we have extra here, being on the farm and all, so it won’t matter to us if you take some stuff back with you. Anyway it’ll help Helen settle back in, having the things she’s got used to for a while after you get home.”

“Thank you,” said Mrs. Davies. “That’s very kind of you, and I’m sure we’ll both love to have something to remind us of Yorkshire, for a while at least. I’m very grateful.”

“Not a problem at all,” said Elsie. “I’ll get Frank here to sort some stuff out for you, and we’ll drop it off at the post office first thing in the morning. You are staying there, aren’t you?” she added, seeing Mrs. Davies’ face change when she mentioned the post office.

“Well, I’m not exactly sure,” she replied. “I went there first, obviously, and Mrs. Thwaites said Helen was here. I was so excited, it never occurred to me to ask about staying over night.”

“Well, if I know Mrs. Thwaites,” Elsie said, somewhat grimly, “she’ll be glad of an excuse not to have anyone else stay. You can stay here tonight, both of you. No,” she went on, as Mrs. Davies started to protest, “that’s an end to it. We’ve plenty of room; if you want to share a room you can, otherwise you can have separate rooms, it’s all the same to us. And it’ll give the girls one more night to say their goodbyes,” she continued with a smile. “They could even share Suzie’s room if they wanted.”

Elsie absolutely wouldn’t hear any more protests from Mrs. Davies, and Frank was dispatched to fetch her case from just out-

side the door where she'd left it. Helen and I exchanged delighted glances, and I was so pleased she was going to stay the night and we could have a little more time together that I forgot I was feeling shy, and started to join in the conversation. Elsie gave me a sharp look, but was obviously satisfied that I was behaving myself because she sat back down at the table and tea continued.

Helen and I went back outside after tea, and went and sat down in the barn. We didn't say anything much to start with. I think Helen was as much a victim of shock as I was.

"I'm going to miss you," I said eventually.

"And me," she replied.

"Do you want to go home?" I asked.

"I don't know," said Helen honestly. "I remember it as being very dark, with piles of stuff all over the place, and then running into the shelter when the sirens went off. That's why it was such a shock when I came up here."

I nodded. Helen's memories chimed with my own confused impressions of life before I came to Yorkshire.

"I do want to go home with mum," she went on, "but I don't want to leave all this." She made a broad sweeping gesture with her arm around the barn, and I knew what she meant. We had a great deal of freedom living up here, and we could wander pretty much where we wanted as long as we were back in time for tea.

"I don't think there's anything green down in London," she continued, "and I'm going to miss that."

"Maybe you can come back for the holidays," I suggested, hoping to cheer her up a bit. "I'm sure Elsie and Frank wouldn't mind." Knowing Elsie and Frank, I felt confident about asking Helen without first checking with them. They would never say 'no'. Hospitality was a key virtue in their make up, along with most of the other people in the area, and having people to stay was considered as much a part of life up here as not going anywhere themselves.

Helen's face lit up. "Do you think I could," she asked. "Oh, I would love that. I'm sure mum won't mind."

“Why don’t we go and ask,” I suggested.

“What, now?” asked Helen.

“Why not?” I shrugged. “Once we know, we can talk about it and make some plans.” I jumped off the straw bale I had been sitting on, and Helen followed. We ran out of the barn, and into the kitchen. Frank had by this time returned to his work, and Elsie was just starting to make the evening meal.

“Your mum’s upstairs if you want her,” said Elsie to Helen. “She’s just getting washed up after the trip, but she’ll be down directly.”

Before Helen could reply to this, I burst out with my request.

“Elsie, can Helen come and stay in the holidays?”

Elsie looked at me, and then at Helen.

“Please?” I added desperately. “She’s really going to miss everything up here, and it would make it better for her going home if she knew she could come back sometimes.”

Elsie didn’t disappoint me. “That’s a fine idea,” she said. “I’ve certainly no objection. It’s all right with me if your mother doesn’t mind. You’ll have to ask her, and if she says it’s all right, then I don’t see a problem.”

“Yes,” I cried ecstatically and, grabbing Helen’s hands, I started to dance around the kitchen.

“Calm down now,” said Elsie. “You’ll have something off that table before you can say Jack Robinson. And don’t forget, Mrs. Davies will have to agree as well.”

“Agree to what?” said Mrs. Davies, who had just come into the kitchen.

“These bairns have hatched a plot,” said Elsie, with a glimmer of a smile. “I’ve no objections, but you’ll have to agree as well.”

“What have you been up to?” Mrs. Davies asked Helen, with a small frown on her face.

“Please Mrs. Davies, can Helen come up and stay during the school holidays?” I asked. I felt as though I was holding my breath.

Mrs. Davies looked at both of us, then looked over our heads at Elsie.

“You really don’t mind?” she asked.

“Not at all,” replied Elsie. “They’ve been spending weekends up here anyway, and they’ve never been any trouble. And it would be a pity for Helen to lose all the friends she’s made up here.”

Mrs. Davies nodded her head. “It would,” she said. She folded her arms and looked at Helen sternly. Helen looked back at her with a pleading look on her face.

“Please mum,” she said. “Please?”

“Well,” began Mrs. Davies. “If Elsie really doesn’t mind, and you promise to be a good girl in between times, then I suppose I could let you come up for at least part of the holidays.”

Helen whooped, and I followed suit. We started dancing round the kitchen again, whilst Mrs. Davies and Elsie looked on in amazement.

“Settle down,” cried Elsie. “You crazy pair, you’ll break something.”

“That’s enough,” said Mrs. Davies at the same time. “Helen, if you carry on like this Miss Linthwaite won’t want to have you come and stay.”

As this dire threat percolated Helen and I calmed down, and sat at the table.

“That’s better,” said Elsie. “Now, go on outside and play in the barn, and I’ll call you when it’s dinner time.”

We needed no further urging and ran out of the kitchen and off across the yard to the barn. We spent the next couple of hours playing there, and Helen made me a corn dolly to remember her by, and I made her one to bring her luck in being good so she could come up for the holidays.

After dinner, Helen and I went up to bed (Helen had eagerly accepted my invitation to the spare bed in my room), and we talked until dark. I don’t remember when we went to sleep, we just drifted off happily. When we got up in the morning we went down to breakfast.

“Come on you two,” said Elsie as we went into the kitchen. “We’ve got to get a bustle on.”

Mrs. Davies was already sitting at the table, eating her breakfast. Helen’s suitcase was still at Mrs. Thwaites’, and would have to be collected on the way to the railway station. Elsie was busy packing a bag for Mrs. Davies to take with her. On the table in front of her were bacon, eggs, sausages, butter, bread and cake, and she was packing this all into a big bass bag.

Mrs. Davies was protesting. “I can’t take all that,” she said. “That’s far too much.”

“Don’t be daft,” said Elsie. “I told you we had a lot of extra. You might as well take it as have it go to the Ministry.”

The bass bag was duly packed, and put on the floor next to Mrs. Davies’ small suitcase. Helen and I finished our breakfast and were told to get tidied up, as Frank was waiting to take us all down to Mrs. Thwaites’ place to collect Helen’s things, and then to take us to the station. Elsie gave a smaller parcel to Mrs. Davies.

“You can give that to Mrs. Thwaites by way of a ‘thank you’,” she said. “She’ll appreciate the gesture, and it’ll make things easier for you.”

Mrs. Davies thanked her again. Frank came in and picked up the case and the bag, and took them out to the car. Elsie put on her hat and came out with me, Mrs. Davies and Helen. We all climbed into the car, and off we drove to the village to see Mrs. Thwaites.

Mrs. Thwaites was predictably put out that Mrs. Davies had seen fit to spend the night at the farm, but was soon put into a better frame of mind by the gift Elsie had supplied. She showed Mrs. Davies up to Helen’s room, and was so pleased that she would have her flat to herself again that she even allowed me and Helen to take two sugar sticks each out of the jars in the sweetshop.

We said our goodbyes and once again piled back into the car, with Helen’s case balanced on our knees on the back seat. We arrived at Halifax station and made our way to the platform.

The train arrived (on time for a change), and Frank picked up the bags and started to walk along, looking for an empty compartment. Having found one, he put the case and bag up into the luggage rack, and then came back out.

“In you go,” he said, handing Mrs. Davies into the train. Helen followed, and they shut the door and opened the window.

“Write to me?” I asked Helen.

“Of course I will,” she replied. “Otherwise you won’t know when I’m going to come back, will you, silly.”

I blushed. I had forgotten that we would need to know when Helen was coming back up.

Mrs. Davies was saying pretty much the same thing to Elsie. Helen leant down from the window, and we hugged briefly. The guard waved his flag and blew his whistle and the engine started to move, chugging out of the platform. I waved, Helen waved, Mrs. Davies waved, and Elsie waved. Frank nodded, which was about as much as he ever did, and we stood and watched until the train disappeared into the tunnel at the end of the station.

Elsie must have seen the look on my face because she put her arm round my shoulders and said “Come on then lass, time to go back home.”

I nodded, and we walked together up the stairs out of the station, and went back to the farm.

Chapter 8

After Helen left to go back to London, life continued pretty much in its usual vein. School terms came and went, my little group of friends had its usual ups and downs, with one or the other of us threatening never to speak to the others 'ever again', and then the subsequent 'making up'. One question which seemed to take an age to sort out was the question of whether I could be called Suzie Linthwaite.

I found out at a later date that Frank had done a fair bit of research, and even consulted the family lawyer. Apparently he had also enquired about formal adoption, but been told that without my mother's consent it would be impossible. As no one had heard from my mother since I had arrived at the farm it was generally felt that this was an option that wouldn't have much chance of success. The lawyer did say that as long as it wasn't for any fraudulent purposes then it didn't really matter what I was called as a child, and I would have the option of formally and legally changing my name once I reached the age of twenty one anyway. Accordingly, Frank and Elsie had a word with the school, and I was allowed to be known as Suzie Linthwaite from then on. When referring to me in any formal way the name 'Hennessy' was included, just to keep records straight. I was extremely happy with this arrangement, and although I never referred to myself as Suzie Linthwaite Hennessy, the name was nevertheless there.

These were very happy years. The war was over, and things gradually returned to normal. For me this meant that things changed quite a lot, as I had never known ‘normal’. The biggest change was the ending of petrol rationing, as it meant that Elsie and I could go out on Saturdays and Sundays, and on one of these outings we made my first ever trip to the seaside.

Elsie had decided I was looking a bit ‘peaky’, and thought some sea air would do me good. Accordingly, first thing one Sunday morning, she packed us up a good lunch and after breakfast we set off for Scarborough. Frank had suggested Blackpool, but Elsie (displaying the only evidence of snobbery I ever saw in her) said that a ‘nicer class’ of people went to Scarborough, so that was where we went.

What a trip! We rolled through the amazing Yorkshire moorland, and then descended onto the Yorkshire wolds, an area of wide open spaces which looked incredibly flat to my eyes, used to the hills around Halifax. It was a brilliant sunny day, and the sky was as blue as only a Yorkshire sky could be. We arrived in Scarborough just before lunchtime and Elsie parked up on the sea front at South Bay. We took the blankets out of the back of the car and carried these and the picnic basket onto the beach. I was completely intrigued; I had never seen anything like this before. There was a wide, open, sweeping stretch of sand, bordered at its edge by the sea—an immense stretch of water which seemed to go on forever. The air had the salt tang you only ever get by the coast, and the breeze was scented by this and by the not so pleasant smells coming from the harbor a little further up the coast. The air was full of the sound of sea gulls and the sound of the waves running up the sand and then returning to the water. The tide was full in, hiding the rocks at the southern end of the beach, and it was towards this end that Elsie directed us. We set the blankets down on the sand and plonked the basket down on top.

“Do you want to paddle?” asked Elsie.

“What’s that?” I replied, never having heard the term before.

“Paddle—you know, go in the water,” Elsie said.

“Is it safe?” I asked in some trepidation. I was completely over-awed by the expanse of ocean in front of us and had no idea what to expect.

“It’ll probably be a bit cold,” replied Elsie, “but you always paddle when you come to the beach.”

“Well, all right then,” I agreed nervously.

“It’ll be quite safe,” said Elsie. “Look, all those people are doing the same thing.” She pointed to the edge of the water, where several people were either standing or walking through the surf.

We took off our shoes and socks (or in Elsie’s case, stockings), and left them, neatly folded, on our blankets and set off for the water’s edge.

I had never walked on sand before, and found the sensation unusual, although not unpleasant. My feet were very soft, and I think had I been walking on the beach for any length of time they would have soon become sore. However, we made it to the edge of the water and I stepped into the sea for the first time. My first feeling was one of sheer delight as the water lapped around my ankles and then retreated. The second, which followed on extremely quickly, was that the water was cold! After the first few seconds of shock I adjusted to the temperature, and decided that I liked this paddling. The sensation of walking on sand whilst in the water was one which I found unsettling to start with. I wasn’t used to the way the sand eroded under my feet when the water pulled at it, and it took a bit of getting used to. My balance was upset and on several occasions I nearly fell into the water, and it was only my grip on Elsie’s hand which prevented me going over. After we had walked a little way, Elsie turned round and we walked back, and made our way back to the picnic basket.

Lunch was sandwiches, hard-boiled eggs, home made cakes, and home made lemonade. The salt air gave my appetite a boost and I ate everything Elsie gave me. The lemonade was amazing. I had no idea where Elsie had got lemons from, but the sharp taste was a wonderful accompaniment to the meal.

After lunch, we repacked the basket, and took it and the blankets back to the car. Elsie drove up the main road to North Bay and we had another quick paddle before heading off to explore the castle. I scrambled happily over the remains of this imposing edifice until Elsie called me and said it was time to come home.

Just as I was scrambling across the last little bit of the castle ruins I noticed a man walking across the grass towards Elsie. She had her back to him and hadn't noticed him approaching. Just as I finally reached the grass and was about to run over to her, he reached Elsie.

"Elsie?" he asked, doffing his hat. "Elsie Linthwaite?"

Elsie turned, obviously taken by surprise. "Yes," she replied.

"I thought I recognized you," said the man. "Don't you remember me?"

Elsie studied his face for a few moments, and then said "Maurice? Maurice Fletcher?"

Maurice smiled. "Yes, it's me," he said. "How are you? I didn't expect to bump into you here."

Elsie appeared to be a little flustered, with a heightened color. "I've brought my cousin with me," she said. "We're just having a day out."

"I didn't know you had a cousin," he replied. "Where is she? It is a she, I take it," he added.

"Yes, she's just here," said Elsie, indicating me. Maurice turned around and looked at me.

"She's just a child!" he exclaimed. "I thought you meant another adult."

"No, this is my father's cousin's daughter," she said, "Suzie Hennessy."

"I never knew you had a cousin," he said.

"Why would you?" she riposted. "As I remember you were always far too concerned with yourself to be bothered to find out anything about anyone else."

Maurice blushed. "Yes, well, that was a few years ago. People change, you know."

“Maybe they do, and maybe they don’t,” replied Elsie repressively. “I wouldn’t know.”

“So how come you’re looking after Suzie, then?” he asked. It struck me that he asked not so much because he wanted to know, but because he seemed anxious to change the subject.

“She came to stay with us during the war, evacuated from Coventry, and she’s been here ever since.”

Maurice appeared to be a little taken aback by this. “But you’re far too young to be looking after a child her age,” he said. “Can’t she go back to her parents?”

I could tell that Elsie was made extremely angry by this remark. “No, she can’t” she snapped. “Not that it’s any of your business anyway.”

And with that she grabbed my hand and walked away over the grass. I looked up at her, and could see that she was still extremely angry. I looked back, and Maurice was standing on the grass staring after her, turning his hat around in his hands.

“Who was that?” I asked, as we reached the car.

“No one special,” replied Elsie shortly. “Just someone I used to know.”

I knew from her tone that she didn’t want to talk about it, so I climbed into the car and she drove off. Elsie was quiet on the drive back to the farm but by this time the excitement and exercise of the day was catching up with me and I was happy enough to sit and drowse in the front seat, watching the scenery as it sped by. We got back to the farm and Elsie carried the basket into the kitchen. Frank was there, making tea in the familiar brown pot, and there was a lovely smell of shepherd’s pie coming from the range.

“Ah, there you are,” he said. “I’ve made tea, and I’ve put pie in’t range, so it’ll be ready in a jiff.”

Elsie took our coats and hung them up by the door. She came over to the table and sat down. Frank had been watching her closely, and after handing her a cup of tea, asked “Is anything wrong lass?”

Elsie looked up and said “Nothing that can’t be talked about later.”

Frank evidently got this coded message, because he nodded his head and said nothing more. Being neither blind nor stupid, I also got the message that Elsie didn’t want to discuss our encounter until after I had gone to bed.

Frank looked over at me, and asked “Did you have a good day at the beach then lass?”

This was a clever move on his part. I immediately started to tell him all about the day at Scarborough, and what I had thought of the sea, and all about the castle. By the time I’d finished, I was nearly falling asleep in my chair and Elsie thought it time I had my usual bath, and went to bed. I was tired enough not to argue, and a little more than half an hour later I was warm and cozy, tucked up in bed. I fell asleep almost immediately.

I have no idea why I suddenly woke up later. There must have been some noise outside, perhaps a vixen screaming, but I was suddenly wide awake. I decided I was thirsty, and got out of bed to go down to the kitchen and get a glass of water. I made my way downstairs, and was just outside the kitchen door when I heard Elsie’s voice.

“I couldn’t believe it, he was just standing there,” she was saying.

“Did he say where he’d been?” asked Frank.

“He didn’t get the chance,” she replied. “He asked about Suzie, said she should go back to her parents. That’s when I left.”

“Maybe you should have stayed and talked,” he suggested.

“Are you mad?” Elsie retorted. “After what happened!”

“Well you might have got an explanation of why he suddenly left,” Frank continued.

“I wasn’t going to start that sort of conversation with Suzie standing there,” she said. “It wouldn’t have been fit for a child’s ears, what I wanted to say to him.”

“So what will you do if he comes back round?” asked Frank. “Will you give him chance to explain, or just slam the door in his face?”

“I suppose I should give him the chance to explain things,” Elsie said, slowly. “But what do I do if I see him again, to give him the chance to explain, and I don’t like his explanation?”

“Well, you only have to see him once, don’t you?” replied Frank. “If you don’t like what you hear you don’t have to see him again, and if he starts being a nuisance I’ll tell him to get lost.”

Elsie gave a small laugh. “Dear Frank,” she said. “You do look after your little sister.”

“Well of course I do,” he replied. “Who else is going to do it?” I could hear the teasing note in his voice as he spoke.

I had never heard Elsie and Frank talk like this before. It had never occurred to me that they might speak differently between themselves to how they spoke when I was around. I suddenly realized that they had a whole life between then that I was completely unaware of, and wasn’t involved in. I was upset for a few minutes but then I realized that I was lucky. When I was with Elsie I had her complete attention, and not many people can ever say they’ve had that from the adults in their life. I decided that it didn’t make any difference really. If Elsie and Frank talked about things when I wasn’t around that was fine, because Elsie and I talked about things when Frank wasn’t around. Come to that, I talked to Frank about things when Elsie wasn’t around. I think I grew up quite a bit then, sitting on that stairway in the middle of the night.

I decided I still wanted a glass of water, so I got up and went across to the kitchen door, and went in. Frank and Elsie were sitting either side of the fireplace, with a cup of tea. They turned to the door as I came in.

“Hello love,” said Elsie. “What do you want?”

“I’m thirsty,” I announced. “Can I have a drink of water?”

“Of course you can,” she replied. She went over to the sink, and filled a glass with water and brought it over.

“You’d better let her sit by the fire,” said Frank. “She’ll freeze over there, she’s nowt on her feet.”

“Come and sit on the rug,” she said. “That way you’ll still be warm when you go back up to bed.”

I obediently sat down on the rug, and started to drink my cup of water. It was cold, and fresh, and tasted wonderful. I loved the water on the farm, and had done since I arrived. It tasted so much more alive in some way than the water in the town. That was one of the few memories I actually had of Coventry—the water tasted horrible, all flat, and it always seemed to my recollection to have been slightly warm. The farm water, however, came from a spring further up the hill side and was as pure as you could wish. I remember Elsie telling me on one occasion that her grandfather had paid to have water piped into the house and had installed a hot water tank because his wife, her grandmother, had slipped and broken her leg one winter when getting water out of the pump in the farm yard. The pump was still there and as children we used to play on it, pretending to pump water when playing ‘house’. I remember telling Elsie that I thought that story was extremely romantic. I remember how she snorted.

“Romantic,” she said. “Nowt of the sort. He just didn’t like being without his home comforts while she couldn’t get about, and wanted to make sure it didn’t happen again!”

I was sitting holding my glass, and felt sleepy again. I looked around and realized I was close to Frank’s chair, so I shuffled backwards a little until I could lean against it and then settled down. I put the glass down on the floor, and made myself comfortable. I could feel myself drowsing again, and remember feeling perfectly content and secure. I could dimly hear Elsie and Frank talking again about something but I wasn’t aware of what it was. I must have fallen asleep for a while, because once again I woke up. I was still on the floor, snuggled against Frank’s legs, and he and Elsie were once again talking about the mysterious Maurice. Realizing that this was my best chance to find out what was going on I played possum, staying where I was by Frank.

“So what are you going to do?” Frank was asking.

“I really don’t know,” replied Elsie.

“Do you want to see him again?” asked Frank.

“Again, I really don’t know,” she responded. “I thought I’d got over him, but seeing him there today brought it all back. I don’t want to get involved with him again. What if he does it again? I really don’t think I could stand it.”

“It would be different this time, though,” said Frank. “You’re both older for one thing, and at least one of you is a lot wiser. You’d just have to be careful, see what he wants, hear him out, and then decide whether to continue to know him or not.”

“You make it sound so easy,” Elsie said, a touch grumpily I thought.

“Well, and so it is,” he replied. “What ever you decide to do you know you’ll have my support and, if you need it, my protection. I’ll keep an eye on you my girl, and if I think you’re making a mistake, I’ll tell you. You don’t have to listen, but I’ll tell you anyway.”

Elsie laughed. “I’ll sleep on it and tell you in the morning,” she said. “In the meantime, let’s get this one off to bed and then I think I’ll turn in myself. It’s been quite a day.”

“Fair enough,” said Frank. “And did you enjoy paddling on the beach again?”

“Oh yes,” she replied. “It was such fun. And to see Suzie’s face when she first stood in the water, it would have made you laugh. We’ll have to go again, and try and make it all of us next time. I’m sure you could manage a few hours away from the farm.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” he said amiably. “There’s not so much going on at the moment. We’ll have to plan it and make a real day of it.”

“That would be lovely,” Elsie said. “We’ll talk about it in the morning.” She bent down and gave me a little shake. “Come on poppet, up to bed with you or you’ll be yawning all day at school.”

I got up, and we went up to bed together. She came in with me and made sure I was tucked in before she left. I was excited by the idea of all of us going to the sea side again, and thought it would be lovely to have Frank with us. As it turned out, I was destined to be completely disappointed.

* * * * *

The highlight of these years was definitely Helen's visits from London during the summer holidays. We wrote regularly, but our correspondence was closely regulated by our respective families. Elsie and Mrs. Davies had agreed that nothing would spoil a friendship quite as quickly as running out of things to say, and thereby not writing regularly. Accordingly, I wrote to Helen once a month, and she replied. However these letters were staggered, so that my letters to Helen were a fortnight away from hers to me. I assume that Elsie and Mrs. Davies also corresponded on a regular basis, as Elsie seemed to know quite as much (if not more) about what was happening in London as I heard from Helen.

I found out some time later that Mrs. Davies had told Elsie that Helen coming up for the school holidays in summer was a godsend to her. She had to work full-time as her husband was yet another war casualty, and was now so disabled he was unable to work. He was happy enough looking after Helen for a few days, but found it hard to look after her for any length of time. The Easter holidays were especially difficult for them, and afterwards Mr. Davies was totally exhausted and usually quite ill. The thought of looking after Helen during the whole of the summer was apparently enough to drive him to distraction, so Elsie's offer of having Helen really made a difference. Under the circumstances it was, of course, impossible for Helen's mother to reciprocate and have me down there for a holiday, but as (when asked) I had expressed complete disinterest in going to a dirty, noisy, stuffy town, Elsie was able to say that it would be better

for both of us to spend some time outdoors during the summer, and that it was no trouble at all to have a guest all summer.

I, of course, was unaware of this at the time, and was just wildly excited at the prospect of Helen coming up to stay for an extended period. Elsie had me make a calendar to mark the days, as she got tired of me asking how long it would be before Helen came up to stay. The school term dates were slightly different in London, and we broke up nearly a week before they did, so I had plenty of time to get things ready. I helped Elsie to get Helen's room ready, although I had already planned that Helen wouldn't spend that much time in it; after all, I had a spare bed in my room, and Helen could sleep there. Elsie, however, said with her usual practicality that we might not always get on, and that Helen needed to have a space where she could be alone if she wanted. Naturally enough I disregarded Elsie's statement—after all, Helen and I were friends, weren't we? I did help Elsie with the dusting and polishing, although I have to admit that she did most of the work. The day before Helen was due, I went out and picked a big bunch of flowers from around the farm and the garden, and put them in a vase on her dresser, so that the room would fill with their scent for when she arrived.

I had naturally enough told Nora and the rest of our little gang that Helen would be coming up, and they were as pleased as I was. She had really made quite an impression for the comparatively short time she had been up here. We planned to have picnics, and we all planned to ask various parents for a day at the seaside. We figured that if each set of parents could take us for one day, then that would be a total of six days at Scarborough. Naturally enough, we never thought to ask whether the parents could afford to do this—we naturally assumed that, as adults, they had all the time and money in the world, and would obviously do what was required to keep us busy.

Finally the day came when Helen was due to arrive, and I was up so early I beat Elsie down to the kitchen. I had now graduated to the stage of being able (and allowed) to make tea in

the big brown pot so I put the kettle on to boil, and sat down at the table. I was just making the tea when Elsie came in.

“You’re up early, love,” she said.

“I know, I just couldn’t stay in bed any longer,” I replied.

“Well, you’ve been waiting a long time to see Helen,” she said, sitting down at the table. “It’s only to be expected, I suppose.”

I poured out two cups of tea, and we sat drinking in companionable silence for a couple of minutes.

“What time do we set off for the station?” I asked.

“Oh there’s time yet, poppet,” she replied. “I don’t think the train’s due until this afternoon. It’s a long way up from London, you know.”

“I hope she’ll be all right, travelling all that way by herself,” I said worriedly.

“Now don’t you fret none,” said Elsie. “Her mum will put her on the train and ask the guard to look out for her. She’ll be fine.”

“Oh, I just can’t wait to see her,” I exclaimed.

“Well,” replied the ever-practical Elsie, “I’m afraid unless you’ve found a way to make time run faster, you’ll have to do just that.” She looked over at me. “If you’ve finished your tea, you can give me hand to get the eggs.”

“Good idea,” I said. I jumped up and took the used cups over to the sink to be washed, then I topped up the tea pot and left it by the side of the range ready for when Frank came downstairs. I covered it with a slightly singed tea cozy, a reminder of my young and enthusiastic idea that the closer the pot was to the fire, the better it would be for the tea. Fortunately Elsie had arrived just in time to prevent the tea cozy bursting into flames, but it remained singed. I picked up the egg basket, and we went over to the barn to collect the day’s eggs. About half an hour later, we returned with only half a dozen eggs.

“I’m sure I don’t know what’s got into them hens,” Elsie muttered as we walked across the yard. “They were laying well until this week. I’ll have to get Frank to have a look at them.”

Like most farm children, I knew what this meant. ‘Have a look at them’ was a euphemism for ‘see if they need to be got rid of’. The only hen that had spent more than three years on the farm was my own special hen, Henrietta. As my pet she had been spared the prospect of slaughter, and had been allowed to grow old and die naturally once her egg-laying days were over. The other chickens, though, did not have this protection and were thus subject to the need for egg production. As Elsie had explained to me once, just after I arrived, they could not afford to keep non-productive chickens, and any that didn’t earn their keep were either sent to the slaughter house and sold as broilers, or were killed on the farm and eaten.

“Maybe you should let the dogs loose in there again,” I suggested, forgetting that this incident was supposed to be secret. Elsie turned sharply to look at me, and no matter how innocent I tried to look, I could feel myself blushing hotly.

“And just what do you know about the dogs getting into the barn?” she asked in a deceptively mild voice.

I stood there, looking down at my shoes. “Well,” I began.

“Come on now, let’s have the truth,” she said.

“It was an accident, really,” I started.

“Really,” she repeated.

“No, it was Elsie, honest.”

“Hmm. And how did it happen, this ‘accident’?”

“We were playing in the play barn, and Nora suggested it would be fun to go and play in the hen barn.”

“And so you naturally decided to join in,” Elsie put in. I looked up at her, and then looked down at my shoes again.

“It just seemed to happen,” I said. “I didn’t mean to go along with it, but somehow we all ended up in the hen barn. Then Martha left the door open, and the dogs got in. We tried to chase them out, but they wouldn’t come for us.”

“So how did you get them out again?” asked Elsie.

“Frank was whistling for them, and they just dashed off,” I finished.

“I see,” said Elsie.

“It did make them start to lay again,” I ventured. I had heard Elsie lamenting the fact that the hens were not laying a couple of days before this incident, and then marveling at the increased production which resulted afterwards.

“I suppose it did. But what if the dogs decided to kill all the chickens?” she asked sternly.

I hung my head. “We didn’t think they would touch the chickens. They’re not foxes, after all.”

“Oh Suzie,” I heard her say, with a sigh. “All this time on a farm and you still don’t know that a dog will kill a chicken as fast as a fox will. Why do you think Frank keeps them chained to their kennels when they’re not working?”

“I didn’t know,” I muttered. I was feeling really ashamed, and felt that I had let Elsie down. Then I heard her make a noise as if she were a boiling kettle, a sort of sputtering noise, and then, to my disbelief, she suddenly burst out laughing. I stared at her in astonishment.

“What are you laughing at?” I demanded.

“Oh Suzie, you are priceless,” she replied, still laughing. “You should see your face, poppet.”

I still didn’t understand why she was laughing so hard. “I thought you were going to tell me off,” I said.

“I know,” she replied, “and I was going to, but your face was such a picture I just couldn’t be cross anymore.”

“But what about the dogs killing the chickens?” I asked.

She sobered slightly, but I could still see the laughter in her face, and hear it in her voice.

“That was true,” she said, “but sending the dogs into the barn to chase the chickens is sometimes done as a way of shocking them into laying. Of course,” she added, “Frank is usually there to keep control of the dogs, and he brings them out before they get too excited.”

“So I’m not in trouble?” I demanded.

She leant over and gave me a hug. “No, poppet, you’re not in trouble. You and your friends saved us a job, after all. Frank

was intending to send the dogs in himself but you did it for him. Why do you think he was close enough to whistle the dogs? He saw what had happened, and came over to make sure it didn't go too far."

"But ... but," I sputtered.

"But what?" she asked.

"I don't know," I replied. "But that wasn't fair!"

"What wasn't?" she said.

"Letting me think I was in trouble, and then laughing at me!" Indignation at Elsie's laughter warred with relief that I wasn't in trouble and I couldn't decide how I felt.

"Oh sweetheart," she said, giving me another hug, "I know it wasn't but I just couldn't resist it. Come on, let's go and put these eggs away, and then suggest Frank gets the dogs. And I don't know about you," she added, starting to walk across the yard, "but after all that I could do with another cup of tea."

I walked across the yard with her, still feeling slightly upset, but as we got nearer the kitchen my sense of anticipation began to replace it. We went in, and Frank was sitting there having a cup of tea.

"Morning," he said in his usual laconic fashion.

"Morning Frank," I replied, taking the eggs over to the walk-in pantry and putting them on the storage tray there. It had taken me some time to learn that fresh eggs went at the back, and that we used the older eggs first. I had confused Elsie no end at first by putting the new eggs at the front. I put the basket back, and went into the kitchen.

"You're up early today," he commented.

Elsie laughed. "That she is," she said. "She's that excited she can hardly sit still. We've been out for the eggs already."

"So I see," he replied.

"What time can we leave for the station?" I asked.

"Soon enough to get there," he replied.

"I knew you were going to say that," I retorted.

"Shouldn't have asked then," he said.

I smiled at him and sat down at the table. This was an old exchange between the two of us, and when I was younger had usually resulted in me stamping my foot and flouncing off to the other end of the kitchen to sulk. However I had by now got used to it, and recognized it for the teasing it was.

“We’ll leave at three,” he said, relenting. “Train’s due in at four, so we should get there nice and early. We’ll be back in time for milking then.”

I smiled again, and nodded. Elsie had mentioned making scones for tea and she was planning a big cottage pie for dinner, which was one of Helen’s favorites. Helping Elsie make these would pass the time wonderfully, and I was now content to wait until three o’clock when we would leave for the station.

Chapter 9

That summer with Helen was everything I'd anticipated. We were growing up, but we still enjoyed some of our more childish pursuits and still enjoyed playing in the play barn, even if the games had changed. Our group was still together, and we all still enjoyed each other's company. With Helen not being around all the time now we did of course have a lot of catching up to do, which occupied us for several hours when we first got together.

We did get some trips to the beach, although not as many as we'd hoped for. Elsie Frank and I never did manage to all get there together. Elsie was always wonderful in that way—if none of the other parents could or would take us, she would usually volunteer as driver unless she had something else planned.

After she had volunteered for this duty a couple of times, I noticed that whenever we went up to the castle for our picnic, to which all the parents contributed, sooner or later Maurice Fletcher would turn up as if by accident, and he and Elsie would sit and talk, or walk and talk, whilst we girls were busy around and about them. At first putting this down to coincidence, I soon grew suspicious and realized that Elsie was actually volunteering to take us all over so that she could meet with him. What I couldn't puzzle out at first was why she would want a group of little girls around when she met him, but a conversation I overheard proved most illuminating.

I was just outside the kitchen one lovely summer's day, and Elsie and Frank were just finishing their lunch. Helen had gone to Nora's house for the afternoon. I hadn't wanted to go, so I'd stayed at the farm to help Elsie with some chores. Underneath the big kitchen window was an old stone bench, which was extremely useful for sitting on when pulling on a stubborn pair of wellies. Because of the relative heights of the window and the bench, and the fact that the window sill inside was crowded with Elsie's houseplants, when sitting on this bench you were completely invisible to anyone sitting in the kitchen. Because it was such a warm day, Elsie had opened the kitchen windows and this meant that any conversation held in the kitchen was clearly audible to anyone sitting on the bench. Although not by nature given to eaves-dropping, it was sometimes a useful way of finding things out that Frank and Elsie didn't think I ought to hear.

"So how's it going then lass?" Frank asked.

"It's all right," said Elsie. "I'm taking it slowly. I don't want a repeat of last time."

"You do right, girl," he replied. There was a brief pause, then "Has he told you what happened last time?"

"Well, he's mentioned it," Elsie said slowly.

"It sounds as if you don't like what you heard," commented Frank. "Or that you don't believe it," he added.

"I'm not sure I do," said Elsie. "It's a strange tale he's come up with."

"Are you going to share it?" asked Frank. "Or do I have to try and figure it out for myself?"

Elsie gave a little laugh. "All right then," she said. "See what you make of this." She cleared her throat, and began.

The story that Elsie related that afternoon was quite bizarre. She and Maurice had met at school and had been extremely close all through their school years. When Elsie left school at fourteen and came home to work with Frank and her parents on the farm, Maurice had kept in touch and had come over from his parents' place on weekends. They had done the usual things—going to

the pictures, going to concerts on a Sunday afternoon in the park, and having picnics. Elsie's parents, and Maurice's parents, were quite happy with the situation, and it was generally expected that Elsie and Maurice would eventually marry and settle down together after Maurice had finished at university, where he was expected to study mathematics and physics. He had been accepted by both Oxford and Cambridge, and was waiting to make his choice. Elsie accepted that there would be a separation, but it came sooner than she expected.

Just as everything was going in the direction everyone expected, Maurice came over one afternoon just after Elsie's nineteenth birthday. Maurice had told Elsie he had something important to tell her, and Elsie was expecting him to come over to propose. Elsie was all excited, and (to use her words), 'all of a twitter'. Her mother had made a special tea, and Frank and his father had worked hard to ensure they could be around in the afternoon, and everything was set.

Maurice arrived, and took Elsie for a walk, as expected. Ten minutes later, Elsie ran into the house in floods of tears. Instead of proposing, Maurice had finished the relationship, and told Elsie he didn't want to see her again. He said he'd found someone else and had been seeing this person regularly whenever he wasn't out with Elsie. They were going to be married in a couple of weeks, and that was that.. Maurice left, and Elsie hadn't seen or heard from again until they met at Scarborough on that fateful afternoon.

Since meeting up with him again, Elsie had asked him what he had happened, expecting to hear he was married with a family, and he had told her that he had been approached and asked to join a special service which was being set up to monitor German signal traffic. Maurice pointed out that he was very young and hadn't finished his university degree, but the 'men from the ministry' said that he was exactly the sort of person they were looking for, and they wanted him to join their group when term started instead of returning to university. Maurice was worried by this, and had asked about his qualifications. After the war, he said, he

would need to find a job and if he hadn't finished his degree he wouldn't be able to apply for what he wanted. He was told that Cambridge (he had decided on Cambridge in the end) would issue him with a degree based on the work he did during his service with this special unit. Maurice asked for time to think about it, and was told that he could have three days. Then they told him that if he accepted, he would have to make sure he had no ties—no wife, no girlfriend, no fiancée, nothing (except for his parents).

Maurice had spend the next three days considering the offer and what it would mean, and then decided that he couldn't turn it down. When Elsie had asked for his reasons he replied that it was a mixture of curiosity, excitement, patriotism, and pride that he had been selected for this special work. It was a heady mix for a young man of twenty and he had been unable to refuse. He made contact with the man who was recruiting him, and told him he wanted to accept. He was then told that he would have to finish his relationship with Elsie, which he agreed to do, although extremely reluctantly. This he had done on that Sunday afternoon when Elsie had expected to be asked to marry him. He had left immediately, and been taken to a secret location where he had undergone a year of training, and then he had been transferred to France. He had remained there for three years, and had then been transferred back to England for more training. Once Hitler had come to power in Germany, the work had become more demanding, and the level of secrecy had been intensified. He had once again gone to France and Germany to gather information, and had remained there for another two years before returning to England.

Once war had broken out, he and the rest of his team had been virtually incarcerated in their headquarters and had been allowed little or no contact with the outside world. He had worked there for the whole of the war, and had only recently been discharged from his service with the promised degree to help him back into civilian life. He had returned to find his parents had sold the farm, and moved to Scarborough for their retirement.

He had been saddened by this, as he had hoped to return home and take up dog breeding—in particular, collies for farm work.

Feeling a bit claustrophobic in his parents' house, he had been out for a walk the day he bumped in to Elsie and me at the castle, and had been completely taken by surprise. Seeing Elsie with a young child had rocked him to the core, which was why he had reacted the way he did. He had gone back to his parents' house and questioned them about Elsie; was she married, did she still live at the farm, what she was doing. The answers he had received had surprised him, but given him hope he might have the chance to repair the damage done all those years ago. He had taken to spending Sunday afternoons in and around the castle on the off-chance that Elsie might reappear, and had taken heart when he talked to her without being rebuffed. Elsie's voice drifted off, and there was silence for a while. Then Frank spoke.

"And do you believe him?" he asked.

"I don't know, Frank," she replied. "I want to, but it all sounds so far-fetched. Secret organizations, spying on Germany, being kept away all those years of the war. If it is true, then he didn't want to leave me, but then again he did leave."

"He did that right enough," said Frank, with a kind of wry amusement in his voice. "He left you in a right state."

"He certainly did," she responded.

"And how do you feel about him now?" asked Frank. "Do you want to carry on where you left off?"

"Again, I don't know. I don't even know how he feels about me now. Anyway, I'm too old to think about getting married."

"Don't talk rubbish to me, my lass," said Frank sternly. "Tha's only just thirty, that's plenty young enough to be getting married, aye, and to start a family."

"Do you think so?" she asked.

"Look at our parents," Frank replied. "Our Dad was nearly fifty when he married our mam, and she were over thirty. She had six kids over time, she were over forty when you were born."

“Yes I know,” said Elsie. “I wish they were both still around.”

“Well, farming’s a hard life, it can take it out of you, and our mam were never that strong. Not like you, lass. You’re a tough one, you take after our grandmother.”

Elsie laughed. “Bless you Frank, you don’t have reassure me,” she said. “But it’s nice to hear all the same.”

“Any road,” said Frank. “Don’t go convincing yourself that you’re too old to have a family if you want one.”

There was a silence during which I could hear the clink of tea cups as Elsie cleared the table. I heard a chair being pushed away from the table, scraping on the stone flagged floor.

“You think about it lass,” said Frank.

“I will. And thank you.”

“Nowt to thank me for,” Frank replied gruffly. “You’re my sister, it’s up to me to look after you. Now get along.”

I heard footsteps across the kitchen floor, and realized I had better make myself scarce. I ran across to the play barn and got inside just in time. Frank came across the yard. I heard him stop outside the barn, and then he spoke.

“Suzie,” he called.

“Yes Frank?” I replied.

“Next time you want to know something, just come and ask, lass, don’t hang around outside kitchen windows overhearing things.”

I was totally astonished. “How did you know I was there?” I said, before I could stop myself. Frank put his head round the door. He was grinning.

“I didn’t,” he said. “But seeing you whisk yourself into the barn in such a hurry it wasn’t difficult to figure out that you’d been doing something you shouldn’t, and then you just told me yourself that you were there.”

I turned crimson. My only consolation was that he was still grinning at me.

“Sorry,” I mumbled.

“Don’t be sorry,” he said, coming over and chucking me under the chin. “It’s not a nice habit, but this once it was harmless enough. Reckon it’s time you learnt some family history.”

“Poor Elsie,” I said. “Fancy being jilted like that. She must’ve felt dreadful.”

“Reckon she did for while,” he replied. “But she got over it, and then you arrived and you’ve been good for her—gave her something other than me to think about. But it’s no life for a woman, stuck here on the farm. She needs a husband. And that reminds me of something else,” he continued.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“I don’t want you to be mean with Elsie and Maurice. I know we’ve spoiled you, but Elsie’s got a heart as big as Yorkshire, and just because she’s got Maurice it doesn’t mean she thinks any less of you. She’s got this one last chance to be happy, and I don’t want you to spoil it by acting ansty and feeling left out if they go out for the day.”

I looked at him. His voice was unusually stern, and he had never spoken to me like that before. It had never occurred to me that I might have a bearing on what happened to Elsie, so I was surprised he had mentioned it.

“I won’t spoil things for Elsie,” I said. “I want her to be happy as well. I promise I’ll behave.”

“That’s a good girl,” he said in his more usual tone. “I didn’t think you’d do anything deliberate, but I don’t want this chance spoiled. Elsie will still be there for you, and for me, but we’ll have to share her with Maurice.”

“I don’t mind sharing,” I told him. “And I like Maurice, we’ve talked sometimes when we’ve been at Scarborough.”

Frank nodded. “I knew I could count on you,” he said. “You’re a good lass, and I know you wouldn’t do anything to hurt Elsie.”

“Of course I wouldn’t,” I replied.

“Well, that’s that then, we don’t need to talk about it again.

But if you do need to talk to me, I'm always here for you, you know that."

"I know," I said, and gave him a hug. As usual his coat was scratchy against my cheek, and smelled of hay and animals.

"There now," he said. "Don't be so daft. Get along with you."

I let him go, and smiled at him.

"Right then, I'm back off to work. See you later."

"See you later Frank."

He went off in the direction of the fields, and I went back to the kitchen. When I went in, Elsie was standing at the kitchen table making pastry for a pie.

"Hello love," she said. "What you been doing?"

I didn't say anything, just walked up to her and gave her a big hug.

"Now, what's all this then?" she said, surprised.

"I just wanted you to know that I love you," I replied. "And that I wouldn't do anything to spoil things for you."

"Well I knew that already," she said. "But thank you for the thought, poppet. Now I must get on with this pie. Where's Helen?"

"She's not back from Nora's yet," I said. "Why, did you want her?"

"No, not especially," Elsie said. "I just want some eggs from the barn, that's all."

"Oh, I'm sure she'll do it when she gets back. I know she enjoys it."

"Well don't let Helen get lumbered with doing all the chores," Elsie said seriously. "She might enjoy it now, but there's nothing more designed to put someone off doing something than making them feel they have to do it."

"Don't worry, Elsie," I reassured her. "Helen really likes ferreting through the straw bales for the nests."

"Well, just make sure you do your share," she said.

"I will," I replied.

Following my discussion with Frank, I kept a close eye on

Elsie next time we went up to Scarborough. She seemed to be perfectly happy to spend time with Maurice when with us children, but seemed curiously reluctant to spend time with him on his own. Equally, Maurice seemed reluctant to ask to see Elsie on her own.

Having sworn Helen to secrecy, I told her all about my suspicions, and asked what we should do about the situation. Naturally we had no great faith in the ‘grown ups’ being able to sort this out without our help. In our experience, grown ups seemed particularly inept at sorting out what seemed to us to be relatively simple problems. Helen immediately found the whole situation extremely romantic, and fell in with my plans to ‘get something sorted out’. Precisely what, and how it should be sorted, were details we didn’t really bother about.

After puzzling ourselves silly for a couple of days, we decided that what needed to happen was for Elsie and Maurice to be left alone for some time during one of our Sunday visits. Accordingly, we let the others into the secret. They assumed we were up to mischief, and readily agreed to help us out.

We all set off on Sunday to Scarborough. It was a wet day and Elsie had suggested that we should perhaps go somewhere else, but we all expressed a preference for Scarborough, saying that we could shelter in the sea front shops if we needed to. We arrived a couple of hours later during one of the few breaks in the weather, and we had fish and chips eaten from the paper whilst we perched on the harbor wall. After lunch, when Elsie asked what we would like to do next, we all stated that we wanted to explore the castle again. Having over-ridden Elsie’s objections (“but you’ve all been there before,”), we set off to drive to the castle.

The weather was playing on our team that afternoon. The sun came out, and it became so hot that you could see the steam rising from the pavements and stones of the castle, creating a weird misty landscape.

True to form, after we had been there for nearly half an hour

Maurice arrived, looking as if he was just out for an afternoon's stroll. Elsie saw him, and smiled as he approached. They started to wander about the castle grounds, and we put our plan of action into operation. Gradually, we all moved away from Elsie and Maurice, until they were walking along by themselves. Maurice linked his arm through Elsie's and they strolled around, heads together, talking earnestly. We watched from our various nooks and crannies, speculating on what they were talking about.

Suddenly, Maurice stopped, and turned Elsie round to face him. He held her by the upper arms, and seemed to be trying to persuade her into something. She had her head down, and seemed to be refusing to give him an answer. Maurice let her go, and stood there, frustration etched in every line of his body. He glanced round, and caught sight of me where I was partially concealed by one of the castle walls.

"Suzie," he called. "Could you come here for a minute please?"

Although feeling this was not exactly in keeping with a romantic interlude for two, I came over to where they were standing. Elsie had her back to me, looking out to sea so I couldn't see her face, but Maurice was looking frustrated.

"Suzie," he began, as I got close to them. "I have asked Elsie a question, but she says she can't give me an answer because her decision is going to affect you. I want to know what you think so that you can tell Elsie."

I had an inkling what was going to come next, but I kept my face composed in an enquiring look.

"I've asked Elsie to marry me," Maurice went on. "However, she says that she can't leave the farm, as it wouldn't be right for you to stay with Frank by yourself, especially as you get older. I can't offer you a home, as my parents' house isn't big enough. So Elsie won't marry me. What do you think?"

"I knew it, I knew you just needed some time on your own before you asked," I exclaimed.

The look on Maurice's face was a picture of total surprise.

“You mean you knew?” he said.

“Of course we did. We all figured out you wanted to marry Elsie. What I can’t understand,” I continued, “is why it took you so long to ask her!”

Maurice looked baffled. I glanced aside at Elsie and saw her shoulders shaking, but whether with laughter or tears I couldn’t see. She had her handkerchief stuffed in her mouth, but I couldn’t get a clear enough view of her face otherwise.

“So what do you think?” Maurice repeated. “Should Elsie accept my proposal?”

“Well of course she should,” I replied instantly.

Elsie turned back to face me. Whatever she had been feeling a few moments ago had been brought under control and, apart from looking a little strained, her face was perfectly composed.

“But where would we live?” she asked. “I can’t leave you on the farm with Frank, and we can’t all live at his parents’ place.”

“Oh that’s easy,” I airily replied. “That’s all sorted out.”

“What do you mean?” said Elsie. Maurice was looking at me intently.

“Why don’t you come and live on the farm? You’d still be there to look after me and Frank, you’d be close enough to visit with Mo’s parents, and he’d be able to breed dogs, like he wanted to.”

Elsie and Maurice looked at me sharply when I made this last statement. “And what do you know about Mo wanting to breed dogs?” Elsie asked.

“That doesn’t matter,” broke in Maurice impatiently. “I think this wonderful girl’s just come up with the ideal solution.”

“Well yes, but ...” started Elsie uncertainly.

“Don’t you think it would be perfect?” Maurice asked. “We all get everything we want! My parents get their house back, I get my perfect wife, you get to continue looking after Frank and Suzie, they won’t be lonely, and I can breed dogs. What could possibly be better? Say yes, Elsie, please say yes.” In his excitement, Maurice had forgotten that he and Elsie were not alone, and he was once again holding her by her upper arms, staring

into her face, his own aglow with love. Elsie was staring up at him, looking as if she was going to cry, but also smiling.

“Well, seeing as you and Suzie have it all worked out between you, I suppose I don’t have much choice, do I?”

“None at all,” replied Maurice, with a smile.

“Well in that case,” she said, with the glimmering of a smile, “I suppose I’d have to say yes!”

Maurice took one step forward, and literally swept her off her feet, swinging her in a tight circle around him, kissing her all the while. I started jumping about excitedly, and all the other girls, seeing this, came out of their various hiding places, and ran across the grass to join us.

“Did he do it?” asked Helen, excitedly.

“Yes, he did!” I exclaimed.

“And did she say yes?” demanded Mary.

“Yes, she did!”

“Yippee!” they all shouted, making such a noise the birds rose in a squawking group above the castle, and all the other visitors to the castle turned round to find out what the bother was all about. Elsie and Maurice had separated by this time, and were standing hand in hand watching us.

“And were you all in on the secret?” she asked.

“Well it wasn’t much of a secret, was it?” replied Helen saucily. “Everyone knew how Maurice felt about you except you!”

Elsie laughed, and said “I should have know I couldn’t keep a secret from you lot.”

“So when’s the wedding going to be?” I asked. “Can I be a bridesmaid?”

“I don’t know, we’ll have to think about a date. And yes, of course you can be a bridesmaid. And if we can get it sorted out quickly enough, Helen can be one too.”

Helen was taken completely by surprise at this, but recovered enough to give Elsie a big hug. “Thank you, thank you,” she said, “I’d love to be your bridesmaid.”

To celebrate this momentous occasion, Maurice said he

would treat us all to ice creams on the sea front, and then to tea in one of the tea rooms which were liberally scattered through the resort. Having bought us all tea, Maurice insisted on driving back to Halifax with us, so that he could be there when Elsie broke the news to Frank. Elsie said he could spend the night, and then go back in the morning, and asked if he wanted to speak to his parents before we all left for the day. Maurice said they would be delighted with his news, but he would take Elsie back with him and they could be together when they told his parents.

All in all, it was a very excited bunch that drove back to Halifax that golden Sunday afternoon. We sang all our old favorite songs from during the war, and some of the newer ones. We dropped off Mary, Martha and the rest at their various homes along the way, until Elsie, Maurice, Helen and I arrived back at the farm. Frank was there, and watched as Maurice parked the car up. We all scrambled out, and Maurice and Elsie walked over to where Frank was standing.

“Frank, Frank, we’ve got something to tell you,” said Elsie, rushing up to him. “We’re getting married!”

“Nay then lass,” Frank retorted. “We can’t get married, we’re brother and sister, think on.”

Elsie, completely taken aback, started to laugh. “No, Maurice and I are getting married.”

Frank started to laugh in return. “Well I knew that, lass,” he said fondly. “I was just wondering what was taking you so long.” With that, he gave Elsie a huge hug, and then did the same to Maurice.

“Come on, let’s go in and celebrate,” he said. “I’ve got something put away in the cupboard that’ll do very nicely for a celebration.” Then he looked back at me and Helen. “You girls can have some lemonade,” he said. “You’re a bit young yet for what I’ve got in here.”

We all trooped into the kitchen. By the time the toasts had been drunk, followed by several cups of tea, Helen and I were so tired we were nearly falling asleep where we sat. Elsie looked

over and said “Come on you two, off to bed before you fall asleep here.”

We got up and were on the way across to the door, when Maurice suddenly said “Hang on just a tick, we haven’t had the most important toast of all.”

We all turned round, surprised. “What do you mean?” asked Elsie.

“I mean Suzie, of course,” he replied. “If Suzie hadn’t made her suggestion, I’d still be wondering if you actually wanted to marry me, and wondering if I should ask you.”

“That’s true,” agreed Elsie. “I didn’t even think of having you come to live here. She certainly came up with the goods today!”

Maurice filled his, Frank’s and Elsie’s glasses, and gave me and Helen some more lemonade. He raised his glass. “To Suzie,” he said, “whose quick wits have given me everything I’ve ever wanted, and who found a way round our problems. To Suzie!”

“To Suzie,” everyone replied. My face was burning red with embarrassment, until I looked at Frank. He was looking at me with an expression of pleased pride on his face, which gave me a lovely warm feeling deep inside.

“And now, to bed,” said Elsie firmly, putting her glass back on the table. “Come on, hoppity skip up to bed.”

Helen and I went to bed, and fell asleep with the pleasing feeling of a job well done.

* * * * *

Maurice and Elsie were married three weeks later. Unfortunately they couldn’t get it arranged before Helen went back to London as Elsie wanted a church wedding, but they had lots of photographs taken and sent them together with a large chunk of wedding cake to try and make it up to her. I was bridesmaid, wearing a beautiful blue dress with a white sash, and Elsie managed to make her mother’s dress fit, even though it ended up a little shorter

than had been originally intended. Maurice and Frank wore their best suits, and everyone turned out for the occasion.

After the ceremony, when everyone had come back to the farm for the reception, I was wandering through the guests, when I overheard one of the farmer's wives say to her friend:

"You could have knocked me down with a feather when they announced Elsie Linthwaite was getting married. After all these years, and to the same fellow as well."

"I know," responded her crony. "After all this time, who'd a thowt it!"

Chapter 10

The next few years were extremely good to all of us. Elsie and Maurice married, and a year later, almost to the day, Elsie had a baby boy, which she was going to call Maurice after his father. However, Mo confessed that he had always hated being called Maurice, and suggested they call the baby Frank, after his uncle and grandfather. Frank was followed by baby Elsie, and then baby Suzie. I was immensely flattered to have the baby named after me, and decided that she was my especial charge.

I had also changed over these years. I had grown up and, in Elsie's words, 'become a woman'. Helen had also gone through this mysterious process, and we compared notes, each being relieved that she wasn't the only one to go through this difficult time. Elsie had discussed everything with me in her usual frank and forthright manner and I was well aware what it meant, but that didn't mean I had to enjoy it. During one particularly trying time, when Elsie was telling me it was nature's way of letting me know my body was working properly, I remember retorting 'couldn't nature have found a better way of doing it?' Eventually however Helen and I both got used to the changes, and things started to settle down again.

Maurice's dog breeding business had eventually got going. He had had trouble at first because his dogs weren't widely known in farming circles. Farmers tended to buy dogs of known pedigree and performance, and were wary about buying a pup

that might not have the best characteristics. Of course it was never guaranteed that a pup would turn out to be any good, and the usual method of dealing with such a dog was to knock it on the head and dispose of it. Elsie got upset at the thought of this happening, so she insisted that each buyer was told that if the dog didn't work out, they could return it rather than disposing of it and she would find it another home. This approach was a whole new way of looking at things, and farmers took some time to get used to it.

Maurice finally realized that if he wanted to sell dogs to farmers as working dogs, he was going to have to make a name for himself. He therefore bought a small flock of sheep and started training his dogs for trialing. He entered the trialing circuit, which was fiercely competitive, and after a couple of years began to win the smaller, local competitions. These were fine for selling dogs locally, but Maurice had wider ambitions. Having won local dog trials for two or three years, he finally managed to get into the regional scene. Once again, he trialed for a three or four years, winning steadily and making a name for himself. The peak of his career was when he was picked to compete at the national trials. He took three dogs, to compete in both the single and the pairs competition. All three dogs won, and his reputation was assured. His dogs became sought after and because he would not breed a bitch until she was ruined, their scarcity value made them even more valuable, and he was able to command top price for his dogs. Although he never made what could be called a living by breeding dogs, it was useful income for the farm. He and Frank always got on well, and were happy tackling the day to day jobs between them. Elsie and I continued to keep chickens for their eggs, and later introduced ducks and geese for the food market, and things generally ticked over very happily. Although never especially prosperous, we had enough with sufficient left over for Maurice to take Elsie away for a holiday every year, and for Frank and Maurice to travel to the sheep dog trials whenever they wanted. I never went without—Elsie saw to that.

I had been travelling to school in Halifax for some time. Frank and Elsie had both been determined that I should get a more extensive education than had been available to either of them, and neither of them wanted me to leave school before I had had every chance of a good education. I had done well, achieving top grades in all my subjects and was told by my teachers that, with a little application, I could probably get a university place. I was told to consider which subjects I would wish to study for A Level, so that I could choose my career path carefully.

I wasn't sure what I wanted to study, but I was quite sure I didn't want to do the 'traditional' female subjects. I didn't want to be a teacher, or a nurse, or to work in any clerical occupation. I didn't like art, or history, and didn't want to study English literature. I was certain that I wanted to study at least one of the sciences, possibly biology, or a related discipline. Starting from there, I finally decided I wanted to study to be a vet. I had been helping the farm's vet out for the last couple of years (or at least, hanging around watching whilst he treated various animals), and had thought that treating animals would be a fine way to earn a living. I was probably also influenced by the general view that the 'vitinery' was considered to be 'comfortably off' in the financial stakes. The idea of doing a job I really liked, and also being paid well to do it, was extremely attractive. Frank was startled by this decision, and I think Elsie and Maurice had their doubts as well, however the thought of having a fully trained 'vitinery' in the family was attractive to everyone.

I studied for my A levels, and achieved Grade 1 passes in Biology and Chemistry, and Grade 2 passes in Physics, Mathematics and Latin. Needless to say, I was thrilled with my results.

Frank, Elsie and Maurice were equally thrilled at my success, and we spent several nights sitting round the table discussing where I could do my veterinary training. It was still fairly unusual for a female to go to university as most people assumed they would want to get married, have children, and stay at home;

however, there were now enough women wanting a different fate to this that universities were taking more female students.

Frank, Maurice and Elsie all agreed to support me through my training, which was a big relief. I didn't want to move away from home, but it very quickly became apparent that I would have to move to study veterinary medicine. Edinburgh and Glasgow both had excellent vet schools, but I dismissed these out of hand. It was bad enough having to consider leaving Yorkshire, but to leave England altogether was out of the question. Elsie had concerns about where I would stay whilst studying, and Frank had concerns that I would be 'taken advantage of' by some young student having a fling. It was Elsie who finally said "Why doesn't she go and stay with Helen?" There was a silence, and then we all started talking at once.

"Great idea!"

"Good thought lass."

"Brilliant! Elsie, you're a genius!"

Elsie blushed. "Well, it seems quite logical to me," she replied with some asperity. "Helen's been staying here every summer for years, and although I don't regard that as an obligation, it wouldn't hurt to have the favor returned."

I smiled. This was typical Elsie. She would do anything for anyone, but if she ever needed a favor in return and it wasn't forthcoming, then she would quite simply refuse to do anything for that person again. She never made a fuss or a scene, she would just say she was unable to help. The way she looked at it, you did things for people because you wanted to, but you then had the right to expect that person to do something for you in return. It didn't need to be a big something, but they needed to be willing to reciprocate. This was Elsie's law, and it worked extremely well. Elsie was known to be generous and she seldom asked for help from people, but when she did it was always forthcoming.

"I'll write to Helen tonight," I said, jumping to my feet.

"You'll do no such thing," replied Elsie. "It's for me and Helen's mother to arrange, just like we did when we arranged

for Helen to come here. I'll write to her. No point getting Helen all excited and then disappointing her."

I sat down again. Elsie's logic had once again defeated me.

"There's something else we'll have to do as well," Frank stated.

"And what's that?" Elsie asked.

"We'll have to get one of them dratted telephones in the house," he replied. "If our lass is going off to university, I want her to be able to talk to us easily, not have to leave messages for us at the post office. And suppose we want to talk to her in a hurry? No, we'll have to embrace this new technology, and get the phone in."

I was impressed. Frank had been steadfastly against getting any 'new fangled' stuff in at the farm and still milked all the cows by hand, twice a day. Elsie and Maurice had bought a new automatic washing machine when baby Frank arrived, which now stood in splendid isolation in the scullery. I was terrified of it. When the spin cycle started it had a habit of moving across the floor towards you. I was sure it was possessed, because it didn't matter where you were in the room, it always made a bee line for you. Frank had paid for the electricity to be put in several years before, just after the war, but it was strictly limited in its use. One line was laid to the house (which supplied the washing machine), and a line had been laid into the calving shed to help Frank with a difficult calving or lambing. These were the only concessions to modern living. We still used candles and oil lamps when going to bed, and the range still gave us our hot water. Maurice had installed a new bathroom suite upstairs which was amazing, but he hadn't been able to persuade Frank that we needed any more electric sockets in the house. It was, therefore, not surprising that Frank's announcement that we would be getting the telephone installed stunned everyone into silence. Elsie was the first to recover.

"Does that mean we can have the electric lights put in as well?" she said. "After all," she went on, "if Suzie's going to be

studying, she's going to need a better light than these old lamps. She could do with a decent light upstairs."

Frank looked at her over his pipe. "I suppose you'll be wanting it all over then," he said. "Wasteful woman, you are." I looked over at him, and saw he was smiling at Elsie.

"Does that mean yes?" she asked.

"I've been saving up these last few years," Frank stated. "I've been meaning to get the farm wired. I've been over to Bassenthwaite's farm several times recently. He's just had an electric milking parlor put in, and the amount of time and energy he saves is amazing. I decided I wanted one too. I'm not getting any younger, and anything that means less effort I'm all in favor of."

"Well you sly thing," exclaimed Elsie. "You've never breathed as much as word about this!"

"Didn't want to disappoint you," replied Frank. "I needed to make sure I could afford it before I went ahead and announced it. Well, I can, so we'll have the work done, and that's an end to it."

"Brilliant," exclaimed Maurice. "That'll make things easier all round. Suzie will be able to study, and you'll be able to milk twice as fast. That should give us both more time to work around the farm."

"Well, before she makes her mind up completely, I would suggest that she spends some time with our vet, if he'll let her, and finds out exactly what's involved. No point doing all that study and then finding out that she doesn't like the job. That'd be seven years wasted." Frank made his statement with his usual common sense approach to life.

"I've been helping Mr. Edwards out with the animals for ages," I said. "I'm sure he won't mind me helping him out further if he knows I'm serious about being a vet. He'll probably be able to give me a lot of good advice about what I'll need as well."

"You're right there," agreed Maurice. "You have been helping him quite regularly. Maybe you should have a chat with him next time he comes up."

“Nay, you don’t want to leave it to chance,” said Frank. “I’ll put word out that I need to speak to him, and he’ll call in when he’s going past.”

A couple of days later, Mr. Edwards arrived at the farm. He was tickled pink that his little ‘apprentice’ should want to follow in his footsteps, and made me an offer which took my breath away.

“I’ll tell you what lass,” he said. “If you study hard, and pass all your exams, you’ll not have to go chasing a practice when you’re finished. If you get your degree, you can come and work for me.”

I was speechless. Then I wasn’t, but I was just burbling so much I wasn’t making sense. Finally I flung my arms around his neck and gave him a great big hug. “Thank you,” I said, over and over. “That’s the best offer I’ve ever had.”

“Well now,” he replied, with a twinkle in his eyes. “It won’t do for you to go round hugging your boss now, will it! You be a good girl, and study hard, and you’ve got a job to come back to.”

We went back to the kitchen, and I couldn’t wait to tell Elsie, Frank and Maurice what had happened. They were also thrilled, as they hadn’t wanted me to move away all together but had realized I might not be able to find a job locally. Mr. Edward’s offer meant that I could return home to Yorkshire after I qualified. Elsie had her usual reaction to good news—she put the kettle on and made a cup of tea.

“So how come you’re looking for an assistant?” Frank asked.

“It’s this way,” replied Mr. Edwards. “I’m not getting any younger, and some of the heavy farm work is starting to be a little bit much. I’ve got a good few years left in me yet, though, but in, say, ten years, I’ll be wanting to take things a little easier. So, in ten years I’ll be wanting an assistant. I hate advertising, and I don’t like working with strangers, so your Suzie wanting to be a vet solves a number of problems very neatly. By the time she’s qualified and looking for a job, I’ll be ready to have an assistant. I’ve known her for years; she’ll need a place; and she can carry on living here when she starts work.”

Elsie beamed as she refilled his cup. "That sounds like a good solution for everyone," she said.

"It gets better," said Mr. Edwards. "I have a nephew, who is also studying to be a vet. He's been at university for just over twelve months now and he's doing well, but he wants to specialize. He'll be ready to come up here about a year before young Suzie here, and they can split the business between them. With the number of people with pets growing all the time that's going to be a large part of our business in the future, I reckon. So, with both these bright young things starting work for me, we'll be in a good position to expand the practice."

Frank gave him a shrewd look over the rim of his tea cup. "Works out all very handy for you, doesn't it?" he commented.

Mr. Edwards laughed. "It certainly does," he said. "I couldn't have planned it better if I'd tried."

We spent a very pleasant evening. Mr. Edwards stayed to supper, and Frank was moved to bring out his 'special bottle' again. Everything seemed to be going in the direction I wanted, and I was extremely happy.

Two weeks later I was even happier. I had received a letter from the Royal Veterinary College in London, accepting my application to study. I was to start at the end of September. There then followed a long list of equipment I would need to take with me (including overalls and boots), a list of books recommended for study, and a list of accommodation that I could use to try and find a flat. This last was not required, as Helen's mother had written back to Elsie saying that she would love to have me to stay for as long as I wanted. There had obviously been some discussion about room and board, which Elsie said I didn't need to know about. Frank, Elsie and Maurice would be making me an allowance. It wouldn't be much, they stressed, but it should be enough if I wasn't extravagant. On top of that, they would be paying my room and board to Mrs. Davies, and would be buying any equipment or books I needed for my course. In the weeks leading up to my departure, I re-

ceived long lectures from both Frank and Elsie about what I should do ‘down there’.

Elsie was keen that I should offer to help Mrs. Davies out, that I shouldn’t spend all my spare time ‘racketing around’ with Helen, and I should try my hardest to pass all my exams, to prove that I was worthy of the investment in me and to show Mr. Edwards that I deserved the chance I was being given.

Frank gave me talks on how to deal with boys. His fear was that I would have my head turned by some smooth-talking City boy, and would either ‘throw my cap over the windmill’, as he phrased it and elope, deserting my studies and my family, or that I would give in to his blandishments, and end up pregnant, involving the loss of my livelihood, and my reputation.

Maurice didn’t lecture me at all. He just told me how much he envied me the chance of living in London (even in the suburbs), and of what there was to see and do in the City. He gave me the names of several ‘respectable’ places where Helen and I could go out for a drink or a meal without having to worry about losing either our money or our virginity, and gave me good advice on how to deal with young men.

By the time the day of my departure arrived I was completely awash with advice, warnings, and lectures, and wanted nothing more than to get on the train and leave. Elsie, Maurice and Frank drove me down to the station in Halifax, and we stood on the platform waiting for the train to Leeds. Frank was smoking his pipe.

“Last time I was on this platform,” he suddenly remarked, “was when I took young Alex over to the recruiting office.”

There was a sudden hush in our conversation, as we all turned to look at Frank. I barely remembered Alex, but I could remember the reaction when the telegram had arrived saying he ‘missing, presumed lost’ after a sea battle when his ship had been torpedoed. His photograph still graced the mantelpiece in the parlor, taken just after he joined up.

“Is that a reminiscence or an omen?” Elsie asked, half laughing, although I could see she was suddenly uneasy.

“Just remembering,” Frank returned. “No harm in that.”

“True,” said Elsie. “But it’s not a very happy memory to send our lass off with, now, is it?”

“No harm intended,” repeated Frank.

Down the track a whistle blew, announcing the imminent arrival of the train. We were suddenly all in a bustle as we spotted the smoke from the engine rising over the trees just around the bend in the track. Elsie picked up my suitcase, and Frank and Maurice struggled with my trunk, a large almost antique item unearthed from the attic by Elsie and packed with all my stuff. This would travel in the guard’s van, and would be transferred at Leeds—at least, I hoped it would. It was well-labeled with its destination, so I hoped it wouldn’t get lost en route.

The train arrived. I found an empty compartment and Elsie carried my case on and insisted on putting it in the rack for me. We came back down on to the platform, and were just in time for Frank and Maurice to return from putting my trunk in the van.

“Take care, lass,” said Frank huskily. “Give us a ring to let us know you get there safely.”

“Have a good time, poppet,” said Elsie. “Oh good heavens, look at the state of me,” she exclaimed, dabbing her eyes with a tissue. “You’ll be back at Christmas for the holidays.”

Maurice gave me a hug. “Have fun,” he echoed Elsie. “Come on now, in you get. The guard’s waving his flag.”

Down the platform I could hear the guard shouting “all aboard,” and could hear doors slamming up and down the train. I climbed back into the compartment and hung out of the window, holding hands with Frank, Elsie and Maurice in turn. The train began to move, and I leant out of the window, waving, and seeing them wave back, until the wind (it had to be the wind) brought tears to my eyes, and the train entered the tunnel at the end of the station. I shut the window, and sat down.

“Going far, love?” came a voice.

I looked up and saw my companion, a comfortable, motherly looking woman who had obviously entered the compartment from the corridor.

"I'm off to London," I replied. "I'm going to study to be a vet."

"That's nice, love," she said placidly. "First time away from home, is it?"

I nodded. I suddenly realized I was feeling perilously close to tears and didn't want to speak any more.

"Never mind, I'm sure you'll enjoy it. Would you like a sweet?" She proffered a bag of humbugs.

I took one, and we sat together without speaking for a while, as the train moved steadily away from Halifax and towards Leeds. As the train passed Bradford, and headed towards Stanningley, she started to chat about 'our Dora', and how her husband was no good since he came back from fighting in the war. Her voice was soothing, and she didn't appear to need any sort of reply apart from 'really', and other such minor interjections. When the train finally arrived at Leeds, I had virtually her whole life history down pat.

"Well now, love," she said as she helped me down with my suitcase. "You don't feel like crying any more now, do you?"

I stared at her in amazement. I had been thinking she had been talking to hear the sound of her own voice, but instead she had been talking to help soothe my feelings, and so that I didn't feel I had to contribute.

"Thank you," I replied, somewhat inadequately.

"Don't mind, ducks," she said. "My Dora's not so very much older than you, by my reckoning, and she'd be exactly the same. Have a good time in London." And with that, she picked up her bag, and walked off down the platform.

The guard came up. "Where's this trunk going, then Miss?"

"I need the London train," I replied.

"In that case, you'll need a porter. Hang on here a minute." He walked a little way down the platform, and whistled sharply, then waved to a porter on the opposite platform. The man nodded, and started walking in our direction.

“There you go, Miss, you’ll be all right now. Stanley will see you right.” He tipped his hat.

“Thank you so much,” I replied. “Um ...” I stopped, not knowing how to carry on.

“Don’t worry,” the guard replied. “You don’t need to give him a tip.”

I blushed. That had been precisely what I had been wondering, but hadn’t known how to ask. How the guard had known what I was thinking was beyond me—I guessed it must have been down to his experience. Stanley the porter arrived, and managed to heave my trunk onto his trolley.

“Where to, Miss?” he asked.

“The London train, please,” I replied.

“Right ho,” he said, “Platform Five”, and proceeded down the platform.

I followed on, taking in the sights and sounds of Leeds railway station. I had never been here before, and was a little taken aback at the sheer scale of the place. So many platforms! So many trains, all with whistles blowing, clouds of steam, the smell of burning coal, the shouts and whistles of the guards, the sheer noise of (what seemed to me) hundreds of people bustling about the station, all intent on their own business. I followed the porter into the ancient lift, and we slowly ascended above all the hurly-burly of the platforms, into a region of blowing smoke, and drifting steam. We crossed the bridge to Platform Five, and descended to the platform by an equally ancient lift, whose creaks and groans were hardly designed to inspire confidence in the mechanism.

“Here you go Miss,” said the porter. “Platform Five. Train’s due in about fifteen minutes. The luggage van should stop about here, but just ask the guard.”

With that, he tipped his hat and walked away down the platform. Feeling a little battered by the noise, and starting to feel very much alone, I sat on my trunk and waited for the train to arrive. I passed some of the time by listening to the announce-

ments, and when the train for Manchester was announced ('Calling at Halifax, ...'), I was so tempted to run back across the bridge and onto the train I had to hold on to my trunk to stop myself from getting up. I spoke to myself sternly, reminding me that this was my idea, it was what I wanted, and I should be enjoying myself. Easier said than done, I replied silently to this. What I wanted most in the world at the moment was to be back at the farm, with a big pot of tea brewing on the range, and some of Elsie's wonderful home-made cakes and scones on a plate in the middle of the table, with a large pat of freshly made butter just waiting to be spread on them.

"Platform Five, for the London train, Platform Five." The announcer's voice interrupted my musings, and I turned my head to see the train just pulling onto the end of the platform. I stood up, and waited for the train to draw to a halt. As promised, the luggage van ended up exactly where I was standing with my trunk. The guard jumped off, and I asked him to put my trunk in the van. He looked at me, and then at my trunk, and said "Can you give us hand, lass?"

I grabbed one handle of the trunk and he grabbed the other, and between the two of us we managed to push and pull the trunk into the luggage van.

"Thanks lass," the guard panted. "You get a porter to bring that over for you?"

"Yes," I replied.

"He should have stayed around to help me put it in the van," he said. "I don't suppose you know who it was, do you?"

"I think his name was Stanley," I replied.

"That figures," he grunted. "Rather walk a mile down the platform than do what he's supposed to do, that one. All right then, lass, thanks for the help. You'd best go and get yourself a seat before all the best ones are taken."

I walked down the train, and soon found an empty seat in a compartment. I put my suitcase in the rack, and then settled myself down for the trip. Elsie had bought me two women's

magazines to read, and I had a novel I had bought for myself. In my bag there was a small thermos full of tea, and also a small bag with some cheese sandwiches wrapped in grease-proof paper. Another small bag with one of Elsie's scones enclosed was the finale to this repast.

Although nothing had been said, I knew that the trunk was so heavy because it contained, apart from all my stuff for university, a good selection of the farm's produce; some cheese, butter, eggs, a joint of lamb, a selection of different cuts of bacon (smoked, to keep longer), and a large cake tin full of freshly made cakes. I heard the guard's whistle, and the train lurched forward. We were off! I began to feel a mounting sense of excitement. I was finally on the last stage of my journey. I settled down in my seat by the window, and prepared for the trip of a lifetime.

* * * * *

Four hours later, tired, feeling dirty, with gritty eyes and the start of a headache, I was only too pleased to be able to get off the train in King's Cross station. I pulled my suitcase down from the rack, exited the compartment, and walked back down the train to the luggage car. My trunk had already been unloaded, and I asked for a porter to help carry it to the taxi rank. I had Mrs. Davies' address on an envelope in my bag, and was looking forward to finally getting to sit down on a proper chair, have a cup of tea, and hopefully a long, hot bath.

The porter arrived, and my trunk was duly loaded on to the trolley. We trudged down the platform towards the taxi rank. There was a queue for cabs, but this time the porter stayed with me until he could put the trunk in the luggage compartment of the taxi. He tipped his hat, and looked at me. Blushing, I reached into my bag and found a sixpence. I had been reliably informed by an acquaintance on the train that this was the standard tip for a porter.

“Thanks Miss,” he said, making the sixpence disappear somewhere into his uniform. “Have a good trip.” And with that, he was off back into the crowds on the platform.

“Where to Miss, please?” said the cabbie. I gave him Mrs. Davies’ address, and sat back in the seat. Although feeling more tired than I could ever remember, I was fascinated at the scenes outside the window, and found the whole trip stimulating.

“First time in London, Miss?” the cabbie asked through the window.

I remembered what I had been told about London taxi drivers taking advantage of those who didn’t know the city to take a longer route, and replied “No, actually, I’m visiting an old friend. I’m going to stay with her for a while.”

“Ah, thought you must be moving in with that huge trunk,” he responded.

“Well I am, as a matter of fact. I’m going to study to be a vet at the Royal College,” I called out over the traffic noise.

“Royal College is it?” he called back. “That’s going to take a while then.”

“About seven years,” I replied.

“Well, rather you than me, Miss,” he said.

That was the end of our conversation. In a remarkably short space of time (or so it seemed to me), we had left behind the hustle and bustle of the city centre proper, and were out in the suburbs. We finally drew up in front of a red-brick house, one of a line of other red-brick houses. There was a tiled path up to the front door, and the step was freshly scrubbed. The small garden was neat and tidy, with roses growing in a small bed in the centre. The front door seemed freshly-painted, and the brass knocker gleamed in the late afternoon sun. Fresh white lace curtains could be seen through the bay window of what I assumed to be the parlor, with a glimpse of chintz curtains behind. I just had time to take all this in while the taxi driver was dragging my trunk out of the cab, when the front door opened and Helen rushed out with her mother following her more sedately.

“You’re here at last! I thought you’d been delayed or something,” cried Helen wrapping her arms around me and giving me a quick kiss on the cheek. Mrs. Davies also came up and gave me a quick hug.

“Come on in then,” she said, with a warm smile. “We’ll sort the trunk out. I’m sure you’ll give us a hand, won’t you?” she said to the cabbie.

He gave a wry grin. “Yeah, I’ll give you a hand,” he replied. “Can’t leave three women trying to sort out something like this.”

“Cheeky,” said Mrs. Davies, and laughed. I could hear her and the cabbie having a quick exchange whilst Helen bustled me through the front door.

“Come through here,” she said, opening a doorway at the end of the hall. “This goes to the kitchen. Oh, I can’t believe you’re here at last,” she continued. “It seems like we’ve been waiting ages for you to arrive.”

The kitchen seemed small to me, used to the large farm kitchen. There was no range; instead a gas cooker stood in the middle of one wall. There was a dresser and a work table to one side, with the sink under the kitchen window. This looked out over a small garden, once again neat and tidy, with a small lawn and flower beds round the edges. The floor was graced with what appeared to be new linoleum in a lovely shade of blue, and there was a cool box in the furthest corner from the door. Next to this a back door lead out into the garden. In the middle of the room stood a pine table with four chairs around it. Helen pulled out one of these chairs, and said “Sit down, sit down, you must be dead with exhaustion.”

“I’m just about all in,” I replied.

“I’ll put the kettle on,” she said, and bustled about getting the tea things ready. I heard the front door slam, and Mrs. Davies came down the passage to the kitchen.

“These cabbies,” she said. “They must have to do a degree in cheek before being allowed onto the streets. Have you put the kettle on, Helen?”

“Yes mum, it’s all ready. Sit yourself down and I’ll pour you some tea.”

“You’re a love,” replied Mrs. Davies. “Did you have a good trip down Suzie?” she asked.

“Well, it was very tiring,” I replied. “But I enjoyed most of it. It just seemed to take so long.”

“Yes, it is a long way,” said Helen, and I remembered that she’d done it every summer for the last few years. “And it is tiring if you’re not used to it.”

She poured the tea, and I sat sipping it, feeling myself relaxing as the hot, soothing liquid went down.

“When do you start at the Royal College?” asked Mrs. Davies. “Elsie did say, but I can’t remember the exact date.”

“I start on Monday, Mrs. Davies,” I replied.

“Oh please,” she said. “Please call me Marion. If you’re going to live here you don’t need to be so formal.”

“I’ll try,” I replied.

“I know it’s difficult when you’ve been brought up properly,” she said, “but I’m sure you’ll get used to it. Now, if you’ve finished your tea come on up and I’ll show you your room.”

“Thank you Mrs. . . . Marion,” I managed.

“That’s a good girl,” she replied. “This way.”

She led me down the passage, and up the stairs. The room she had given me faced onto the garden (“I thought it would be quieter for you here”), and had a lovely large wardrobe, a small table (“for studying”), a dressing table, a chest of drawers, and the bed. The room had been decorated in shades of blue and yellow, and looked lovely.

“I hope you’ll be comfortable,” said Marion.

“I’m sure I will be,” I replied.

“Well, make yourself comfortable,” she said. “The bathroom’s just along the landing, so if you want a nice hot bath, feel free. And tea’s at half past five.”

“Thank you Marion,” I said.

“Right ho, then, see you later,” she said, and bustled away.

I walked over and sat on the bed, looking about me. I had never felt so lost and lonely in my life. I was in a strange house, and although I knew Helen I had never had much to do with her mother, and I had never even met her father. I sat there and wondered what on earth I was doing so far from home, with seven years of hard work before me. I dropped my head in my hands, and cried.

Chapter 11

Three quarters of an hour later, refreshed by a lovely hot bath, and a hair wash, I was sitting down to tea with Helen and her family.

Mr. Davies ('call me Brian') turned out to be a lovely man. He was tall and thin with receding blonde hair, blue eyes, and a tired expression. He had been injured during the war which had made it impossible for him to return to his pre-war job in a foundry, and his employer had retrained him to work in the company office. He gave the impression of being really quiet and gentle, and to find out that he had been in the special forces during the conflict was really surprising. He just didn't seem to be that sort of man.

We were sat round the table in the kitchen, where Marion had explained they usually ate during the week. "We don't stand on ceremony on a weekday," she told me. "We use the dining room on Sundays, and for things like Christmas or a special occasion, but we normally eat in here. It's more convenient."

I had recovered my equanimity during my soak in the bath and was feeling much more confident. I had telephoned Elsie and Frank and assured them I had arrived in one piece, and hadn't been bothered on the train. I had the weekend to go before I needed to start at university, and Helen had promised to take me out the next morning, Friday, to show me the route I would need to take to get there. I was quite nervous about this as I had only ever caught the

bus to go into Halifax on a Saturday morning with the other girls to have a coffee. The thought of having to count bus stops and change buses was quite daunting, but also exciting. Although I couldn't honestly say I was looking forward to the trip, I did feel a small frisson of excitement when thinking about it. I had also unpacked all the goodies Elsie had packed up for Marion, and taken them downstairs where they had been received enthusiastically, especially by Helen who was a big fan of Elsie's cakes.

After tea Helen and I did the washing up, whilst Marion and Brian retired to the sitting room. I was surprised at how large the house actually was; it hadn't seemed very big from the outside. Helen explained.

"This was my grandparents' house," she said. "My mother's parents. When they died they left it to her as the only child. My grandfather was quite well off at one point, and he bought this house as an investment. Later on, after he lost all his money, he kept it as a nest egg. They had no mortgage so it was cheaper to stay here than to rent somewhere else."

I had never thought about things like that before. Frank and Elsie had inherited the farm from their parents and I had never considered where other people might live. As with most children, I accepted my life style as the way everyone did things, and had never thought to question if other people might do things differently.

"That's why it's such a large house," Helen continued. "My grandfather never intended for his family to live here, he was intending to rent it out to make some money on it."

"I never thought about things like that," I said. "Elsie and Frank had the farm, and I just took that as being normal."

"I think most children do," replied Helen, thoughtfully. "We always accept that what we have is the way everyone does things. Anyway," she continued. "Grandfather bought this house for a large family to rent so it has four bedrooms, a sitting room, parlor, dining room, and a bathroom and kitchen. It's far too big for just me and mum and dad, but if it means you can come

and stay I think it's just the right size." She smiled at me, and I smiled back. We finished doing the dishes, and Helen put the kettle on.

"Now," she said. "Do you want to stay in here and natter, or do you want to go and sit in with the parents?"

"Can we sit in here for a bit?" I asked. "I'm still feeling a bit lost."

"No problem," she promptly replied. "I told mum you might want to sit out here for a bit."

Helen made the tea and took cups in for her parents. When she came back we sat and chatted for well over an hour. After we had caught up we went and joined Marion and Brian in the sitting room, where I was in for another surprise. They had a television! I had only seen this marvel once before, in a shop window in Halifax, and I had been glued to the window until Elsie had forcibly removed me. After I had marveled at this modern technology we sat and watched until the programs finished at ten o'clock, and then went to bed. I undressed in my room and virtually fell onto the bed, having finally given in to my exhaustion. I closed my eyes and didn't wake up until Helen came in the next morning with a lovely, and extremely welcome, cup of tea.

"Come on sleepy head, time to get up. It's a lovely morning and a great day for our trip out. Get dressed and come on downstairs, mum's cooking some of that lovely bacon for breakfast."

I got up, washed, and then dressed in some of the new clothes I had bought, and had made, for university. I chose to wear a pair of slacks. I had insisted on having several pairs of these, despite Elsie's protests that they made me look 'fast', as I felt they would be more practical for life as a trainee vet. I had bought three pairs, and had several other pairs made by the wonderful Mrs. Tewitt, a dressmaker who lived in the village. You could take her any garment and she would unpick it, make a pattern, and sew it back up again without any signs of what she'd done. I had taken her a pair of slacks and she had not only copied the design, she had improved on it. All my stuff had been unpacked

the night before and was now hung up, or folded neatly in the drawers. My books and equipment were still in my trunk, as I had no idea what I would be needing to start with.

I ran downstairs, and entered the kitchen. The smell of cooking bacon was familiar and extremely welcome. Marion smiled as I came in.

“There’s cereal on the side there,” she said, pointing towards the dresser. “Milk’s on the table in the jug, along with sugar if you take it. Do you want an egg with your breakfast?”

“Yes please, Marion,” I replied, helping myself to cornflakes.

“All right then, you get those down you and I’ll start your egg off.”

Helen was already half way through a bowl of cereal, and had a slice of toast on her side plate. I sat down at the table and started my breakfast. The cereal went down well and just as I had finished, Marion brought over two plates of bacon, sausages and eggs. I was surprised at how hungry I felt, and tucked in. Marion came and sat down as well bringing her breakfast with her.

“Now then,” she began. “I know it’s going to sound dreadful, but we need to discuss how we’re going to manage various things whilst you’re living here.”

I looked across at her. “What sort of things?” I asked.

“Well, take this morning,” she said. “I don’t usually make a habit of cooking breakfast on a weekday, but today’s your first day and I wanted to make you welcome. But normally I’d expect you to get your own breakfast before you go out for the day. Helen makes her own, as she’s up and out early for work, and I’ll look after Brian and myself. Is that going to be all right with you?”

I nodded. “Of course Marion,” I said. “I’m used to helping Elsie get breakfast for Frank and Maurice, and the children, so I can make myself useful doing things like that. And I’ll probably get up with Helen so we can help each other out.”

Helen, who was busy chewing her breakfast, nodded vigorously and made a sound which was meant to signify agreement.

“That’s fine then,” said Marion. “I just wanted to get that straight. Of course, I’ll have a meal ready for you in the evening, that goes without saying.”

“What shall I do about washing clothes and things?” I asked.

“Oh don’t worry about that,” replied Marion. “I do a wash twice a week, so your things will just go in with the rest. That’s no trouble.”

“Oh, lovely,” I said. “Thank you very much for that.”

“Like I said, that’s not a problem,” she repeated. “If you were just staying around the house all day then I’d expect you to help out with the household chores, but as you’re going to be out all day at university I don’t mind sorting those out myself.”

“Well I’m used to helping Elsie out around the house,” I said, “so if you need any help, I’m only too willing to give you a hand with anything.”

“That’s very good of you,” she replied, “and if I need a hand I’ll let you know. Now, eat your breakfast, and then you and Helen can go exploring.”

I realized from our conversation that Marion was probably one of those women who didn’t trust anyone else to look after their house the way they wanted it looking after, and it would be easier all round if I accepted that she would be easier to live with if I took the role I was assigned. It would probably be quite difficult, as I had helped Elsie with the house and the children for several years, even when Helen had been to stay, and it was part of my routine. Now, however, I was starting a new life with a new routine, and I would have to get used to that. Helen and I finished our breakfast with tea and toast, and then helped to clear the table (Brian had had his breakfast some time earlier, and had already left the house), wash up and tidy everything away. That done, we got our coats and left the house.

“You are brave,” said Helen as we walked down the street to the bus stop.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You wearing trousers is what I mean. It’s very modern.”

“I know,” I replied, and giggled. “Elsie doesn’t approve at all, she thinks they’re ‘fast’, but I think they’re going to be just the thing for studying at university.”

“I hope they don’t get you into trouble,” said Helen. “You might give some of the blokes the wrong idea.”

“Don’t you worry about that,” I replied. “Maurice has given me lots of advice about what to say, and do, to blokes who get too friendly, or a bit fresh.”

“Oooh, do tell,” said Helen. The rest of our walk to the bus stop was enlivened by me repeating all the various bits of advice that I’d been given about dealing with ‘the opposite sex’, as referred to by Elsie and Frank, or ‘those young scallywags,’ as referred to by Maurice. By the time the bus arrived we were in fits of giggles, and were given several stern looks by the other occupants of the bus.

That first trip went by in a blur. It was a good job Helen knew where she was going, as I would have been lost as soon as I got off the first bus. We finally arrived outside the Royal College, and I stared up at its impressive frontage and wondered if I would ever dare walk through those doors.

“Come on,” said Helen, taking hold of my arm and pulling me up the stairs.

“Where are you going?” I squeaked.

“Let’s go and find out where you report to on Monday. No point coming here if you need to be somewhere else.” She dragged me up the stairs, and in through the doors. Inside was amazing, mostly because of its size. In one corner was a desk with someone sitting behind it. Helen dragged me over in that direction, with me protesting in a loud whisper all the way across the floor.

“Hello there,” said Helen brightly. “This is my friend Suzie, she’s starting here next Monday and wants to know where she needs to go.”

The receptionist looked up and smiled. She took in my blushing embarrassment and Helen’s determination in one glance, and the smile grew.

“Of course she does, and very sensible she is too,” came the reply. I immediately began to feel a little better. “You need to report here, my dear,” she continued. “Make sure you’re here bright and early, and we’ll point you in the right direction.”

“Thank you very much,” I managed to say. “That’s most helpful.”

“Don’t you worry about a thing,” she said. “I know it’s almost overpowering getting started on a new course, so we’ll make sure it’s as easy as possible.”

I started to relax a bit then, and managed to smile back at her. “What time do you think I should get here?” I asked.

“If you’re here for nine o’clock that will do nicely,” she said.

Helen and I thanked her and went back out onto the street. I pulled my arm free from Helen’s and turned to face her.

“What did you do that for?” I asked. “I’ve got all that information in my student information pack. She’s going to think I’m a right Dilys for coming and asking.”

Helen was completely unfazed. “Yes, you probably have,” she admitted coolly. “But don’t you feel better now for having actually been in the place?”

“I give up,” I said, starting to laugh. Helen usually had that effect on me. She was so completely outrageous I just had to laugh at her. She stopped me taking things too seriously.

“Of course you do,” she said, “because you know I’m right.” And with that she tucked her hand through my arm and we started walking down the street. “Come on,” she said. “I could murder a cup of tea.”

We walked a little way down the road, and found a Jo Lyons café. We sat at a table and a waitress came over and took our order.

“All right,” I finally admitted as our tea arrived. “You were right, I do feel better for having been there.”

“Like I said, of course you do!” she said, helping herself to a scone, and starting to butter it.

“So how come you’re here today? Did you take the day off especially for me?” I asked.

“Well someone had to!” she replied. “Dad would have been too shy, mum’s always busy with housework, so that left me. I couldn’t leave you to wander round London on your own.”

“Didn’t they mind?” I asked curiously.

“I wasn’t bothered whether they minded or not, to be honest,” she replied, tossing her head. “Bunch of old fuddy duddies.”

She saw me looking at her quizzically, and laughed. “Oh all right,” she admitted, “I have a couple of days owing because I covered someone’s shift on a weekend without pay, so I asked if I could have one of those days today.”

Helen had left school at fifteen, and had gone to work for the same company as her father. She had been given the job of office junior working in the accounts department, and had soon got to grips with the requirements of the job. So much so, in fact, that two years later she had been promoted to clerical assistant, and been given a far wider range of responsibilities. She seemed to be on track for a steady career. There was only one problem—she hated it. She hated the work; hated the office; hated the foundry with its associated smells. The salary wasn’t brilliant, and she knew she could get more money if she could get her shorthand and typing skills up to scratch. She was taking evening classes, and was hoping to get a job working in a bank when she had her certificates.

Because she had been working Helen had only been able to come up for two weeks during the summer for the last couple of years, and hadn’t been able to come up at all this last year as other staff had booked their holidays before she was given the chance. She was still owed her annual leave, and was planning to take some time off just after Christmas.

“So how are the evening classes going?” I asked.

She grimaced. “I’m good at it, the teacher says I’ll get my certificate, but I really do wonder if I want to work in an office. It’s just so damned boring all the time.”

“I know what you mean,” I said. “I’d rather do anything than work in an office.”

“Yes,” she replied, “but you’ve got brains, so you have a choice. I was rubbish at school, you know that.”

I nodded. Academic achievement had never been Helen’s strong point, and I had spent a large part of our time together trying to help her with her summer projects. I didn’t know what to say.

“What else do you fancy?” I asked idly.

“What I really fancy is joining the Wrens,” she said.

I was so startled by this I jerked upright. “What?” I demanded.

“It would be great,” she said. “I’d be away from home, I’d get to meet loads of gorgeous blokes, and the pay’s fantastic. Plus I’d get the chance for foreign travel, which I can’t afford on what I’m paid now. And the uniform looks amazing. If I do well, I could even apply for officer training.”

“But it’s such a big change,” I said. “How would your parents manage?”

“Oh they’d be all right,” she said with a dismissive wave of her hand.

“If you say so,” I agreed dubiously. “What do you need to get in?”

“If I can get my shorthand and typing certificates, I can go in as a stenographer,” she replied. “I’ve looked into it, and the officer at the careers office said I would be an ideal candidate.”

“So you’re just waiting to get your certificates before you apply,” I said. “Here I am, only just arrived, and you’re already planning on abandoning me!”

She laughed. “Don’t be feeling sorry for yourself just yet,” she replied. “It’s going to be a few months before it happens, I’ve only just started the course.”

“Ok then,” I retorted. “I’ll try not to.”

We finished our tea and scones and left. We spent the rest of the day wandering around all the London attractions—for me, seeing the British Museum, and for Helen, Bond Street—before heading home at about three o’clock. I insisted that we went back to the university before we went home, so that I could follow the route back.

When we got home, Marion was just starting to prepare the evening meal. I volunteered to help and ended up peeling the potatoes. Seeing me occupied Helen also volunteered (which I gathered was a fairly rare event) and she got the carrots and sprouts to deal with. All in all it was a harmonious time, with the three of us laughing and joking back and forth across the table. I was feeling more comfortable with Marion, and therefore felt more relaxed generally. Brian arrived home at just after five o'clock and we sat down to a meal of boiled beef and carrots with mashed potato.

"Well girls, did you have a good day?" asked Brian after the meal, when we were sitting at the table with a cup of tea.

"Yes thank you," I replied. "Helen dragged me into the university, and I made a fool of myself, and then we had a great day just wandering around."

Brian laughed. "That sounds like Helen," he replied. "She's always doing things like that." He looked at her fondly as he spoke, and it was easy to see she was the proverbial apple of his eye.

Marion merely sniffed. "It's about time she settled down and decided what to do," she said.

"I've told you, I want to join the Wrens," Helen replied.

"Yes, well, maybe you do, and maybe you don't," her mother retorted, "but you'll get nowhere unless you learn to apply yourself."

Helen rolled her eyes upwards. "Yes, I know. I've got some homework to do," she said in a long-suffering tone of voice. "I'll go and do it after we've watched the news."

I looked amazed at this. Helen had never been interested in current affairs before and I couldn't figure why this change had occurred, until Helen whispered to me that if she wanted to be an officer she'd have to be well up on current events. I smiled to myself when she said that—it looked like she was learning to apply herself to something at least.

Once again worn out by the exertions of the day, I went up to bed early and spent some time writing a long letter to all those at

home. I had promised to write regularly, and we had agreed that I would write a weekly diary telling them everything I had been doing. Having phoned them the night before I didn't need to write, but I wanted to feel that I was in touch with them all. I finished my letter, and then undressed and went to bed. I fell asleep quickly and dreamt I was chasing some of Maurice's dogs around the farmyard. I couldn't catch them, and it was important that I should.

In the morning, the weather was grey and damp, and decidedly off-putting. Back home in Yorkshire I would have just dressed accordingly and got on with the day, but it seemed different here in the London suburbs. There were still reminders of the war around—gaps where houses had been demolished, and some houses showing obvious signs of bomb damage although this had, by and large, been repaired. I went down to breakfast and found Helen tucking in to a large bowl of cereal. I joined her at the table, and tucked in myself.

“What should we do today?” I asked.

“Oh, I don't know,” replied Helen. “The weather's not brilliant, is it?”

“What do you usually do on a Saturday?”

“Well usually me and mum go and do the shopping in the morning, before the shops shut, then have lunch in a café somewhere and come home. Dad watches Grandstand in the afternoon on the telly, so we can either watch that or sit and read.”

“Well, I wouldn't mind coming shopping with you,” I said. “It'll be interesting to see the shops round here.”

Helen looked over at me. “Interesting? The shops round here? You must be mad,” she replied. “The only shops worth looking in are those in the middle of London, and I can't afford their prices.” She looked over what I was wearing, and continued “I don't know how you can afford to dress so well.”

I laughed. “It's not because I've got lots of money,” I replied. “It's just that we have an excellent dress maker in the village. She can copy anything you want, and doesn't charge the earth for it.”

Helen look skeptical.

“Look, I’ll tell you what. It’s your birthday soon, and you’ll be wanting a new dress. Or at least one for Christmas. Why don’t you give me one of your favorite dresses, and an idea of color and material, and I’ll send it up to Elsie and ask her to get one made. You can have it as a present.”

“You can’t ask Elsie to do that,” she exclaimed.

“Why not? It won’t cost a fortune.”

Helen argued with me for a good half hour before she eventually gave in, and agreed to let me buy her a dress for Christmas. Having finished our breakfast we washed up, and then went out with Helen’s mum.

The rest of the weekend passed in a kind of blur. I was alternately looking forward to, and then dreading, the Monday morning and was half wishing it would never arrive. However, time marched inevitably on and in the early morning of Monday, I found myself dressed and walking through the front door with Helen down to the bus stop. The first part of our respective journeys coincided, but Helen got off the bus several stops before I did. She gave me a quick hug, and whispered ‘good luck’ in my ear before she got off. I felt as if my last lifeline had just been taken away as I watched her walking down the street towards the factory. I waved as I went past, and she waved back. I managed to make all my connections, and arrived at the Royal College at the appointed time. I got off the bus and crossed the road to the main entrance, and stood looking up at the imposing frontage. As I stood there contemplating the stonework I heard a voice behind me.

“Are you starting today as well?”

I turned and looked straight into the most amazing green eyes I had ever seen in my life. They belonged to a young man whom I guessed to be the same age as I was. He had the sort of face that people instinctively trust, although he wasn’t good looking in the conventional sense. His features were well-defined, but just missed being handsome by a hair’s breadth until he smiled,

when his whole face changed. He had those green eyes, and they were by far his most outstanding feature. However, the thing that most people would notice about him first was his flaming red hair. It was cut slightly longer than usual, and seemed to float around his head. I blinked as he turned his smile in my direction, and felt my heart give a sudden thump.

“Yes, that’s right. I’m Suzie Linthwaite.” I held out my hand.

“Robert Carstaires,” he replied, shaking it vigorously. “But you can call me Robin, everyone else does.”

“Hello Robin.”

“You’re from Yorkshire then?” he asked.

“How did you know that?” I replied, somewhat taken aback.

“Two clues,” he joked. “The accent for one, and the name for the other.”

“I don’t have much of an accent,” I protested.

“It’s enough, believe me,” he said. “It sounds lovely though,” he added hastily, worried about giving offence.

“Hmmm.” I wasn’t sure about Robin, but he seemed nice enough that I didn’t want to have nothing more to do with him.

“Shall we go in?” he asked. “I believe they’re expecting us.”

I laughed. “I do believe they are, Mr. Carstaires,” I said. “After you.”

“On the contrary,” he responded. “After you.” He made an extravagantly sweeping gesture in the direction of the steps. I really couldn’t help laughing as he took my arm, and escorted me towards the door. As we got there he opened the door and held it for me, ushering me through with a bow. Once again I had to laugh. He took my arm again, and we crossed the floor of the entrance hall.

“Hang on here a minute,” he said, disengaging himself. “I’ll go and find out where we go.”

He dashed over to the desk, and engaged in conversation with the receptionist. It seemed he was having the same effect on her as on me, as she was laughing when he left and came back over to me.

“It’s this way,” he nodded. “Shall we go?”

We set off in the direction he had indicated, and soon found ourselves at another set of doors. Once again he ushered me through.

“Here we are,” he said finally. “This is us.” He opened the door to what seemed to me to be an enormous room. “After you,” he repeated, and gestured for me to go through.

I took a deep breath. This was it, this was the start. I stopped on the threshold, and took a deep breath. Then I stepped forward into the room, and into my new life.

PART THREE — ALEC HENDERSON

Chapter 12

He came awake slowly, blinking up at the bright white ceiling. He was puzzled. The last thing he remembered was lying on his back staring up at the bright sky. How had he come here? As his vision slowly came back into focus he realized he was lying on a bed, with the covers pulled up to just underneath his chin. His eyes wandered over the ceiling and walls, and eventually found a window opposite the bottom of his bed. The view from this window was not much different, just a different shade of white. He turned his head a little to the left, and saw curtains, and beyond them another bed. He looked to the right, and saw the same thing. He tried to lift himself up onto his elbows, but a sharp stabbing pain in his chest made him cry out and he fell backwards onto the pillows. He sensed movement near the bed, and then heard a voice.

“So, you’re finally back with us,” said the voice. A cool professional tone overlay an unfamiliar accent. A hand took hold of his wrist, and he felt his pulse being taken. Turning his head slightly towards the speaker he saw a crisp white uniform leading up towards a face topped with a white hat. I’m in hospital, he thought through groggily. What happened?

“There now, that all seems to be quite normal,” the speaker went on. “Hang on just a minute and I’ll go and get the doctor. You’ve given us quite a bit of worry, young man.” He arm was placed back onto the bed, and the covers smoothed over. The uniform went away and he drifted back off into a doze.

“Well now, how are we doing?” came a voice, masculine this time. “Nurse tells me you’ve woken up at last. We’ve been quite worried about you, you know. Nurse, the screens please.”

There was the rattle of curtains being drawn around the bed, and the light dimmed a little. He opened his eyes, and saw another face looking down at him. This person was also wearing white, but this time it was a white coat.

“Doctor,” he croaked.

“Yes, well done, I’m the doctor,” came the voice. “Let’s just have a quick look at you.” The sheets were drawn back, and his pajama jacket was undone. The doctor gave him a quick examination, feeling his ribs, and tapping his chest. A thermometer was put in his mouth, and his pulse taken once again. His blood pressure was taken, then his jacket was buttoned up, and the sheets replaced.

“Well, everything seems to be satisfactory,” said the doctor. “I don’t think you’ll be doing any foot racing for a while, but you’re coming on very nicely. If you want to sit up you can, but if you get any pains in your chest you must tell the nurse and lie back down flat again. I’ll come back and see you tomorrow.”

The doctor left, and the nurse came back to the bed. “Do you want to sit up?” she asked.

“Yes please,” he responded. His voice didn’t seem to want to work too well, and he felt he was whispering. He tried something else. “Could I have a drink please?”

“I’m sorry, honey, I didn’t catch that. What did you say?”

“Drink please,” he croaked.

“Of course honey, just a sec.” He felt himself lifted and the pillows being adjusted, and the head of the bed was lifted a fraction. The nurse laid him down again, and he found himself sitting up in bed. The nurse passed him a glass of water, and he gulped it down.

“Hey, take it easy honey,” said the nurse. “There’s plenty more where that came from.” She took the glass from him, and placed it on the bedside cabinet. She drew the curtains round the bed and he could take in his surroundings for the first time.

The ward was not long. There were at most ten beds in it, he thought. All the beds faced the windows, giving a view over the gardens outside. He reckoned he must be on the first floor because all he could really see was the top half of the trees that seemed to surround the building, albeit at a distance. The sky was white, as he had thought; cloudy with a consistent cover that gave no hint of the time of day. The trees were in leaf but again he was unable to work out what season it was.

To the left of his bed was just one other bed, currently unoccupied. At the end of the room on that side was a nurses' station, just visible beyond the curtains. To the right he could see at least six other beds, three of which were occupied. The rest of the room was obscured by a set of curtains that had been carelessly drawn back, but from looking at the opposite side of the room he was able to work out that there were probably more beds beyond this. The walls were painted a fresh shade of blue, and the windows were hung with curtains which reflected this color in their pattern. The bedspreads were also blue, as was the floor.

He lay there for a while, content to alternately doze and look out of the window. When the light from outside began to darken, the nurse came back down the ward and drew the window curtains and then switched on the lights. As she passed his bed he managed to raise one hand. She noticed this gesture, and came on over.

"What is it, honey?" she asked.

He struggled to formulate the vague idea that had come to him.

"Where?" he asked, waving his arm around vaguely.

"Where are you, do you mean?" she asked. He nodded.

"You're in the Sisters of Mercy Convent Hospital in Philadelphia."

"Philadelphia?"

"Yes, honey, Philadelphia. Just outside the city."

"Philadelphia?" He was becoming confused. Although he wasn't certain of anything, he was somehow pretty certain that Philadelphia wasn't right. He tried to marshal his thoughts again.

“Yes honey, Philadelphia. You know, in Pennsylvania.”

He shook his head. “No, England.”

The nurse looked at him sympathetically. “Sorry, honey, I’m afraid you’re in the US of A, the United States of America. In Philadelphia.”

He closed his eyes, and felt tears start from under their lids. He shook his head. He knew something wasn’t right, but didn’t know why. He felt the nurse patting his hand.

“Come on, now,” she said. “I know it’s not Hollywood, but it’s nothing to get upset about. You’re lucky to be alive to be anywhere, you know. You were in a bad way when you came here.”

He opened his eyes. There was something else he wanted to ask. “Name?” he whispered.

“Your name or my name?” asked the nurse.

“Mine.”

“Well now, that’s a puzzle,” said the nurse. “We don’t know your name; you weren’t wearing any dog tags when you were found, and there was nothing on your paperwork when you came here. We’ve got you down as a John Doe.”

“No, not John,” he said.

“Are you sure?” asked the nurse doubtfully.

He nodded. “Not John.”

“Well, OK, we’ll stop calling you John. But if you’re not a John, who are you? Do you know?”

He thought about this for a few minutes. He couldn’t remember clearly, his brain seemed to be stuffed with fog, but after a while he thought he could hear a voice shouting ‘Al, Al, over here.’

“Al,” he said. “Al.”

“OK, if you want to be called Al, we’ll call you Al,” the nurse said. “Do you remember anything else?”

He shook his head. He suddenly felt terribly tired and wanted to go to sleep.

“Do you want anything else, honey?” asked the nurse.

“Sleep,” he said.

“OK then, I’ll just sort the bed out for you.” He felt the bed head being lowered and the pillows rearranged, then he was laid back on the bed. The last thought he had as he fell back towards sleep was of a small girl’s laughing face. The girl was standing in front of two other people, but their faces were blurred and lost in a sort of mist. Then the mist came down over the girl’s face as well, and she vanished from view. Sleep came, washing over him like a black tide, and he knew no more.

* * * * *

When he woke up the next morning, he found he felt a lot better. His head was clearer, and he could move much more easily.

“Good morning,” said a bright voice, and he turned his head to see a different nurse approaching the bed. “I’m nurse Petersen, and I’ve come to give you your breakfast.”

She came to the head of the bed, and lifted him sufficiently to let her adjust the bed head and the pillows so that he was sitting up.

“There, is that better?” she asked.

“Yes, thank you,” he said. She bustled away to the end of the ward, speaking to other patients on the way, and tidying curtains here, twitching a bed cover straight there, and generally making the place look neat and tidy. She came back down the ward carrying a tray which she deposited on the table at the foot of the bed. She adjusted the height of this to make sure it would fit comfortably over the bed clothes, and maneuvered it within easy reach.

“Now don’t you worry about a thing,” she said. “I’m going to feed you, so you just lie back and enjoy it.”

He smiled at her, and she smiled back. She was a dainty looking woman, with black hair and brown eyes. She wouldn’t be called beautiful but there was something very taking about her, and she was undeniably attractive. She sat on the edge of the bed and fed him eggs, toast and coffee. He was surprised at how hungry he felt, and he enjoyed the food immensely.

“That’s good,” said nurse Petersen as he finished the last mouthful. “Now, just sit back and relax and I’ll get you tidied up for the day.” She took the tray and bustled back to the end of the ward, returning this time with a bowl of water. She bathed his face and hands, and gave him something to chew to clean his teeth. Feeling well fed and refreshed he sat there gazing around the ward once again.

Nurse Petersen came back again. “I see on your notes you want to be called Al,” she said. “Well, Al, that’s fine by us. I’ve been asked to see if you can remember your second name.”

He frowned. Once again, he had a feeling he could hear someone in his head shouting at him, but this time they were calling something different. He closed his eyes for a moment, concentrating on what they were calling. He almost had it, but then it slipped away again. He concentrated once again, and then felt he had it.

“Hen ... Hen,” he stuttered.

“That’s fine, no worries,” said nurse Petersen. “Is that all you can remember?”

He shook his head in frustration. “Hen,” he started again. A feeling of panic started welling up in him—he must be able to remember his name!

“Hen,” he tried.

“Hey, don’t get so worked up sweetheart, it’ll come back soon. Just relax for a moment, and wait till the doctor gets here.”

He lay back on the pillows and tried to relax. The feeling of panic was still there and he could feel that he was on the verge of tears. He tried to relax and gradually the feeling subsided, leaving behind a feeling of intense frustration. After a while the emotional turmoil took its toll and he dozed off again. He was woken by the arrival of the doctor. Nurse Petersen was with him.

“Here he is, doctor. This is Al,” she announced, pulling the curtains round the bed.

“I see you’ve made progress,” said the doctor. “By the way, I’d better introduce myself as well as we’re going to be seeing quite a lot of each other. I’m Doctor Henderson.”

He shot up in bed. "Henderson, that's it!" he exclaimed.

"Henderson. Are you sure?" the doctor asked.

"Yes, Henderson, I'm sure." He sat back against the pillows.

"OK, well if you think you're Al Henderson, who are we to argue with that?" responded the doctor. "I still think you'll need to consider that a bit more carefully, but that's good enough for now. Right then, on with the examination."

Once again the doctor poked and prodded him, but this time he was able to respond to the doctor's questions. Once he was dressed again the doctor came and perched on the side of the bed.

"Well then, Al," he began. "I'm very pleased with your progress, and I think we might try getting you out of bed sometime tomorrow, if you'd like that."

"Yes please," he replied.

"OK then, keep up the good work, and I'll see you again tomorrow."

The doctor left, and Al started to think about the moment of revelation that had come with the doctor's name. He was almost certain he was called Henderson, but somehow it still didn't seem quite right, like a shirt that was a size too large. It should fit, but it still felt uncomfortable. He kept puzzling over the problem in a vague sort of way, because he soon found that if he tried to think too hard about it the feelings of panic would come back and threaten to overwhelm him.

Lunch came and went, and the afternoon passed in much the same manner as the morning. Other doctors came to visit other patients, and the nurses changed shift. Nurse Godwin took over from nurse Petersen. Al didn't like nurse Godwin; she was a very large, brusque sort of woman, who never took 'no' for an answer and insisted on carrying out her duties no matter what. Al got the impression that even if the building was disintegrating around her, she would insist that all the beds were neat and tidy, and all the curtains pulled back in the recognized fashion.

After the evening meal which he enjoyed but found strange, as if for some reason he wasn't used to eating this sort of food,

the curtains were drawn as before but not before a glorious sunset colored the sky blood red. Al found the color somehow disturbing, but again could not remember why.

In his dreams that night Al found himself running over open fields, chasing after the same small girl he had seen the previous night. He tried desperately to catch her, sure it was vital that he do so, but no matter how fast he ran he could never catch her; she always stayed one step beyond his reach. She laughed and ran, and he chased her, until he made a gargantuan effort and managed to snatch the hem of her dress. He fell forward through the field, and fell and fell, landing with a bump. He sat up in bed shouting "Suzie." He opened his eyes, and saw that it was still dark. A nurse was hurrying up the ward towards him, and he realized he had woken most of the other patients up with his shout.

"Is everything all right here?" the nurse demanded. He looked over and realized it was the first nurse he had met. "What's all the noise?"

"I'm sorry," he said. "Nightmare."

"Well we can't have you waking everyone up," she replied. "Do you want a sleeping pill?"

"No, no pills," he responded.

"Well, you lie back down, and try and get back to sleep, do you hear?"

"Yes," he said, lying back down in the bed. She pulled the covers straight and tucked them in.

"Comfortable?" she asked.

"Yes, thank you," he muttered. Sleep was beckoning him again, and he went down with it. He saw the laughing girl in his dreams again, but this time there was no anguish, no striving associated with her, and he spent the rest of the night peacefully.

* * * * *

When the morning came, he had no recollection of having dreamt at all, let alone of having a nightmare. The nurse came

over with his breakfast, and after he had eaten she told him he could get out of bed and go the bathroom—with an escort.

He managed, with some help, to get out of bed and stand upright. The nurse helped him on with his dressing gown, and then took his arm and led him down the ward to the bathroom. As they passed the other beds, he took note of which beds were occupied and who was in them. He noticed that one bed all by itself at the end of the ward was occupied by a black man. The curtains were drawn around the bed so that only the end nearest the walkway was open, screening the occupant from general view. Most of the patients were all having their breakfast, but the black man had apparently finished his and was lying there looking out of the window. As Al passed the end of the bed, he glanced up and made eye contact with the man. He nodded his head in greeting and the other man, with evident surprise, nodded back. The nurse gave Al a quick look, then shrugged and continued walking him to the bathroom.

Al was exhausted when he got there, and was glad to subside into a chair in front of the sinks.

“So who’s Suzie?” she asked as she unbuttoned his pajama coat.

“Eh? What?” exclaimed Al, evidently confused.

“Well, I heard all about last night,” the nurse continued. “You crying out for Suzie an’ all. I just wondered who she was.”

Al shook his head in puzzlement. “I’ve no idea what you’re talking about,” he replied.

“Oh come on, honey,” the nurse said. “We all heard you calling out. You said you were having a nightmare.”

“I’m sorry, I really don’t remember. I don’t remember waking up last night at all.”

The nurse gave him a quizzical look, but let the matter lie.

“Do you want me to shave you?” she asked.

Al took a quick glance in the mirror. He was shocked at what he saw. His face was gaunt, with black shadows under the eyes. There was a stubble of beard growing, the black of the beard

forming an even greater contrast with his pallid skin. Worst of all, he didn't remember the face. He closed his eyes, and then covered his eyes with his hands and rubbed his face. He saw the nurse watching him out of the corner of his eye, and put his hands down in his lap.

"Something the matter, honey?" she asked.

"I don't recognize myself," he said bluntly.

"Well, that's not surprising," she replied. "You've been extremely ill. It's not surprising that you've changed a bit."

"No, it's not a question of changing a bit. I don't recognize the face in the mirror. I don't remember this as my face."

"Well, you've got amnesia," said the nurse. "Some patients don't remember things that everyone else takes for granted. Like your name—it took you a lot to remember that."

Al grunted. He leant forward and took another long look at the face in the mirror. Apart from being drawn and gaunt, it was actually quite a good looking face and also looked amazingly young. He didn't feel that young—he felt about seven years older than God—and he certainly hadn't expected to see a face that young in the mirror.

"Who am I?" he wondered aloud.

"Well, you told us yesterday you were Al Henderson. Does that feel right?"

He hadn't realized he had spoken out loud.

"It feels nearly right. It doesn't feel totally right. But I suppose it's close enough," he replied. "I didn't expect to be so young."

The nurse giggled. "Hell, honey, you're the best looking guy in the ward," she said naughtily. "We all draw lots to see who gets to look after you."

Al smiled, but it was an effort. "I'll leave the shaving for now," he said.

"Good idea, you're looking totally bushed all ready. Shall we go back to bed?"

If there was anything else intended by that remark, Al decided to ignore it. The short walk down the bathroom, the shock of seeing

himself in the mirror, and the wash had all taken their toll. He stood up and they started back out into the ward. Thirty seconds later, Al knew he wasn't going to make it back to his bed. He staggered.

"Hold on honey, I'll go get a chair for you," said the nurse, and left him leaning on the wall outside the bathroom. He tried to walk a few more steps, ashamed of his weakness, but the effort was almost more than he could take.

"Hey man," came a voice, "you look totally beat. You'd better sit down somewhere."

Through a haze, Al looked round and saw the black man he had noticed earlier. There was a chair by the side of his bed, and Al staggered over and sat down in it.

"Thanks," he said.

"No problem," the man replied. "But you don't want the others to see you sitting here."

Al looked up. "Why not?" he asked.

The man looked at him amazed. "Because I'm black, man. The others, they don't like sharing a room with a black boy, that's why the curtains are drawn."

"But that's ridiculous," he said incredulously. "Why should that make any difference?"

"Well you tell me," his companion said. "But it surely does, and you won't be popular if you stay with me."

"Well, I can't move at the moment," Al replied, "but I wouldn't move because of that anyway. Stuff and nonsense."

"Well, don't say I didn't warn you," came the reply.

Al sat there for a couple of minutes. When he had recovered somewhat, he sat up a bit straighter.

"So what's your name?" he asked.

"I'm Robert, Robert Clark," came the response. "From Rochester County, New York State. You can call me Rob. Pleased to meet you." He held out his hand, with a questioning look on his face.

Al leant over and shook the proffered hand. "I'm Al, Al Henderson, from God knows where," he said with gallows humor.

"You mean you don't know?" asked Rob.

“I don’t remember a thing,” replied Al frankly. “Before I woke up here, I just have a memory of staring up at the sky. I don’t know who I am, or where I come from. I certainly don’t remember how I ended up here. I don’t even what here is.”

“Well, I can tell you that,” said Rob confidently. “You’re in the ...”

At this moment, the curtains were pulled back and the nurse briskly wheeled a wheelchair alongside the bed.

“Come along now,” she said brightly. “Time enough to chat later. We need to get you back into bed.” With that, she maneuvered Al into the chair, and whisked him off down the ward. Back at his own bed, she equally briskly got him back into his bed and then quickly vanished with the wheelchair.

For the next few days the pattern was the same. He would have breakfast, walk to the bathroom, and then be wheeled back to his bed. He was never given the chance to continue his acquaintance with Rob, and he was almost certain this was quite deliberate on the part of the nursing staff. He noticed that he was being given black looks by some of the other patients, who all quite deliberately avoided looking at him when he was walked or wheeled past the end of their beds. After another three days of this, Al had had enough. He was determined to have another talk with Rob and improve their acquaintance.

It was nurse Petersen’s turn to be taking him to the bathroom. He was now strong enough to walk nearly all the way back to his bed by himself, but the nurses insisted on wheeling him back. On this particular morning he didn’t wait for the nurse to come after breakfast, but got himself out of bed, and started the walk down the ward. When he came to Rob’s bed, he stopped in surprise.

He had been intending to stop and chat with Rob, but the bed was empty, the curtains pulled back, and the personal items cleared off the top of the bedside locker. Al stood there in disbelief until a small hand took him by the elbow and steered him into the bathroom.

“Where’s he gone?” he demanded, as the door shut behind him. “Where’s Rob?”

“None of your concern,” replied nurse Petersen. “But he’s been moved to another ward. A more . . . appropriate ward.”

“What do you mean, more appropriate?”

“Shall we just say, where he can be with his own kind,” she responded primly.

“Own kind, what do you mean, own kind? He’s a person, isn’t he?”

Nurse Petersen came round to face him. “Now you listen to me,” she said sternly. “Sergeant Clark has been moved to another ward to stop him making a nuisance of himself. He’ll be better off down there. The other patients up here don’t like him.”

“Why don’t they like him?”

She didn’t answer, but continued filling a basin with water. He took hold of her arm, and turned her to face him. “Why don’t they like him?” he repeated.

“You should be able to work that out for yourself,” she finally replied.

“You’re telling me that it was because he was black?” he demanded. “They don’t like him because he’s black? That’s a load of crummy nonsense. He’s the only one that ever bothered to speak to me. And you’ve packed him off somewhere else, somewhere more . . . appropriate . . . I suppose that means he’s on a ward full of other black guys, where he won’t stand out. That stinks,” he spat out.

She pulled herself free. “Yes it does,” she said in a quiet but intense voice. “But you’ll never get me to acknowledge it in front of anyone else. I agree, it is a load of crummy nonsense, but you’d better get used to it because that’s the way life is around here. And if you want to stay here and get well, you’d do well not to start saying things like that. If the other patients hear what you’re saying, you’ll be branded a nigger-lover, and you’ll be treated like dirt.”

“I don’t care.”

“You will,” she replied grimly. “What happens here can have a bigger impact on your future than you realize.”

Suddenly Al sat down. He leant forward and put his head in his hands.

“I don’t understand any of this,” he whispered. “I don’t know who I am, where I am, how I got here, what I’m going to do when I’m better, any of it.”

Nurse Petersen put her hand on his shoulder. “Don’t you worry about those things just yet. You just concentrate on getting well. Everything will sort itself out, you’ll see.”

“And what about Rob Clark. Will he get sorted out?” he asked bitterly.

“Again, don’t you worry about him, he’ll be fine. And if you behave yourself I’ll let you into a secret.”

He looked up at her, confused. She was smiling a conspiratorial smile.

“What secret?” he asked.

Just at that moment, another patient came into the bathroom. He nodded to Al, and went down to the other end of the room where the baths were. He went into a cubicle and locked the door. The next moment, they heard the running water.

Nurse Petersen gave a slightly furtive look towards the cubicle. “I’ll tell you later,” she whispered. Al nodded and they continued the business of getting him cleaned up. Nurse Petersen had brought a razor and shaving soap with her, and he succeeded for the first time in shaving himself. There wasn’t too much blood as his hands had stopped shaking quite so much, and after the job was done he looked, and felt, a lot better.

“I don’t know,” nurse Petersen remarked, “you shave like you’ve never done it before.”

“For all I know, I haven’t,” he retorted. “I might not have had to shave before.”

“True,” she replied. “You don’t look old enough.”

Al got dressed and she escorted him back down the ward. When they got to his bed he suddenly felt that he didn’t want to spend any more time lying down.

“Can I sit in my chair?” he asked. “I don’t want to get back into bed.”

“I don’t see why not,” nurse Petersen replied. “Hang on a second and I’ll get you a bath robe.” She went back down the ward to the storeroom, which was next to the bathroom. She returned very shortly with a toweling bathrobe, which she helped him to put on over his pajamas. She sat him in the chair.

“Now, if you get cold or uncomfortable, just pop yourself back into bed,” she said. “I’ll be back to see you later.”

Al nodded, but she had already gone bustling back down the ward. He wondered idly what the time was. The ward had no clock that he could see, and although the meals turned up regularly, he had no idea at what times they were served. During the day was the closest he could get, and that was by judging the daylight coming through the window. He started to wonder once again about who he was, and what he was doing here, and started to feel thoroughly miserable when he couldn’t remember anything. He drifted off into a reverie, until nurse Petersen suddenly turned up.

“Hey there, guess what?” she said.

“I don’t know, what?” he replied.

“You’ve got a visitor,” she announced.

“A visitor?” he said, confused. “But I don’t know anyone.”

“Not a problem, not a problem,” came a new voice, and nurse Petersen was gently moved aside. Al found himself confronted by an extremely large person, dressed smartly in a business suit, carrying a briefcase.

“I’m here to try and help you remember some of those pesky details that seem to be escaping you, and to try and figure out what we should do with you when you leave.” The man sat himself gingerly in a chair which nurse Petersen had brought up, and placed his briefcase on the bed. Bewildered, Al just sat and looked at him.

“Now then,” said the visitor, “let me just get this case open, and we’ll get started unraveling things a little for you. Are you ready?”

“I suppose so,” Al replied. He was feeling equal amounts of anticipation and trepidation, but he was also determined to find out something about who he was and how he had arrived here.

The visitor rummaged around in his briefcase, and produced a sheaf of paper. He settled down in his chair, and made himself comfortable. “OK then, let’s get started.”

Chapter 13

“Now then,” said the visitor. “Introductions first.” He took out a case, and settled a pair of glasses onto his nose. “My name is Hugh Whittam, and I’m a representative of the Seaman’s Mission in America.”

“And why are you here?”

“I’m your case officer,” replied Hugh. “I’m responsible for getting you the treatment you need, and then I’ll be trying to find you something to do when you come out of hospital.”

Al shifted in his chair. “So you’re saying I’m a charity case, then?” For some reason, that made him feel uncomfortable, but he couldn’t have said why.

“Let me explain something,” said Hugh, reaching up and taking his glasses off. “I’ll start at the beginning. Do you know how you came to be here?”

Al shook his head. “My last memory is of staring up at the sky, and then I woke up here. I don’t remember anything else. I’m not even sure I’ve got the right name.”

“OK then. Let’s review what we do know about you. Firstly, you’re a sailor. You were picked up by an American merchant ship just off the coast of Spain. You were drifting on a lifeboat, and it’s a miracle you were found at all. There were no markings on the lifeboat, you weren’t wearing a life jacket, and you were naked. You were wearing dog tags but they were unreadable, so from this we deduced you were on a war ship. We’ve checked

our records, and we have no record of any ships going down in that area at that time.”

Al looked at him. “I’m a sailor?” he asked. “So my memory of staring at the sky must come from when I was on the lifeboat.”

Hugh nodded. “Unfortunately, the drama doesn’t end there,” he continued. “The ship that rescued you was part of a convoy to Malta which was attacked by U-boats. The convoy scattered to seek safety, and this ship was picked up by a second U-boat and torpedoed about two days later. The survivors were picked up by yet another American ship, you among them, and brought back to the Navy yard at Philadelphia. Those service personnel who were picked up were sent to various military hospitals and the rest, those who were unidentified, were sent to various charity hospitals for care. You came here.”

Al digested this information. “Do you even know that I’m American?” he asked.

“Well, your accent gives you away there,” Hugh replied. “We’re 99% certain that you’re English. But we’ve been in touch with the British embassy, and they have no record of any ships being lost in the area you were picked up, and as we couldn’t identify you they wouldn’t take responsibility for you. So, for the time being at least, you’re being treated as an American civilian casualty. What will happen later is really up to you.”

“What do you mean?” asked Al. “If I’m British, surely I should be repatriated?”

Hugh shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “Like I said, the British embassy won’t take responsibility for you because we can’t prove that you’re British. Hell, we can’t even prove you’re not German. They won’t take you because they won’t admit that they’ve lost you.”

“So it looks like I’m going to be an American.”

“Looks like it,” said Hugh. “After all, you were picked up by one American ship, then torpedoed, and picked up by a second American ship. To all intents and purposes, we’re treating you

as an American citizen. If you want to be British you're going to have to prove you're British, and to do that, you'll need to get your memory back."

"But the doctor's told me that could take years. I can't even be sure that I've got the right name. It feels mostly right, but it's not totally familiar."

"And that's where I come in," said Hugh. "The Seaman's Mission is here to help people like you."

"So what will you be doing for me?" asked Al.

"Well, firstly, we're paying all your hospital bills," replied Hugh with a smile.

Al didn't make any reply for a moment. "Is that costing a lot?" he finally asked.

"Nothing you need to worry about," said Hugh reassuringly. "But as you're on your way to a full recovery, we need to make plans for your future. As we don't know anything about your past, we have to try and find a trade that you can follow. Have you any clues about that?"

Al considered, then shook his head. "I don't remember anything," he said.

"In that case, we'll put you through the full assessment program," said Hugh. "Nothing terrible," he hastened to assure Al, as he saw the look of mild panic that crossed his face. "We just give you a series of aptitude tests and see what you're good at. Then we try and find you a job in that line. We've had lots of success in getting people out of hospital and into work."

Al sat there trying to digest all the information he had been given. Hugh looked at him quizzically. "Anything wrong?" he asked with a smile.

Al looked at him incredulously. "Anything wrong," he repeated. "You have got to be joking. I'm here in a country that probably isn't mine, disowned by the country that probably is, with no memory of anything that's gone before, finding out I'm only here through charity, and being told I'm going to be found a job—how do you expect me feel?"

Hugh sat and watched him as he tried to settle himself back down. "I know it must be difficult for you," he started, then held up his hand as Al started to interrupt. "No, please let me finish. There's nothing to be ashamed of in any of this. The charity you're receiving is not something to be worried about. There's a lot of good people out there who know that medical care is expensive, and not everyone can afford it. The convent sisters here provide the accommodation and the ancillary services such as the cooking, and the cleaning. The nursing staff are all trained professionals, paid through the charity. This is a caring society which is trying to get people like you back into a productive life. There's nothing to be ashamed of."

Al shrugged. "I guess so. It just seems wrong to be taking without paying anything back."

Hugh laughed. "Is that what's bothering you? It shouldn't. When we get you into paid work, we ask you to make a small contribution from your pay check on a monthly basis. You're not in any way paying back what you owe, you're just making a contribution to the charity to help us help others."

Al looked back at Hugh. "Is this contribution compulsory?" he asked wryly.

"No, it's not compulsory. Like I said, we ask you to make it, we don't insist on it. And we don't ask until you're earning a reasonable amount."

Al thought about it for a bit, and then relaxed. "OK then," he said. "When do I get assessed?"

Hugh looked at him. "Are you in a hurry to get out of here?"

Al grimaced. "It's not that, it's just that I appear to hate being in hospital, and to hate being bored."

Hugh laughed. "I can understand that," he said sympathetically. "If you feel well enough then, how about tomorrow?"

"Sounds good to me," replied Al. "I think I'd look forward to that."

"Good," said Hugh. "I'll be along for you about ten o'clock. I'll ask the nurses to get you some clothes, as we'll be going outside."

Hugh stood up, and put his papers back in his briefcase. He stood up, and held out his hand. Al shook it. "See you tomorrow."

"Yeah, see you tomorrow."

When Hugh had gone, nurse Petersen arrived with a cup of coffee.

"Was that interesting?" she asked.

One thing Al had noted was that nurse Petersen was rather more formal than the other nursing staff. He had quickly got on first name terms with most of them, but when he asked what her first name was nurse Petersen had replied with a charming smile and the word 'nurse' and had declined to answer any further. Al had noticed a wedding ring on her finger, but she had refused to be drawn on that subject or, indeed, on any personal information whatsoever. She was also extremely nosy, although she would probably not have put it quite like that.

"Yes, it was interesting," he replied. "I'm going to need some clothes, he's taking me out tomorrow."

"Really," she said. "First I've heard of it."

"Well, I'm sure if you check you'll find out," Al said. "I'm not trying to abscond, you know."

"No, I supposed you aren't at that," she replied. "After all, where would you go?" And with that she bustled off, leaving Al to ponder her words.

Yes, he thought, where would I go? I'm in a country I don't know, and no knowledge of friends, or family, or anything very much. I'm not even sure I've got the right name, for crying out loud. And she's worried about me leaving the hospital! Al brooded for most of the rest of the afternoon until the shift changed and Mary, a young Irish nurse, brought his dinner. She also brought him a selection of clothes in various shapes, colors and sizes, and asked him to try them on and make a choice for the morning. Al spent the rest of the evening finding clothes which would fit and look smart, and in the end felt fairly satisfied with his choice. He paraded himself in front of the staff, and they all

gave their approval of his choice, although Mary did suggest a different tie. Al took the clothes off and got ready for bed, feeling that at least he now had something to call his own.

In the morning he was up and dressed before breakfast had even arrived on the ward. He was finding that he was more excited than he realized, and had been up and about early. He waited impatiently after breakfast for Hugh to arrive. Finally, Mary came up to him and told him that Hugh was waiting for him downstairs in the lobby. She had to show him the way—he had never seen anything of the hospital other than the ward he was on. He made it downstairs, and there was Hugh.

“Ah, you made it,” was the greeting. “Looking pretty dapper, too.”

“Well, I might as well make the most of things,” replied Al.

“Too true. Come on, let’s go.” Hugh led the way out of the main door and onto the drive. Al followed after him, a little apprehensively if truth be told, and stood blinking in the daylight.

“Come along,” called Hugh, and Al saw him standing by the side of a large black car. “Get in, and we’ll be off,” he called.

Al descended the few steps to the drive and climbed into the front seat of the car. Hugh immediately gunned the engine and drove off down the drive in a shower of gravel, leaving big marks on the surface behind him. They travelled for just over half an hour, with little conversation on the journey. Hugh was concentrating on his driving, and Al was just content to sit and watch the scenery go by. Eventually they arrived on the outskirts of a town in what was obviously an industrial district, and Hugh parked the car outside a large warehouse.

“Here we are,” he said cheerfully, and got out of the car.

Al followed suit, and took in his surroundings. It was obvious the district had seen better days. The street was lined on both sides by warehouses in various states of disrepair. There were broken windows galore, and it was obvious that most of them had been broken into at one time or another. Rubbish was blowing around in the faint breeze, and graffiti had been daubed on

some of the walls. He turned round and looked at the warehouse they had stopped in front of. This one was in marked contrast to the rest on the street, being in a good state of repair, freshly painted and with all its windows intact. Hugh was standing by a small door which had been let into the large loading doors, and was obviously waiting for Al to follow him in.

Once inside the building, Al was taken aback at the contrast. The place was brightly, even brilliantly, lit, and the floor space had been divided into cubicles. From what he could see, each cubicle was set up to test a different set of skills. He could see engineering equipment, welding, bricklaying, decorating, all sorts of different trades. He looked up, and it was apparent that the same thing had been done in what was obviously the old office complex.

“What do they do up there?” he asked Hugh.

“That’s where they teach office skills; literacy, numeracy, all that sort of stuff,” he replied. “You’ll be put through your paces up there as well before you finish.”

Al nodded. “Where do we start?” he asked.

“This way,” said Hugh, leading the way through the cubicles towards the stairs leading upstairs. “We need to get your paperwork sorted out first.”

Doing the paperwork took about ten minutes, as to most of the questions Al had to answer ‘I don’t know’. After he had been registered Hugh took him on a brief tour of the top floor, showing him the training rooms up there. He also gave Al a brief literacy and numeracy test, saying “You’ll do,” when he had completed these. From this response Al gathered that he had reached the required standard, and wouldn’t need any further training in these subjects. Hugh decided he didn’t need to bother to learn to use a typewriter, but did sign him up for a course in bookwork, and office processes ‘just in case you want to run a business’, he said.

Al couldn’t ever imagine himself running a business, but decided that any training that was free would be useful, even if not

particularly relevant. They descended back to the ground floor and Hugh pointed out the cubicles.

“Here we have the practical skills,” he announced. “Clockwise from here, we have welding, then car repair, car electrics, electrical training, plumbing, joinery, cabinet making, brick laying, interior decorating, house framing (just the start, the rest is done elsewhere), and finally we have appliance repair (anything for the house, that is). What do you think?”

Al looked around. “It’s pretty impressive,” he said. “Where do I start?”

“That’s the spirit,” Hugh said enthusiastically. “Now, what happens is that you pick something that you feel happy about doing, and try that for a while. If it suits you, you can carry on and go into it further. If you’re not happy, or it doesn’t feel right, you can try something else. You can do up to three skills. So, for example, you could do house framing, followed by brick laying (for the chimneys, you know), and then decorating, which gives you the abilities to build a house from scratch. So, which do you feel is your best option?”

Al chewed his bottom lip as he studied the various cubicles. He didn’t know why, but he was feeling strongly drawn to the engineering side of the building.

“Can I start with the car repairs?” he asked. “Then perhaps do the welding?”

Hugh beamed. “Of course, no problem. I’ll just take you over and introduce you.” Hugh led him over to the cubicle directly opposite the main door, which Al had seen on first entering. He had noticed that there were two or three other men working in the area, but hadn’t really taken any notice. As he got nearer he noticed that one of the other men working there was Robert Clark. Rob lifted his head and looked at Al as he approached. Al smiled at him and was about to greet him, when Rob shook his head ever so slightly, and looked back down at what he was doing. Confused by this behavior, Al scarcely heard the introductions Hugh was making.

The instructor, a big, burly man called Ted, explained how the workshop and the courses worked.

“It’s a simple routine,” he explained. “You get the bus here every morning from the hospital, or the hostel when you’re discharged from hospital. You have training in the morning on how to carry out a procedure, and then in the afternoon you get your hands mucky working on an engine, doing that same procedure. As soon as you’ve mastered one procedure, you move on to the next.”

“Sounds reasonable,” said Al. “How long does it usually take?”

“Well, to go through the whole course usually takes between three and six months. Then if you wish, you can leave and get a job, or you can stay on and take the advanced course which leads to a qualification, and takes another three months. Of course, if you’re really quick, and good at the job, you can do the whole thing, start to finish, in six months.”

Al nodded. “When can I start?” he asked.

“That’s up to Hugh,” came the reply. “You can start as soon as he gives the go ahead.”

Hugh smile at Al. “Don’t worry, we can have you in here by Monday next week,” he said. “At the same time we can move you into the hostel here in town, which will be better for you. You don’t really need to be in hospital full-time now.”

Al looked around the workshop, and said, “Yeah, that sounds good.”

Hugh beamed. “Excellent!” he exclaimed. “Let’s get you back to the hospital now, and we can make arrangements for you to move to the hostel. Then we can get you settled in and you can start next week.” He nodded to Ted, and then ushered Al out of the cubicle and across the floor to the main door.

“You’ve never mentioned a hostel before.” remarked Al, as they got back into the car. “Where is it?”

“Well, the hostel is only for those who are fit enough to leave the hospital, so we don’t tend to mention it until people are ready

to move on. The doctor told me this morning that you were fit enough to leave, although you'll need regular check ups until you get your memory back—or until it's obvious it's not going to come back—but you can attend the clinic at the hospital until you're fully fit.”

“So where's the hostel?” asked Al. “Who lives there?”

“We'll take a detour via the hostel on the way back to the hospital,” replied Hugh, starting the car. “It's not far away—you could walk it when you get your fitness back. As for who lives there, it's for people discharged from hospital who haven't got anywhere else to go. People like yourself, with no friends or family, and nowhere to live. It's a sort of half-way house between the hospital and living on your own.”

“How much does all this cost?” asked Al curiously, as Hugh weaved his way through the morning traffic. “I mean, I haven't been asked to pay anything, and as you haven't mentioned anything about paying for the training and the hostel I assume that's the same thing, just making donations, but it must cost a bit to run.”

Hugh glanced over at Al. “You're right, it does cost a lot,” he admitted. “Especially the medical care. But there are enough people across the country who like to make charitable donations, especially during war time, that we can afford both the hospital, the hostel and the training. And of course there are the donations made by former patients and trainees. Not everyone we train comes through the hospital.”

Al was interested, but was too tired to pursue the matter further. He found he was more disturbed at the thought of leaving the hospital than he had thought, but was resolved that he would move into the hostel as soon as possible. Meanwhile Hugh, who had skillfully negotiated the traffic, was turning into the front of a large building set back from the street. At first glance it appeared to be a stunning Colonial period building, painted white. At second glance the observer would notice the fact that the paint was peeling, and in need of a touch up, and that the gardens were

a little overgrown. The driveway needed the fallen leaves raking up, and the whole building had an air of genteel shabbiness. Al loved it on the spot.

“Here we are,” said Hugh, switching off the engine. “Let’s go inside and get you sorted out with a room.”

Al got out of the car, and stood looking around. “What is this place?” he asked. “How did you get hold of it?”

“It was a donation,” Hugh replied. “One of our patrons had this as his town house. His family grew up and moved away, and when his wife died he couldn’t bear to live here anymore. He also couldn’t bear to sell it, so he gave us the property on a permanent lease and then left it to the charity in his will.”

“It’s beautiful,” Al said.

“Yes, I suppose it is,” said Hugh. “You get so used to looking at these places you sometimes forget how they must appear to other people. Come on, let’s get inside.”

He briskly led the way up the front steps and through the front door. Al followed him, taking in the details of the building as he passed. There was a large veranda running the entire length of the front of the house, with pillars at intervals. The first floor incorporated the additional floor space of the veranda, giving the building a flat-fronted appearance. The front doors were huge, made of solid oak with glass inserts. The hallway was also large, tiled in a typical black and white Victorian pattern. The paintwork looked quite fresh, and was done in an odd shade of bluey grey, but it looked in keeping with the period of the property.

“This way,” Hugh indicated. “This is the way to the Warden’s office.”

“Warden?” asked Al.

“Yes, we have a warden who looks after the property, assigns rooms, keeps the place clean, things like that. He’s also responsible for security, although that’s not much of a job.”

Hugh lead the way down the left hand corridor on the ground floor to the end room. This had obviously been part of a much larger room at one point, but it had equally obviously been re-

modeled to provide more accommodation. Hugh knocked on the door and walked in.

“Thomas, good to see you,” he greeted someone. “I’ve brought you a new inmate.”

Al heard a wheezing laugh. “The more the merrier, Mr. Hugh,” came the reply. “Let’s have a look at him then.”

Hugh gestured for Al to come through the door. As he came into the office he was assailed by a strong smell of cigarette smoke. The room was hazy with smoke and Al, blinking furiously to clear his eyes, could just make out a figure at the desk. Al came forward and, as his eyes cleared, he could see who it was. The first surprise was that he was black; the second surprise was that he only had one leg. Al extended his hand, and it was taken and shaken vigorously.

“And who are you, sir?”

“I’m Al,” he replied.

“And I’m Thomas,” came the response, along with another wheezing laugh. “Welcome to Laurel House.”

Al couldn’t help smiling in response to the laugh, it was infectious. He found himself smiling back at Thomas.

“That’s the ticket,” said Thomas. “Now then, Hugh and Al, what can I do for you?”

“Al needs a room, Tom,” said Hugh. “He’s fit enough to be leaving the hospital and needs somewhere for a few months until he gets on his feet.”

Thomas pursed his lips in thought. “We only have a room left in the attic,” he replied. “Next to Robert Clark.”

“Robert Clark, the guy from the hospital?” Al asked eagerly.

Thomas looked at him warily. “Yes, that’s the fellow,” replied. “Is that a problem?”

“Absolutely not,” replied Al earnestly. “He’s a great guy, it would be a pleasure to be next to him.”

Thomas relaxed. “Then that’s settled, you can share the attic with Robert. You’ve got one bathroom up there between the two of you, so there shouldn’t be any fighting going on.”

“Sounds good to me,” said Al. “When can I move in?”

“He’s a keen one,” wheezed Thomas.

“He sure is,” agreed Hugh.

“Well now, the room’s been given a good clean out and some fresh paint, so it’s ready anytime you are.”

“Great,” said Al. He was now really looking forward to moving out of the hospital and into the hostel.

“In that case,” said Hugh, getting to his feet, “we might as well go and make the arrangements now. We can get you sorted out, and you can move in tomorrow. How does that sound?”

“Wonderful,” Al replied.

“OK then, off we go.”

Hugh and Al said their goodbyes to Thomas and went back out to the car. It was only a short drive back to the hospital, and Hugh gave Al a running commentary on the route they were taking. Al started to listen attentively but found his attention wandering, and then when Hugh announced he would be travelling backwards and forwards on the charity’s bus, he stopped listening altogether and just enjoyed the ride.

Once they arrived back at the hospital, Hugh announced he would go and sort out all the paperwork. Al wandered back to the ward. Once there, he found a surprise on his bed. There, all laid out, was a selection of clothes, all in his size, and three pairs of shoes. The items were obviously all second hand, but were all spotlessly clean, pressed, and ready to wear. There was even a pair of jeans and some overalls, for when he was working at the training centre. Under the bed was a worn portmanteau. Al spent about half an hour packing everything into the case. On his night stand was more; a toothbrush (brand new, he was pleased to note), tooth powder, a razor, shaving soap, washing soap, a wash cloth, and two towels, a hand towel and a bath towel. He packed these as well, and then realized he would need them for the night and morning before he left, so unpacked them and left them on the wash stand. At that moment Hugh came bustling up, with one of the nurses in tow.

“Ah, Al my boy, I see you’ve packed already!” Hugh exclaimed as he came up to the bed.

“Where did all the clothes come from?” asked Al.

“They’re all donations,” replied Hugh. “They come from all over the place. The staff here wash them, mend them if they need it, and then sort them into bundles by size. Then, when someone comes in who needs kitting out, we’ve usually got something we can send them out with.”

“It’s amazing,” Al said weakly, sitting on the bed. “I had no idea that you could get all this stuff.”

“Like I said, there’s plenty of people who feel guilty about not doing more during the war,” Hugh said. “Now then, Nurse Williams has some paperwork for you to complete, and then after breakfast in the morning, you can hop on the bus to the hostel and get settled in.”

Hugh smiled at Al, shook his hand, and then left. Nurse Williams (Hazel) sat down with Al and went through the paperwork, got him to sign various forms, and then left, after promising him a good ‘last meal’ and a great breakfast. Al smiled as she left, and wished, for a moment, that she had offered him something else before he left, but supposed he was expecting too much.

In the morning Al packed the rest of his stuff, and waited impatiently for breakfast. Once that was out of the way Nurse Williams came back to see him, and said the bus would be along in five minutes and he had better get down to the front door. She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek, and he walked down the ward. Some of the other patients waved, but most of them simply ignored him. Two more of the nurses came and said goodbye, both of them kissing him warmly. He went down the stairs and stood by the front door waiting for the bus, and enjoying the feel of sunshine on his face. A lovely day was, he felt, a good omen for a new start. After a few minutes the bus arrived. It wheezed to a halt in front of the building, and the driver got out.

“You for the hostel or the training centre?” he asked.

“The hostel,” Al replied.

“OK then, you can sit up front,” said the driver. “You’ll be getting off first.”

He picked Al’s bag up, and slung it into the luggage rack before going into the hospital. Al was glad there was nothing breakable in there. He climbed into the front seat and settled back to wait. A couple more guys drifted down the steps and got on, and then the driver came back out with some papers, got in, and they were off.

After five minutes Al was wondering if the guy had ever taken a driving test, or if anyone had checked to see if he was capable of driving. He could understand why the other guys had gone to the back of the bus—it was probably less terrifying if you couldn’t see where you were going.

At the end of a thrilling ride, Al was set down outside Laurel House. His heart rate had accelerated, and he was feeling a little light-headed. His bag was unloaded from the bus, and this interval gave him time to get settled down. As he was reunited with his personal belongings the door to the hostel opened and half a dozen men came down the steps. Al recognized Robert Clark amongst them. He stood to one side, and met Robert’s eyes as he passed. Robert looked straight at him and then gave him a wink. Al smiled back, and watched as Robert got on the bus. This was presumably what he would be doing as of Monday. He watched the bus out of sight, then picked up his bag and went inside. He left his bag just inside the door, and went down the corridor to see the Warden. He knocked on the door and hearing a cheery voice shout “come in”, he opened the door and entered the office.

Thomas might well not have moved at all since Al saw him the day before. He was still sitting in his chair, and the room was still fogged with tobacco smoke.

“Hiya Al, nice to see you,” Thomas greeted him as he entered.

“Hi there,” Al replied.

“Hokay, let’s get you sorted out.” Thomas hopped agilely up from his chair, and grabbed a crutch that had been leaning against the desk. “Room ten, top of the house. Follow me.”

Thomas started crutching himself vigorously down the corridor, taking Al completely by surprise at the speed at which he moved. Al hurried after him, interested to see how he would manage the stairs. Thomas was waiting for him in the main hall.

“You grab your bag, young fella,” he said as Al caught up to him. “Go straight up the stairs as far as you can go, and I’ll meet you at the top.” And with that, he disappeared down the opposite corridor. Al started after him in bemusement for a couple of seconds, then picked up his bag and started up the stairs.

The stairs were quite grand in a faded, shabby sort of way. The staircase had obviously been designed to allow the ladies of the house to make a grand entrance. At the first half landing they split to the left and the right, meeting up on a landing on the first floor. From there a much smaller staircase led up to the second floor, and then a smaller one still to the attics. From the lack of décor on this floor, Al reasoned that the attics had originally housed the staff. Just as he arrived at the top of the stairs Thomas appeared, slightly out of breath.

“How in the world ...?” Al began.

Thomas laughed. “Everyone wants to know my little secret,” he chuckled. “It’s no great mystery. There’s an old dumb waiter which runs the full height of the house. It’s just been adapted for my use, so I can get about more easily. I can manage the stairs on my crutch, but it’s a hell of a lot easier to use the lift.”

“Great idea,” Al murmured. “I suppose it’s not strong enough to take anyone full-sized.”

Thomas laughed. “Are you trying to tell me I’m a dwarf?” he asked.

Totally embarrassed, Al started to stammer a disclaimer, but was interrupted by Thomas.

“Don’t take on so, I was only teasing,” he said. “Come on, this is your room.”

He pulled a key from his pocket and crutched down the corridor a little way. He put the key in the lock and turned it,

and pushed open the door to the room. “There you go,” he said. “What do you reckon?”

Al entered the room and dropped his bag on the floor. He couldn’t resist a smile of pleasure. It was apparent that several smaller rooms had been made into one bigger room—or rather, he amended the thought hastily, two. The first was a large, airy bedroom, painted cream. The floor had highly varnished bare boards, but a beautifully patterned rag rug had been placed over them giving the room a vibrant focal point of reds, oranges and yellows. The bed was plain and simple, but made with freshly laundered sheets and two plump pillows in clean white pillow cases. The only other furniture was a bed side table, a chest of drawers, and a wardrobe, all of which had been painted cream to match the rest of the room, although the door panels on the wardrobe had been picked out in blue. Through a door to his right he could see a smaller room which appeared to be a wash room of sorts. When he had a better view through the door, he could see a wash hand basin and a toilet, but no shower or bath.

The view from the large, floor to ceiling window was amazing. This was to the back of the house, and looked over the gardens. Although they needed work they were still quite outstanding, and beyond the gardens could be seen the city. For some reason Al was consumed with a desire to go out and start working on the gardens. He seemed to know exactly what needed to be done, and he itched to go and do it. He turned to Thomas.

“Thomas,” he began, and got interrupted.

“Call me Tom,” came the reply. “Uncle Tom if you wish.” When Al looked at him blankly, he explained.

“Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” he said. “You know the story?”

Al shook his head.

“Oh well then, you wouldn’t get the joke,” continued Tom. “But you were saying?”

“Yeah, um ... who does the garden?”

“The garden?” Tom repeated. “Well now, I guess you could say I do. Or rather I did. But it’s a mite difficult to manage doing

all that with only one leg. If I put my foot on a shovel, I tend to fall over.”

“Yeah, I guess you would,” Al commented.

“Was you thinking of volunteering?” asked Tom.

“I seem to know what needs doing,” replied Al. “And I have this urge to go out and do it.”

“Well, if you feel like that about it, then you can go right ahead. I’ll give you the key to the tool store, and whenever you feel like doing something out there you can just go ahead and do it. I’d be grateful, it’s a damn shame to see such a beautiful place going to rack and ruin.”

Al nodded. “You’re right there,” he said. “Ok, you’ve got a deal. When I have the time, I’ll sort the garden out.”

“Now that’s what I call real handsome,” said Tom. “Now, about this room. You’ll have noticed you have a basin and a toilet, but the bathroom is down the hall a ways. You share it with Rob Clark, who you know. Any problems with that?”

“No, none at all,” responded Al. “Why do you keep asking if I have a problem with that?”

“Well now, some of the guys that come out of that hospital, they think they’re better than some of the guys here, even me, just because they happen to be white and we happen to be black. Some of them refuse to share a bathroom with a black boy, or a kitchen. I’m glad to hear you’re not like that, but then, you’re a Brit, so I guess you wouldn’t have that problem.”

“No, I don’t have a problem with anything like that,” he replied. “I have no time for that sort of behavior. I met Rob when I was on the ward, and he was the only one there who ever tried to speak to me, or give me a hand. As far as I’m concerned he’s a decent bloke, and I’m pleased to be able to renew our acquaintance,” he concluded.

Tom was beaming, a great smile on his face. “Now I’m glad to have you here,” he said. “I wish more were like you. Now, you get yourself settled in. We serve the evening meal downstairs in the dining room (that’s to the left of the stairs as you

come down) at six o'clock. That gives the guys time to get back from the workshop and get washed up before we sit down. Have you got a clock?" he asked.

Al shook his head. Time hadn't been an issue whilst in hospital. "I don't even have a watch," he replied.

"Well, I've got plenty, so I can lend you one until you can afford to get one yourself. See you at six." He stumped across to the door, and went off down the corridor.

Al shut the door after him, and turned again to look at the room. He picked his bag up and put it on the bed, and started to unpack. His meager wardrobe scarcely filled one quarter of the available space. Having hung everything up he was at a bit of a loose end, and after glancing out of the window again decided to go and have a look at the garden. After some trial and error he found his way to the kitchen where two cooks, Mike and Glenda, were preparing the evening meal. They were delighted to meet him and insisted he stayed for a cup of coffee. Al was still trying to get used to coffee—he liked it, but felt he would prefer tea, although he had no recollection of ever drinking tea. This was one of the things he was slowly getting used to—likes and dislikes seemed to come to him from nowhere, and he just had to go along with them.

After chatting with Mike and Glenda for a while, he asked about getting into the garden. They were over the moon that he was going to tackle 'the jungle', and said that there had, at one time, been a highly-productive walled vegetable garden which had provided most of the vegetables and herbs for the kitchen. After they had pointed him in the right direction, he wandered around the gardens for a while before he found the kitchen garden. Mike had been right, he decided, this garden would have provided an enormous amount of vegetables. Before he really knew what had happened, he had started to measure out beds, and to decide which vegetables would be best where. After an hour had passed, he had the whole thing planned out in his head. He returned to the house, begged some paper and a pencil from

Tom, and spent the rest of the day in his room drawing up a plan for the vegetable garden. Tom came up with an alarm clock at about four o'clock and when Al explained what he'd been doing, was so pleased Al thought he might cry.

Tom explained that he had mainly concentrated on the vegetable garden, and it would make life so much better if they could grow their own vegetables again. Al promised to see what he could do. Tom reminded him once again that the evening meal was at six, and left him to it.

When six o'clock arrived Al was in the corridor downstairs, when he heard his name called. He turned around, and there was Rob Clark.

"Hi," he called out. "How you settling in?"

"Fine," replied Al. "It's a great place."

Rob looked at him a little strangely. "Before you make your mind up about that," he said, "you'd better come and meet the rest of the guys." So saying, he turned and lead the way into the dining room.

Chapter 14

The dining room matched the rest of the house that Al had seen so far—a vision of faded grandeur, with stained mirrors over the two fireplaces at each end of the room, and with a totally modern table (or rather two, pushed together) in the middle of the room.

Al entered behind Rob and waited until he was seated before he came forward and took the one remaining empty seat. This was situated half-way down the table's long side, facing towards the window. Al found he had a white guy on his left, and a black guy on his right. He nodded to both of them before he sat down. Rob was sitting a little further down the table, and he nodded at Al as he sat. Taking stock, Al noticed that there was a clear demarcation between the white residents and the black residents.

“You all right sitting there?” his white neighbor asked.

“Of course, why wouldn't I be?” he replied.

“Just wondered,” was the response.

Al shrugged, and gave his attention to the rest of the room. The ceiling still retained its large ceiling rose, although the chandelier which had presumably graced it in better times had been replaced with a modern light fitting and shade in a repellent shade of green. The walls were painted blue, and the carpet on the floor was an indeterminate shade somewhere between blue and grey. There was a battered sideboard on the wall behind Al which was loaded with food warmers, with the candles underneath all lit.

The door opened, and Mike and Glenda came in with the food. They quickly transferred this to the food warmers, placed jugs of water and bowls piled high with bread rolls on the end of the sideboard, and then left. Everyone stood up and formed an orderly queue for the food. Once again, Al noticed that all the white guys went first. He joined the queue between the two men he had been sitting between.

The meal was good, hot and plentiful, and although not gourmet cooking was definitely a cut above the food served at the hospital. There was a big dish of beef casserole ('stew', thought Al), biscuits ('dumplings', he thought again), and mashed potato. There was also a dish of greens and the bread. Al helped himself and sat down. He enjoyed the meal immensely, not so much because of the standard of the cooking but because he was sitting at a table, he could help himself, and there was plenty to go around. When the first course had been eaten Mike and Glenda came back with dessert. There was ice cream and a big bowl of fresh fruit. Once again, he could help himself.

After the meal everyone left the table and headed across the main hall to another room. Al followed on, and found himself in the residents' lounge. There was a selection of books and magazines, a radio, and a phonograph with a selection of records. At the far end was a pool table. Al stood and watched for a few moments, and then noticed Rob standing near the door. Al looked at him and Rob winked and jerked his head, indicating the corridor. Al gave him a small nod back. Rob left the room and Al waited a couple of minutes before he followed him.

Rob was standing in the hall.

"Come back in here," he said to Al, and took him back into the dining room. As soon as the door was shut, Rob gave him a beaming smile, and said "You're looking good, man. I'm so glad you wound up here!"

Al held his hand out, and Rob shook it vigorously. "Nice to see you as well. What's all the business in the training centre about, and here at the hostel?"

“Hell man, you mean you don’t know?” asked Rob incredulously. “You must be British, else you’d know all about it.”

“All about what? Will you please explain?” Al said plaintively.

“Oh, it’s easy enough,” said Rob. He put on a stereotypical ‘black’ voice. “All us poor black folks, we ain’t allowed to mix with you white folks. It ain’t seemly.”

“Eh? How come?”

“Well, we fought the war and all that, you know, the civil war, and still we get treated like second class citizens. Hell, we *are* second class citizens. We’re expected to keep ourselves to ourselves. You won’t see one of us playing pool, or listening to the radio, or playing records. We can read, or we can chat, but we’re not allowed anything else.

“Well can’t Tom do anything about that?”

“Tom? What can he do? How we get treated depends on the number of blacks and whites at any one time. If there’s more blacks than whites, we get to chose who does what. If there’s more whites than blacks, then it’s their choice.”

“But that’s all wrong,” protested Al. “Color shouldn’t make a difference.”

“Shouldn’t, but it does. When you finish your training you can go out and get a job as a manager just like that,” said Al, clicking his fingers to emphasize the point. “You could even go to the bank and get a loan to start your own business. Me, I’m going to end up working for someone else. No one is going to employ a black man as a manager, and no bank is going to lend me enough money to start a business.”

Al was shocked. “Stuff that,” he replied. “Tell you what, when we’ve both finished here, we’ll set up a business together. I’ll do the dealing with the public bit, but we’ll both work on the motors, and split everything fifty-fifty. How does that sound?”

Rob grinned. “Sounds pretty damn fine to me,” he said. “But keep this under your hat. Oh, and you don’t want to be too friendly with me in front of the other guys. They would probably ostracize you as well.”

“I don’t give a damn about that,” replied Al heatedly.

“I know you don’t man,” said Rob. “But you are going to need a reference from Ted at the workshop, and if you don’t do what he expects he won’t give you one. And not fraternizing with us black folks is what he expects.”

Al thought hard for a minute. “Ok then,” he said finally. “I’ll play their silly games. But I meant it about working together,” he added. “I take it we can ‘fraternize’ when we’re upstairs?” he asked.

“Hell yes,” replied Rob. He stuck out his hand. “OK then,” he said. “Let’s shake on our deal. You work your butt off, and we’ll start our own business. What should we call it?”

Al shook his hand in return. “How about Black and White Motors?” he said, with a wry smile.

Rob creased up laughing. “Oh man,” he gasped out, “that would certainly be a great name for us! I like it, we’ll be Black and White Motors. Now you’d better get back to the lounge and join the white folks.” So saying he opened the door, and ushered Al back out into the corridor.

“What are you going to do?” asked Al.

“I’m going back up to my room to study. I may not be allowed to take the management courses, but sure as eggs I’m going to take the advanced course. So, I need to study. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow,” replied Al, as he went back across to the lounge.

He spent the rest of the evening there. After he had checked out the couple of shelves of books, he found one which looked to be a fairly interesting read and sat down with it in an easy chair by the radio. Some of the guys were playing pool, and others were either writing letters or just sitting and chatting. Occasional bursts of loud laughter and talk came from around the pool table, and someone would occasionally comment on what was on the radio, but other than that it was reasonably peaceful. None of the other residents made a move to intro-

duce themselves, and Al wasn't about to intrude where he felt he wasn't wanted. Being left alone didn't bother him, he was quite happy sitting and reading. At just after nine o'clock he went up to his room. Although it was early for him, he thought he might as well go to bed and read.

He was just changing into his pajamas when there was a knock at the door. He hastily tied the belt on his trousers, and went and answered the door. Rob was standing there, along with another black guy.

"Can we come in?" asked Rob. "Charlie here has something to ask you."

"Sure, come on in," replied Al, opening the door so they could come through. "Sit yourselves down."

Rob and Charlie came in. Rob sat on the bed, and Charlie took the only chair that was visible. Rob seemed a little apprehensive, and Charlie just looked nervous.

"What can I do for you guys?" asked Al, wondering what this was all about.

"Well, it's like this," began Rob. "I was telling Charlie here what you said about opening our own business when we finished our training. That's what Charlie's always wanted to do, you see, but he never got to finish his schooling so thought he didn't stand a chance. But he's an absolute genius when it comes to engines, he can fix anything he can get his hands on."

"I see," said Al, "go on."

"So, like I said, me and him got to talking, and we was wondering if you would mind taking on another partner? Someone else to work in the garage?"

Al considered for a moment, and then grinned. "I think it's a fine idea," he said. "After all, if we're going to be the biggest and best car repair centre around here, we're going to need great people to work with."

Rob and Charlie suddenly relaxed, and looked relieved. Rob turned to Charlie. "See, I told you he wasn't like those other stiff downstairs. Al's a regular guy."

Charlie stood up, and Al suddenly realized how big he was. He just went up and up. Al reckoned he must be at least six feet six inches, possibly a bit more. He had not an ounce of fat on him, but looked incredibly strong and wiry. He was also completely bald, his head shining like a billiard ball.

“Thanks for saying yes,” he said, holding his hand out. His voice was incredibly soft, and Al almost had to strain to hear what he was saying. He shook Charlie’s hand.

“No problem. It’s great to have a couple of friends to start out with. We can all starve together.”

Rob and Charlie laughed, and then they said their goodbyes and left. Al finished getting ready for bed, but instead of getting in and settling down for a good read, he sat there and considered the direction his life seemed to be taking. He now had two business partners, but no business, and a job, but no qualifications. Life was strange, he thought, but at least he had a direction now and a purpose, and that made all the difference. On that thought he turned out the light, and settled down for sleep.

* * * * *

That night set the basic pattern for life at Laurel House. Every day Al would catch the bus with Rob and Charlie and the rest of the residents who were training, and go into town to the training centre. He would spend the day there, eating the sandwiches provided by Mike and Glenda from the kitchen, and then come back in the evening to wash up and have his evening meal. He would then spend the evening in the lounge, either reading or, having gradually been accepted by the rest of the group, playing pool. He turned out to be extremely good at the game, never having (so far as he could remember) played it before. After he had played a few games, or read for a while, caught up on the latest news of the war, and chatted, he would go up to bed and read for a while, or knock on Rob’s door and discuss future plans with him and Charlie. These plans grew bigger and bigger as

time went on, until they were planning to take over the automotive repair business for the whole East coast of the USA.

It had been agreed between the three of them that it would be better if Al was the front man, and the one who did all the business with the banks, as they reckoned the banks would give him a better deal. Al would also do the books, as he was the only one likely to receive the business training they would need. They had decided to set up business on the outskirts of Philadelphia which was Charlie's home town. He was familiar with the places and the people, and had contacts who could be useful. Rob wasn't bothered; his parents were dead, and he said one place was much like another to him. Al of course didn't have any preferences whatsoever, as he had no memory of anywhere to influence him.

During the weekends, and when the evening weather was favorable, Al also kept his promise to sort out the kitchen garden. He found this work both enjoyable and satisfying, particularly as Rob and Charlie could join him in the garden without any eyebrows being raised or comments made. Tom was over the moon with the progress they made, and Mike was equally happy as soon as things started to sprout. The first meal prepared with home grown produce was greeted with a round of applause.

The work at the training centre was equally satisfying. Without knowing where it came from, Al found that he had a natural aptitude for engineering and could easily pick up even the most complicated techniques for engine repair with the bare minimum of training. He swallowed the training manual for the basic course within one month, and went on to the advance course immediately. He got through that course in a little over six weeks and Ted, almost overcome at finding someone with such an amazing talent for engineering, trained him in every technique he could think of. After four months' work, Al was fully qualified as a motor mechanic, and was being put through his paces with business management, accounts, and all the associated courses he would need to run a business. He had confided a small part of his

plans to Ted, and Ted was very encouraging. When he found out that Al was going to go into business with Rob and Charlie, he was actually very complimentary towards them, saying that they had a great mechanical aptitude, and should be able to produce high quality work. Ted obviously assumed that Al would be the boss and the Rob and Charlie the hired help, and Al didn't disabuse him of that idea. He felt telling Ted that the three of them would be equal partners could possibly spoil his relations with Ted, so he let Ted assume what he wanted and carried on learning as much as he could.

Once the engineering and business management side was sorted out, Al suggested the three of them should ask about doing the welding course. All three of them were keen, so Al mentioned it to Ted. Ted thought about for a while and then agreed it would be useful if they could weld. He had some discussions with the instructor over a beer, and a few days later they were on the course. On this course, Charlie excelled. His work was on a level above that of both Al and Rob, and in one of their meetings he was unanimously elected as 'vice president of welding', with much hilarity and toasting with coffee.

Al was happy in the hostel. He had a good rapport going with Rob and Charlie; he and Tom got on like a house on fire, as did he and Mike. He had settled in with the other residents, and the place felt like home. However, he was reminded he would have to leave by the sudden and unexpected appearance of Hugh Whittam at the training centre one morning. Hugh arrived with a couple of people in tow. They had a slightly bemused look Al instantly recognized; he had worn it himself not so long ago. They looked around the place, taking in all the different activities. Hugh guided them round, and eventually they finished the tour at the welding section. They stood watching for a couple of minutes, and when Al had finished what he was doing Hugh indicated he would like a word. Al put his welding gear down, and walked a little way with Hugh.

"What's up?" he asked. "Is something the matter?"

“No, nothing’s the matter,” replied Hugh. “I was just wondering whether you’d thought about what you were going to do when you left here, that’s all.”

“When I left? This is a bit sudden. Are you kicking me out or something?”

“No, nothing like that. It’s just that when a student approaches the end of his training schedule we have a chat with them to see whether they have any ideas about what they’re going to do next. We can give advice, and sometimes a bit of financial help. We can help you find accommodation, too.”

“Sounds like a comprehensive service to me,” remarked Al.

“Well, we like to do our best for our people,” replied Hugh. “After all, if we didn’t help them out, who would? I’ll come by the hostel later this afternoon and we can discuss the next steps then. OK?” Al nodded.

“Great, I’ll see you later on.” And with that, Hugh was off after his little group of new recruits.

The rest of the day passed pretty much as usual. Al completed his welding course, and although his standard was acceptable it was nowhere near as good as Charlie’s. Charlie seemed to have a real gift for it which Al couldn’t help but envy. At the end of the day he washed up and caught the bus back to the hostel, where he was told by Tom that Hugh was waiting in the office for him. Al walked down the corridor and went in.

“Ah, there you are!” exclaimed Hugh. “Good timing, I’ve just finished with the last of the new boys.”

Al came in and sat down. The office was the same as usual with its smell of stale tobacco smoke.

“So,” said Hugh. “I’m told you’ve done just about every course you can in your area, and you’ve nearly finished the welding course. What do you intend to do next?”

“I want to open my own garage,” said Al. “I want to work for myself, not for anyone else.”

“Great ambition,” said Hugh. “Have you any idea where you want to open this garage?”

“Well, I was thinking maybe on the outskirts of Philadelphia.”

“Any reason why?”

“Yeah, I’m going to be working with Rob Clark and Charlie Hagenbacher. They’re going to be my mechanics. Charlie has family in Philly, so it makes sense that he wants to be down that way. Rob and I don’t have any reason to go anywhere else, so it suits all of us.”

This was the line agreed by the three of them. Al would say he was going to run the garage, and Rob and Charlie would be working for him.

Hugh seemed surprised, but also pleased. “Well now, seems you’ve given this quite a bit of thought,” he replied. “Are you sure the other two will be OK with this arrangement?”

Al nodded. “Oh yes, we’ve spent quite a bit of time discussing it. All we need is a loan to get some premises started, and then we’re in business.”

“Well, I think we can help out with that. Through our trustees and board members we have a wide-ranging network of business contacts, and we use those to help our people get loans and premises—all sorts of things. We can even supply an accountant to help with those pesky tax returns and what have you. The last thing they’ll give you is some ‘seed money’. You are supposed to use that to invest in businesses, so you get an income over and above what you work at.”

“Investments?” asked Al. “I don’t know anything about investing.”

“Don’t worry about that, you’ll be given good advice.”

“All this sounds very expensive. What do we have pay back? And how long have we got?”

“Don’t worry about that. All you have to pay back is the loan and the seed money. You pay the loan back monthly, at very favorable rates let me tell you. You repay the seed money when you’ve made enough to cover it, in one lump. So if you invest and it fails, you don’t have to pay it back. Of course, you won’t get any more, so it pays to be a little careful.”

“Sounds scary,” commented Al.

“Not at all. As I said, you’ll get plenty of advice. I’m sure you’ll do well. Now, any more questions?”

“None as yet,” replied Al.

“In that case, I’ll be off. I’ll get in touch with you when I have some further information.”

“That’s great, thanks,” said Al sincerely. “We were wondering how we would get on trying to find some premises, and we could certainly do with the help.”

“Not a problem,” replied Hugh. “After all, we have to look out for our people don’t we? Now then, I must be off and you need to have your meal.”

Hugh stood up, and Al followed suit. They walked down the corridor to the main hall where they parted after shaking hands. Hugh left the building and Al continued on to the dining room. After the meal, instead of going to the lounge as usual Al went straight upstairs to Rob’s room, and knocked on the door. As expected, Charlie was there as well, and Al went in and sat down.

“Well, what did Hugh want?” demanded Rob.

Al explained what was going to happen, and how Hugh was intending to help them out, through the charity.

“Do we have to pay anything back?” demanded Rob. “I mean, it’s going to be hard enough to make a living to start with, without having to make payments to everyone.”

“Only the loan, and the seed money,” said Al. “I think if we offer a free car repair service to the other people who give us a hand, that should be sufficient. After all, depending on where we are they might not even want to come to us, I don’t know. But if we make the offer and they don’t take us up on it, they can’t blame us for not showing willing.”

Rob and Charlie nodded. “Sounds about right to me,” said Rob. “But only to those who help. I’m not giving free stuff away to everyone’s wife and daughter as well.”

“Of course not,” said Al. “We need to make some sort of profit.”

“Where did you tell them we wanted to be?” asked Charlie.

“I said on the outskirts of Philadelphia,” replied Al. “I don’t know the districts well enough to be specific, so I left it at that.”

“It doesn’t really matter, as long as we’re near Philly,” said Charlie. “I can get anywhere across town with no problem. It’s not that big a place.”

“What sort of area are we aiming at?” asked Rob.

“Well,” replied Al, “it needs to be a good enough area that people can afford cars, for a start. On the other hand, we don’t want to be anywhere really swanky, either. I’ve heard it said that rich people never pay their bills, and we don’t want a lot of nobs for clients in case they don’t pay. So, a nice middle-class district would be fine.”

Rob and Charlie both smiled. Al noticed. “What?” he said.

“Middle class?” Rob said. “Now I know you’re a Brit.”

“Well, what would you call it?” asked Al.

“Try ‘white collar’,” replied Rob. “This is America, we don’t do classes.”

“Oh really?” asked Al, with deep sarcasm in his voice. “I’ve heard all about your ‘upper classes’, your Boston upper crust, and the rest.”

Rob and Charlie laughed. “You’re right on there,” said Rob. “But *officially*,” he stressed, “there’s no such thing as class here.”

“Oh well,” said Al, also laughing, “if it’s *official* then I suppose we can’t argue with that.”

“So, we’re all set to get in business,” Rob said. “I can’t believe this actually going to go ahead. Do you reckon we’ll make a fortune?”

“I don’t know about making a fortune from the car repairs,” replied Al, “but if we get some good investment advice we should be able to make some money with stocks and shares.”

“Hey, I’m going to leave that up to you,” said Rob, shaking his head. “That’s way over my head. Just make sure you don’t cheat on us, now!”

“I promise,” said Al. “I’ll try and make sure we invest in something that will bring us a nest egg for our retirement. You never know, we could end up millionaires!”

They all burst out laughing, and then Al wished them both a ‘good night’ and went back to his room. As he got ready for bed he thought about the conversation, and thought about how great it would be to make enough to not have to work. If he could achieve that, he thought, to get just enough so that he could retire at a reasonable age and not have to worry about where the money was coming from, he would be satisfied. As he climbed into bed he considered what life might hold now he was starting this next big venture, and where he would be ten years from now. You never know, was his last sleepy thought, we might actually make it rich. He fell asleep imagining himself as a millionaire.

Chapter 15

“Ready to call it a day then guys?” Al called.

He straightened up, wincing slightly as he did so, and wiped his hands on the oily rag he had been using to wipe down the engine he was working on. Across the workshop he could see Rob face down across a car working on the engine, and Charlie was busy welding a water tank as a special order for another customer. The workshop was immaculately tidy, with each man’s tools on a trolley beside him. The floor was swept clean at the end of each day, and rubbish was left out the back for disposal. All three men liked to work in a clean and tidy environment, and felt that it presented a more professional appearance. Larger tools were displayed on boards around the walls, each on in its place. Larger pieces of equipment, such as Charlie’s welding equipment, were kept neat and tidy in an area at the back. Al was pleased with what he saw, and felt a glowing sense of pride in the place. He, Rob and Charlie had worked their socks off to get the place started up and now, after six months of hard work, they were up and running and building up their client base.

They had finally found premises in a suitable area, and had settled in well. Help with advertising and word of mouth referrals by their patrons had helped them to get started, and it hadn’t taken long for word of their excellent services to get round. One advantage they had was that with Charlie’s excellent welding skills, they could do not only car engine and other mechanical repairs

(thanks to Rob), they could also do electrical repairs (thanks to Al taking a final course before leaving), and they could produce one-off custom-made steel items for customers looking for that type of work. Satisfied customers for this side of the business had also spread the word, and they were getting to the stage where they almost had more work than they could cope with.

The investment seed money was also doing well. Under the tutelage of one of the trustees of the charity, Al had initially invested the money under his guidance and they had quickly recouped their initial investment. Al had since been investing some of their money on his own, and had had a modest success. He now spent a few minutes every day reviewing their stocks and shares, and drawing up the list of companies he was interested in. He would discuss this list with Rob and Charlie, and they would arrive at a consensus. Although their initial investment had yielded good returns, all three of them had decided that they were uncomfortable about investing heavily in armaments, and they had been looking further afield for ideas.

Al was of the opinion they should invest in the motor trade, and Rob and Charlie agreed. Al also wanted to invest in IBM, because although they were also producing armaments for the war effort, he liked the idea that they had set up a fund to give pensions to IBM war widows and orphans. Charlie suggested that household appliances might be a good idea, and he was a fan of J Edgar Hoover, so they also put Hoover on the list. Accordingly, the next time Al had a meeting with their mentor, he said he wanted to invest in these companies. After a little discussion, their mentor agreed, and the investments were duly made.

They were busy at the garage, extremely so. Their reputation had spread very fast, and they were inundated with work. This was very good news as far as the business was concerned, but not good as far as not working all hours was concerned. The three of them had been discussing getting a fourth member of the team to join them, and as Al wandered over to see what Rob was doing, Rob raised the question again.

“I’ve been thinking,” he said, as he wiped his hands and closed the bonnet of the car. “We need someone else working here, we’re completely swamped.”

“I agree,” said Al. “Any suggestions?”

“We could advertise,” replied Rob.

“We could,” said Al dubiously. “But would we get someone who was any good?”

Charlie shut off his welding equipment, and took off his mask. “How about Ted?” he asked.

Al looked at him blankly for a moment. “Ted?” he repeated.

“Yes, you remember, Ted from the training centre,” replied Charlie.

“Are you serious?” Al said incredulously.

“Quite serious,” came the reply. “He’s a good guy; he was always telling us extra little bits and pieces, and he was pleased when he found out we were setting ourselves up in business with you.”

Al was nonplussed. He turned to Rob and said “What do you think, Rob? Good idea or not?”

Rob shrugged. “He was always an OK guy as a trainer,” he replied, “but we’d have to go and talk to him before I said one way or another. How about you?”

“I got on with him fine,” shrugged Al, “but the question is, would he like working for you two, and how will he react when he finds out that we’re partners?”

“Why don’t you ask him?” suggested Charlie. “You may be surprised, I don’t think he’s as bad as you reckon.”

“So how do we handle the problem of us all being partners, and him not?”

“So make him a partner,” interjected Rob. “It’s not as though we’re short of business right now.”

“Well, if you’re sure about this,” began Al.

“Yes, I’m sure. You go see him tomorrow and ask him.”

“OK, if that’s what you want.”

The three of them got themselves cleaned up as best they could, then locked the garage and walked the three blocks to their

living quarters. They had been fortunate in that they had found a house for rent with four bedrooms, two bathrooms, and a large living room, dining room and kitchen. It wasn't luxurious but it was affordable, and it was easy to look after. They took turns cooking, which gave them a variety of cooking styles. Al was good at plain, wholesome cooking, with casseroles and stews being his specialties. Rob had been taught to cook by his mother, who was from the Deep South, and his cooking style leant heavily in the direction of jambalaya and gumbo. Charlie had been taught by his grandmother who was Jamaican, and he treated them to some fantastic Caribbean food. They didn't cook every night—some nights they were so late all they had time for was a sandwich—but regularly enough that they were getting known at the local stores, and the shopkeepers would keep special items for them. Some nights they would pop into the local late-opening deli and get something from there, and once a week they would do enough shopping for there to be staples in the house if they needed something extra.

Their routine was fairly well set. Whoever was cooking got first try at a bath (the boiler was old and crotchety, and needed encouragement to provide enough hot water for more than one bath at a time), and the other two would wait and get bathed a little later. There was a shower in each bathroom but they weren't totally reliable, and the three of them were saving up for a plumber to come and sort them out.

Weekends were spent doing whatever they wanted. They would work Saturday mornings at the garage, and after closing would go their own ways. Charlie usually went to see his relatives in and around Philadelphia, and Al usually went back to the hostel to look after the garden. He had thoroughly enjoyed working with the soil when living at the hostel, and figured that to continue to look after the garden would go some way towards paying off the debt of gratitude he owed them. He sometimes had a helper or two from the current batch of residents but more often than not he had the place to himself, and he valued this time on his own. Neither Al nor Charlie knew what Rob got up

to on a weekend; he disappeared from lunchtime Saturday until late Sunday night. They had given up asking him what he'd been up to, as his invariable answer was 'whooping it up'. Whatever he got up to it seemed to put him in a good mood, as he was invariably cheerful on a Monday.

Al, Rob and Charlie locked the garage up and started off down the street. At the next junction Rob and Charlie headed back to the house, while Al carried on towards the training centre. He really wasn't sure how this was going to go, but he had promised to ask Ted whether he would join them and now was as good a time as any. Although training would have finished for the day, Al was sufficiently acquainted with Ted's routine to know that he would still be at the centre, cleaning up and getting things ready for the next day. He arrived at the big double doors and knocked on the small entry door, knowing it would be bolted on the inside at this time of the day.

Al was in luck, it was Ted himself who opened the door. He looked surprised to see Al but gestured for him to come inside.

"So what brings you back here?" Ted asked as he shut the door behind Al. "Got a job you need some help with?"

Al shook his head. "I've come to ask you something," he said.

"Well I gathered that," retorted Ted. "I wouldn't expect you to be here to ask after my health."

Ted led him back across the workshop to the car repair section. Although it hadn't been that long since he had left, Al had irrationally expected things to have changed. He didn't know whether to be relieved or disappointed that it looked exactly the same as it had the last time he was here.

"OK then," said Ted, "what brings you here?" Ted had seated himself on the edge of one of the work benches. Al looked around for somewhere to sit, and then decided to stand.

"We've got a proposition for you," began Al.

"We? Who's we?" interrupted Ted.

"Me, Rob and Charlie. We set up a business together, remember?"

“Yeah, I remember,” said Ted. Al couldn’t read anything from Ted’s response; he was keeping his face strictly neutral.

“Well, we need another mechanic.”

“Why? Not as good as you thought you were?” asked Ted, jeeringly.

Al looked at him. “I said this was a waste of time,” he said, and turned to go. “But at least I tried, like I said I would.”

“Hang on a sec,” said Ted, in a different tone of voice. Al turned round.

“I’m sorry about that,” Ted apologized. “It’s just an automatic reaction. I’ll shut up and listen if you’ll tell me what you came for.”

Al regarded him suspiciously. “What I came for was to ask if you’d like to become a partner in our business,” he said. “Charlie seemed to think it would be worth asking you.”

“A partner?” repeated Ted. “A full partner?”

“Yes, a four-way split,” replied Al. “We’ve got so much work coming in we can’t cope, and we haven’t got the time to train anyone up. Charlie said you were a decent bloke, so I said I’d come and ask you. Seemed like it was going to be a waste of time but I said I would, so here I am.”

Ted seemed stunned by the information. “You want to ask me?” he repeated. Al nodded. “We couldn’t think of anyone better,” he confirmed.

“I don’t know what to say,” said Ted. “It’s what I’ve always dreamed of, being a partner in my own business, but I never thought I’d get the chance. And then you walk in off the street to offer me my dream, and I nearly blew it before it was offered. I am such a jerk!”

Al nodded. “Yep, that just about sums it up,” he said.

Ted looked at him suspiciously, and then started to laugh. Al started to smile at him, and then ended up laughing with him. When they had both laughed themselves out, Ted sat back and wiped his face.

“You guys really take the biscuit,” he said. “Here I go, teaching you all I know, and then you offer me a job.”

“Yeah, well, we’ve made the offer,” began Al, “but are you going to accept it?”

Ted looked at him. “You know, I really think I will. But before I do, how much are you turning over a week?”

Al told him, and Ted whistled. “Man, that’s a good deal,” he said. “There’s plenty there already for four, you guys must really be raking it in.”

Al shook his head. “It’s not a question of the money,” he said, “although that is the good side. We mostly take just what we need to live, and put the rest back into the garage. You know, better tools, more equipment. A decent coffee machine.”

Ted laughed. “Yeah, you gotta have a good coffee maker,” he replied. “Crap coffee means crap working. I don’t mind putting money back into the company, it makes sense. I suppose you want bigger premises eventually.”

Al nodded. “Yeah, we want to get somewhere bigger eventually. But we don’t want to over-extend too soon. It’s a fine line, between being too cautious and too reckless.”

“Yeah, tell me about it,” replied Ted. “That’s how I ended up working here. My last boss over-reached himself and went bust, and here I am.”

“Not for much longer,” said Al. “You might want to pop round and see the place before you finally decide.”

“Hell no, if I give you boys time to change your minds about asking me, you might take this chance away from me. I have to give notice here, and then I can start. Probably be a couple of weeks, is that OK?”

“Yep, that’ll be fine,” replied Al.

“Just one thing,” Ted said tentatively. “I get accommodation thrown in with this job, so I’ll need to find somewhere to live as well.”

“Not a problem,” Al reassured him. “We have a house not far from the workshop, and it’s got a spare room. If you don’t

mind mucking in with the cooking and cleaning, you can move in there with us.”

“Sounds good to me,” Ted replied. “I’m no great shakes as a cook, but I don’t mind learning. I’ll sort out my leaving here, and let you know when I can start.”

Al stood up. “That sounds good,” he said. “We’ll look forward to seeing you. If you want to come round anytime, just pop into the workshop and we’ll point you in the right direction. Welcome aboard.” He held his hand out, and Ted took it.

“Just one thing,” said Ted. Al looked at him with his eyebrows raised.

“What’s that?” Al asked.

“I want to say thank you, to all of you, for giving me this chance. I can promise you I won’t let you down—any of you.” Ted had a look of total sincerity on his face as he said this, and Al looked him in the eyes, and nodded slowly.

“No problem. But don’t thank me, thank Charlie. He’s the one who insisted I should come and see you.”

“I don’t care which one of you thought of me, I know it must be a joint decision, and that means you all agreed. That means a lot to me, and I just want you to know that I appreciate it.”

“No problem. Let us know when you can start, and we’ll get everything sorted. If you want to move into the house, pop round the garage on a Saturday and we’ll take you round when we finish for the day.”

“Will do. Now, I’d better throw you out so that I can get on with clearing up here.” Ted ushered Al across to the small entry door, and unbolted it for him. Al stepped out, turned around and bent down to see Ted’s face.

“Are you sure you’re going to be OK working with Rob and Charlie?” he asked.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Ted retorted.

“Well, I got the impression you didn’t like ... blacks ... when I was being trained. You seemed to be blocking them from going further.”

“Well, yes, I was,” Ted admitted slowly. “But that was nothing to do with how I felt about them. They’re great guys, and excellent mechanics. But the powers that be, they seem to think that blacks are no good at doing anything more than basic stuff, you know? I knew that if I recommended them for the advanced courses they would have got turned down, so it’s easier to discourage them in the first place than to raise their hopes and then have them thrown back at them. You know what I mean?”

Al nodded. “Yeah, I know what you mean.”

“I got no problem working with anyone who’ll give me the chance you will,” said Ted earnestly.

“Well then, that’s OK,” said Al. “See you soon.”

“Sure will!”

Ted shut the door behind Al, and he heard the bolts being shot home. With his mind eased of its major worry, Al walked back to the house deep in thought. Bigger premises! He hadn’t—none of them had—thought about bigger premises, but with four of them working, they might well need to move. He decided that hurdle could be dealt with when it arrived and it would need more discussion between the three—no four, of them anyway.

Al arrived back at the house just as Rob was serving up one of his mega meals. Al was glad of it, he was hungry after his slightly longer walk. He hung up his coat then walked into the kitchen and washed his hands. He sat down at the table just as Rob served up.

“Well,” demanded Charlie, as Al reached for the bread. “How’d it go?”

“Surprisingly well,” replied Al. “You were right, Charlie, he’s over the moon we asked him.”

“See, I told you,” responded Charlie.

“I even asked if he minded you two being black, and he said he had no problem with it.”

“So why didn’t he give us the chances he gave you?” asked Rob, sitting down at the table.

“He explained that,” replied Al. He went on to explain why Ted had never pushed them into the advanced courses. Neither of them seemed particularly surprised.

“Aren’t you mad?” asked Al.

They shook their heads. “Naw, you get used to that, being black,” replied Rob. “It’s just one of those things. People think because you’re black you’re either one step removed from a gorilla, or else you’re stupid. And a lot of the backers of the charity are from the South, they still think we’re slaves or something.”

“Isn’t there something you can do about that?” Al asked.

Rob shook his head. “There’s some guy called King working down in Georgia, but we have it better up here than they do. We just get on with our lives.” He looked at Al’s face, and added “Now don’t get all riled up about it. You start doing stuff on our behalf and you’re going to screw up the business we got going. Then we’ll all be out of a job, and no one will employ us because they’ll see us as trouble makers.”

Al set his jaw stubbornly. “But it’s wrong,” he declared.

“We know it’s wrong,” said Rob. “But while there’s not one darn thing we can do about it, we’ll just live with it and get on with life. When we’ve made enough money we don’t have to care about our reputations, then we can do something about it. But not yet. So please don’t go off on a crusade on our behalf, because we don’t want you to. Not yet. Promise?”

Rob had taken hold of Al’s wrist and was gripping it tightly. He kept his grip until Al looked him in the face. Al sighed and shook his head.

“All right, I promise. I won’t do anything until you think it’s the right time,” he conceded. He flicked Rob’s fingers. “You can let go of me now, I want to finish my meal,” he smiled.

Rob smiled back, and released him. Al rubbed his wrist absently as he continued eating. Unlike Rob and Charlie, Al used both a knife and fork, and was told by the others that this habit definitely marked him as being un-American, but no matter how hard he tried, he just couldn’t eat a whole meal with a fork.

The rest of the meal passed in virtual silence. They were all hungry, and the food was too good to waste. After the meal, once the washing up and tidying up had been sorted out, they all sat and relaxed in the front room. Charlie had suggested they got a TV, and Al and Rob were agreeable. They sat and watched the TV for a while, and then Charlie went off to have his bath. Rob, of course, had taken advantage of Al's absence earlier on to have his bath as soon as he got in.

Al and Rob were sitting watching the TV when Rob suddenly said "What do you think about making a will?"

"A will?" asked Al. "What brought this on?"

"Well, me and Charlie were discussing what would happen if something happened to one of us," explained Rob. "We don't want just anyone having a say in the business, and if someone else got hold of part of the company they might be able to shut it down. We don't want that."

"No, we certainly don't," agreed Al. "What did you have in mind?"

"We think we should have a clause that states that our stakes in the garage should only be left to other members of the original partnership—including Ted, of course. The other partners would have the chance to buy it from the rest, but it shouldn't go outside the original group."

Al pursed his lips as he thought the idea through. "I think that's a good idea," he said finally.

"So, can you sort out with a lawyer to get it done?"

"Sure, I'll get it done when I next see our mentor."

"How soon will Ted be joining us?"

"Well, he said he's got a couple of weeks notice to give, but he'll be over as soon as possible. Oh, he also wants to move in here with us. Is that OK?"

"Yeah, don't see a problem with that. We might need to get the boiler upgraded though."

"Why don't we just get a new one? Probably save time and money in the long run."

“You could be right. I’ll get that organized.”

Charlie came back in, dressed in his favorite bright pink bathrobe. Al and Rob had ribbed him about the robe since the day he first bought it. He just shrugged, smiled, and carried on wearing it.

“Al thinks we should get a new boiler in,” Rob told him. “Oh, and Ted’s moving in as well. You OK with that?”

Charlie shrugged. “What the hell, we’re going to be working with the guy, we might as well share the house with him. But you’re right about the boiler, Al, it won’t cope with four of us wanting a bath.”

“Rob’s going to sort that out for us,” Al told him. “I’m also going to arrange for us to get the wills sorted out. There’s no rush, we can do that once Ted is on board.”

“Sounds good to me,” Charlie murmured.

Just then Rob’s favorite show came on, and they stopped talking and watched until it was time for bed.

The next couple of weeks went by quickly. Work was steady, and they were just about coping with the volume. They couldn’t wait for Ted to get started. He’d popped round one night and they’d shown him the house. He was happy with the room they had given him. They explained about the boiler, and he had immediately agreed to contribute. Things seemed to be going really well, and there were no clouds on the horizon.

Al had been quietly looking about for a larger workshop. There wasn’t much scope in their immediate neighborhood, so he was going further afield on his Saturday afternoons. He had found somewhere he thought would be just about perfect, but he wasn’t sure how the others would react to the idea of moving. It was a longer trip, but it was on a bus route. He was also seriously considering getting the business a vehicle of some type—maybe a pick up truck, or a tow truck. A car would be handy as well, to get them to and from work if nothing else.

Although he could see the reasons behind moving premises, Al realized that there could be several drawbacks. People

might not want to travel further to have their cars done, no matter how good the service offered, and if they lost customers they might lose the business. Larger premises would be more expensive, almost inevitably, so their overheads would go up which would mean either smaller profits, or bigger prices charged to the customers which could also lose them custom. Al turned the pros and cons round in his brain whenever he got the chance and finally took a decision, although he decided to wait until one of the others brought the subject up before mentioning what he had done. In the event, this was sooner than he had anticipated.

Ted arrived, and moved into the house. The new boiler functioned exceptionally well, and could quite easily cope with running hot water for two baths at a time. It also heated the house, and the whole place was now lovely and warm all the time. Ted turned out to be quite a good cook although his repertoire was limited, and they were all happy enough with his food. He had more of a problem adapting to the food Charlie produced, but once he got used to it, he pronounced it brilliant.

Ted in the workshop was a revelation. The other three had been trained and were very good, but Ted had been working as a mechanic for 30 years, and what he didn't know about fixing things wasn't worth knowing. He continued their education whilst working, and they all learnt all the little tricks of the trade which defined a craftsman as opposed to the merely competent. Word soon got round, and business picked up even more.

One night, when they had been falling over each other all day, Rob slammed a spanner down on his workbench and said "This is driving me nuts."

The others all stood and looked at Rob with something approaching shock. Rob was generally the most even tempered of all of them, and for him to come out with something like this was so unusual as to be astonishing.

"Whatever do you mean?" asked Al, who was standing just along from him at the bench.

“This place is too darned small,” Rob said. He pointed to the bench. “I’ve been getting your way, and you’ve been getting in mine, all day.” he declared. “Charlie hardly has any room to do his welding, and Ted can’t get on with his stuff because he needs the bench and we’re using all of it between us. We need a bigger place.”

Al nodded. “I agree,” he said. “It’s been obvious for a while that we’re outgrowing this place, so I’ve been looking around. I think I’ve found somewhere, but we need to discuss it before we do anything about it.”

“Please don’t overdo things,” Ted put in. “I told you before I lost my job because my boss over-extended, and I don’t want to be in that position again. Let’s be a bit cautious, eh?”

Al smiled. “It’s OK Ted,” he reassured him. “I don’t think this place will over extend us. In fact, when I enquired about the rent it’s almost identical to this place, except for the yard. It’s got a big yard at the back which is accessible off the street, and we’d have to pay a bit extra for that. The neighborhood’s about the same as this, and it’s not much further to travel for the customers. In fact, I’ve been mentioning the idea to a couple of them and they’re all in favor. They could leave their cars overnight if we have a secure storage area, and it would give us more time to work on them.”

“So why didn’t you mention it earlier?” asked Rob.

“Precisely because of the reasons Ted has put forward,” replied Al. “I didn’t want us to over-extend, to walk before we could run. But business is doing so well, I think we can afford to move. Our customers will come with us, I’m sure, so we won’t lose any trade.”

“So where is this perfect place?” asked Charlie.

“I’ll show you on the way home,” said Al. “We’ll have to take a different bus home, but it’s worth it, I think.”

“OK, well let’s go now,” said Ted. “Like you said, I can’t work here today anyway because you two bums are in my way, so we might as well take an early break and go. It’s only an hour off.”

The others agreed, and they cleared up, cleaned up and then locked up the garage. There was a quiet air of excitement as they walked up to the bus stop, and waited for the bus.

“Of course, we can also use the yard to store the tow truck, and it’s somewhere to park the car when we get to work,” said Al casually as they waited. Rob, Charlie and Ted regarded him in astonishment.

“Tow truck?” asked Ted.

“Car? What car?” demanded Rob.

“Well, we can’t rely on the bus all the time,” Al replied, enjoying himself hugely. “We can use the car to get to and from work, and if a customer breaks down we can use the truck to go and fetch him. Of course, we’d need the telephone putting in.”

“Now hold on a minute ...” Rob started, but he was interrupted by Ted.

“No, wait a sec, he has a point,” he said slowly. “If we’re going to afford larger premises, we’re going to do more repairs, which means bigger premises. It’s a circle. If we can expand to the point where we can afford a tow truck, it means we’ll be able to offer a more complete service to people, which means we should get more trade.”

By the time Ted had finished, Rob and Charlie were looking thoughtful. They had to wait until they got off the bus for any further discussion as they couldn’t get seats close enough to each other to let them carry on the conversation. They got off the bus, and set off towards the premises. There wasn’t much conversation until they got there.

“Well,” demanded Al, “what do you think?”

The premises were huge—or seemed to be compared to where they were now. There was a large showroom at the front with glass fronts, and they could see that there was a very large workshop to the rear. The yard was securely fenced, and had large, lockable gates.

“Damn,” said Rob quietly. “It’s huge. Are you sure we can afford this?”

“Oh yes,” replied Al, “the rent is only fifty a month more than we pay now.”

“And what do you propose we do with the show room?” asked Ted.

“We can ignore it to start with,” Al said confidently. “After a while we can use it to sell things like polish, maybe some driving clothing, bits for cars, you know, like mirrors and things. Later, maybe, we could sell a few cars.”

“You’re mad,” said Rob with conviction. “Sell cars? Us? I’d like to see that! Who do you think is going to buy a car off us?”

This time it was Charlie who saw the potential. “You’ve been thinking about this for a while, haven’t you?” he said. Al nodded. “You got big ideas, man.” He turned to Rob and Ted. “We need this guy,” he said simply. “We need to ride his coat-tails as far as he takes us.”

“But what if we fail?” asked Ted.

“We ain’t gonna fail,” replied Charlie. “We’re gonna live the high life, and go places.”

Rob looked at Charlie. “Do you really believe that we can do this?” he asked.

Charlie nodded. “I think we can. We can really go places if we want,” he replied.

Ted was also nodding his head. “I reckon we can do this,” he stated quietly. “It’s just a question of whether we want to or not.”

“I want to,” announced Charlie.

“Yeah, and me,” agreed Rob.

“I’m already there,” said Al.

“Let’s do it,” said Ted suddenly. “To hell with being cautious, let’s do it.”

“Don’t you want to see inside?” asked Al.

“Can we arrange that?” asked Ted.

“Sure, come on,” replied Al.

“Don’t we need the keys?” asked Rob nervously.

Al grinned, and pulled a bunch of keys from his pocket. “Come along gentlemen,” he said, “let’s go an inspect our new

premises.” He looked around at their startled faces, and started to laugh. “You look just like a bunch of goldfish,” he chuckled.

“How ... what ... when ...” started Rob. He tried again. “When did you get the keys? And how did you know we’d want to see it today?”

“I got the keys last week, when I bought the place,” he replied. This produced another sensation. He held up his hands to stop the questions. “Yes, I bought it. We did exceptionally well on some of our short-term investments, and this place was too good a chance to miss out on. If you hadn’t agreed, I would simply have either let it, or sold it.”

“But where did the money come from?” asked Ted.

“We have some investments,” explained Al. “It was seed money given to me when I started up the business. We’ve been lucky, that’s all. I used some of the returns from the investments to buy this place. I’ve had the keys for a few days, I was just waiting for one of you to suggest moving.”

“Jeez, you’re some guy,” Ted said in admiration. The others nodded.

“Come on guys, let’s go see inside.” There was universal agreement to this suggestion. Al lead the way, and opened the gate to the yard. They trailed across the yard to the workshop entrance, which Al also opened.

“Come on in,” he invited them.

Inside, the place was larger than they had thought. There would be ample room for each of them to work. There were three ramps, four work benches, and a massive amount of room for storage. Incongruously, a brand new pristine-looking fridge stood by itself against one wall. Al wandered over to it, whilst the others looked around their new premises. A sudden loud ‘pop’ made them turn round. Al was standing there with a bottle of champagne in his hand, pouring some into a glass.

“Let’s toast our new venture,” he said, handing the glass to Rob, who was first over. He poured a glass for each of them, handing them round.

“Here’s to us!” he toasted.

“To us,” the others replied in unison. They drank. Charlie raised his glass. “To Al, the brains behind this outfit.” Before Al could protest, they had drunk his health.

“No, I’ve got a better idea,” he said. “Let’s drink to the business. Gentlemen, I give you Black and White Motors!”

Chapter 16

Al stretched, and straightened up from under the bonnet of the car he was working on. It had been a long day, and he was feeling bushed. He wiped his hands on an oily rag, and decided to call it a day.

“Hey guys,” he called out. “I’m calling it a day. How about you?”

Charlie straightened up from where he was welding a customer’s lock box, a special order item he had taken on.

“Give me five minutes,” he called back. “I’m nearly done here for today.”

Ted looked over. “If you’ve finished I could do with a hand here for few minutes,” he said. “This mother is playing silly buggers, and I haven’t got enough hands to do the job.”

“Sure, no problem.” Al went over, and Ted showed him what he needed. Al followed his directions, and the job was soon completed.

“Right, that’s it for today,” Ted said as he shut the bonnet. “I’ll give this little beauty a wash and polish in the morning, and then she’s ready to go.”

Rob came over. “Al,” he started, “how are we doing on spares at the moment?”

“Not bad,” replied Al. “Why are you asking?”

“It’s this damned rationing,” Rob grumbled. “It’s bad enough having to scrape around for spare parts at the best of times, but now it’s getting impossible.”

Charlie had obviously overheard the conversation, and he came over. "I can get you some parts," he said, "as long as you're not too fussy about where they came from."

Al looked a bit dubious. "Will they be traceable?" he asked. "I don't want government inspectors, or the police knocking on the door and telling me we're being shut down, arrested, or both."

"Don't worry about that," replied Charlie. "I know where we can get spares. Tell me what you need, and I'll get the family on it."

Al nodded. He had been made aware that it was Charlie's family contacts which had made it possible for them to open the workshop and not be bothered by any protection rackets. Apparently Charlie's family had a lot of influence in the shady underworld of Philadelphia, and a mere suggestion that they would find it annoying if Charlie, Charlie's friends or their business were interrupted in any way had been enough to ensure they were left strictly alone. Although not entirely happy with the situation, regarding it as a right that they should be able to run a business without any trouble, he was pragmatic enough to appreciate that the situation gave him one less thing to worry about.

"OK, I'll leave that in your capable hands," he told Charlie. "But there is something else we need to think about."

The other three looked at him expectantly. Al explained. "We've got this enormous showroom out front and we're not using it. We need to generate some income from it, so I would like us to sit down tonight and have a session to discuss what we're going to use it for."

The others nodded agreement. "You're right," said Rob, "it's a crying shame to have it sat there doing nothing. Whose turn is it to cook tonight?" he continued.

Al put his hand up. "I think it's mine," he admitted. The others gave theatrical groans. "I know, I know, but it could be worse," he continued.

"Don't see how," said Ted, and the others laughed. They all washed up, and then left. After locking the workshop, they

walked back to the house and Al bathed, then cooked whilst the others cleaned themselves up. They sat down to Al's dinner (pork chops, sweet potato and vegetables from the hostel), and then took their coffee into the living room. Al gave the others paper and pens, and then sat down himself.

"OK," he began, "I want each of you to spend about half an hour thinking about what we can do with the showroom. It doesn't have to be motor trade related, although I confess that's what I wanted it for originally, but with the war on and cars being rationed we're not going to get enough second hand cars to make a business out of that yet. That will have to wait until the war's over, and things get back pretty much to normal. But for now, we've got a large space and nothing to fill it, so let's have a brain storming session, and get some ideas on the table."

Silence fell for several minutes, broken only by a couple of heavy sighs and the sound of pens on paper. Rob and Charlie went back for more coffee, but Al and Ted didn't move. Finally, Al looked at the clock and said "OK boys, time's up. What have you got?"

No-one spoke, although Ted did look up.

"Ted, what did you come up with?" he asked.

"Well, we could convert part of it to an ice cream parlor," he said. "Put some tables in, a couple of soda fountains, a juke box maybe."

"Not bad," said Al. "Rob, what did you think of?"

Rob looked frustrated. "I couldn't think of one single thing to use it for, so eventually I thought 'why not do a bit of everything?' Maybe we could let out different areas for different things. There's always people wanting to start a business, who can't afford their own shop. They might be able to afford a corner of ours, though. Maybe we could use it for that."

"That's another good idea," Al said. "Charlie, what about you?"

Charlie hesitated. "Well," he began.

“Come on Charlie, we’re not going to laugh at you,” said Al. “What did you think of?”

“Well,” he said again, “my folks are looking for premises. My mother wants to run a hair and beauty parlor, and needs somewhere for that.” He looked as if he expected everyone to laugh, but no one even cracked a smile. Al looked around.

“OK,” he said. “We’ve had several ideas put forward. Now I want you to think about each idea, and put down your thoughts on them.”

“Hang on a sec,” said Rob. “We haven’t heard your idea yet.”

“I was going to suggest we did a bit of everything—you know, sell pots and pans, household items, furniture—all that sort of thing. It’s a bit like Rob’s idea, but we’d be doing it instead of letting space to other people for them to do it.”

Ted nodded. “It’s feasible,” he agreed. “Let’s have our few minutes thinking, and see what we come up with.”

Silence descended once again. After several minutes, Al raised his head and said “OK, let’s see what we’ve got this time.”

He looked around the group. “OK Charlie, let’s hear your thoughts first.”

Charlie looked startled, and a bit embarrassed to be going first. “Well,” he started, “thinking about what everyone’s said, I guess we should try and run the place ourselves, or at least get someone in to run it for us, but have it as our shop. I also think we should do the ice cream parlor bit, and maybe combine that with some of the other stuff.”

Ted broke in with “I know it was my idea originally,” he said, “but having thought about it, are we in the right area for an ice cream parlor? I mean, we don’t exactly have a lot of houses round here.”

“No, I know that,” replied Charlie. “My idea was that we would have a little place, and serve the customers who came for the other stuff. You know, the ones who came to buy stuff, or maybe someone having their car done. They might want to stop off and have a drink or something.”

“Hey, I think Charlie’s onto something there,” Rob exclaimed. “That’s not a bad idea, you know?”

Al nodded. “Yeah, I think we might be on to something as well. I was thinking that we might expand a bit, you know, after the war, and do stuff like tire changing, things like that. If we have an ice cream parlor we can have somewhere for the folks to go while they’re waiting for their cars.”

Ted looked excited. “I never thought of it that way,” he said. “But Charlie’s right, we could have a small place, and see how it goes. And maybe,” he continued excitedly, “we could give his mom a corner for her hair and beauty place, then we’ll have more customers waiting as well.”

Charlie beamed. “Hey, yeah, that would be great,” he agreed enthusiastically. “It might even bring people in from elsewhere, you never know.”

“OK, so are we agreed then?” asked Al. “We’re going to set up part of the showroom as an ice cream parlor, and give Charlie’s mom some of it as well. In the space in between, we’ll sell stuff, not sure what yet, but we’ll decide that later.”

Rob, Charlie and Ted nodded. “Good, then I’ll get someone to draw us up some plans, and we’ll need to get someone to talk to City Hall for us and get the paperwork started for permits and stuff. Let’s have a drink to celebrate!”

He walked into the kitchen, and got four beers out of the fridge, and opened them, and took them back into the living room. Having handed them round, he said “Let’s toast our new enterprise!”

They clinked bottles, and drank. Although he was happy that the showroom would be used, he still felt that there was a certain lack of enthusiasm in his partners.

“OK guys, what’s up? You’re about as excited about this as a snake in a shooting pit.”

Ted looked at him. “We’re just worried, that’s all.”

“Worried? Worried about what?”

“About whether we’re going too far too fast,” put in Rob. “It’s a big step we’re taking—or should I say, another big step

we're taking, putting money into another business. What happens if it falls flat on its face?"

"Oh, so that's it," Al said. "Is that the only problem? Truly?" They all nodded.

"OK, sit yourselves down while I get some paperwork to show you." They sat back down while Al went to the small room he laughingly called his 'office'. There he got the files he needed and went back to the living room.

"Right, come and have a look at this," he said, as he opened the file to the right page. Inside the file were all the bank statements and broker statements from the business and the investments they had made.

"See this figure here," he said, pointing to the bottom of the bank statement. They nodded. "This is how much we have in the bank."

Rob whistled in amazement. The figure was probably about twice as much as the whole garage was worth.

"And here," continued Al, "we have the figure made off our investments over the last six months." This time it was Ted's turn to be amazed. Charlie just looked totally staggered.

"Is that all our money?" asked Rob in an awed voice. "Truly, is it all ours?"

"It sure is," said Al. "This is what we've made from the business, and also from our investments. Please don't worry about us not being able to afford the new business. That should be the least of our worries."

Ted, Rob and Charlie all relaxed. "I had no idea about how much we were making," said Ted.

"Me neither," said Rob.

"Well, to be fair, it's not all coming from the garage," said Al. "What with the restrictions on parts, and the rationing of things like tires, the garage is barely ticking over and most months we only break even. Most of that amount has come from our investments. But after the war is over, and things get back on an even keel, I reckon we can start and make a real go of the business ...

businesses, rather,” he corrected himself. “My thinking is if we get in now then we’ll be in a better position after the war, as we’ll already have things in place. That’ll give us a big advantage over the other guys who will have to start up from scratch.”

He looked up at the other faces round the table. They were looking distinctly happier since looking at the figures.

“So, what do you reckon then?” he asked. “Shall we go ahead with it?”

Ted stood up straight, and said “Why not? Why the hell not? Let’s live dangerously for a while.”

Rob laughed. “I never thought I’d hear you say that,” he said.

“Well, you can’t be afraid of things forever,” Ted replied.

“Charlie, what about you?” Al asked.

“I’m happy ... and I know my mom will be too. She’s going to get her beauty parlor, after all.”

“Right then, now we’ve got that settled, shall we try and have a celebration again?” asked Al.

This time, they all laughed, and were quite willing to drink a toast to the new enterprise.

“What are we going to call it?” queried Rob, after a while.

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Al. “Charlie, got any ideas? After all, it’s your mom who’s going to be working there.”

Charlie blushed. “Well, I did have one idea for a name,” he admitted.

“Well come on then, let’s hear it,” Ted demanded.

“I was thinking we could call it ‘drink ‘n’ shears’,” he mumbled.

Everyone laughed. “That’s a brilliant name,” said Al, when the laughter had died down a little. “Fantastic. Tells you exactly what we do. I love it!”

“You clever brother, you,” said Rob, giving him a hug. “How long did it take you to come up with that?”

Charlie looked a little embarrassed. “It’s what my mom was going to call it,” he explained.

“Well, it sounds damn good to me,” said Ted. “Let’s toast it ... here’s to drink ‘n’ shears,” he cried.

“Drink and shears,” the others echoed.

* * * * *

Three months later, Al stood looking around the transformed showroom feeling a definite glow of satisfaction. After weeks of work and arguments, the place was finally ready and was going to open to the public. However, despite the feelings of satisfaction his main thoughts were on the subject of ‘never again’, especially when it came to sorting out arguments between the architect, the builder, and Charlie’s mom. Even thinking back to some of these gave Al the shivers. Talk about battle of the Titans, he thought to himself. The arguments between Charlie’s mum, Hester, and the architect had been the worst, he thought. But then, the arguments between Hester and the builder weren’t too far off the mark either. At least the architect and the builder had got on all right—up to a point. Still, at least the work was done now, and all the arguments were over. He hoped. The memories of how he’d had to step in between warring parties could still give him the jitters. On one occasion he had been certain he was going to suffer actual bodily harm from Hester, but Charlie had been there and had managed to calm her down. Hester, Al thought, was a seriously frightening woman. He certainly wouldn’t want to be on the receiving end of any form of physical violence from her. He had the feeling she would be able to pick him up in one hand and throw him bodily through the plate glass window of the show room. But, as things had gone on, she had calmed down—usually as soon as she got what she wanted.

“Hey, Al,” a voice called, interrupting his musings. “Where d’you want this putting?”

Sighing to himself, Al turned towards the shout. As expected, it was some more of Charlie’s family who had been roped in to

help move furniture and fittings into the beauty parlor. For some reason they seemed to think he was the man to ask about everything, even though he knew that no matter what he decided, Hester would change it around as soon as she arrived.

“Just stick it down over there fellas,” he called back. No point in telling them where to put it just to have them move it again later, he thought. He was more than half convinced that the guys were having a laugh with him by asking him where to put stuff. He had a shrewd idea that Hester had told her family the exact location of each piece of equipment and furniture, and they were just asking his opinion as some obscure joke. On impulse, he decided to go and help in the garage. At least there he would be out of the way. He would send Charlie out, he thought. Let him deal with his mother! However, his ideas of escape were abruptly shattered.

“Yoo-hoo, A-al,” he heard.

“Oh no,” he muttered to himself. He quickly looked around for an escape route, but it was too late. The door between the show room and the garage had been locked to prevent customers of the ice cream parlor and the salon wandering in the wrong direction, and he hadn’t got his key on him. The only other route out was now blocked by the outline of Hester. She was standing there waving at him.

“Hey, Al baby, over here,” she continued.

Gritting his teeth, Al walked over to her. “Hi Hester,” he greeted her. “How’s it going?”

“Well, you know, it would go a lot quicker if there was someone here who knew where everything was supposed to go.”

“Well, you’re here,” he replied.

“Yes honey, but I also need to be at the other end to make sure everything that needs to come here is moved. And I can’t be in both places at once.”

Al looked closely at her. He was certain she was measuring him up, and quite suddenly he knew he really didn’t give a damn.

“Come off it Hester,” he heard himself saying. “You know as well as I do that you’ve told these nephews of yours exactly where to put each and every item of furniture before they lay so much of a finger on it at your place. Don’t tell me you haven’t managed to organize that, after you’ve organized so much else about this place.”

There was an instant’s frozen silence, and Al silently waited for the storm to break over his head. Then, suddenly, he heard Hester begin to laugh.

“Oh, you take the biscuit,” he heard her say. “You really absolutely do. Good on you,” she continued, and then gave him a slap on the back that felt as if a elephant had hit him. “You are so right. Hey, fellas, didn’t I tell you this one would suss us out?”

Al looked at her in mingled amusement and resentment. “This was all a test then,” he asked, not quite laughing.

“Of course it was, honey,” she responded. “I need to know whether we’ll get along or not, once I’ve moved in.”

Al private thought that if they couldn’t get along after all the trouble there had been getting the salon up and running, then it would be a bit late to do anything about it now, but held his peace.

“I’m just going out back,” he said. “There’s a job of work I need to get sorted.”

“No problem,” Hester replied. “I’ll see you around later.”

Not sure if this was a threat or a promise, Al beat a hasty retreat. In the workshop, he found Rob, Ted and Charlie all hard at work. Al picked up a couple of spare parts Charlie had managed to obtain, and walked over to the car he was currently working on, a 1941 model which needed new clutch bearings. As he passed where Charlie was working, he stopped.

“Hey, Charlie,” he said. “Is your mom always that impossible?”

Charlie stood up, and grinned. “Yep,” he replied. “She’s been like that since I can remember.”

“Heaven help the customers,” said Al, shaking his head.

Charlie laughed. "Oh no, she's always very polite to the customers," he chuckled. "Otherwise she wouldn't have any left!"

Later that afternoon, when he'd done as much as he could on the car, Al wandered back into the show room. He was rather taken aback at the transformation. There was now a reception desk which had appeared from heaven knew where, with a young woman sitting at it. All the furniture had been installed, as well as the mirrors. The new sinks, which had caused one of the major rows between Hester, the builder and the architect, now all had chairs in front of them. The place did look good, he had to admit. The partition walls now boasted shelving units displaying all sorts of salon goods, and there was a coffee table with a collection of magazines on it, with four easy looking chairs around it. On the other side of the show room, the ice cream parlor was being assembled under the watchful eye of Luigi.

Luigi had come as a bit of a shock to Al. He was second generation New York Italian, about five foot six inches tall, with a shock of curly black hair which he Brylcreamed into submission every morning. Al had persuaded the others that they really should advertise for a manager for the parlor, and had placed an ad in the local shops and the paper. Luigi had turned up the next morning, and announced that HE would run their parlor for them, because no one in America had the slightest idea about ice cream. Once he had produced some samples, Al and the others had to agree with him. However, he was also the possessor of a quite astounding temper, and despite his small size there was no chance that anyone would ever over look him. However, thought Al, at least he didn't speak Italian.

"How's it going Luigi?" Al asked as he crossed the floor.

"Fine, fine. As long as these stupid idiots can follow orders, we should be up and running by the morning," Luigi replied. 'These stupid idiots' referred to the hapless delivery men who were in the process of bringing all the equipment into the show room. Al looked over at them, and smiled sympathetically. One

of the men looked heavenwards, and rolled his eyes theatrically, and then got on with what he was doing.

“Tell you what, Luigi,” Al suggested. “Why don’t you take a break and go get a coffee or something. I’m sure these guys can cope on their own for half an hour.”

“You think I should?” asked Luigi.

“I’m sure of it,” Al replied solemnly.

“OK then, I’ll take off for a few minutes. But I’ll be back in half an hour, tops.”

“No problem, take your time. I’ll make sure it’s all done as you’d want it to be.”

Luigi took off his apron and, after giving the delivery men a suspicious look, went out. The delivery men promptly heaved a sigh of relief.

“Thanks for that,” said one, the older one. “If he’d stayed around a moment longer you’d have been serving Luigi-flavored ice cream tomorrow.”

Al laughed. “I could see things were getting a bit tense,” he replied.

“A bit!” the younger one exclaimed. “If he’d sworn at us one more time, I think I’d have probably thrown him through the window!”

“Well, you’ve got a Luigi-free half hour now, so just relax a bit. When he comes back I’ll try and distract him with something else. But I suspect that now he’s out of the place we’ll be lucky to see him back in an hour.”

“Well, if we don’t, he won’t see us, because we’ll make sure we’ve finished installing all this lot before he gets back.”

“Well, if you have any more problems, just give me a shout. If I’m not around in here, I’ll be out the back.”

“Yeah, OK,” said the older one. “By the way, when’s the opening?”

“Saturday,” replied Al. “Why, are you going to come along?”

“You betcha,” he replied. “I want that Luigi to serve me the biggest damned ice cream you’ve ever seen in your life!”

“Tell you what,” said Al. “You come in on Saturday, and I’ll buy it for you ... both of you.”

“Hey, that’s real nice of you. You got yourself a date.”

“Great, see you Saturday.” Al walked around the place for a couple of minutes, looking to see if anyone needed any help. Everything looked to be going smoothly, so he went back into the garage.

“Any one need a hand?” he asked generally. There was a chorus of ‘no thanks’ from the other three so, feeling at somewhat of a loose end, he wandered back into the show room.

“Hey, Al, come over here,” he heard Hester call. Heart sinking, he walked around the partition into the salon.

“Hester, what can I do for you?” he asked.

“No, you’ve got it wrong, it’s what I can do for you,” she replied. “Come and sit down over here.”

Al looked where she was pointing, and it was one of the washing sinks.

“What you going to do?” he asked, feeling a little suspicious.

“I want to test these sinks out and you look like you could do with a haircut,” she replied. “So come on over here and sit down, and we’ll give you a bit of pampering.”

Al wasn’t sure he liked the sound of that, but he couldn’t think of a way of refusing without offending, so he went and sat down where Hester was indicating. She pushed him back in the chair until his head was resting in the cut out of the sink, and then jumped when his head was suddenly doused in warm water.

“Sorry honey, is that too hot?” she asked.

“No, just wasn’t expecting it,” he replied.

“Well, you just sit back and relax,” she said, and then proceeded to wash and rinse his hair. Al couldn’t believe how great it felt. He had never felt so relaxed in his life before (that he could remember). The feeling of the warm water, and Hester’s hands massaging his head, made him feel so good it wasn’t true. Al could now understand why women liked going to have their

hair done. His only regret was that it didn't last long enough. Hester was obviously very practiced, and was telling him to 'sit up' long before he was ready.

She wrapped his head in a towel, and took him over to one of the cutting stations, where she gave him a hair cut. Al had only ever had the clippers used, so to feel someone actually cutting his hair was another new sensation. She was gentle but efficient, and very quick. Within an incredibly short space of time Al was regarding himself in the mirror, and was amazed at how good his hair looked. Involuntarily, he smiled at himself. His eyes met Hester's in the mirror, and he could tell that she was pleased with what she had done.

"There you go honey," she cooed. "I bet you've never had a hair cut like that before."

"No, never," Al agreed.

"Well, you can have one on the house whenever you need it."

"Oh, you don't need to do that," replied Al, feeling absurdly embarrassed.

"Hey, now don't you tell me I don't need to do that," Hester retorted. "If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't have this chance, and I don't forget things like that. So, whenever you want a haircut, you come and see me and I'll sort you out."

Al blushed. "I don't know what to say," he stammered. "Thank you very much, I appreciate that."

"No need to say anything," said Hester. "Now you run along, I got work to do!"

Al took the hint, and went back into the garage. As he walked in, Charlie looked up, and started to laugh.

"What's the matter?" asked Al.

"I see mom got to you then," Charlie replied. "I was taking bets on how long it would be before she gave you your first haircut. She's been itching to run a comb through your hair for days now. She said you might be able to wear a suit better than anyone else, but with your hair the way it was you still looked like the cat had dragged you through the hedge."

Rob and Ted had both turned round to look, and they both started to laugh as well.

“Mind you,” said Ted, “I’m still jealous. You have to admit, he does look the business.”

“Hey Charlie,” called Rob. “How come your hair still looks like a bird’s nest, if your mom can do haircuts like that?”

“What, you don’t think she’d waste her skills on the family do you? I’m lucky if I can get one of my sisters to use the clippers on me when she’s out.”

Al joined in the laughter. “Ah, so that explains it!” he exclaimed.

“Explains what?” asked Charlie, suspiciously.

“Explains why you sometimes look like you’ve been to the grooming parlor,” said Al. Rob and Ted started to laugh again, and after a couple of seconds Charlie joined in as well.

“Laugh all you want,” said Al, “but if I look this good, I know who the ladies are going to fancy when we all go to the dance.”

“Dance? What dance?”

“Oh, didn’t I mention it?” Al said innocently. “We’ve been invited to the annual dinner dance for the local Chamber of Commerce. It’s a week on Saturday, at the City Hall.”

There were whistles from Ted and Rob. Charlie just looked worried.

“Well, I ain’t going,” he said.

“Why not?”

“Hell, look at me man! I can barely eat with a fork, let alone a knife as well. And in case you’ve forgotten, I’m black. I ain’t welcome at things like that.”

Rob nodded his head. “I think they either don’t know you have two black partners, or they’re hoping we won’t turn up. I don’t think I’ll go, either. I just wouldn’t feel comfortable.”

Al turned to Ted. “What about you. You’ll come, won’t you?”

Ted shook his head. “What, me? In there with all those fancy toffs? I should think not,” he said. “You can go for all of us, you’ll represent us brilliantly, I’m sure. We’ll stay home.”

“What, not one of you’s going to come and give me moral support?” asked Al, feeling upset.

“We can’t come, we won’t make the right impression,” said Ted, gently. “I know you want us all to come but believe me, with the crowd you get there you’ll make a much better impression on your own. Trust me.”

“But I don’t want to go on my own,” said Al. “You’re my partners, you should be there with me.”

“Well, we ain’t going, and that’s that,” said Rob. “You’ll be all right, you know how to talk to those guys. And don’t say you’re not going either,” he continued, as Al opened his mouth to say just that. “You’re going, and that’s final.” Ted and Charlie agreed.

“Well, OK then,” said Al reluctantly. “It still don’t seem right to me, but if you won’t go you won’t.”

“Good, that’s settled then,” said Ted decisively. “And now, I think it’s time to call it a day, and go home for some dinner.”

They tidied everything up, and left the garage, locking the door behind them.

Chapter 17

Al looked at himself in the mirror, turning slightly from side to side to see how he looked. If truth be told he felt slightly ridiculous dressed in a dinner suit, but he supposed that it was necessary if he was going to a formal dinner. At least his hair looked tidy. Hester had kept her promise and given him another trim just that morning. He checked himself over once again, and then decided it would have to do. He picked up his overcoat from the chair and went downstairs. He had ordered a cab to take him to the City Hall and was expecting it to arrive in the next few minutes.

He entered the living room, and did a double-take. As well as Charlie, Rob and Ted, Hester was sitting there. As he walked in, she stood up and came over to him.

“Now, let’s have a look at you,” she said firmly, as he stood there. She walked round him, tweaking his jacket for a better fit. “Have you got a clean handkerchief on you?” she asked.

“What?” he replied, rather taken aback.

“Have you got a clean hankie?” she repeated.

“Yes, of course I have,” he said, feeling a mixture of annoyance and amusement at her question.

Finishing her inspection, Hester finally stepped back. “You look great,” she said. “Now make sure you behave yourself tonight with all those lovely ladies.”

“For heaven’s sake,” he said, half laughing. “You’re not my mother!”

“No, I’m not,” Hester replied. “But you don’t have a mother here so I’m looking out for her boy, like I’d want her to look out for mine if she could.”

Al was touched, and before he knew what he was doing he had stepped forward and given her a big hug. Her eyes misted over and she returned it, then pushed him away.

“Get on with you, you great booby,” she said, giving him a gentle slap on the chest.

Al straightened up, and coughed. Rob, Charlie and Ted were all watching him with amusement in their faces, although they stopped short of actually smiling. Al glared at them, daring them to smile which had exactly the opposite effect. Turning away from the grinning faces, Al tried to muster his dignity. He picked up his overcoat just as the taxi announced its arrival by honking its horn.

“Right, well, I’ll see you lot later then,” he said.

“Yeah, we’ll wait up for you,” said Ted with a smirk.

“Don’t you talk to him like that,” said Hester, turning round to confront Ted. “You should be going too, to keep him company and to keep him out of trouble.”

“Trouble?” asked Rob. “What sort of trouble can he get up to at a dinner?”

“You’d be surprised,” replied Hester darkly.

Rob looked expectantly at her, but she merely folded her lips and looked forbidding. The taxi honked again and Al turned to leave. “I’d better get going,” he said, and went out of the door. The taxi was sitting outside the house and he went over to it.

“Taxi for Henderson?” the driver asked as he approached. Al nodded, and climbed in the back seat. “Where to?” the cabbie demanded.

“City Hall, please,” replied Al, settling back into the seat.

“Oh, you’re another one for that big do they’re having then,” the cabbie commented. “We’ve all been busy running people to that. You’re about the last one I’ve got to pick up ... unless you don’t mind sharing a cab, that is? That would save some time.”

“Share the cab?” Al echoed. “No, I don’t mind sharing the cab. Who with?”

“Guy by the name of McCluskey and his daughter. Got to pick them up from some fancy address. But they’re going to the same place, so I guess if you don’t mind they won’t either.”

“Suits me,” Al shrugged.

“OK then, we’ll swing around and pick them up too,” the cabbie said, gunning the engine and swinging round the corner.

Al was content to sit back in the cab and let the driver do all the talking. He’d heard about the cabbies’ propensity for chat, and found it quite soothing to just sit there and say things like ‘really’, ‘you don’t say’, and ‘how about that’ at appropriate intervals without really following the conversation. He was actually feeling quite nervous about the evening, and the closer they got to City Hall the more nervous he was feeling. He was too taken up in his own thoughts to notice where they were going until the cab pulled up outside another house. Once he looked out of the window, he felt even more nervous. This wasn’t a house, this was a mansion, and all of a sudden the idea of sharing a cab seemed less of a good idea. The driver jumped out of the car and went up and rang the bell, and stood there turning his hat round in his hands. The door was opened by a servant and after a brief conversation the driver hurried back to the cab.

“They’re just going to be a few minutes,” he said. “Good job we did come round and pick them up, they’d be late otherwise.”

Al just nodded, feeling far too nervous to do anything else. He sat and stared at the front of the imposing house, wondering how much money he would need to be able to afford anything like it. Then again, he thought, that’s probably been in the family for generations. There was a sudden flurry of movement glimpsed through the open door and two figures came out and down the steps. The cabbie jumped out and went around to open the door for them. The larger of the two ushered the smaller into the back seat, and then waited whilst the cabbie opened the front door for him to get in.

Al was suddenly overwhelmed by the smell of expensive perfume, lightly spiced with clean girl fragrance, as his fellow passenger climbed into the back of the car. Then he yelped as a three inch stiletto shoe made contact with his foot.

“Sorry,” came a breathless voice. “I’m not really used to these things yet. Have I hurt you?”

“No, no,” Al stammered, trying to move out of the way. “Not at all.” This was despite the excruciating pain from his toes that was telling him he was unlikely to be dancing at all that night. He found time to wonder whether he would have to polish his shoes again in the gents’ before going into dinner.

His companion, who was wearing some sort of stole over her head, turned to look at him. All Al could see in the dim light cast by the street lights was a pair of eyes looking at him. Then she smiled, and he could see very white teeth.

“Hi,” she said. “I know we haven’t been properly introduced, but I’m Bridget McCluskey.”

Al could see a small hand being held out to him, and he reached forward and took it in his own.

“Very pleased to meet you, Miss McCluskey,” he replied. “I’m Al Henderson.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed. “You’re the one with the new beauty salon and ice cream parlor.”

Al was flattered that she had heard of him. “Yes, that’s me,” he replied. “We just opened up last week.”

“Yes, I’ve heard about it,” she said. “You’ll have to tell me all about it when we get to City Hall.”

“I’d be honored to,” Al replied politely.

After that, conversation languished as the cabbie sped them on their way to the evening’s entertainment. They arrived fairly quickly and Al scrambled out of the cab to try and get to the other door before the cabbie beat him to it. As it happened, Mr. McCluskey beat both the cabbie and Al to it and opened the door for his daughter himself, offering her his hand as she made as graceful an exit as possible. Al stood

to one side as Mr. McCluskey paid the fare. Having sorted that out, Mr. McCluskey offered his arm to his daughter and, totally ignoring Al, escorted her up the steps into City Hall. Al followed on feeling singularly out of his depth, and more than a little foolish.

“Hey,” came a shout. Al turned round to see the cabbie standing there.

“Who, me?” he asked.

“Yeah, you,” the cabbie replied. “You want me to pick you up again afterwards? Or do you fancy walking home?”

“Oh, er, yes please,” Al returned. “Can you come for me at midnight?”

“Yeah, no problem, Cinderella,” the cabbie retorted. “I’ll see you at midnight.” Without waiting for a reply, he turned and got back into his cab and drove away. Al continued up the steps and entered the building.

In the entrance hall Al made his way over to the cloakroom, and deposited his coat. As he turned to go into the main hall he saw his companion from the taxi just exiting the ladies’ cloakroom. She was chatting to another young lady, but as she turned she looked towards him and caught his eye. She smiled. Al smiled back, and decided to go over to speak to her, but as he set off he was accosted by a familiar figure.

“Al, my boy, how are you doing?” boomed Hugh Whittam’s voice in his ear. Al had no choice but to turn around and shake hands.

“Fine, thank you, Hugh,” he replied.

“Yes, so I hear,” said Hugh, with the glimmering of a smile. “Making quite a name for yourself from what I gather. One of the year’s up and coming young business men by all accounts.”

Al blushed. “Well I wouldn’t say that exactly,” he stammered. “I just like taking opportunities when they present themselves.”

“Quite right, quite right,” Hugh agreed. “And your opportunities seem to keep coming, don’t they!”

“They certainly seem to present themselves quite frequently,” Al replied. “But it’s the stocks and shares that fund most of the business really.”

“And aren’t you causing a stir with your investments,” Hugh chuckled. “I’m amazed at your ability to read the market and to pick out up and coming businesses. Quite a knack.”

Al shrugged. “I don’t know about a knack,” he said. “And we’ve had some losses as well, you know.”

“Oh yes, I’m well aware of those,” Hugh replied airily. “But they’re far outweighed by your successes. Now, to business. Let me introduce you to some of the people who matter in this town.”

So saying, he took Al’s arm, and ushered him through the doors into the magnificent main hall. For the next half hour or so he introduced Al to various men who between them controlled much of the commerce in and around Philadelphia. Al smiled and nodded and made a mental note of the names, but refused to be drawn into any conversations beyond saying what was polite. When they had made a circuit of the hall Al turned to Hugh.

“Now then, Hugh,” he began. “Can you do me a favor?”

“Of course, my boy, of course. What can I do for you?”

“You see that young lady over there?” Al asked, discreetly pointing in the direction of his cab ride companion.

“Ah, the handsome filly. Yes, I see her,” Hugh replied. “What of her?”

“Can you introduce me to her? Properly, I mean. We shared a cab on the way here, but I didn’t catch her name properly, and I would like to know more about her.”

“Certainly, not a problem,” Hugh boomed out. “I thought it would be something difficult.”

Once again he took hold of Al’s arm and guided him across the floor to the lady in question. As they waited for her to finish her conversation with another young lady, Al had plenty of time to appreciate her face and figure.

She was probably about five feet six inches tall, he thought, measuring her against his six feet two inches. She had regu-

lar features with a small straight nose, slightly too generous mouth, blue eyes well set under strong brows, and a complexion commonly described as being 'peaches and cream'. Her hair was just too dark to be called blonde, and could probably best be described as dark honey, and she wore it in one of the popular styles. She was dressed neatly but without ostentation, and wore just one string of pearls. Her dress was pale blue, setting off her hair and eyes to advantage. She wore long white gloves with a pearl bracelet, and a pearl broach was pinned to her dress. Al could see her profile and thought that although she would never be described as beautiful, she was undeniably attractive. When she turned to them and he saw her full face, he was again struck by how attractive she was, and could understand why anyone would describe her as a handsome girl.

"Miss McCluskey, may I please introduce a young friend of mine, by the name of Al Henderson?"

Al gave a little bow. Miss McCluskey held out her gloved hand, and Al took it and raised it to his lips.

"Charmed to meet you, Miss McCluskey," he said.

"And I you," she replied, looking at him from beneath lowered lashes. Al couldn't decide whether she was shy, playing the role of the coquette because she thought she ought to, or was a genuine flirt.

"I'm afraid we weren't introduced properly earlier on this evening," he continued. "So I asked Hugh to rectify that omission."

She blushed slightly, and gave a quick glance up at him. "I'm very flattered, Mr. Henderson," she replied. Her voice was quite low and Al thought it sounded quite musical, and also not very American. However, he wanted to hear more so he could identify what it was.

"May I say I hope to become better acquainted with you, Miss McCluskey," he responded.

"Why would you want to do that?" she asked.

“Because I would like to know you better,” Al said directly. This approach appeared to fluster her as she blushed harder, and tugged her hand out of his fingers.

“Well, I can’t imagine why I would want to know you better,” she almost snapped. “I mean, who are you? Are you one of the people I ought to know?”

Hugh laughed. “You don’t need to worry about this young man,” he told her. “Al’s one of the up and coming businessmen in Philly. Give him five years and he’ll give your father a run for his money.”

“Who’s going to give me a run for my money, Hugh?” said a voice directly behind Al.

“Arthur, great to see you,” cried Hugh, turning and grasping the hand of the man the voice belonged to.

“What are you up to now, you crafty old fox?” asked Arthur.

“I’m just introducing one of my protégées to your daughter,” Hugh replied laughingly. “I was just telling her that Al here is going to give you a run for your money one of these days, if he carries on the way he’s started.”

Arthur McCluskey turned to Al, and gave him a searching glance. Al unconsciously straightened up, and returned the look.

“And just who is Al Henderson?” he asked.

“Well now, why don’t we go and talk about that,” said Hugh, taking hold of Arthur’s arm, and starting to lead him away. “The young folk can get acquainted whilst we wait to go in for dinner.”

Arthur looked at Hugh suspiciously, but raised no objections. He looked at his daughter. “You be polite now, Bridget,” he instructed as they walked off. “None of your tricks, young lady.”

Bridget shot Al a look which could only be described as murderous before turning to her father and saying “OK pops, I’ll be good.” She turned back to Al, with a long-suffering expression.

“Well, it looks like I’m stuck with having to get to know you after all,” she said petulantly.

“Looks that way, doesn’t it?” agreed Al pleasantly. “A trial for both of us, it would seem.”

Whatever she had expected him to say, that patently wasn’t it. She shot him a startled glance and then regarded him more steadily.

“I’m sorry, that was rude of me,” she said quite sincerely.

“And I apologize as well for being so gauche as to react to it,” he replied. She laughed. “Now, having got the apologies out of the way, shall we start again?” he suggested.

She laughed again, and extended her hand. “Hello Mr. Henderson, I’m Bridget McCluskey. I’m very pleased to meet you.”

Al took her hand, and shook it. “Hello Miss McCluskey, I’m Al Henderson, delighted to meet you too.” This time they both laughed.

“And now Mr. Henderson, perhaps you can tell me why Hugh Whittam is escorting you, why he called you his protégée, and why you’re going to give my father a run for his money.”

“I’d be delighted to, Miss McCluskey.”

Al started to tell her his history as he knew it, and found that she was an excellent listener. He told her about his training and the seed money he’d been given to get started, and about his investments. After a few minutes, however, he could see that she was getting a little bored and he decided to switch topics.

“But that’s enough of me,” he announced. “What about Miss Bridget McCluskey. What do you do?”

“Me?” She seemed startled by the question. “No one’s ever asked about me before.”

“Well, I’m asking now!” he smiled at her. “Come on, what do you get up to?”

“I don’t really do anything,” she replied. “I’ve finished college, my father doesn’t think I need to go to university, so apart from running the house I do nothing at all.”

“Well running the house sounds interesting. Tell me about that.”

“Really?” she said doubtfully. “You really would be interested?”

“Well, if I’m not I can always tell you, and we can talk about something else. But yes, I would like to hear about running a house. It sounds as if it would be similar to running a business.”

“Well, OK then, if you’re sure.”

“Go ahead.” He smiled encouragingly, and after a slightly hesitant start she began to describe the ins and outs of running a house. All the while she was speaking, Al had strange flashes of images, almost as if he could picture what she was talking about. Sometimes, as she was describing things, he could almost tell what she was going to say next. He found this slightly disturbing, but also fascinating. He was sorry when the gong was rung for dinner and the Master of Ceremonies announced dinner.

“I wish I could sit with you through dinner,” he said, as her father came up to take her in.

“And me,” she replied. He bowed slightly to her father, and then again to her, and watched as she was led away. He could see that she was chatting to her father, and rather hoped it was about him.

“Well my boy,” boomed Hugh in his ear. “Shall we go and eat?”

“Of course,” replied Al. “Do you know where we’re sitting?”

“Well, I’m sitting on one side of the hall, and you’re sitting opposite, but on the other side of the room. We’ll have to signal each other with napkins.”

“Oh, you mean like semaphore,” said Al.

“Yes, that’s right,” replied Hugh. “Do you know semaphore?”

“I don’t know,” said Al. “The name sounds familiar and I know it uses flags, but I don’t know if I know it, if you see what I mean.”

“Yes, I know what you mean,” said Hugh. “I guess you won’t know if you know it until you try.”

“Well, I’m not going to try tonight,” laughed Al. “I don’t want to get thrown out for misbehaving, and knocking the soup flying or something.”

Hugh laughed as well. “No, that wouldn’t be very good. Will you be all right on your own?” he asked. “Not nervous or anything?”

“Not really,” Al replied. “I’m a bit worried about making the right impression, but other than that I’ve enjoyed it so far.”

“Yes, talking to Bridget McCluskey, I noticed. Just you be careful there boy. She’s the apple of her father’s eye, and he won’t take kindly to you trifling with her. If you’re serious, you’ll have to prove to him you can look after her. If you’re not, then leave well alone. He’s one of the most influential men in this town and if you get on the wrong side of him you can kiss goodbye to those business ambitions of yours.”

Al was a bit startled at the intensity of Hugh’s warning. “Come on Hugh,” he responded laughingly. “I’ve only just met the girl. How am I supposed to know if I’m serious or not?”

“Well, I suppose that was a bit over the top after a first meeting. But take heed—don’t mess with Bridget McCluskey!”

They parted company and Al made his way down the room to his seat, which was about as far from the top table as it was possible to get and still be considered to be in the same room. However, after he had sat down, he realized there were some compensations. He had an excellent view of Miss McCluskey as she sat down. However Al realized that it would be extremely rude, not to mention potential business suicide, to ignore the people he was sitting with, so he went out of his way to ensure he spent an equal amount of time talking to those to his left and right, making connections. Somewhat to his surprise, he found the evening extremely enjoyable. It was stimulating to talk to other members of the business community, and he was also surprised to find that both his dinner companions had heard of him. He could only put this down to the fact that his business mentor had mentioned him to several people, and they in turn had mentioned him to others.

Although he had been an attentive dinner partner, Al had still managed to keep an eye on Miss McCluskey during the meal,

and had confirmed his first opinion of her. She wasn't a beauty, but was none the less a taking little thing and he thought he would like to pursue the acquaintance. Whether it would blossom into anything else, he wasn't sure—he didn't know her well enough. There was a spark of attraction there, but he was well aware that sparks could easily be snuffed out. He genuinely wasn't influenced by the fact that her father was one of the most important business people in the town; he would never consider pursuing or marrying anyone for anything other than love.

After the meal Al was wishing to go and talk to Miss McCluskey again, but found himself included in a group which consisted mainly of his dinner companions. Not being that well versed in social niceties Al couldn't figure out a way of excusing himself without giving offence, so he stayed with the group, discussing business propositions, the state of the stock market, the effects of the war, and various other issues of interest to the business community. He had almost given up trying to break free when he felt a light touch on his arm, and smelt perfume. The other men he was with stopped speaking, and Al turned round. Bridget McCluskey was there.

"If you're not busy," she began, "my father would like a moment of your time."

Al looked at the others in the group. "No, don't worry about us," one of them said. "If Arthur McCluskey wanted me, I'd already be gone! You go with Miss Bridget and see what he wants."

The others all nodded, so Al made his goodbyes and went off with Miss McCluskey.

"What does your father want me for?" he asked after they were out of ear shot.

"Absolutely nothing," she replied. "But I know those men, and if they thought I wanted you they would spread rumors faster than the wind. This way they'll think father needs you for something, and apart from doing you a lot of good they won't think to mention it to anyone."

Al was astonished. Firstly that she could be that manipulative, and secondly that she actually wanted to talk to him enough that she would interrupt a group of men to do so.

“I’m flattered,” he said.

“And so you should be,” she responded. “I don’t do this for just anyone you know.”

“So why me?”

“You’re different. You didn’t try to impress me, and you asked about me.”

“So why is that different to other guys?”

She gave a little toss of her head. “You wouldn’t believe how many boys—and men—try to use me to get to my father. I get so sick and tired of being used. You were different. You didn’t seem to be impressed by who I was, you just looked as if you liked me for my own sake. So, you’re different.”

“Thank you,” replied Al. He thought of what else to say. “Did you enjoy the dinner?” he asked. “You seemed to be enjoying yourself.”

“You were watching?” she asked. He nodded. “I didn’t see you. Where were you sitting?”

“Right at the bottom of the farthest table,” he replied. “My companions were very nice people and we got on well, but the best thing was the view.”

“The view?” she repeated, obviously confused. “But the curtains were drawn, you couldn’t see outside.”

“I was talking about the view inside,” he said with a grin. “I could see right up the room to where you were.”

She blushed, tried to speak, and failed. She started to cough and Al patted her gently on the back until she got her breath back.

“You shouldn’t say things like that,” she told him.

“Why not?” he asked. “It’s true. I could see you, and I did look at you.”

“Yes, I suppose so, but it makes you sound like all the others.”

“Ah, but I’m not, you said so yourself,” he replied.

She laughed. "I suppose I did, didn't I?" she said playfully. "So don't you go proving me wrong, please."

"I won't, I promise," he responded.

"Ah, Bridget, there you are," a voice came over Al's shoulder. He turned round quickly, and saw her father with Hugh Whittam at his shoulder.

"Good evening sir," Al said, giving a little nod of his head.

"Good evening, young man," Arthur responded. "If you've quite finished monopolizing my daughter I think it's time I took her home." Saying that, he took hold of her left hand, and placed it on his arm. "Come along Bridget," he said. "The car's here, it's time to go."

"Couldn't we stay just a little bit longer?" she asked him.

"Not this time," he replied. "Come along."

Al was quite certain that there was more happening than he realized in this conversation, but was quite unable to think of anything to say.

"Well, goodnight Mr. Henderson," she said, holding out her hand. He took it, and once again kissed it.

"Goodnight Miss McCluskey," he responded. "It's been a pleasure."

"It certainly has been," she replied warmly, slightly pressing his fingers before releasing his hand. "Please call around when you're in the area, I'd like to meet you again."

"I will," he promised.

"Well come along, let's get a move on," said Arthur McCluskey. He shook Hugh's hand, nodded to Alex, and led his daughter out of the building. Hugh stood and watched them go then turned to Al.

"I think you've made quite an impression there," he said.

"Do you think she liked me?" Al asked, quite surprised.

Hugh laughed. "I wasn't talking about Bridget," he replied. "No, I was thinking about Arthur. He seems to think you've got a good future in this town. He's asked me to arrange a meeting with you to discuss a business proposition he's interested in."

He's looking for a partner to do most of the ground work, and he seems to think you'll do just fine."

"Me?" Al almost squeaked. "What did you tell him?"

"Well, I told him what I knew about you, and how you'd made a tricky business work and had opened another one, and that you weren't averse to taking the odd risk here and there. I also told him you were a hard worker, and if you took something on you'd see it through. Why, do you disagree with anything there?"

"No," said Al slowly.

"So what's your problem?" asked Hugh.

"What about my business partners? I can't just abandon them," he said.

"No, you can't," replied Hugh. "But you've got to realize that you're different from them. They're quite happy with the repair shop, and maybe a tire place after the war when the restrictions are lifted. But you, you've got more to you than that and the sooner you realize that, the sooner you can start moving on the right path. I'm not saying you should abandon them, or disown them. They're your partners, and you want to stay partners. But don't let their aspirations become yours—you need to learn that you're a high flyer, and you can't let them hold you back."

Al nodded as he heard what Hugh was saying. Truth to tell, he had been getting bored with running the repair shop, and the new business venture was not going to be enough to satisfy him. He'd already found himself looking through the business pages wondering what else he could take on. Hugh was right, he didn't want to abandon the other guys, but even he had to admit that they were not in his league. He knew he could do better than a repair shop and a beauty parlor, and he wanted more. He was hungry for more, and he wanted to get out there and take more. Finally he turned to Hugh.

"Yes, you're right," he said. "I don't want to abandon the others, but they're happy as they are, and I'm not. I do want more, and I'm prepared to go out and get it."

Hugh beamed at him. "I knew you'd understand," he cried. "I told Arthur you'd want to be involved. I'll call him in the morning and let him know."

"Yes, please do," he replied. Al knew he was standing on the brink of something, and he only had to take that last step and he could be on his way. He didn't know precisely where he was going, only that he wanted to be there.

"That's my boy," said Hugh, grinning from ear to ear. He called a waiter over, and took two glasses from his tray. "Here you go my boy, a toast. The future!"

Al raised his glass. "Yes, the future," he replied, knowing that he was on his way.

PART FOUR — SUZIE

Chapter 18

My first few months at the Royal College were tough, there is no other word to describe it. I had been a good student at school and had worked hard to get good marks for my coursework and in my exams, but nothing had prepared me for the sheer volume of work I was expected to do. The main subjects—chemistry, biology, physics, and animal management—were all more intense than anything I had done before, and the amount of information I had to take in was staggering. I have to admit I struggled for a few months until I got the hang of things. Added to this were the stresses of living away from home for the first time in my life and although Marion and Brian were incredibly nice, and really made me feel at home, I still missed Elsie, Mo, and Frank every single day, and I found I missed the farm as well.

However, as time went on I started to find the work got a little easier, and inevitably I got used to life at Helen's and things started to become routine. I spent my first Christmas break back at the farm and had a wonderful holiday up there, although I still had to work hard producing essays and assignments that needed to be completed by new year. I managed to get this into a pattern though—after the first couple of days spent catching up, I would work in the mornings in my room, using the desk Frank had moved up there for me when I was doing my A levels, then have some lunch and either help Elsie out around the kitchen, or go out on visits with Mr. Edwards, who was tickled pink that he

now had an assistant. This first holiday was just that, but after having spent several afternoons discussing things with Mr. Edwards it was clear that each subsequent holiday, and especially the long break in the summer, I would be expected to work with him constantly to get sufficient time 'seeing practice' to qualify. We got everything sorted out though, and it gave some sort of plan to the next few months.

Being back at the farm was wonderful that Christmas. Elsie was in her element, cooking for everyone and producing her amazing Christmas lunch (which we actually ate about three o'clock, after watching the Queen's Speech on the television). The 'modernization' of the farm house had continued during my absence, and the whole place was now on 'the electric', and we had lights everywhere in the house, which helped me no end whilst I was upstairs studying. Elsie even had a vacuum cleaner which Mo had insisted on buying her, but she still used a brush, dustpan and broom upstairs, because, as she said, she 'couldn't do with dragging the dratted thing upstairs'. I tried once, and it was just too heavy to lift either comfortably or safely. I laughingly made a remark to Mo that maybe he should have bought two, one for upstairs as well, and he got a thoughtful look on his face. A couple of weeks after Christmas I had a letter from Elsie telling me that he had done just that, and she was now the proud owner of two cleaners!

Frank had given in to Elsie and Mo and had bought a television soon after I left, and the house had been wired up. He said he had no use for 'the goggle box' as he called it, but I caught him watching it several times during the two weeks I was up there. Elsie and Mo each had their favorite programs and, although there wasn't much choice, seemed to find it entertaining enough. I was used to watching the evening news everyday with Brian and Marion, and found I wanted to continue with this as it kept me up to date with life generally.

After the Christmas break life settled back down, and I found it easier to settle back in to my new routine having had a brief

taste of home. Helen was still insisting she wanted to join the WRNS, and was arguing with her parents about it nearly every night. As things stood she couldn't join up without their consent as she was still under twenty one, and she was constantly nagging them about it. Every issue that was brought up inevitably ended up with her saying 'well if you'd let me join up, it wouldn't be a problem, would it?', which was generally unanswerable. Finally, in the March of 1958, Brian and Marion finally gave in and agreed that she could join up—more for a bit of peace than because they thought it was a good idea. Helen was ecstatic and immediately brought home the application form, which required her parents' signatures.

Once this had been signed she took it straight back to the careers office, where she was told to wait until she was called for testing and for an interview. If she was successful with both of these she would then be called for a medical, and if everything was fine with that, she would be given a joining date. She couldn't wait, and was first up every morning to make sure she didn't miss the postman. She didn't have long to wait. Two weeks later a very official-looking envelope dropped on the mat addressed to her, giving her a date ten days later for her test. There was no clue as to what the test would be about, so she was in a state verging on complete panic when she left on that morning for the careers office in London. Although it would mean she was early, she decided to come with me. The office was in High Holborn, and she could make her way there easily enough after seeing me to college. To be honest, she was in such a state of nerves I was convinced she wouldn't make it through the test, but I should have known better. When lunch time came around I was given a message to say that she was waiting for me in the foyer. I made my way down there, and sure enough there she was, looking immensely pleased with herself.

"So, how did it go?" I asked as I came near.

"Piece of cake," she replied, looking smug. "It wasn't nearly as difficult as I'd feared."

“So what sort of questions were there?”

“Oh, all sorts. Math, English, general knowledge, all sorts of stuff.”

“When do you find out if you’ve passed?” I asked.

“Straight away,” she replied.

“Ah, I wondered at that big cheesy grin on your face,” I teased her. “So when do you get your interview and medical?”

“Not sure yet, they said they’d let me know.”

“And what is it you want to be again?” I asked.

“I want to do communications,” she replied. “You know, manning radios, and signaling, and all that sort of stuff.”

“Sounds interesting,” I commented. I shifted my load of books. “Want to swap?”

“Not on your life,” she replied. “I couldn’t do what you’re doing for a thousand pounds a week. All that science and stuff.”

“It’s not that bad,” I told her. “It’s not difficult, there’s just such a lot of it.”

“Well, enough of that.” She grabbed my arm and dragged me off to the bus stop. “Let’s go and have a coffee or something.”

I managed to get a look at my watch. “I can’t, I really can’t, I’ve got a lecture in half an hour. And I can’t be late for this, it’s important.”

Helen’s face fell. I felt guilty, as if by not going with her I was belittling her achievement.

“Look, tell you what, why don’t we pop out for a bit tonight? I haven’t any homework to do, and I’ve got my allowance in from Frank and Elsie so it can be my treat.”

She brightened up, and suddenly smiled. “You’re on,” she said. “I’ll wait around here until you’ve finished tonight, and then we’ll stop off at the café on the way home. You can get me tea, and we’ll call in for a quick one on the way home at the Crown and Anchor.”

“Super,” I replied, although I wasn’t keen on her itinerary. “Make sure you call your mum and tell her what we’re doing. Then she won’t worry when we’re late, and she won’t cook us any tea.”

She was looking rebellious, so I added "Please Helen? It makes life so much easier if you'll just give her a ring."

"Oh all right," she agreed, finally. "What time shall I meet you here?"

"Hang on a sec," I said as I rummaged around in my bag for my timetable. "My lectures should be finished at around four, so I'll meet you on the front steps at four fifteen."

"OK, that should be fine. See you then." With a cheery wave of her hand, she turned and disappeared into the lunchtime crowds outside the college.

"And who was that?" someone asked in my ear.

"Hi Robin," I replied. "That was my friend Helen. I lodge with her and her parents."

"Do you now?" he said. "Good looking, isn't she?"

"Oh you," I retorted, elbowing him in the ribs. "And I'm not, I suppose?"

"Ow," he exclaimed. "No, of course you're not. You're not good looking, you're gorgeous."

I had frowned at the first part of this sentence, but by the end of it I knew I was smiling and blushing. Robin had that effect on me. We had been friends since our first day at college, and we were seldom apart during the day. However our relationship had never developed any further and, although frustrating at times, I accepted the limitations. To be honest about it I was so busy with course work and everything that went with it I didn't have time for romance as yet. I knew Robin went out with other girls and wondered where he found the energy, but I never felt the slightest pang of jealousy, or wondered where he was spending his evenings.

"Fancy coming out with us tonight then?" I asked.

Robin shook his head. "No, I've got another date tonight," he replied. "But thanks for asking," he added.

"Well, maybe next time. Hey, come on, we'll be late if we don't get a move on."

"You're right. We'd better not keep old Munroe waiting."

We turned back into the college and made our way to the lecture theatre. After an afternoon's lectures on animal physiology, and anatomy, I really didn't feel like having any sort of celebration, but having promised Helen I would go out with her I felt I should make the effort. I got to the front entrance, and waited on the steps. By quarter to five I was getting worried; Helen still hadn't shown up, and I didn't know what to do. By five o'clock I was getting cross. I went back inside and asked to use the telephone on the desk. I explained the circumstances and Joyce, the receptionist, relented sufficiently for me to make a call home to Helen's. I made the call, and the phone was answered after a couple of rings.

"Hello?"

"Helen, is that you?"

"Suzie! Gosh, I forgot we were supposed to be meeting. Would you mind awfully if we didn't go out tonight?"

"No, I don't mind, but why?"

"Well, while I was wandering around waiting for you, I bumped into a friend from school who I hadn't seen for ages! She was with her brother, and we got chatting and they've asked me to go to the cinema with them tonight. I know we were supposed to be going out but we can always do that another night, can't we?"

"Yes, no problem. Can you explain to your mother I'm going to be a bit late home please?"

"Of course. I'll tell her it's my fault as well, she won't have any trouble believing that. I'll see you when you get home."

"OK, see you then." I hung up, thanked Joyce, and left. I didn't know whether to feel relieved that I wasn't going to have to go out after all, or cross that Helen had leapt at the chance to go out with this school friend and her brother. I was cross that she had left me waiting on the steps of the college, but I knew it would be a waste of time for me to mention it to her—that was Helen all over.

As I made my way home it did occur to me to wonder whether the 'school friend' would actually be going along with Helen

and her brother, or whether it would just be the brother. Helen certainly enjoyed a good time out much to her mother's disapproval, and usually insisted on dragging me along with her—much to mine. It wasn't so much that I didn't enjoy these evenings out, but Helen was always one for the boys so I usually ended up playing gooseberry, and I didn't want to be out too late as I usually had either college or studying to do the next day. Helen and I seldom argued, but when we did it was usually over whether we would go home at a reasonable hour, or whether we would stay out later. I usually won these arguments, but when Helen had managed to find a good looking boy to talk to (or dance with), I had to wait for her. I knew Helen's mother relied on me to be her chaperone and to simply walk away and leave Helen to it was not in my nature. Fortunately these arguments never lasted long, and certainly not into the next day.

By the time I got in Marion had the tea ready, and I just dumped my things at the bottom of the stairs and went straight into the kitchen. There was a heavenly smell of stew wafting around the kitchen, so I got myself a bowl and some bread and helped myself. I sat down at the table, and started to eat. Marion came in when I was halfway through my second bowl.

"Hello love," she said brightly. "Have you had a good day?"

I nodded, having a mouthful of stew at the time. I chewed and swallowed hastily.

"Yes, it was anatomy today," I said. She gave a little shudder.

"I don't know how you can sit there and eat meat after what you do all day," she said.

I shrugged. "I grew up on a farm, don't forget. Animals are meat to me."

"Yes, I suppose that would give you a slightly different view point," she replied. She sat down at the table, and I could see that she wanted to discuss something with me. I also had a feeling I knew what it would be. When Marion wanted to discuss 'something', it usually meant Helen. I waited for her to make the first move.

“Helen tells me you were supposed to be going out tonight,” she began.

“Yes, that’s right,” I confirmed.

“And now she says she’s going out with an old school friend, and her brother,” she went on. I nodded.

“I don’t suppose you’d consider going with them?” she said in a rush.

“Well, I didn’t really want to go out at all,” I explained. “But Helen wanted to celebrate passing her test and I didn’t want to disappoint her. But I’m just as glad she’s got someone else to go out with. I’ve got a lot of work to do tonight, and need to make a start.”

Marion’s shoulders slumped. “I was hoping you’d go,” she said. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this old school friend. I can’t get it out of my head that it’s the brother Helen’s interested in.”

“You’re probably right,” I agreed. “But she’s going for all that. You know what she’s like.”

Marion nodded. “Yes, I do know,” she said grimly. “That’s why I was hoping you’d go along too. But if you’ve got work to do then I suppose I’ll just have to worry about her.”

It was usually at this point that I would give in and go out. But this evening I had to get some research done for an essay and the books had to be back in the college library the next day. One thing I had learnt about Marion was that she was quite manipulative, and would use various tactics to try and get people to do what she wanted. Most times, as I said, I would give in and go, but I hadn’t been invited out tonight and I was certainly not in the mood to play gooseberry.

“Yes, I’m sorry Marion, but I really do have to get some work done.”

“Not to worry,” she said, admitting defeat. “I suppose Helen will do what she wants to do, as usual.” I nodded in agreement, and carried on eating my tea. Marion made a pot of tea and poured one out for me. When I had finished my meal we sat for a while drinking the tea in silence.

"I wish Helen was more like you," she suddenly said.

"What? Why?" I asked.

"You're so settled, so steady. You know what you want to do, but you listen to other people and take their feelings into consideration."

I was astonished. No one had ever said anything like that to me before. She must have seen the look on my face, because she gave a little laugh and carried on talking.

"I suppose it's my own fault," she said. "I could never give Helen the attention she needed before the war, then she was evacuated to stay with you in Yorkshire, and then her father was so poorly when he came back I had to look after him. I'm not surprised Helen thinks I don't really care about her. I've not exactly shown her that she's number one."

I didn't know what to say. "I'm sure she knows, deep down," was all I could manage.

"I'm sure she does," Marion replied. "But she doesn't show it. So now I'm paying the price for not paying enough attention to my daughter, by having to watch her throw her life away."

"I'm sure she'll settle down when she gets in the Wrens," I said.

"You really think so?" she asked. "From what I've heard, those girls are just regarded as high class whores for the ward-room—for the officers."

"But Helen's not like that," I protested. "She's a good girl."

Once again a strange little smile played across Marion's face. "Yes, of course she is," she replied.

I could tell she was really worried. Whilst not willing to go out I did resolve to have a word with Helen before she went out. I took my things to the sink and washed and dried them, then collected my books and went up to my room. I dumped everything on the bed, and then went and knocked on Helen's door.

"Come in," she cried. "I'm decent."

I went in and found her in the process of 'getting ready'. This involved taking most (or even all) of her clothes out of the ward-

robe and throwing them on the floor; rummaging through her underwear drawer for 'something special' to wear; putting on her stockings, and making her face up. She was still in Stage 1 when I got there. She was taking stuff out and holding it up against herself, and then throwing it away. I caught a silk blouse as she threw it in my general direction and put it neatly on the bed.

"Why haven't I got anything decent to wear?" she wailed. "I've got nothing new at all."

"You're going to a lot of trouble for an old school friend," I remarked, as yet more clothes cascaded off the bed onto the floor.

"Don't be ridiculous," she retorted. "I'm not doing this for Sarah, I'm doing it for her gorgeous dish of a brother Simon."

"So you're just going out with Simon then?" I asked.

She cast me a withering glance. "Don't be stupid," she replied. "Of course I'm not going out with just Simon. Sarah is coming out with us, but she's meeting her boy friend at the night club so I'll be with Simon."

"I'm glad I'm not coming with you then," I muttered.

"Ah, Mum's been at you to come with me again, has she?"

"You know she worries about you," I reminded her.

"Hah! Yes, of course she does," Helen remarked bitterly.

"She does," I insisted. "She's worried that you might do something stupid and ruin your chances of joining up." This was stretching the truth slightly but I wanted to say something.

"All she's worried about is that I'll disgrace her by getting pregnant," Helen retorted. I couldn't find anything to say to that because I had to agree with her.

"Well, she can stop worrying. I'm not going to do anything to stop me joining up. This is what I've wanted for ages and I'm not going to throw it all away for a quick roll in the hay."

I was relieved to hear Helen say that, because I had been thinking the same thing myself.

"Well just you be careful someone doesn't slip you something in your drink," I warned her. "I've heard it can happen."

“What, white slavers?” Helen’s head emerged from inside a jumper she had just pulled on. “I don’t believe in those. But I will be careful, I promise. There, satisfied?”

“I suppose so.” I shrugged.

I had never had a boy friend as such, and had precious little experience of what Helen called ‘petting’, but I had got the general idea from the discussions we had had after her various nights out. To be honest I couldn’t see the attraction of being groped by various boys who were in various stages of drunkenness, but Helen had assured me it was as good as sex but without the problems of ‘going all the way.’ I wasn’t in the least bit curious about finding out—it seemed to make life extremely complicated, and I had enough on my plate as it was. The best advice I received on the subject was from Elsie. Having plucked up enough courage to talk to her about it, we spent a wonderful afternoon discussing all sorts of female issues, including men, and sex. I had confessed to Elsie that the thought of being ‘mauled about’ as I put it, really seemed extremely off putting. Elsie had just smiled and put her arm around me, giving me a hug. “Trust me,” she said. “When you find the right man, you’ll enjoy it.” So far I hadn’t put her words to the test, but as I so far hadn’t enjoyed any physical encounters I could only assume I had not, as yet, found the right man.

Helen finally finished dressing and started to put on her ‘face’, as she called her going out make up. I had never seen the attraction of putting on makeup, and resolutely refused to let Helen near me with a make up brush when we went out. My attitude was that if a man didn’t like me ‘au naturel’, then he probably wasn’t worth bothering with.

“He can take me as I am,” I declared on one occasion, “or he can leave me be. It’s up to him.”

Helen had written me off as being unremittingly provincial, and I agreed with her. However having been brought up with Frank’s unrelenting disapproval of women who wore too much make up I wasn’t about to change. After a couple of months of

trying to reform me, Helen had given up the attempt much to my (and probably her) relief.

“There, what do you think?” she asked, turning round and giving me a twirl.

I studied her, and said “Well, I think you may have missed a bit on your face, but I suppose you’ll do.”

“What do you mean, missed a bit?” She turned round to the dressing table mirror and began checking her make up. When I started to laugh, she spun back round, and threw a cushion at me. I caught it, and was going to throw it back, but she shouted “Don’t you dare ... I’m all done,” so I dropped it on the floor.

With both of us laughing, we left the bedroom. She went off downstairs in a cloud of perfume, and I went into my bedroom to start my studying. Dimly up the stairs I could hear the sounds of arguing, and could imagine the scene. Helen and her mother would be confronting each other again over whether Helen was really going out like that. Next thing I heard a car horn beep, and the front door slammed as Helen left the house. Sighing a little, I pulled my books towards me and settled down to an evening’s study.

* * * * *

Next morning, Helen was conspicuous by her absence from the breakfast table. What was more surprising was that neither Marion nor Brian appeared to have breakfasted either. Shrugging off my concerns I tidied up after myself and set off for college.

I was half way to the bus stop when I heard footsteps behind me, and someone calling ‘Suzie, wait.’ I turned round, and saw Helen running down the road after me. I could sense immediately that something was wrong. For one thing Helen wasn’t dressed, and for another, her face was as white as a sheet.

“What’s wrong?” I asked as she came up to me.

“It’s Mum, she’s had some sort of turn. Dad’s out and I don’t know what to do!” she gasped. “Please, come home and help me.”

Without a word I set off back to the house, with Helen almost running alongside me. We got back to the house and I found the front door open. Marion was lying in the kitchen, looking as if she had just fallen off her chair.

“Did you find her like this?” I asked.

“Yes, I’d just come downstairs and I heard a crash. I ran in and found her lying there.”

“Right, first things first. You call for an ambulance, tell them it’s an emergency. Go on, now.”

I pushed Helen out of the kitchen and shut the door behind her. Marion was lying partially on her back. I could see she was breathing but her eyes were shut, and she wasn’t moving. Remembering the first aid I had picked up from a course I had done when starting college, I quickly checked her over for broken bones, and then put her in the recovery position. I shook her shoulder and called out to her. There was no response as such, but her eyes flickered when I spoke to her. I could hear Helen on the phone giving the address, then she hung up and came back into the kitchen.

“What’s the matter with her?” she asked in a hushed tone. I turned round to look at her.

“I think she’s had a stroke,” I replied. “Look, if you want to go to the hospital with her you’d better go and get dressed. I need to phone the college and let them know I won’t be in today.”

“But we can’t just leave her on her own,” Helen protested.

“All right, I’ll stay here while you get dressed, and then you can stay with her while I phone the college. Now, where’s your dad likely to be?”

“He’ll have gone to work.”

“Right, have you got his works number?”

Helen shook her head. “He’s not supposed to get calls at work,” she said.

“All right, I’ll try and find it. You go and get dressed.” I once again pushed Helen gently out of the kitchen. Suddenly she flung her arms around me and said “She will be all right, won’t she?”

I gave her a quick hug. "I'm sure she will," I reassured her. "Now go on, go and get dressed."

Helen left to go upstairs, and I returned to the kitchen. I checked Marion's breathing and tried to find her pulse, but couldn't. I fetched a cushion from the living room to put under her head, and then sat holding her hand until Helen came back in.

"Here, sit here and hold her hand," I told her. "I'm going to see if I can find your dad's work number."

Helen took my place next to her mother, and I was just starting to look in the little book Marion kept with important phone numbers when the ambulance arrived. I opened the door and let them in, and they came straight in with the stretcher. In no time at all they had Marion comfortable on the stretcher and they carried her out to the ambulance. Helen argued about going with her mother, and they eventually gave in. As she got in, I shouted "Which hospital?"

"St Bart's," one of the ambulance men replied. With no further ado they set off, with the bells ringing and the lights flashing. I went back into the house and after a little bit of searching, found the number for Brian's work. I called the number and asked to speak to him, explaining it was a family emergency. They put me on hold for what seemed like an age, and then he was there. I told him that Marion had been taken ill, and was on her way to St Barts, and he said that he would go straight there. I put the phone down and wondered what to do next. I knew that I wouldn't be allowed to go to the hospital as I wasn't family, and I had no desire to go to college that morning. I finally decided to tidy the kitchen, to leave it the way Marion would have wanted it, and then I suddenly thought of ringing Elsie. I dialed the number, and the phone rang three times before she picked it up.

"Oh Elsie," I managed, before bursting into tears.

"Suzie, what's happened?" she asked.

I managed to explain through my tears, and she immediately became the practical Elsie that I loved.

“OK, you hang on there. They won’t let you in to the hospital, you’re not family. I think the best thing I can do is come down there for a few days and help out.”

“Come down here?” I asked, astonished.

“Why not? Mo can look after the children, that won’t be a problem, and you’ll need someone down there to look after things. Helen and Brian won’t be any use at all for a few days, and if the worst does happen, there needs to be someone with their head screwed on right to deal with things.”

I hadn’t considered what might happen to Marion, but behind Elsie’s words I suddenly understood that Marion might die. What effect that would have on Brian and Helen heaven only knew.

“Oh if you could, that would be fantastic,” I said.

“I’m on my way. I’ll give you a ring when I get chance, so you’ll know what time to expect me. Take care now, I’ll see you soon.”

After we had hung up I thought about getting a meal ready for when Elsie arrived. I hunted around in the kitchen and found a joint of beef, which I thought would do nicely. Marion had probably intended it for Sunday, but I couldn’t find anything else to cook. I did the potatoes, and some carrots, and got everything else ready to go in the oven. I even managed to make some Yorkshire pudding batter, though I suspected Elsie wouldn’t have called it that. Then I waited. Some two hours later, Helen and her father arrived home.

“How is she?” I asked.

“She’s stable, that’s all they’ll tell us,” replied Brian. He looked awful, with his eyes red where he’d been crying. Helen didn’t look much better.

“Well, I rang Elsie and she’s on her way down to look after us,” I told them. Helen looked at me in astonishment.

“Elsie’s coming here?” she exclaimed. “Whatever for?”

“She thinks we’ll need someone around to look after us,” I said. “And I think she’s right. If you and Brian are at the hospital all day, and I’m at college, there needs to be someone here to keep

an eye on things, and to cook and stuff.” I didn’t mention Elsie’s other comments. They wouldn’t have helped the situation.

“I suppose so,” said Helen, and then burst into tears. I put my arms around her and let her cry on my shoulder for a while. When she had managed to stop crying, I said “Why don’t you and your dad go and sit down for bit. I’ll make a cup of tea.”

“OK,” she replied, and went into the living room. I found Brian in the kitchen, trying to make a pot of tea.

“I’ll do that Brian,” I said, taking the kettle off him. “You go and sit down in the living room with Helen.”

“Yes, all right,” he said vaguely, then put his arms around me. I stiffened up, not being used to close contact between us, and not knowing quite what to do about it.

“You’re a good girl, Suzie,” he said. “Thanks for looking after us.” He let me go, and shuffled out of the kitchen.

I shrugged, and put his odd behavior out of my mind. He’s probably just upset, I told myself. I made the tea, and took it into the living room. We all sat there, in the quiet, drinking it. Helen looked exhausted, and Brian just looked bewildered. After a while I looked at the clock and jumped to my feet. Helen looked at me in surprise.

“I’ve got to get tea on,” I explained. “Otherwise Elsie won’t have had a meal today.” She nodded, and made to get up to help.

“No, it’s all right, I did most of it this morning while you were at the hospital. I just need to put the gas on and put the meat in the oven.” She nodded again, and settled back down into her chair.

I hustled about the kitchen, and silently thanked Elsie for the training she had given me in household management. I felt quite confident that I could produce a decent meal. By five o’clock, Elsie still hadn’t arrived, and the tea was just about ready. I once again left Helen and Brian in the living room, and finished off the meal. By the time the meal was ready I also had the table laid. I dished up, and then called Helen and Brian in for their tea. Helen looked at the plate and started to push it away.

“Don’t you dare,” I said. She looked up at me. “Starving yourself is not going to help your mother. Get that eaten.”

She looked at me for a moment, and then started to eat. Brian, on the other hand, ate in a mechanical way, cutting up the food and putting it in his mouth. I was quite certain after watching him for a few minutes that he would have eaten anything I put in front of him in the same way. He would probably have eaten sawdust with gravy on it.

“What time can you go back to the hospital?” I asked Helen.

“They said not before six o’clock,” she replied.

“You’ll just have time after your tea then,” I commented. She nodded. They finished their tea, and then Brian rang for a taxi and he and Helen left to go back to the hospital. I cleared up and was just starting the washing up when there was a knock on the door. I dropped the washing up brush in the sink, and ran through the hall. I threw open the door, and there was Elsie.

“Oh Elsie, you won’t believe how glad I am to see you!”

She opened her arms, and gave me a hug. “There you go,” she said, comfortingly. “Now, let’s get this case in, and you can show me where I’m going to sleep.”

“You’re in with me, I’m afraid,” I told her. “There’s a spare bed you can have, we won’t have to share.”

“Well, I don’t mind sharing,” she said as we came up the stairs, “but it’s always better to have your own bed.” We put her stuff in the room, and then went downstairs again.

“I was just finishing the washing up,” I told her.

“Well then, let’s get that sorted out first off,” she said.

“Don’t you want a cuppa first?” I asked her.

“We’ll put the kettle on while we finish off cleaning up, and then we can sit down together in the kitchen and have a natter.”

“Oh I’m so glad you’re here,” I said again, giving her a quick hug as we went into the kitchen.

“Yes, I can tell that,” she said with a smile. “Now, why don’t you tell what happened again, whilst we get this sorted out.”

I went over it again with her, and we were just sitting down for a cup of tea when I heard the front door.

“That must be them back,” I said. “That was quick.” I looked at Elsie, and she was looking unusually serious. “What’s the matter?” I asked.

“I think you’d better get ready for some bad news,” she said. Just as she said that, the kitchen door opened, and Helen came in. She had obviously been crying.

“Helen, you’re back early,” I said. “What’s the matter?”

Helen looked at me, and burst into tears. I ran over to her and took her in my arms.

“Helen, what is it?” I repeated, although I was certain I knew what it was.

“She’s dead,” Helen wailed. “She’s dead and I never got to tell her I loved her. The last time I saw her we argued. And now she’s dead and I can’t tell her I’m sorry!” She collapsed back into my arms, and cried as though her heart was breaking.

Chapter 19

Elsie was wonderful. She took charge of everything. She gave Helen a cup of tea, and then put her to bed. She made Brian sit down when he arrived back from the hospital, and gave him a glass of whiskey she had found in the cupboard. After he had drunk this she also sent him up to bed. Then we sat back down in the kitchen. For a while we just sat there in silence, drinking tea, when Elsie suddenly said “Of course, you realise you can’t stay here for much longer.”

I was totally taken aback. “What do you mean, I can’t stay here?”

Elsie looked at me. “You said Helen was going to join the Wrens,” she said. I nodded. “Well you can’t stay here with just Brian. It wouldn’t be proper.”

I looked back at her. “I never thought of that,” I admitted.

“Would you want to stay here with just Brian?” she asked.

I thought of how he had put his arms around me the night before, and gave a little shiver.

“No, not on my own with Brian,” I said. Elsie hadn’t missed my little shiver, but she obviously decided not to pursue it further.

“Well, you’ll have a little time before Helen leaves,” she said. “That should let you have a look round for somewhere decent to stay.”

“I’ll ask at the college,” I said. “There’s always cards up advertising rooms or flats to share.”

“Well make sure you have a look at the place before you move in,” she said. “Go round on short notice, or without telling them exactly when you’re coming. That’ll mean they won’t be able to hide anything that might be wrong with it.”

“Good idea,” I said. I was feeling tired, and wanted to go to bed. “I think I’ll go on up.”

“I’ll just wash these up, and then I’ll be up myself,” she replied.

We were quiet as we got ready for bed, and although I felt exhausted I found it difficult to get to sleep. My brain just wouldn’t switch off, and I kept seeing Marion lying on the floor of the kitchen. I supposed it was reaction. I had managed to hold things together until Elsie arrived, but once she was there to take things off my hands I could fall apart. Eventually I dropped off into a restless sleep, and woke in the morning feeling as if I hadn’t really slept at all. I went down to the kitchen in my pyjamas and dressing gown, and found Elsie already up and cooking breakfast.

“Are you going to college today?” she asked.

I yawned, and nodded. “I think I should,” I said. “I don’t really have an excuse to stay away, and if I don’t hand my essay in today I’ll not get it marked.”

“You’ll have to go then,” she agreed.

She put a plate of food down in front of me, and told me to eat up. I managed to eat it all (Elsie hated wasted food), and then went upstairs to get dressed. I was just coming out of the bathroom when Helen came out of her room.

“Hello sweetheart,” I said. “How are you feeling?”

She tried to smile, but it went a bit awry. “Dreadful,” she said. She took in my appearance. “Are you going to college then?” she asked.

“Yes,” I replied. “They won’t give me another day off because Marion wasn’t a relative. And I’ve got work to hand in.”

Helen nodded. “That sounds about right,” she said.

“Elsie’s downstairs,” I told her. “She’ll make you some breakfast when you go down.”

“I suppose I’ll have to eat it then,” she said.

“I’d better go,” I said. I reached out and gave her a hug. “I’ll be back as soon as I can,” I whispered.

“I know,” she said. I let her go, and she went into the bathroom. I went downstairs, said good bye to Elsie, collected my books, and went off to college.

* * * * *

When I got to college, I quickly found Robin and the others in my class, and got settled in.

“Where were you yesterday?” he asked.

I explained what had happened, and he said “That must have been awful for you.”

“Not as awful as it was for Helen,” I replied.

“True,” he admitted, “but I only know you, so you get all my sympathy.” I smiled at him, but a bit sadly.

“Hey come on,” he said, putting his finger under my chin and lifting it. “It’s a tragic event, and I know she’s your best friend’s mother, but you can’t let this get you down. After all, it’s not going to change your life.”

“Oh yes it is,” I said, removing his fingers. “I’m going to have to find somewhere else to live now.”

“Oh? How come?” he asked, as we walked up the stairs to our first lecture.

“I can’t stay in the house with just Brian once Helen joins up. And to tell the truth, I really wouldn’t want to.” I explained about how I had felt yesterday when he put his arms round me. Robin’s face changed, and I couldn’t read his expression, but I gathered he wasn’t pleased. I had given a little shiver again as I had related the experience, and I knew Robin had noticed it.

“No, you can’t stay there,” he said decisively. “Tell you what, why don’t you move in with us?”

“With you?” I was startled, never having given a moment’s thought to where Robin might live.

“Yes, why not? It’s a big house, and we all have our own rooms. Fair enough, we share a kitchen, bathrooms and living room, but there’s a couple of girls already there so you wouldn’t be on your own. Why not give it a try?”

Why not indeed? I thought. “Can I come round and see it?” I asked.

“Pop round tomorrow if you like,” he replied.

“Not today?”

“There won’t be anyone in tonight,” he explained. “Me and the other lads are going off to watch football, and the girls are staying late studying.”

“OK then, I’ll come round tomorrow. Can I bring Elsie with me?”

“Yes of course you can, no problem,” he replied. I felt reassured that he raised no objections to Elsie coming with me. Maybe Helen would like to come as well, I thought, just to get out of the house for a bit.

“Lovely. I’ll be round tomorrow then.”

The rest of the day passed as usual except that I had to have an interview with my course tutor to explain my absence of the day before. Once I had told him what happened he was more than sympathetic, and readily agreed to my request to have another day off for the funeral. I couldn’t give him a date, but he assured me there wouldn’t be a problem even though Marion wasn’t a close family member.

I got home on time and found Elsie had taken charge of the house. Tea was ready and waiting, and smelling delicious. Helen and her father were in the living room with a cup of tea, and after I had put everything in my room I went into the kitchen to talk with Elsie. I told her I might have found somewhere else to live and that I was to go and look at it tomorrow, and asked her if she could come with me. As I had suspected she was delighted to get the chance to inspect my possible new accommodation. When I told her it was a shared house, I got the distinct impression one of the things

she would be checking for was the quality of the lock on my bedroom door.

Helen and Brian came in for tea. Helen seemed to be a bit better, certainly calmer than she had been in the morning. Brian, however still seemed to be in a daze. He once again mechanically ate everything on his plate, drank his tea, and got up from the table. This time he tried to put his arms round Elsie, but she ‘wasn’t having any of that nonsense’ and pushed him away. I saw Helen looking at her father in a worried sort of way, as if puzzled by his behaviour. She stayed in the kitchen with Elsie and me, drinking another cup of tea, rather than join him in the living room.

“Anything the matter, pet?” Elsie asked, looking at her shrewdly.

“I don’t know, it may be nothing,” she replied.

“Better out than in, my girl,” Elsie responded. This phrase from our childhood brought a smile to both myself and Helen. She seemed to take heart from it.

“It’s my dad,” she blurted out. “He’s really strange, and he keeps wanting to hug me all the time. But not like he’d hug me before. It’s as if he thinks I’m Mum or something. It gives me the creeps.”

I nodded. “I know, he did it to me yesterday,” I told her, “and you saw just now he tried to do it to Elsie as well.”

“I honestly don’t know if I can stay here with him on my own,” she said. “I know I’ll be leaving in a little while to join up, but that may still take a couple of months and I don’t know if I could cope in the meantime.”

This seemed like the perfect time to tell Helen I would be moving out.

“Helen, I know how you feel. I hope you understand, but I don’t think I can stay here now your mum’s gone. I feel dreadful at deserting you like this, but I feel the same way as you about your dad.”

Helen looked at me. “I thought you might go,” she said. “That’s one reason I was so upset this morning. Have you got anywhere yet?”

“Nothing definite,” I said. “I’ve been offered a room in a shared house. I’m going to look at it tomorrow evening, with Elsie. Would you like to come too?”

“What, to look at it?” I nodded.

“Yes, I’d love to come,” she said. She gave a little laugh. “If it’s halfway decent, maybe I could move in too.”

“Maybe we should see if there’s two room available,” suggested Elsie, and I knew she was concerned about Helen staying here on her own with her father as well.

“Maybe we should,” agreed Helen.

We cleaned everything away, and then we all joined Brian in the living room. The television was switched on, but he didn’t seem to be watching it at all, just staring at it.

“Brian,” Elsie called to him. He didn’t respond. “Brian,” she repeated, slightly louder. This time he reacted. He over at Elsie, but didn’t seem to see her.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Have the hospital been in touch about arranging the funeral?” she asked.

“Funeral,” he repeated vaguely. “No, I haven’t heard anything about a funeral.”

Elsie looked at him strangely, but let the subject lie. She turned to Helen.

“It looks like your dad can’t cope with arranging anything just yet,” she said quietly. “Do you want me to try and sort something out?”

“Oh would you, please, Elsie,” Helen replied. “I don’t have the first idea where to start. It should be Dad doing all this, but he’s done nothing. I don’t even think he’s rung the hospital today or anything.”

“Right then,” said Elsie determinedly. “First thing in the morning, after Suzie’s gone to college, we’ll pop up to the hospital and start getting things rolling. I’ll need you there as you’re family, but once you’ve told everyone I’m sorting things out for you, you can come home if you like.”

Helen looked at her gratefully. "That would be wonderful, Elsie, thank you so much."

"Think nothing of it, lass," Elsie replied. "I've long thought of you as being part of the family, seeing as you spent so much time with us, and I'm doing nothing for you I wouldn't do for anyone else in the family."

"Well, you're still wonderful," Helen told her stoutly. Elsie smiled at her, and we turned our attention to the television.

The programme wasn't that interesting, so Helen, Elsie and I sat and chatted for most of the evening, mainly about what Helen and her father would want for the funeral. Helen said that her mother hadn't been particularly religious but that she would want a proper church burial, probably at the local church. We suggested hymns and music, and Elsie asked Helen to suggest somewhere for the flowers. Helen hadn't got a clue, so Elsie suggested the hospital might be able to help there. Elsie asked if there were any family that should be told about the funeral. Helen mentioned a couple of aunts and uncles, from both sides of the family, but couldn't think of anyone else. She went and fetched her mother's address book from the hall and went through everyone in it, marking those she thought should be told with a pencil. Elsie asked her if she felt up to ringing them up, or writing to them, the next day, and Helen said she would be able to do that.

"Who do you want to do the funeral?" Elsie asked at one point. Helen looked blank.

"Which undertakers do you want?" Elsie rephrased the question.

"I've no idea," she replied.

"Then I'll get in touch with the local Co-op," said Elsie. "They've always done people proud up in Halifax, and I'm sure they'll do the same down here."

"Yes, fine," agreed Helen.

"Is that all right with you Brian?" Elsie called across to him.

"Hmm, what?" he said.

“Shall I get the Co-op in for the funeral?” Elsie repeated.

“Oh, yes, if you like,” came the response. Elsie shrugged, and left it at that. I went to bed soon after that, and Helen came with me. Elsie said she’d sit up for a bit and see if she could get any response from Brian. However, as she came to bed not long afterwards it seemed she didn’t get any further than before.

Sleep came quickly that night, probably because I’d had such a disturbed night the night before. However, this night wasn’t to be much better. It seemed as if I had no sooner gone to sleep than I was being woken up again. I sat up in bed and found Helen standing by the side of the bed.

“What’s the matter?” I whispered.

“Can I stay in here with you tonight?” she asked.

“Yes of course, but why?”

“It’s Dad,” she replied. “I woke up and he was standing by the bed. He didn’t speak to me, but he was just standing there looking at me. I asked him what he wanted, but he didn’t say anything, and then he started to get into bed with me. It was horrible.”

I pulled back the covers, and gestured to her to get in. She climbed in and lay down. She was freezing cold, and shaking like a leaf. I put my arm round her, and cuddled her until she settled down.

“Are you sure you’re OK with this?” she asked after a while.

“Yes of course,” I told her.

“It’s going to be a bit tight,” she commented.

“Don’t worry about that,” I replied. “But if you start kicking, you can have the bed to yourself. I’ll climb in with Elsie.” I was relieved to hear her giggle.

We settled down, and after a while I could tell she was asleep. I managed to doze off several times during the night but kept coming awake thinking I could hear noises, and worrying that Brian might try and come in this room as well. However, whatever strange fantasy was driving him at the moment obviously still recognised that this room was off limits, because he

didn't come in. I managed to get some sleep towards the end of the night but still awoke in the morning with gritty eyes and a slight headache. Elsie woke up at the same time, but didn't comment when she saw both of us in the one bed. She just raised her eyebrow before going out to the bathroom.

The three of us gathered in the kitchen for breakfast. Elsie cooked for us once again, and we all sat down with food and a cup of tea. Nothing was said for a while but then Elsie broke the silence.

"When we're out this morning, Helen," she began, "remind me to get a couple of bolts, will you?"

Helen looked up at her, but didn't say anything. She just nodded her head, and then got on with her breakfast. Brian still hadn't appeared by the time we had finished, but as I got my books together and went to leave I heard Elsie ask Helen if she knew the name of the family doctor.

I met up with Robin again when I got to college, and finalised the arrangements for seeing the house. It wasn't far from the college, which would mean I wouldn't have to get up quite so early. The problem I could see was that the neighbourhood wasn't as nice as Helen's. I told him Elsie would be coming, and possibly Helen, depending on whether she wanted to stay with her father or not.

"That must be dreadful for her," he commented when I had explained what had happened the night before.

"She was so upset," I told him. "I don't suppose there's another room available in the house, is there?"

"I'm sure we can find room for her," he said with a grin. "If the worst comes to the worst, she can always share mine!"

I told him precisely what I thought of that particular offer. "Seriously though, is there another room there?"

"Well, the room you're coming to see is a double," he told me. "At least, it's got two beds in it. Maybe she could share with you?"

"Brilliant idea. We'll see when we get there tonight," I replied.

I made a quick phone call back to the house at lunchtime, using a phone box just outside the college. Elsie answered and said that she'd asked the doctor to pop round and have a look at Brian. She and Helen had been to the hospital that morning, and had made arrangements for the undertakers to collect Marions's body after the post mortem had been carried out. From having discussed things with them, Elsie thought the funeral would take place the following week. Helen had been really upset at the thought of a post mortem, so Elsie had sent her back to bed with a couple of aspirin as soon as they had returned home, and she was currently fast asleep in bed. Elsie also told me she had bought a couple of bolts, and had put one on Helen's door so she could sleep in peace. The other one was for our door, 'just in case'. Just as we were saying our good byes, the door bell went, and Elsie exclaimed "that must be the doctor," and put the phone down. I went back into college and spent the rest of the day's lectures worrying over this and that.

When I got home that evening Helen and Elsie were alone in the house.

"Where's Brian?" I asked.

Helen replied. "The doctor's had him taken into hospital," she explained "He thinks he's suffering from shock, that's why he's been acting so strangely."

"Well, at least he'll be looked after there," I said. I didn't add that at least we could sleep easily in our beds that night, but the thought was there, and it seemed to hover unspoken in the air.

"What's for tea?" I asked. I couldn't smell anything cooking.

"I thought as we were going out to look at this house of yours," Elsie replied, "we might as well get fish and chips on the way home."

"Ooh, yes please," I said. "I haven't had fish and chips since I came down," I continued. Marion had always been a bit of a snob where fish and chips were concerned, and wouldn't have them in the house, claiming that they 'stank the place out'.

“Sounds good,” said Helen. She was looking considerably better once again. The sleep this afternoon had obviously done her good. There was something else, though, that seemed to have put some sparkle back in her eyes. She was also obviously dying to tell me something.

“So, what news have you had today then?” I asked her, smiling.

“I’ve had a letter from the Wrens,” she replied. “I’ve been accepted, and I join up in three weeks, on a Monday. I have to report to HMS Dauntless at Burghfield, near Reading, for my basic training.”

“Brilliant news!” I exclaimed, coming round the table to give her a hug. “Oh, I’m so pleased for you,” I continued.

“Yes, isn’t it great? I’ve finally got what I wanted.”

“Well, come on girls, if we’re going to look at this house.” Elsie’s voice cut over our excited chatter. “Get your coats on and let’s go.”

We left the house and took a bus to the end of the right road. The house was a large Victorian terrace, which didn’t look big enough to house seven or eight people, but Elsie said that this sort of house was deceptive and bigger than it looked. I rang the bell and Robin quickly answered the door.

“Hi there, come on in,” he said, holding the door open and gesturing for us all to come in. We trooped through the front door and looked about us. The hallway was long, quite dark, and tiled. A coat stand was at the far end, looking as if everyone in the house had thrown their coats on to it.

“The kitchen’s through there,” Robin gestured to the end of the passage. “That door on the left is the living room.”

“We’ll start there then,” announced Elsie, and led the way. The living room was much bigger than I’d expected, and furnished in what Elsie called ‘typical student’, a mismatch of styles and types of furnishings but managing to look comfortable and cosy at the same time. The large open fire probably helped create that impression. The room was currently unoccupied.

“Where is everyone?” I asked.

“Either having tea in the kitchen, or in their rooms studying,” Robin replied. “Do you want to look at the kitchen next?”

“Of course,” replied Elsie. Robin led the way.

“Through here,” he said, opening the door. We were instantly assaulted with the smell of cooking, along with the noise of several people all talking at once. The kitchen was typically Victorian, being large with a scullery off the far end.

“Hi, people,” Robin called over the hubbub. “This is Suzie, she’s come to look at the spare room.”

Various greetings rose from the group sitting round the large pine table in the middle of the room. Pots and pans were piled up on the cooker and in the sink, all adding their bit to the aroma of the kitchen. The overall effect was of a room that people were comfortable to be in, and that had a welcoming (if slightly messy) atmosphere. I nodded to a couple of people I recognised from college, and then Robin pulled the door shut.

“Don’t worry about the mess,” he reassured us as we went back up the hallway to the stairs. “That’ll all be cleaned up later.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” muttered Elsie from behind me, and I heard Helen snort with suppressed laughter.

“The room’s this way,” said Robin, leading the way up the stairs. “It’s right at the top, I hope you don’t mind a bit of a climb.” We all puffed up the stairs after him.

“Well, this is it,” said Robin. “What do you think?”

The room was actually the old attic, and had obviously been converted from servants’ rooms at some time. It was enormous, covering the whole area of the floors below, except for one small area which had been partitioned off. The room was painted white, presumably to make it look lighter and bigger. There were four dormer windows, two to the front of the house and two to the back, and at some stage someone had put a couple of roof windows in as well. The floor was painted floorboards, also white, covered in various places with colourful rugs. There were two beds, one either side of a large fireplace which had been bricked

up. The ceiling dipped towards the floor in various places, but furniture had been placed to provide plenty of storage. A large wardrobe dominated the wall opposite the fireplace and there were a couple of tallboys and a chest of drawers. A dressing table had been placed to get the light from the roof lights without blocking the floor, and opposite this was a desk with a light. Curtains had been hung from the roof beams at various points to screen off the areas where the ceiling really was too low. All in all, it was a lovely room; big, spacious, and comfortable. Radiators had been fitted, so it promised to be warm as well.

“It’s lovely!” I exclaimed, and Helen echoed me. Even Elsie was nodding with approval.

“What’s in there?” I asked, pointing to the partitioned area.

“Ah, that’s the only drawback with this room,” Robin said. “That’s where the hot and cold water tanks live, and they can be a bit noisy. If you don’t mind that, then I think this is the best room in the house. It’s certainly the largest.”

“I love it,” I said. “And I’m sure I can put up with a bit of noise.”

Elsie looked over at me. “There’s noise and there’s noise,” she said. “I think you should hear what the noise is before you say for definite you want the room.”

“I suppose you’re right,” I agreed reluctantly.

Robin was standing by the door. “Hang on up here a bit,” he said. “I’ll go downstairs and get some of the others to run the hot and cold water. That’ll show you how much noise there is.”

Before we could stop him he had gone, and we could hear him running down the stairs. We waited a few minutes, and then the noise began. It started with a distant banging which gradually got louder, and then a shrieking noise began, which also got gradually louder. They both reached a crescendo after about a minute, and then suddenly stopped. We all stood and looked at each other in amazement. Footsteps on the stairs heralded Robin’s reappearance.

“What was it like?” he asked.

“Absolutely dreadful,” I replied. “I couldn’t live with that.”

Robin’s face fell. “I was hoping it wouldn’t be too bad,” he said. “Mind you, I did get people to turn on every single tap in the building—the kitchen, the bathrooms, the wash basins, everything. That might explain it a bit.”

Elsie was looking at him in amusement. “Do you know what you need, young man?” she asked.

Robin looked at her warily. “New lungs?” he suggested hopefully.

Elsie laughed. “No, you need a plumber. I bet if you got a plumber in, he could fix those pipes so they didn’t make so much noise.”

Robin looked as if a light bulb had gone off in his head. “A plumber,” he exclaimed. “Why didn’t I think of that!” He turned to me. “If I promise to get a plumber in to sort the noise out,” he went on, “would you move in?”

“Yes, I think I would,” I told him. “It’s a lovely room, and it’s so close to college. I would love to move in.”

Robin beamed. “Great. that’s settled then,” he said.

“Wait just one moment,” Elsie cut in. “There’s one thing we haven’t talked about.”

“What’s that?” asked Robin.

“What’s the rent?” she asked.

“Oh, the rent, I’d forgotten that,” said Robin. He named a figure which didn’t seem too bad to me. Elsie turned to me.

“I think we can afford that,” she said. “It’s really very reasonable when you look at the size of the room.”

I smiled at her gratefully. Helen had been mooching around the room, and had been sitting on one of the beds.

“I’m sure I could afford to pay half of that,” she said. Elsie gave her an enigmatic look, but didn’t comment.

“Won’t you be staying at home now your dad’s in hospital?” I asked her.

“Well, yes, but if he comes back before I leave to join up, I’d rather come and stay here with you.” I could quite understand how she felt.

“Well, no need to jump the gun,” Elsie put in. “I think we need to go and talk things over. However, we will take the room, Robin, and thank you for showing us round.” She held out her hand, and he shook it. Elsie then left the room with the rest of us trailing behind.

“When can you move in?” asked Robin, as we reached the front door.

“How about this weekend?” I suggested.

“That would be great,” he said. “I’ll let the others know, and they’ll give you a hand moving your stuff upstairs.”

“That’ll be fantastic, thank you so much,” I said. “See you on Sunday, then?”

“No, silly, see you tomorrow at college,” he replied, grinning. We all set off down the road, but when I turned round he was still standing at the front door, and gave us a cheery wave. I waved back, and he went inside.

“Well, I’m glad that’s sorted out,” I said, as we walked down the road.

“It’s a lovely room,” agreed Helen.

“Yes, well, you want to watch yourself with that young man,” said Elsie.

“Whatever do you mean?” I asked her.

“What? Can’t you tell?” she asked me with surprise.

“Tell what? What do you mean?” I replied.

“Tell that he fancies you something rotten,” replied Elsie.

“Me? But we’re friends!” I exclaimed.

“Honestly Suzie,” Elsie continued. “I don’t know how you got to nineteen without being able to tell when a boy fancies you. You mark my words, he’ll be after you as soon as you move in.”

“But I’ve never thought of him like that,” I protested.

“You may not have done,” she replied, “but you take it from me, it’s the way he thinks about you.”

We carried on down the street to the bus stop. I didn’t know what I felt, but it was a mixture of alarm, pleasure, and confusion all rolled into one. Elsie and Helen were quiet on either side

of me, so I was left alone with my thoughts. Robin, as a friend, was wonderful; always there for me when I needed him. Robin as a potential boy friend was another matter altogether. I really wasn't sure how I felt about him, but I felt curious about how our relationship might develop. I turned to Elsie once again.

"You're sure about this, are you?" I asked her.

"Of course I am," she said with a laugh. "You don't get to my age without knowing the signs."

"Hmmm," was all I said.

We collected the promised fish and chips from the local chippie, and when we got back to the house Elsie ushered us straight into the kitchen. Plates, knives and forks were laid, tea was brewed, and bread buttered before we sat down to eat. We had just started our meal when the phone rang. Elsie got up to answer it. We couldn't hear much of the conversation from this end, just the odd 'yes,' 'no,' and 'I see' which came through the door. After a few minutes Elsie came back in, then sat down next to Helen and put her arm around her.

"You're probably not going to want to hear this," said Elsie, "but you need to know. That was the hospital on the phone. I'm afraid your father won't be back for quite a while. They've had a look at him, and decided he needs to be sectioned under the Mental Health Act."

Chapter 20

I got up the following morning and realized that I had finally had a good night's sleep. Elsie was obviously already up, as her bed was empty and neatly made. I got washed and dressed, and went down into the kitchen.

Elsie and Helen were both sitting at the table drinking tea. I was surprised to see Helen up so early.

"Morning you two," I said as I went in.

"Morning," came the reply from both of them.

"How are you feeling?" I asked Helen. She looked at me.

"Guilty," she replied.

"Guilty? What on earth for?"

"Guilty because I'm glad Dad won't be around for a bit," she admitted.

"Oh." I sat down, feeling somewhat deflated. Whatever I had expected her to say, it certainly wasn't that.

"Breakfast?" asked Elsie, pouring me a cup of tea.

"Yes please," I replied. "What are you having, Helen?"

"Oh, I don't know, whatever's around," she responded. She sounded really tired, as if she hadn't slept much.

"So, what are you going to do?" I asked her.

"About what?" she replied.

"About anything," I replied.

"I don't know, I haven't really thought about it."

“Do you want me to stay here with you?” I asked. She looked at me in surprise.

“Would you do that for me?” she asked.

“Well of course I would, that’s what friends are for,” I told her. She smiled at me for the first time that morning.

“That’s really lovely of you, Suzie,” she replied, “but I’m only going to be here for a couple more weeks, and then I’ll be off in the Wrens. What would you do then? I don’t suppose they’ll keep that room for you for as long as that.”

“Well, they might have to if they can’t find a plumber,” I said. “I can’t move in while all that noise happens every time someone has a bath, or does the washing up.”

She smiled. “No, it’s all right, I’ll be fine here for a couple of weeks. Elsie’s going to stay until the funeral’s over, and then come with me to the solicitor’s to hear the will being read. What happens next depends on that.”

I hadn’t even thought about the fact that Marion might have left a will.

“What about your dad?” I asked.

“What about him?” she responded. “He’s been carted off to a lunatic asylum, and you know as well as I do it’s impossible to get out of one of those places unless you can convince the doctors you’re all right. Judging by his performance since Mum died, I don’t think he’ll be doing that in a hurry.”

I was still surprised by Helen’s indifference to her father, even though I knew that she had had very little to do with him since he came home from the war. Her mother had kept them apart, as having her around was a big strain on him. I had always thought his disability was the result of a physical injury, but now I was wondering if he’d been discharged because of a mental problem. Still, it wasn’t my problem.

“So what will you do with the house while you’re away?” I asked her.

“I’m hoping the solicitor will help me with that when I see

him tomorrow,” she said. “Elsie’s going to come with me, so we can get some stuff sorted out.”

“Sounds like a good idea,” I said. “I don’t suppose you can plan anything until that’s been done.”

Soon afterwards, I picked my stuff up and went off to college. Rather surprisingly, Robin wasn’t in sight when I got there so I made my way to my lectures on my own. The lecture had already started when he arrived, and slid into the seat I had saved for him next to my own.

“Where have you been?” I hissed as he got settled in.

“Tell you later,” he responded, as the lecturer gave us both a dirty look for disturbing his lecture. I had to sit and wait until the lecture finished to find out what he’d been up to.

“So, where were you?” I asked as we made our way out of the lecture theatre.

“Finding a plumber,” he replied with a grin.

I raised one eyebrow at him. “You’re keen, aren’t you?” I said.

“You wouldn’t believe how keen,” he replied. There was a look in his eyes that made me blush, and suddenly feel all fluttery inside.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said, a bit crossly, as we walked to our next lecture.

“I’m well aware of that fact,” he said ruefully. “But I keep on hoping.” We walked along in silence for a bit.

“Do you think things will change between us when I move in?” I asked, somewhat naively, I will admit.

“I certainly hope so,” he replied, more seriously this time.

“For better, or worse?” I asked.

“For richer, for poorer, in sickness and health,” he continued, laughing.

“No, Robin, I’m serious,” I said. “We’ve got a good friendship going, and I don’t want anything to ruin it. I want to know we’ll always be friends.”

He stopped suddenly, so suddenly that I walked on a couple of paces before I realized he'd stopped. I turned and went back to him. He was looking at me with a strange expression on his face.

"What's the matter?" I asked him.

"Something that I can't explain right here and now," he said. But then, with a muttered exclamation he grabbed me by the arm and dragged me into an empty class room. He put his books on one of the tables, and took my bag from me, and shut the door.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Showing you how I feel about you," he replied, then he took me in his arms and kissed me.

I had never been kissed like that before. I'd never had the sort of boy friend that indulged in kissing—none of the boys I'd seen had ever got to that stage. I froze at first but then, as he continued to hold me gently but firmly, I started to relax. I found the touch of his lips on mine strangely compelling, and I felt a fluttering sensation start in the pit of my stomach. He pressed his lips harder onto mine, and I felt his tongue trying to slip between my lips. I gave in to the insistent pressure, and suddenly I knew what Elsie had meant about finding the right man. I put both arms around the back of his neck, and started kissing him back. The sensation was incredible. I felt like flying. After a couple of minutes he pulled back, ending the kiss. To say I was disappointed would be putting it mildly. I wanted to carry on.

"There," he said huskily. "That's how I feel about you. That's what I've wanted to do to you ever since I first saw you on the steps outside."

"Really?" I said, realizing that it sounded a bit stupid even as I said it.

"Enjoy that?" he asked.

"Oh yes," I said dreamily.

"Good. That's how I want our relationship to change," he said. "And believe me, whatever happens, I will always be your friend." This last was said with such sincerity I couldn't help but

believe him. "And now we'd better be on our way, or we'll be late for our next lecture. And that would never do!" So saying, he picked up my bag and handed it to me, and then picked up his own books.

I have no idea what was discussed in that lecture. To this day I can't even remember what it was about. It was a good job Robin was taking notes and let me copy them the next day, as I was sitting on top of cloud nine and didn't come down again until lunch time. We had lunch sitting in the sunshine outside the college. I wanted him to kiss me again and asked him to, but he refused.

"I want to as much as you," he assured me when he saw my face fall. "Believe me, I really want to kiss you again. But I also want to kiss you properly, and we're not going to get that chance here at college. Besides, you know the sort of teasing that goes on with couples here. Do you really want that?"

I shook my head. I had seen the sort of practical jokes that were played on couples, and thought most of them were cruel and crude. The thought of someone making me and Robin the butt of their humor was unbearable.

"But what about at the house?" I asked. "Won't they make fun of us there?"

He shook his head. "What happens at the house stays at the house," he said. "We'll be off limits while we're there. They'll respect our privacy."

I thought I knew what he meant. There were rules of behavior governing even student society, although most people thought we were totally lawless and beyond the pale.

We finished lunch and went back inside. To my relief I found I was able to act towards him as I had always done, and we were soon bantering backwards and forwards as usual. If there was a slightly warmer look in his eyes when I saw him looking at me, I hugged it to myself and just enjoyed feeling happy. That evening he walked me to the bus stop and gave me a quick peck on the cheek just before I got on the bus. I was so lost in thought on the way home I nearly missed my stop.

When I got in, Elsie and Helen were in the kitchen and, surprise surprise, Helen was cooking tea.

“What’s all this then?” I asked. “I didn’t think you knew one end of a cooker from the other.”

Helen turned round and threatened me with the wooden spoon she was holding. “Just for that I ought to keep your tea in the saucepan,” she said.

“So go on, what brought this on?” I asked.

“It’s Elsie’s fault,” she said. I turned round to look at Elsie, and saw her smiling.

“Exactly how is it Elsie’s fault?”

“Well after we’d been to the solicitor’s today, I thought that Elsie deserved a treat for coming all this way to look after us. The best—in fact the only—way I could think of was to cook her a meal. So I asked her what she fancied, and decided to cook that. And you know I can cook—she taught us both, remember?”

I laughed. “Yes, I remember. I also remember you sneaking out of the kitchen every chance you got, leaving me to do the washing up.”

“Cook’s perks,” she replied, turning back to the pan.

“What are we having anyway?” I asked.

“Well, it was going to be cottage pie,” Helen replied, turning back to the cooker, “but we didn’t get back in until later and there wasn’t time to do the full works. So we’re having minced beef cobbler and mash.”

“Sounds lovely,” I said. Minced beef cobbler had always been one of my favorite dishes, and just the sound of it conjured up memories of home.

“So, how did it go at the solicitor’s?” I asked, pouring myself a cup of tea.

“It was really quite a surprise,” Helen responded. She took one last look at the pan on the stove and decided it could look after itself for a little while, and came and sat down at the table. She poured herself a cup of tea, and offered Elsie one.

“When we got there, we were shown straight into his office. He was a really nice old man, wasn’t he Elsie?”

“I don’t know as I’d call him an old man,” Elsie replied dryly. “He wasn’t that much older than me, you know.”

“Yes, but I don’t think of you as being old,” said Helen with a cheeky grin. “Anyway, we got shown in, and he started off by offering his condolences, which were nice but a bit sort of ... I don’t know ... as if it was something he said so many times it didn’t mean anything anymore.”

“Yes, I know what you mean,” I interrupted. “Some of my lecturers are a bit like that.”

“So, after that was out of the way, he asked what he could do for us. I introduced Elsie, and then we got down to business. He told me that although it was customary to wait until after the funeral to read the will, as it was a relatively simple document and didn’t have much in it, would we like to go through it now?”

“Sounds interesting. I assume you said yes?”

“Of course. So, he gets this piece of paper out of one of those lock boxes, and spreads it out on the desk. Then he picks up his glasses and starts to read it out. All the formal stuff, you know, like ‘being of sound mind and body’, and ‘I hereby bequeath’ and all that stuff. Elsie had to prod me to keep me awake, I can tell you.”

“Don’t blame you, it sounds awful.”

“Well, after all that was out of the way, we got down to the meaty bits.” Here Elsie nearly choked on her tea. After she had recovered, Helen went on.

“Apparently, the house didn’t belong to Mum and Dad jointly, it belonged to Mum on her own. So she can leave it to whoever she wants. And she left it to me—completely and utterly to me. Dad didn’t even get a look in. There was a bit in the will about that—something about the effect the war had had on him, and she didn’t feel he was competent to manage his affairs, let alone mine. So, I now own the house. There was also some money. Not a lot, a couple of thousand or so, but that’s in trust

for me until I'm twenty five. Apparently Mum had this left to her until that age, and she carried on the tradition."

"So you're a young lady of property now," I put in.

"Yes, isn't it exciting! The only problem is that I'm under age, and can't inherit until I'm twenty one. So, I had to appoint someone to look after things for me until then. I wanted Elsie to do it, but she declined the honor."

I looked over at Elsie. "Whatever for?" I asked.

"I'm living in Yorkshire, lass," she replied. "I can't be running down here every time there's a problem with the house, or summat."

"No, I suppose not," I said. "So, who did you appoint?"

"Well, I asked the solicitor what was customary in these circumstances, and he said his firm would act as trustee until I was twenty one, and afterwards if I wanted, as I was likely to be away a lot whilst I was in the Wrens. I thought that sounded perfect, so I agreed to that. He then went away for a while, and came back with all these legal documents for me to sign. I wasn't going to bother reading them, but Elsie insisted, so I had to plough all the way through them."

"And quite right too," said Elsie. "Never sign anything without reading it through first. That's only common sense."

"Well, common sense or not, they were fearfully boring. All in legalese, which I didn't understand, but Mr. Johnson told me what it all meant. So he's going to look after the house for me after I've left."

"That sounds good," I commented, pouring another cup of tea. "You shouldn't have to worry about anything. What are you going to do with the place?"

"I'm going to rent it out. I won't be living in it for a while, and I'm sure I can come and plonk myself on you whenever I'm on leave, so I can go away and forget about it."

Elsie harrumphed. "Not quite forget about it, I hope," she said repressively. "You'll still have responsibilities, you know."

“Well maybe not totally,” Helen replied, “but it’s not been so much fun living here I want to remember, if you know what I mean.”

Elsie’s eyes softened a bit as she looked at Helen. “I know what you mean, lass,” she said softly. “But you must never forget that whatever happened between you and your mum, she loved you enough to make sure you had a home by leaving you this house.”

“I know,” said Helen, and for a moment the grief showed through the mask of gaiety she had erected. We were all quiet for a moment, and then Helen suddenly jumped in her seat.

“I almost forgot to tell you the best bit!” she exclaimed. “Mr. Johnson said that I should really have a legal guardian until I was twenty one as dad is now in the loony bin and incapable of acting in that capacity, and in case there’s decisions to be made about my future. He told me that because of my age I could have a say in who I wanted, so I said I wanted Elsie. She’s the closest thing I have to a mother after all, and I knew she’d have my best interests at heart. You should have seen her face!”

Elsie looked at me. “Fair knocked me off my chair, she did, when she said that,” she said. “It was the last thing I expected. But I was quite pleased,” she added with a smile.

“So now we’re as good as sisters!” Helen exclaimed. “Aren’t you pleased?”

“Of course I am,” I said warmly, getting up and giving her a hug. “But I’ll tell you one thing I am most definitely not pleased about,” I continued.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“You’re burning the dinner,” I replied.

With a shriek, Helen jumped up and ran over to the cooker. The mince wasn’t really burnt, it had just caught a little on the bottom of the pan. After it had been poured into an oven proof dish it was obvious that it was going to be all right. Helen put the cobblers she had made on the top, and put the whole thing in the oven. While she was doing that I cleared away the used tea

things, and put the kettle on to boil to make a fresh pot of tea. When we were all finally sitting back at the table, Helen went on with her story.

“So, I’ve asked for Elsie to be my guardian,” she continued. “Mr. Johnson said it would have to go through the courts to be approved, although he can’t see a problem with that. The will also has to go through Probate, which will take a couple of months, but everything should be sorted out fairly soon. As soon as that’s done, I’ve got a trustee and a guardian! Can’t be bad.”

We all laughed. Then the tea was brewed, the meal was ready, and after Elsie had mashed the potatoes saying she couldn’t stand to watch Helen making such a hash of it, we settled down to eat. I have to admit that the minced beef was delicious, and the cobblers were light as a feather. I even told Helen I was impressed with her cooking. We washed up and cleared away, and then went into the living room. Helen switched the television on and we sat and watched that for a while, then Elsie got her knitting out and I said I had to do some studying. I winked at Helen and she got the message, saying that she had to get some clothes sorted out for washing. We left Elsie in the living room and went upstairs. Helen followed me into my room, and promptly sat on the bed.

“What do you want to talk about,” she said. “I assume that’s what all those facial contortions meant downstairs.”

“Facial contortions indeed,” I sniffed. I came and joined her on the bed.

“So what is it?” she asked.

“Robin kissed me,” I blurted out. Helen burst out laughing.

“Shush,” I hissed.

“Sorry,” she apologized, although she didn’t sound very apologetic. After a second she asked “Did you enjoy it?”

“Oh yes, I certainly did,” I said.

“Yes, you must’ve done,” she replied, sounding amused. “You’ve gone all gooey eyed just thinking about it.”

“Well, I’ve never been kissed like that before,” I retorted.

“What brought this on?” she asked. “It’s not like you.”

I blushed a little. “Well, I was thinking about what Elsie said,” I explained, “you know, about how Robin fancies me. So I asked him if he thought our relationship would change if I moved in, what with us being such good friends. So he said he wanted to show me how he wanted it to change. He pulled me into one of the classrooms and kissed me.”

Helen started to laugh again, but quietly. “Oh Suzie,” she giggled, “you really do take the biscuit. Haven’t you any idea of how to speak to boys?”

I felt quite offended by that. “Of course I have,” I said hotly. “I just don’t know how to speak to boys who fancy me!”

“I’m sorry,” she said contritely. “I forget just how much of an innocent you are at times. You’re usually so practical and clever it just doesn’t occur to me that you haven’t had much experience with boys.”

“I can’t deny that,” I replied glumly.

“Well go on, how did it make you feel?” she asked.

“It was lovely,” I replied. “It made me feel all fluttery inside, and sort of different in other places.”

“What other places, and how different?” she demanded.

“Well, here, and here,” I gestured towards my breasts, and vaguely lower down my body.

“All sort of tight and exciting,” Helen put in.

“Yes, that’s it. I’ve never felt anything like that before.”

“Well, you wouldn’t have,” replied Helen practically. “You’ve never been kissed like that before. Do you want to do it again?”

“Oh yes,” I answered dreamily.

“Oh good heavens,” said Helen in mock alarm. “I do believe you’re in love, Miss Linthwaite.”

“Do you really think so?” I asked her.

“Of course you are, silly. I think you have been for ages, but just never noticed the symptoms.”

“There is one thing though,” I said. “One thing I’m worried about.”

“And what would that be?” she asked.

“What if he wants to go further—you know, go to bed, and all that,” I finally blurted out.

“Well, what if he does? My advice is to lie there and enjoy yourself.”

“But what if I get pregnant? What if I have a baby? I can’t carry on at college if I’m pregnant. I don’t want to leave, I love it there.”

“Here, calm down. For heaven’s sake, you’ve only kissed him once, and you’re already being thrown out of college for being pregnant! What an imagination the girl has.”

“Yes, but it could happen,” I insisted.

“Well, as I see it, you’ve got two options,” said Helen. “You could always just say ‘no.’ That would be effective, but not very satisfying. Or you can get yourself along to one of those new family planning clinics, and get yourself a cap.”

“A cap?” I repeated confusedly. “What’s that?”

“Oh dear, you are an innocent,” replied Helen. “A Dutch cap, something you wear inside to stop yourself getting pregnant.”

“And just how do you know so much about Dutch caps?” I asked.

“Because I’ve got one,” replied Helen calmly. I gaped at her.

“You’ve got one? You mean you’ve ... you’ve ...” I spluttered to a halt.

“Yes, I’ve been to bed with someone,” she answered calmly. “What of it?”

I could only gape at her still. “How come you never told me?”

“Because you didn’t need to know,” she said. “It happened ages ago, well before you came to live here,” she amended. “I thought he wanted to get married, but it turned out all he wanted was to get laid. It was him who insisted I used protection as well as him, he didn’t want to take any chance of me getting pregnant.”

“So where did you go?” I asked curiously.

“In his car, mainly,” Helen admitted.

“No, not for that!” I exclaimed. “Where did you go to get the cap?”

“I went to a clinic on the other side of London. I didn’t want to run the risk of anyone I knew spotting me there, and telling tales to Mum.”

“Did it hurt?” I asked curiously.

“What, the sex or the cap?” she asked.

“Both, I suppose.”

“Only at first, for the sex, then it was pure bliss. The cap I never noticed at all. Once it’s in, you really can’t feel it.”

“Can you take me there?” I asked hesitantly.

“You sure you want to go?” she asked. I nodded.

“All right then, I’ll make an appointment. I’ll call you Mrs. Linthwaite. They can be a bit funny about giving these things out to young single girls. I think they think we’re all prostitutes. But if you say you’re newly married and studying at college, and don’t want to get pregnant and ruin it all, they’ll be very sympathetic and get you sorted out.”

“You will come with me, won’t you?”

“Of course I will.” I felt relieved. Helen obviously knew what she was talking about, and I trusted her implicitly. I suddenly felt a lot better about things.

“You’re wonderful, do you know that?” I told her.

“Don’t be so daft. After all, I’m virtually your sister now, and sisters always look after each other.” She got up off the bed. “And now, I’d better go and sort out some washing, or Elsie will wonder what I’ve been up to. And you’d better do some studying. And don’t spend all your time day dreaming about Robin, or you’ll fail your course.”

With that she left the bedroom, closing the door gently behind her. I got my books out and settled down to do some work. It was surprisingly easy not to think about Robin, probably because I knew I was going to see him the next day anyway. After I’d been working for about an hour, I heard footsteps coming up the stairs, and heard them go into the bathroom. Must be Elsie,

I thought. The toilet flushed, and the footsteps came along the landing and then the bedroom door opened.

“Ah, here you are,” said Elsie. It seemed a silly to say to me, where did she expect to find me? “I was wanting to have a word with you, if you’ve got a few minutes.”

“Yes of course I have,” I replied, wondering what on earth this was all about.

“Good. I’ve been meaning to have a chat with you for a couple of days, but things have been so hectic I’ve not had the chance.” She sat down on her bed, and started fiddling with the bedspread.

“Elsie, you’re worrying me, what’s the matter?” I said. I’d never seen her like this before, and it was starting to frighten me.

She smiled. “Nothing’s the matter pet,” she replied in her usual tone, with a smile. “I just need to chat to you.” I felt a little better, but still wondered what she wanted.

“Well, go on then,” I said.

She hesitated a bit, and then said “It’s about moving into the house with Robin.”

“Why, what’s wrong with that?” I asked, wondering if she was going to suggest I didn’t.

“I’m worried that he’s going to be putting pressure on you to have sex with him,” she came out with.

I was completely taken aback. This was the last thing I had expected.

“I know you know all about sex, living on a farm you can’t help but pick it up,” she went on. “But you know next to nothing about boys, and you know nothing at all about love between a man and a woman. I just want to know that you’re going to be all right.”

I got up and went to sit next to her. “I know what you’re worried about,” I said. “You’re thinking that I’ll get into something I can’t get out of, and end up pregnant and throw away my chances of being a vet. Well I don’t want that to happen any more than you do, and I’ll be careful, I promise.”

“Yes, that’s all very well,” she replied. “But you might get taken by surprise, and you know as well as I do that you can get pregnant very easily. I just want to be sure you’ll take precautions, that’s all.”

“What, like saying ‘no’,” I teased.

“That’s probably the most effective,” she retorted. “But I know it’s not always as simple as that.”

“Is that what you used to say to Mo?” I asked. Very much to my surprise, she blushed bright red.

“Not always,” she said. I must have looked as surprised as I felt, because she laughed at my expression.

“Really?” I managed to ask. She nodded.

“Trust me,” she said, “sometimes you can have all the good intentions in the world, but then something comes along and you just have to go with the feelings. After the first time I was in a panic in case I caught, so I made sure that if there was a second time it wouldn’t have any side effects.”

I was astonished at this. I had never even thought that Elsie might have felt this way. It was a total revelation.

“So what do you suggest I do about it?” I asked.

“I think we need to get you to a doctor, or one of these new family planning clinics, and get them to give you some advice. I was given a Dutch cap, but there might be something more suitable for you.”

I couldn’t help it, I just had to start laughing. Elsie looked cross.

“I’m sorry,” I managed to gasp out, “but before you came up Helen and I were discussing the self-same thing, and she’s going to take me to a clinic she knows about.”

I was still laughing, and now Elsie saw the funny side and started laughing as well. Helen must have heard the noise, because she came across from her room to see what all the fuss was about. When I had explained, she started to laugh as well. After several minutes we all regained our composure. I wiped the tears from my eyes, and saw that Helen and Elsie were doing the same thing.

“So, miss,” Elsie said to Helen, “which clinic do you recommend?”

“I used one across town,” she replied. “Just so that I wouldn’t see anyone I knew.”

“Very wise,” Elsie approved. “We should probably use the same one.”

“Should we all go together?” I asked.

Elsie started to laugh again. “I think that might be a bit much,” she said. “No, I’ll come in with you. Helen can come along if she likes, but I think she’d better wait outside. And I think Helen’s story is an excellent one.”

“I’ll ring them tomorrow and make the appointment,” Helen promised.

“Thanks,” I smiled at her.

Elsie made to get up off the bed. “And thanks to you, as well,” I said to her. She looked surprised.

“What for?” she responded.

“For being honest with me, and not disapproving because I might want to sleep with Robin.”

Her face took on a wry look. “I didn’t say I approved,” she said, “but I do understand how things work, and I think if we take precautions now you’re much less likely to get into trouble.”

I smiled at her again.

“Right, that’s sorted out,” she said briskly. “I think your washing’s done,” she said to Helen, “and I think you need to finish your homework,” she said to me, and ushering Helen in front of her, she left the room and shut the door.

Chapter 21

Helen was as good as her word, and made the appointment at the clinic. I had told her which day would be easiest for me as I only had one lecture after lunch, and Elsie had travelled to the college to meet me, and to travel with me from there.

The appointment went really well. Whether they believed me or not, they acted as if they did. I think Elsie being there was a definite help. They probably took the attitude that an older relative was unlikely to be condoning pre-marital sex, although Elsie did tell me that clinics like this one had been very busy during the war, making sure that service women in particular could avoid pregnancy whilst serving. I was amazed at the information Elsie was coming out with. It was a side of her that I had never even dreamt about. I suppose every generation thinks that it is the first one to think about sex, and to consider anyone more than ten years older than they are incapable of either indulging in, or understanding, sex. Any way, be that as it may, I came out of the clinic with a little box in my hand, a tube of spermicide, and a set of instructions as to how to use them. Elsie told me that she'd had to practice a couple of times before she felt comfortable with using the cap, and suggested that I did the same. As Helen had told me pretty much the same thing, I thought I would follow their advice. I had asked the doctor about leaving it in, and she had told me that it would be fine for a few hours but not to leave it in over night.

I was relieved to have the appointment over, though. It seemed so clinical, and so pre-meditated. However I wasn't a silly little girl who wanted to have everything in clouds of romance; I wanted to be safe, not sorry, and if this is what I had to do to ensure that would be the outcome, then that's what I would do.

Elsie thorough approved of this attitude. She repeated that she didn't condone pre-marital sex, but her understanding of the pressures I might experience helped me approach the problem practically. I found that in discussing what might happen between myself and Robin, my relationship with Elsie became much closer, moving more from the adult-child relationship we'd had previously had into more of an adult-adult one. I found I valued Elsie more as an equal than I had done before; she wasn't just someone who had brought me up, she was now a friend as well, and moreover a friend I could trust with just about anything.

One thing Elsie did make abundantly clear though was that I was under no circumstances to ever discuss anything about this issue with Frank. Elsie told me that Frank had no idea that she and Mo had ever had a physical relationship before they were married, and would be horrified to the point of denying me my home if he ever thought I was doing the same.

"So be warned," she told me, "if you and Robin ever come up to Yorkshire together, make sure you're not caught out. If you must, you must, but not in the house, and preferably not on the farm either. If he does come home with you, it will be separate bedrooms, understand?"

I did understand, and I told her so. I had no desire to cause Frank to bar me from coming home, and I promised that I would be careful. I also promised to ask her advice about the situation. She seemed quite satisfied with my responses, and said that she'd always known I could, and would, be sensible about things.

I'd put off moving into the new house for a week while Helen got things sorted out, as I didn't want to desert her before the funeral. I know Robin was disappointed, but he accepted my decision with good grace, and even offered to come to the funeral with

us. Helen accepted his offer with gratitude and so there were four of us at the church one afternoon, saying our final farewells to Marion. Despite Helen's best efforts, no one else from either family (Marion's or Brian's) had either been able to come or wanted to make the effort. Brian's doctor had advised against having him attend as he felt it wouldn't help his condition, and Helen had been, I think, secretly relieved by this decision.

After the funeral Robin came back to the house with us, and we had a high tea in the kitchen. Robin was brilliant, keeping us all smiling and not letting the occasion get maudlin. He even helped with the washing up and putting away, causing Elsie to make him blush by calling him 'ideal husband material'. He gave me a guilty look which Elsie saw, but then smiled and shrugged.

After he had left for the night (Elsie and Helen let me show him out, giving us time for a kiss goodnight), we once again spent the evening watching the television. Elsie was still knitting, and Helen and I played a board game to pass the time. I had no need to be studying that night as I was up to date with all my work and Helen was, naturally, not in any rush to go to bed. The board game ended up becoming completely hilarious, after Helen and I had persuaded Elsie to join in, and also a little bit naughty. It was one of the best evenings I had spent for a long time although it was slightly tainted by knowing that Elsie would be returning home the following day. I couldn't complain though. She'd spent the best part of two weeks down with us and had stayed for the funeral, but she was missing Mo, the children and Frank, and wanted to get back where she felt she belonged.

I had wanted to go to the station with her in the morning but she'd told me in no uncertain terms that she didn't like long good byes, and I would be better off studying at college than standing around on a draughty railway platform. Helen wasn't going either, although she did promise to get up and cook Elsie a good breakfast before she left. Elsie accepted the offer graciously, although it did make her smile. Elsie had one final word of advice for me before she left, and it concerned Robin.

“He’s a very nice lad, young Robin,” she said, “but he’s like all men, and carries his brains in his pants sometimes. Make sure he doesn’t talk you into anything you don’t want to do, and if you do want to do it make sure it’s in your time, on your terms, and that you’re fully ready for it. It’s as easy to get pregnant the first time as it is the last, and you’ll have a lifetime of regret if you lose out because you were rushed.”

I promised I would consider things very carefully, and that I wouldn’t let anything happen I didn’t want to happen. She was up when I left in the morning and we hugged and said our good-byes in the kitchen. Helen had actually managed to get up as well, and had kept her promise about the breakfast. Elsie promised to ring that night to let us know she’d got home in one piece, and that was that.

Helen and I spent the next couple of days getting ready to move out of the house, and into my new digs. Elsie had promised to make sure I had enough to cover the rent, and had already paid the bond needed to secure the flat. Robin was over the moon that I would be moving in ‘at last’ as he put it, and managed to hide his disappointment that I would be sharing my room with Helen for a couple of weeks.

Helen was quite happy to leave her house in the solicitor’s hands. She totally trusted Mr. Johnson, and had confidence in his ability to manage the property on her behalf. He had advised her to put all her personal things into boxes and put them in the loft and to buy a padlock and fit it to the loft hatch. We had spent several hours sorting stuff out. Helen had got rid of most of her mother’s clothes, and some of her father’s. She had packed up some stuff for him and sent it to the hospital he was in. The rest she had either given to charity or thrown away. We had enlisted Robin’s aid in the matter of the padlock for the loft hatch. and for putting stuff up there. He had been marvelous, buying the padlock, fitting the hasp, and stacking boxes. In the end we put over twenty boxes of items up there. Helen had told Mr. Johnson to let the house furnished so that she didn’t have to worry about getting rid of the

furniture, and had given him complete powers to act as he saw fit regarding the letting. Mr. Johnson had opened a bank account on her behalf for the rent to be paid into, along with the interest from the money she had inherited. He had agreed that although she couldn't touch the principle amount, there was no reason why she should not have the interest for the time being.

Finally, one Saturday, we were waiting outside the house for a taxi to take us to our new quarters. Helen had left a set of keys with Mr. Johnson and would post her set to him once we were completely certain there was nothing else to collect. Robin had come over to give us a hand, and once again had been wonderful.

Eventually the taxi arrived, and we piled as much luggage as possible into it. Robin went in the front, but he had to promise to come back for us as there was no room left for us. Once the cab was out of sight we sat on the garden wall in the spring sunshine. It was very quiet on the street, the only movement being a cat that slunk between the gardens.

"So when do you reckon you'll go to bed with Robin then?" Helen suddenly broke the silence.

I was so surprised by the question, all I could do was give a quick gasp of outraged laughter.

"How do I know? There's no timetable for this sort of thing."

"Of course there isn't, but you must have some idea."

"No, none. We've never even been out on a date, for heaven's sake!" I exclaimed.

"You don't need a date," she retorted. "You spend most of everyday together as it is."

"Yes, but that's working," I replied. "You can't call that a date."

"No, I suppose not," she sighed.

"Anyway, we won't be able to do anything for at least two weeks," I added. "Not unless you really want to play gooseberry."

She laughed. "Now that would be a first," she agreed. "I don't think I'd like to go that far."

We chatted idly for another few minutes until the taxi reappeared at the end of the street. We piled in the rest of our cases, and climbed in the back. The taxi ride took about ten minutes and we finally arrived at the house. Robin was there to give us a hand and even paid for the cab, over my and Helen's protests. He helped us hump all the cases and bags upstairs, and then very sensibly left us alone to sort ourselves out. As Helen would only be sharing the room for a couple of weeks most of her stuff would stay in cases, and be put behind the curtains along the edges of the room. It was understood that she would be stopping with me whenever she had leave, as the house was likely to be let. We spent the next couple of hours putting things away and generally getting settled in, then descended to the kitchen for a well-earned cup of tea. Robin was there, as well as a couple of the other residents. We put the kettle on, and Robin introduced us to everyone. They all seemed very friendly, and I thought I would be very happy living here. The kitchen was clean and tidy as no one had cooked today, and I thought it looked very homely and comfortable. Helen struck up a conversation with one of the lads, and seemed to be getting on really well. Robin was attentive, but not oppressively so, and I felt really relaxed and very much at home.

"So, are you all unpacked then?" he asked.

"Yes, everything's sorted out and put away," I told him.

"That was quick," he said admiringly. "It took me nearly a week to get straight when I moved in here."

"I can't stand things being in a mess," I replied. "I like to get myself organized and to know where everything is."

"Oh I agree, you need to be organized," he said, coming and sitting next to me. "It just takes me a bit longer to do it, that's all."

There was a burst of laughter from the other end of the room where Helen was sitting. Under cover of the noise, Robin leaned closer and whispered in my ear.

"Would you like to go out for a drink tonight?"

"Where?" I murmured back.

“There’s a nice little place just down the road. We can go out for a couple of drinks, and then come back and watch the TV.”

“That sounds great,” I relied. “Just one question.” He raised his eyebrows in a query. “Why are we whispering?”

“I don’t want anyone else to come with us,” he replied. “If they hear we’re going down the pub they’ll all want to come, and I want you all to myself for a couple of hours.”

I felt as if I was blushing. “That sounds great,” I said. “When?”

“Finish your tea, then go and get washed up,” he said. “By the time you’re ready to go out it’ll be time for us to go.”

“OK, I’d like that. Shall I meet you down here?” I asked.

“Yes, but in the living room, not in here,” he replied.

I nodded, and he leaned back a little on his chair. I could feel his gaze on me, however, and started to feel all fluttery inside again. I finished my tea and got up to leave. Helen made to do likewise, but I shook my head at her and she sat back down. She raised her eyebrows and leant her head in Robin’s direction, and I nodded back. She looked pleased, and then smiled at me. I smiled back. “See you later,” I mouthed to her. She nodded and went back to her conversation with the two lads sitting next to her. I leant over and whispered in Robin’s ear “I’ll be down in about half an hour.” He looked at me and nodded, then picked up our cups and went over to the sink to wash them out.

I went back upstairs, and got some clothes ready for going out. I didn’t pick anything too fancy; after all, we were only going to the pub, then got undressed and put my dressing gown on. I picked up my toilet bag and sallied forth to seek the bathroom. This was located on the next floor down from mine, and was actually one of three in the house, there being one on each floor except the attic.

The bathroom had obviously been recently kitted out, as everything still looked fresh and new. There was even a shower, a new-fangled device that Marion had been dead set against having installed. Being wholly unfamiliar with showers, I decided

to play it safe on this occasion and have a bath instead. I made a mental note to ask Robin how it worked.

I luxuriated in the bath for what seemed like hours, but was actually about twenty minutes. I got out, and then discovered that I had left my towel upstairs in my room. I wasn't too bothered, as I had my lovely toweling dressing gown that Elsie had made for me, and it could do double service as a towel on this occasion. I pulled it round me, and exited the bathroom.

Robin was waiting for me outside. As soon as I had shut the door behind me, he came over and put his arms around me and we kissed. As before, I felt the tingly feelings start all over me. I had read in slushy romantic fiction books where the heroine melted into the hero's embrace, and had thought it very overdone and a little bit silly. I was amazed to find that it was actually true, that it could happen. After several minutes, we separated.

"Oh girl," he said, in a husky voice. "You don't know how long I've been waiting to do that."

"I think I can figure it out," I replied, a little unsteadily. I saw his eyes travel downwards, and discovered that my dressing gown had loosened during our embrace and was exposing rather more of me than I was used to. I went to pull it closed, but he took hold of my wrist in one hand and before I could stop him, he stooped down and kissed me between my breasts. If I'd thought the tingling sensation was strong before, it was nothing to what I felt then. I gasped and shuddered, and before I knew what I was doing I had taken hold of his head, holding him there. He went from kissing to using his tongue in light, delicate strokes, moving ever closer to my nipples. I couldn't move, I felt as if I was melting. However, as he got closer and closer to taking one of my nipples in his mouth, I came to my self, and pushed him gently away. He let me do so, but before I could close my robe, his hand slipped inside and gently caressed my breast. Once again I had to take hold of myself and push him away, and once again he let me. He watched regretfully as I closed my dressing gown firmly, and tied it shut. Once I was finished he again took me in

his arms, but this time just held me tight. I found that my head just came to under his chin and rested against him, with his chin resting gently on the top of my head.

“You’re beautiful,” he said quietly. “Absolutely beautiful. And I want you, you know that.”

He took one of my hands, and pressed it onto his swelling crotch. I let it rest there for a second, and then took it away. To be honest, I had no idea what to do once my hand was there. I just pressed it gently and then brought my hand back up to hold my robe shut.

“You’d better go and get dressed,” he said, regretfully.

“Yes, I think I better had,” I agreed. I turned to go.

He put his hand out, and took hold of my arm. “You don’t mind, do you?” he asked anxiously. “That I kissed you?”

I smiled at him. “Don’t be daft. Of course I don’t mind.”

He smiled back, and this time when I went to leave he let me go. I was conscious of his eyes on my back as I walked along the landing, but heard him go downstairs as I went upstairs.

Once back in my room, I took my dressing gown off and looked down at where he had kissed me. I gently caressed my nipples with my fingers, and then shuddered and stopped. How could it feel so different now he had kissed me there? I wondered.

I was just finishing getting dressed when Helen came in the room. She smirked at me and said, “Now how long will it before he gets you into bed?”

“What do you mean?” I asked her, as I pulled a brush through my hair.

“What do I mean?” she repeated. “Letting him kiss you like that ... and where.”

I blushed. “How do you know about that?” I asked her.

“I saw you, silly. From the stairs.”

“You saw me?” I repeated. “Did anyone else see?” I was in a panic.

“No, I made sure no one else came up the stairs. But talk about hot stuff!”

I knew I was still blushing furiously. She came over and gave me a hug.

“Don’t be in a tizzy about it,” she said. “I’m the only one who saw anything, and I know all about it.”

“Do you think I’m acting like a tart?” I asked her, voicing my main concern.

“No of course not,” came the instant reply. “You love the guy, he loves you, there’s nothing more natural than you should enjoy how he makes you feel. Stop worrying over that. It’s not like you’ve only just met the guy; you’ve known him for over six months.”

I felt comforted by her words. I had the horrid fear that by letting Robin ‘do things’ to me, I was acting in a way that I would regret. I suppose it was my conscience pricking me. It had been carefully honed by my upbringing, and was now working overtime.

“I suppose so,” I replied.

“I know so,” came the response. “Now get yourself out with him, and have a proper date for once.”

She gave me another hug, and I smiled back at her. I went down the stairs to the living room and found Robin there with another guy. Robin turned and smiled at me as I came in.

“There you are,” he said warmly. “I was beginning to think you weren’t coming.” He turned to the other guy, and said “Tom, this is Suzie. She’s just moved in upstairs. We’re at RVC together. Suzie, this is Tom. He’s a great bloke and a good mate.”

“Hello Tom,” I responded, holding out my hand.

“Hi Suzie,” he replied, coming over and shaking it. “Nice to meet you.” He turned to Robin. “You going down the pub?” he asked.

“Yes, and we don’t want company, so keep it quiet will you?” he asked.

“Sure, not a problem. See you later.” Tom ambled back over to the settee he had been sitting on, and collapsed on it again. Robin put his arm round me and we went out of the room, shutting the door behind us.

The walk to the pub was quiet. I was thinking about what had happened outside the bathroom, and was torn between a desire for more, and a dread I was being ‘fast’, as Elsie would have put it. Robin seemed lost in his own thoughts, and walked along with his arm around my waist. I enjoyed the closeness, but was slightly worried by his quietness. I didn’t know what to say to him, so I didn’t say anything. Suddenly Robin seemed to come back to himself. He squeezed me to him, and looked down at me.

“All right?” he asked. I nodded in return, and he pulled me a little closer and kissed the top of my head. “Great,” he said. “Look, here’s the pub.” He let go of my waist, but took hold of my hand instead.

The pub was on the corner, with a sign over the door which should have read *The Horse and Groom*, but which actually read *The Hore and Goo*, as letters had been covered by the buildup of dirt on the words.

“Here we are,” Robin said cheerfully as he led me inside.

The pub was actually not as bad as you might have thought from the outside. It gave an instant impression of warmth, homeliness, and comfort. The main bar ran along the whole of the back wall and was dressed with a collection of horse brasses, which were all highly polished and twinkled in the light from a large open fire at one end of the room. There was a lot of wood evident, the bar being constructed from solid timber, and most of the chairs having large amounts of wood involved in their construction. Tables were dotted here and there around the main area, with a long low table in front of the fire with several dark green chesterfield settees arranged around it. Towards the rear of the main bar area was a raised dais, which had several dining tables and chairs arranged on it. To the other side there was another area, separated from the main bar by a wood and frosted glass partition. Through in this area, the seating appeared to be more settees and club style chairs, arranged in groups around more low tables. A sign hanging from the ceiling indicated the way to the toilets. Robin stood watching me as I looked around, with a gentle smile on his face.

“Like it?” he asked.

“It’s lovely,” I replied. “I’ve never been in a pub like this before.”

He laughed. “Have you ever been in a pub at all before?” he asked.

“One or two,” I said airily, and smiled at him.

“Come on, what do you want to drink?” he asked.

“What have they got?” I responded.

Robin had by this time made our way to the bar and was watching the bar maid, trying to catch her eye. After a couple of minutes, she made her way over.

“Evening Robin,” she said. “Pint of the usual is it?”

“Please Tina,” he replied. “And something for Suzie as well, please.”

“What would you like then ducks?” she asked.

“I’m not sure, what have you got?”

“Do you like cider?” she asked. “We’ve got a good one in today, just up from Kent.”

“OK, I’ll have a half of that please.”

“Coming right up love.”

She pulled Robin’s pint, and turned to get my cider. Robin leant over and said “Sure you know what you’re doing, drinking that stuff? It can be lethal, you know.”

I looked back at him. “Yes, I know,” I replied. “Don’t worry, I’ve been drinking this stuff since I was little. I’m used to it.”

“Well, if you’re sure.” He paid for the drinks, and we made our way to the seating area I had glimpsed through the partition. He chose one of the tables with a settee, over in the far corner. He waited until I had sat down, and then sat next to me. He sat really close and took my hand in his. He gave a big sigh and sat back, resting his head on the back of the settee.

“I’m so glad you’re finally here,” he said, with his eyes shut. “I can’t believe I’m not dreaming. I kept dreaming you were here, and then I’d open my eyes and you weren’t there.” He

opened his eyes and looked into mine. “And now, here you are, my dream girl, sitting next to me on this settee. It’s a miracle.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I leant forward and kissed him on the lips. The effects were electric. He returned my kiss, and I felt him trying to make it deeper. I pulled back a little, and he stopped.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

“Nothing at all,” I replied, “but I don’t think we should kiss like that in here.”

He grinned at me. “No, you’re probably right,” he agreed. “It would be a shame to be thrown out after we only just got here.” He sat back in the chair, but this time put his arm round me, and gently urged me to relax against him. I sat there, feeling quite content.

“Suzie, there’s something I want to say,” he said after a couple of minutes.

“What’s that then?” I asked, still leaning against him, and smelling his wonderful clean male smell.

“No, sit up for a sec, this is serious,” he said, giving me a little shake. Feeling a little aggrieved (I’d been comfortable), I sat up and looked at him.

“What is it?” I repeated.

He put his drink on the table, and then turned a little to face me. He took both my hands in his, kissed them, and then held them on his knee.

“Suzie, like I said, you’re my dream girl. I think I fell for you the first time I met you outside the college. You were just standing there, looking up at the building with the strangest look on your face, and I fell for you hook, line and sinker, but you didn’t seem to be interested in me as anything other than a friend. So I decided if you didn’t want me any other way, I would be your friend, and I’ve tried my best to do that. And then the other day you asked if our relationship would change once you’d moved in to the house. I couldn’t believe you’d asked the question, but I realized that this was my chance to do something about how

I felt, so I kissed you. I know it was the first time you'd been kissed properly, as a woman, and you have no idea how protective of you that made me feel. You returned my kiss, and I began to hope that you'd come to look at me as more than a friend. Since then we've kissed a few times, and each time you have the same effect on me. I want you, I want you badly, I think you're a wonderful person, but I want to assure you that I will try my damndest not to hurt you. If you think I'm rushing you, or doing anything you don't like you must tell me, you must let me know, so that I can keep you as my girl, my dream girl, for the rest of my life."

He stopped for breath, and looked deeply into my eyes. For the life of me I couldn't think of anything to say. I thought I should try and reply, but as I took a breath to speak, he touched my lips with his fingers, and shook his head.

"No, don't say anything," he said. "I know I'm rushing this, but I have to tell you how I feel. I love you Suzie, more than anything else in life, and I want to marry you. Tell me, when we're qualified, will you do me the honor of marrying me? Will you be my wife?"

Chapter 22

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Get married? Marry Robin? I just sat there gazing at him, not saying anything because I couldn't think of anything to say. He had completely taken my breath away. How long I sat like that I have no idea, but he obviously didn't like my silence.

"Suzie, say something, please?" he begged after a couple of minutes.

"I don't know what to say," I began.

"Can you at least tell me you don't hate the idea?"

"Hate the idea? No of course I don't hate the idea. I love the idea of being with you. I just don't know what to say."

Some of the tension in him seemed to drain away. He gave a little laugh, and kissed my hands again.

"I'm glad you don't hate the idea," he said. "You sat there looking like a rabbit caught in the headlights."

"I'm sorry," I said. "You just took me by surprise, that's all. I had no idea you felt like that about me, or that you were going to propose." The sense of unreality that had gripped me temporarily since he had asked seemed to be lifting.

"I suppose I did jump the gun a bit," he said. "You have no idea how hard I was screwing up my courage to make that little speech."

"Is that why you didn't speak much on the way down here?" I asked.

He nodded. "I was rehearsing what I wanted to say to you. I'm sorry, did you think I didn't want to speak to you?"

I nodded. "I was afraid you were regretting kissing me outside the bathroom," I said. At the recollection of just where he had been kissing me, I started to blush again.

"I love the way you do that," Robin said, "it makes you look so sweet and innocent."

"And you want to make me less innocent," I said with a grin. He grinned back.

"You're right there," he agreed. "And I can't wait to make love to you properly. But if you don't want me to, then I won't. I can wait."

I blushed even harder. "To be honest, I want you to as well," I admitted. "I like the way you make me feel when you kiss me."

In response to that admission, he leant forward and I thought he was going to kiss me again. But instead, he spoke very quietly. "I'm glad you like the way I make you feel," he said huskily. "And you won't believe how much better I can make you feel if I kiss you in other places."

As he finished speaking, he came even closer, and kissed me gently on the lips. I felt it as the lightest touch before he pulled back. I had no idea what he meant by 'other places', but it seemed my body did. I was feeling an ache deep in my chest, and I could feel myself becoming warm and wet between my legs at the sound of his voice, and the look in his eyes.

"Do you think you could answer the question now?" he asked teasingly.

"About marrying you?" He nodded. "I think it's the best idea I've ever heard. I would love to marry you."

Robin gave a muffled whoop, and pulled me into his arms again. He kissed me, hard and passionately, and then let me go.

"Oh Suzie," he exclaimed. "You've made me the happiest man on earth, you know that?" He kissed me again, laughing. I was happy watching him and still a bit dazed, but I felt so happy inside it was almost painful.

He looked anxiously into my face. "You don't seem very excited, love," he said.

"Say that again, I liked that," I asked.

"Say what again?" He sounded a bit bewildered.

"Love'," I repeated. "You haven't called me that before."

"Well of course not, you goose," he said lovingly. "I was never sure before how you'd react if I said that."

"I don't know either," I said, and laughed. "I still can't believe this is happening. Talk about sweeping a girl off her feet."

"I'm good at that," he replied.

"Oh, you've had some practice before, have you?" I teased.

Suddenly he was looking at me seriously. "I know you don't know very much about me," he began, "but now we're going to be living together after a fashion, we'll have much more time to learn about each other. And I want to know all about you, every last little thing, and I hope you want to learn about me, too. I think that's going to be the most exciting part of our relationship, in a way." He saw me looking at him, and laughed. "Yes, I know what you're thinking," he continued. "You're thinking that all I want is sex, and you're right, that is important to me as well. But learning about each other takes a lifetime, and I want that lifetime to be spent with me."

There was no doubting his sincerity, and I felt myself welling up as he spoke. There was much love in his voice, so much passion, I couldn't help myself.

"Now what in the world have I said to make you cry?" he asked, reaching out with gentle fingers to wipe the tears away.

"Nothing, I'm just being silly," I told him. "You're such a lovely person, Robin, and you make me feel as if I'm the most precious thing in the world to you."

"You are," he interrupted. I smiled back at him.

"And I want to spend time with you more than anything. I want to spend a lifetime looking after you, and learning about you, all your funny little ways, how you like your tea,"

"Coffee, actually,"

“There you go, I’ve learnt one thing already. But I also want to qualify as a vet. Up until tonight I would have said that I wanted that more than anything else in the world, and I still do—apart from you. And I would love to marry you, I want to marry you, and,” here I dropped my voice, “I want to make love to you and with you, but I don’t want to throw away all my hard work and think the world well lost for love. Can you understand that?”

He put his arm round me, and drew me close again, so I was leaning against his chest. “Of course I can, you silly goose,” he said softly. “I want to qualify as well, you know, and if we’re going to start a family we’re going to need some way of earning a living. And I know what you mean about losing the world for love. I don’t want to stop you studying, and I certainly don’t want to stop you qualifying. I want us both to be able to earn a living so that we can give our children a good life, and us for that matter,” he added in a slightly more normal tone of voice. I laughed.

“Oh Robin,” I sighed.

“What?” he asked.

“I love you,” I told him. “And you’ve put my mind at rest about studying and qualifying.”

“So, can we consider ourselves engaged?” he asked.

“We most certainly can,” I replied.

“Great,” he said. “Now, what should we do next?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“What should we do about telling people? Do you want to tell people?” he asked.

“Well obviously I want to tell Elsie, Mo and Frank,” I said. “And Helen,” I added. “She’s been such a good friend.”

“And she’s sharing your room,” he reminded me.

“Yes, acting as my chaperone to make sure I don’t do anything I shouldn’t, according to Elsie,” I told him.

“Well, she can stop anything happening in your room,” he said, “but there’s always my room.”

“Yes, I suppose there is,” I said thoughtfully. He looked at me.

“Does that mean what I think it means?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I replied playfully. “That depends on what you were thinking.”

“I was thinking,” he said in my ear, “that I would like to take you back to my room, take all your clothes off, kiss you all over and make love to you all night long.”

“Well, we’ve got no college tomorrow, so why don’t we do just that?” I said.

He looked at me. “Are you serious?” he said. “Suppose you get pregnant?” he asked.

I looked at him seriously. “Elsie and I had a long discussion about you last week,” I told him, “and she told me that she knew I would get tempted to have sex with you, so she made sure I took precautions. She took me to a clinic and got me sorted out, so as long as we’re a little careful there shouldn’t be any problems.”

He looked at me in amazement. “She actually discussed this with you?” he said, almost in disbelief. I laughed at him.

“Of course, why wouldn’t she?” I asked him.

“I can’t picture my mother talking to any of my sisters like that,” he confessed. “In fact, if one of them even mentioned it, I think she’d go off her rocker.”

“Well, Elsie was tempted before she got married,” I told him. “And she spent a couple of weeks in a panic thinking she might have caught. She and Frank and Mo have invested a lot of time, effort and trust in me and she doesn’t want me to have to throw it all away because of a fling.” I felt him shift restlessly, and hurried on. “I know you’re much more than a fling,” I reassured him, “and once I tell them we’re engaged, they will too. But it would still be a problem if I got pregnant so the sensible thing to do was to make sure it didn’t happen. I’m a firm believer in the power of prayer, but I never yet heard that prayer made a girl not pregnant.”

“Now you have amazed me,” he said. “Pleased me, but amazed me. I never thought you’d be so, so ... modern!”

“I hope you’re not upset,” I asked him.

“Upset?” he exclaimed. “Oh Suzie, you give me the one thing I want more than anything else and then ask if I’m upset? You’re wonderful.”

“Good, I’m glad you’re not upset. I thought you might think I’d been a bit, I don’t know, calculating about things.”

“Hell no,” he replied. “I’m glad you have been. So, apart from tonight, what do we do next?”

“I think we ought to visit families,” I said seriously. “I know Frank, Elsie and Mo will be thrilled, and they’ll want to meet you.”

“I’m not so sure about my mother,” he replied. “She’s a bit possessive of me, if you know what I mean. I think maybe we shouldn’t rush into telling her. I’ll tell her I’ve got a girlfriend first of all, and let her get used to that idea first. We can introduce the idea of us being engaged later on.”

“I take it she’s not going to be over the moon to meet me,” I said dryly.

“Not at first, my lovely, but when she gets to know you I’m sure she’ll be fine.”

I wasn’t so sure, but held my peace.

“Well, I know my lot will be wanting me to take you up there as soon as possible,” I told him.

“Is Elsie at all like her brother?” he asked.

“No, not really. Oh, and that reminds me,” I continued. “If we go up there, we’ve got to behave ourselves. Frank is very old-fashioned and wouldn’t be at all happy if he realized what was going on.”

“Separate bedrooms, eh?” he asked, in mock alarm.

“If he ever got a whiff of any hanky-panky he’d probably either horse-whip or shoot you, and throw us both off the farm.”

“OK, point taken,” Robin said. “So how am I going to get to meet these folks of yours? I can’t tell Mother that I’m not coming home for the holidays.”

“How about if you told her you’d arranged to see practice with a vet in Yorkshire?” I asked him.

“That would do it,” he agreed, “but I don’t know any vets in Yorkshire.”

“No, but I do,” I replied smugly. “I’m seeing practice with our farm vet, and I’m sure he’d be delighted to have two for the price of one.”

“Girl, you’re a genius!” he exclaimed, kissing me quickly. “That would certainly sort out our problems.”

“And, I don’t know if I’ve mentioned this before,” I went of, “but he’s offered me a job when I’ve qualified. I’m sure we could make room for another vet.”

Robin pulled back, looking at me in amazement. “You’ve actually got a job before you’ve even qualified?” he asked. “You astonish me. Talk about forward planning. How did you manage that?”

So I told him all about Mr. Edwards, and how he was wanting to retire in a few years. Robin was amazed, and asked lots of questions about the practice. It turned out that he’d always wanted to work on a farm, or large animal, practice and he was excited about the chance to do that. I told him that I would telephone Frank and Elsie, and ask them to ask Mr. Edwards whether he could stand to have two apprentices around all holidays, and then arrange for us to go up.

“Sounds brilliant. Who’s a clever girl then?” he said.

Eventually, after a couple more drinks, we made our way slowly back to the house, stopping every now and then to exchange those wonderful kisses. It probably took us about four times as long to get back as it should have done, but we really didn’t care.

When we got back, Robin opened the door. Once we were in the hallway, he asked “Shall we go up to my room?” I nodded, and he took my hand and we went upstairs. His room was on the first floor, overlooking the garden at the back. Because of its situation there were no rooms on either side, so no neighbors to overhear anything that went on.

He ushered me in, and switched on the light. To my surprise, the room was impeccably tidy with everything placed neatly on

shelves. There was none of the clutter I had expected to see on the floor, and the bed was made. Robin had obviously decided that home comforts were his thing, because there was a small fridge, with a kettle on top of it, and tea and coffee making equipment on a tray. There were even a couple of mugs. I looked round, and saw Robin watching me.

“Not what you expected?” he asked in amusement.

“No, it’s so ... tidy,” I said.

“Well, I can assure you that I haven’t tidied up specially for you,” he joked. “I like to be tidy, it means I can find things.” He gave me a shrewd look. “Want a cup of tea?” he asked. I nodded. “Please.”

“OK, hang on a tic. You can put your coat on that chair,” he said, indicating a rather battered but still comfortable-looking leather armchair in one corner. I took my coat off and laid it on the chair. Now that I was actually here I was having an acute attack of nerves, and feeling very unsure of myself. The boldness I had shown in the pub in suggesting a night of love-making was fading fast, and the bed looked incredibly intimidating. Robin was rattling the cups over on the other side of the room so I wandered about, looking curiously at the various items he had on the shelves. There was an odd assortment of knick-knacks, obviously from home, and several pictures which I assumed were of his mother and his sisters. There was no indication of a father in any of the pictures.

His desk was also very precisely arranged, but wasn’t so neat as to give the impression he had measured everything out with a ruler. The books he was currently working on were stacked neatly on the corner, and I could see he was half way through an essay on anatomy—the very same essay that I had finished earlier.

“Here’s your tea,” he said in my ear. I jumped violently, not having heard him approach.

“Hey, settle down, it’s all right,” he said. “Come and sit over here.”

‘Over here’ was on the bed. I sat on the edge of it and began to drink my tea. He sat next to me with a coffee.

“It’s all right, love, just remember you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to. If you want to just drink your tea and then go, that’s ok, you can do just that.”

I smiled nervously at him over the rim of my teacup.

“Tell you what,” he said, getting up and going over to the arm chair, “why don’t we sit on this?”

He moved my coat and sat down, patting his lap in invitation. I got up and moved over to the chair. He took my tea off me putting on a small table to one side, and then scrunched up in the chair.

“There you go, lots of room,” he said.

I sat down, and found that although it was a bit tight, there was enough room for me to sit partly on his lap and partly on the chair. He passed me back my tea and watched me drink it. He put his arm around me, and settled my head on his shoulder.

“Comfy?” he asked.

“Yes, that’s a lot better,” I replied. I finished my tea and he took the cup and put it back on the table.

“There you go, let’s just sit here a while,” he said. I nodded into his shoulder and settled down further into the chair. I felt him shift a little in the chair so that he was now sitting slightly turned towards me, and lifted my head with a finger under my chin. I was very conscious of his eyes, as he bent his head and kissed me gently. He dropped tiny little butterfly kisses on my lips, nose, cheeks, eyes—anywhere he could reach. They were feather light, unhurried, and oh so gentle. I began to feel fluttery again and wanted to feel more, so I put my hand on the back of his neck and, reaching up slightly, kissed him back.

He returned the kiss, slightly harder this time, and I opened my mouth. His tongue flickered in and out testing my reactions, and then became more insistent. I started to experiment, flicking his tongue with my own and found myself enjoying the feelings he aroused in me. As I started to relax, his free hand started to

stroke my hair, running his fingers through it, and then moved onto my face. Ever so gently he ran his fingers across my skin, sending ripples of pleasure and excitement through me. His hand caressed my chin and then my neck, moving up and around my ear then descending back to my chin. I felt him caress my neck and then move down, until he found my breasts. He caressed first one and then the other through the thin cotton of my blouse, applying a gently pressure. He moved lower until he reached the waistband of my skirt. He gently pulled my blouse out of the waistband, then slipped his hand under the cloth. I felt his fingers on my bare skin, and shivered in anticipation. He moved his hand gently up until he was once again caressing my breasts through my bra. I was getting more and more aroused, and wanted to feel more and more of him touching me. He pulled back from the kiss, and looked at my face.

“All right?” he asked softly.

“Oh yes,” I replied, looking lovingly up into his face.

“You want more?”

“Yes please,” I replied. I heard him give a soft laugh.

“That’s my girl,” he said huskily.

This time he very deliberately started to unbutton my blouse, watching my face all the time for some objection or resistance. When he had it completely undone he gently urged me to sit up, and eased it back from my shoulders. He started kissing me again and once again his free hand started to caress my skin. I felt as if I was burning, anticipating his every touch, and wanting more and more of me to be touched. He gently slipped his hand around my back and undid my bra. I stiffened, and he stopped.

“Do you want me to stop?” he asked tenderly.

“No, please, don’t stop,” I replied shyly.

His hand continued its exploration of my back, gently sliding around under my bra until his hand, pushing my bra out of the way, gently cupped my breast with his thumb resting on my nipple. I tensed and gasped at the sensations I felt coursing through me as he gently rubbed his thumb backwards and forwards. Just as I felt

this couldn't get any better, he showed me that it could. He lifted his head and looked at me, then bent it down and started tracing circles around my breast with his tongue. This was what he had started to do outside the bathroom, but with nothing to stop him he continued to trace those circles until his lips found my erect nipple. He gently took it into his mouth, and suckled on it. I felt as if I was drowning in a lake of golden honey, I felt as if I was melting. I felt fire in my belly, and warmth and wetness between my legs. He left off sucking, and once again started to describe circles round it with his tongue. I moaned softly as wave after wave of glorious sensations poured over me. When he lifted his head and looked at me, I felt a keen sense of disappointment.

"I think we'd better stop there, don't you?" he asked. I couldn't believe he could stop.

"Why?" I managed to ask.

"Because you haven't taken those precautions you told me about," he said, "and because if I go much further, I don't think I'd be able to stop. I told you I would never hurt you, and this is the best way I know of doing that."

I felt a wrench of disappointment. I wanted him to continue, and I wanted to find out what other sensations he could make me feel; I wanted to know what else he could do to my willing body. I sensed that the ultimate surrender lay only a few minutes away, and I wanted it.

"But I don't want you to stop," I whispered. "I want you to carry on."

"I know you do my love," he said, "but we really mustn't. Not tonight."

"When?" I asked.

"When you're ready for it," he replied. He gently pulled me up into a sitting position, half on his lap, and took me in his arms. He started kissing me gently, with his hand again gently massaging my breast, and I loved it, I loved every single second of his touch, of the feel of his skin on my skin, his hand caressing my breast, his thumb rubbing my nipple. Then once again he stopped.

“Come on, this won’t do,” he said. “You’d better cover that gorgeous body of yours before I find I really can’t stop myself.”

He stood up, picking me up in his arms and then gently lowered me to the floor. I felt every single crease and ripple in the fabric of his shirt as I slowly slid onto my feet, and it added to my feelings of desire. I stood there naked from the waist up, feeling aroused, disappointed, and very frustrated. As I stood there, he retrieved my bra and blouse from the chair, and turned round to hand them to me. As he turned and saw me standing there, he gave a groan.

“Woman, have you any idea of the effect you have on me?” he asked. Mutely I shook my head.

“Well, believe me, it’s incredible. Here, you’d better put these on.”

I took my bra, and started to put it on. I got the straps over my arms, and he came over and took it out of my hands. He went round behind me and pulled the straps over my shoulders, but before fastening the clasp ran his hands around to my breasts, caressing both of them and at the same time nuzzling into my neck.

“Oh god, you’re so beautiful,” he whispered into my ear. “I could just pick you up, throw you on the bed, and take you here and now.” Just as I was going to tell him to do it, he removed his hands, and fastened my bra properly. He then picked up my blouse, and held it out for me to put back on. He turned me gently around, and did up the buttons, kissing me in between each button.

“Next time I’m going to be doing this in reverse,” he said. “And next time, I want you to be ready, because I won’t be able to stop myself again.”

I pressed myself closer to him, and reached up and kissed him. His mouth opened under mine, and once again our tongues explored each other’s mouths, provoking even more of those amazing sensations.

“Stop it woman,” he said, mock growling, as he pulled away from me. “Hussy,” he continued, smiling at me. “Now let’s get you upstairs, where I can say a decorous goodnight to you in

front of your room mate.” He picked up my coat, and held out his hand to me. I placed my hand in his and together we left the room, and walked up the stairs to my room. I opened the door and there was Helen, already in bed.

“There you are!” she exclaimed. “I was wondering what had kept you.” She saw Robin standing just behind me, and added “mind you, I should have guessed. Say good night to Prince Charming, and come in and shut the door.”

I turned round to Robin, and said “good night”.

He replied “good night,” and kissed me gently on the mouth. “Sleep well,” he said, then turned and went back down the stairs, turning on the last step to blow me a kiss. I blew him one back, and watched him out of sight then went in and shut the door behind me.

“Did you have a good time?” Helen asked innocently.

“Yes, thank you,” I replied.

“And after you got back from the pub?” she asked, with a wicked grin on her face.

“What do you mean?” I replied, aware that I was blushing once again.

“You know what I mean,” she continued. “After you got back from the pub and went to bed.”

“What makes you think we went to bed?” I asked.

“Let me give you a tip, love,” she said. “When a man does your shirt up, make sure he gets the buttons in the right holes.”

I gave an involuntary gasp, and looked down at my blouse. Sure enough, the buttons were done up in the wrong holes. Helen started to laugh. I didn’t know what to do, or where to look.

“So go on, what happened?” she asked.

“He asked me to marry him,” I said.

“He *what?*” she shouted.

“Sshhh, keep your voice down,” I told her. “He asked me to marry him.”

“What did you say?”

“I said ‘yes’, of course, what else did you expect me to say?”

She gave a muffled shriek and leapt out of bed, and came running over to embrace me.

“That’s the best news I’ve ever heard,” she said. “I’m so happy for you, love. He’s a brilliant guy. When’s the happy day?”

“It’s going to be a long engagement,” I replied. “We’re not getting married until we’re both qualified.”

“But that’s another six years!” she exclaimed, aghast.

“Well, we might not wait that long,” I admitted. “But we’re not going to have a family or anything until we’ve got settled down.”

“That’s wonderful,” she said again. “Can I be bridesmaid?”

I laughed. “Of course you can, I can’t think of anyone I’d rather have.”

“Oh I can’t wait to tell everyone,” she said.

“No, please don’t. I haven’t told Elsie, Frank and Mo yet. I think they ought to know before everyone else. And I think there might be a problem with his mother, so we don’t want her to hear about it yet.”

“Spoilsport,” she pouted, then brightened up again. “But you still haven’t answered my question,” she said. “How is he in bed?”

“I don’t know, we didn’t get that far,” I admitted. “We sat in his chair and kissed for a bit, and then came back up here.”

“Liar,” said Helen, but without heat. “If you’d just been kissing, your blouse wouldn’t have been undone.”

“Oh alright,” I said. “So we did a bit more than kissing. But it didn’t go any further.”

“Was that your decision, or his?” Helen asked shrewdly.

“His,” I admitted. “I didn’t want to stop.”

“Ah, then he is as good as he seems. He doesn’t just want your body. He really does care about you.”

“Yes, he does,” I agreed. “I was ready to throw my cap over the windmill, but he wouldn’t go any further. I asked him, but he said if we didn’t stop when we did he wouldn’t be able to stop.”

“Well, shall I tell you what you should do now?” asked Helen.

“Go on,” I said.

“Get yourself undressed, and put your dressing gown on. Then put your cap in, and get ready. Then get yourself back down to his room, and finish what you started.”

“Do you think so?” I asked her. “Won’t he get the wrong idea?”

“Absolutely,” she said. “He’s behaved like a complete gentleman, not pushed you into anything, and stopped while he still could. So now you behave like the lady you most emphatically aren’t, and go back down and show him how much you love him. Give him what he wants. Namely, you.”

“But he might be asleep,” I protested.

“Trust me,” Helen said, “he won’t be asleep yet. And if he is, he won’t object in the least to being woken up again. Now go get ready.”

I didn’t need any further urging. I undressed, and put my dressing gown on, then (with a little advice from Helen, and lots of giggling from both of us), ‘got ready’. Then I walked to the door, and went back downstairs. Part of me couldn’t believe I was doing this, and part of me wanted to run back upstairs.

I went back to his room, and knocked softly on the door. He opened it, and his eyes went wide when he saw me standing there in my dressing gown.

“Is something the matter?” he asked.

“Yes, can I come in?”

He stepped back, and let me in, shutting the door behind me.

“So what is it love? What’s the matter?”

I quite deliberately let my gown open, and then slipped it off my shoulders, but keeping my arms in the sleeves, and holding it closed round my waist.

“This is,” I said. “I think you ought to finish what you started.”

He looked at me longingly, and then came forward. He caressed my face and then my neck, his hands slowly moving down until they once more cupped my breasts. I closed my eyes, and shuddered at his touch.

“You mean finish this?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“Oh yes, I’m sure.”

“Are you sure you’re ready?”

I opened my eyes. “Oh yes, my love, I’m completely ready.”

“That’s all I needed to hear,” he said, and bent his head to kiss me. His hands left my breasts and took hold of my dressing gown, pulling it gently until I released it, then dropped it to the floor. He took a step back, looking at me as I stood there, naked and open to his gaze. He then came forward again, and picked me up in his arms. He carried me to the bed, and laid me gently down on the covers.

“Oh my love, you don’t know how much I’ve waited for this,” he whispered, and bending his head down, claimed my mouth with his own.

Chapter 23

It was later. How much later I wasn't sure. It was still dark but the moon was up and full, and was shining through the gaps in the curtains where they hadn't been pulled properly shut. I was warm, and relaxed, and happy, held in the arms of the man I loved, the man I was going to marry. We had made love for what seemed like hours, and I had then fallen asleep cradled in Robin's arms.

I couldn't believe how Robin had made me feel, how he had known so much about making my first time such a wonderful experience. He seemed to me like a master musician, taking an ordinary instrument and making it play in an extraordinary way. I had had no idea of the things a man and woman could do together. Robin had been very gentle, and very sure of himself, and had always made sure I was happy with what he was doing.

I also couldn't believe some of the things I had done, either. After Robin had laid me down on the bed he had stood there for a minute before he started to get undressed. I had sat up to watch, intensely curious about a man's body, and had found it wildly erotic to watch him disrobe. When he was naked, I stood up and took the two steps that separated us, and pressed myself against him. I had seen his erection which had seemed alarmingly large, and I now felt it pressing against me as I pressed against him. We had kissed, and then I had taken the two steps back to the bed and sat down again, watching him. He had come towards

the bed and I couldn't take my eyes off his erect penis, which seemed to almost have a life of its own. As he approached, I reached out my hand to touch it. As I gently brushed it with my fingers, Robin had shuddered, and closed his eyes. I gently ran my fingers over it, finding the skin soft and smooth, feeling hot to my touch. Before I knew what I was doing, I had leant forward and kissed it right on the end. Robin once again shuddered, and cried out gently.

"Sorry, shouldn't I have done that?" I asked him timidly.

"Oh love," he replied. "You can do as much of that as you like, but it might be an idea not to do it just now. If you carry on, I might not be able to control myself." I had no real idea what he meant, but sat back on the bed. He came and sat down beside me, and started kissing and caressing my body with long gentle strokes. After a few minutes, he gently pressed me back onto the pillows, and continued with the stroking and the kissing.

I had never before realized that just touching someone could have such an impact. He seemed to know exactly where to touch, where to kiss, where to caress, to give me the most intense pleasure. From stroking me all over he turned to kissing, and once again seemed to know how to give me the most incredible feelings. Only once had I made any movement of denial. He had been stroking his hand down my body, and had finally started caressing my mound of Venus, using gentle movements of his fingers. He had slipping his fingers into my warm wet folds, and had found the area of my most intense pleasure. He had rubbed gently back and forth, and brought me to my first climax; wave after wave of pleasure so intense it almost became pain. I gasped and cried out, as his fingers stroked and rubbed. When it was over (for the time being), he held me close.

"Did you enjoy that love?" he asked gently.

I nodded. I was incapable of speech at that moment. "Do you want more?" he asked. Once again I nodded. "Do you trust me?" Once again, I nodded.

He lowered his head and started kissing my breasts, suckling and teasing the nipples with his tongue. Then he moved lower, his tongue tracing down between them, moving over my stomach and circling my belly button. He ran his tongue in smooth circles around it for a few moments, and then moved lower. He gradually maneuvered himself so that he was kneeling between my legs, and then kissed my mound. He gently pressed open the folds, and then bent his head and gently licked inside. I gasped, and instinctively moved to stop him. He instantly withdrew.

“Don’t you like that?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I replied.

“Can I try again?” he asked. “If you really don’t like it I won’t do it anymore, but I think you’ll enjoy it.”

I was still looking doubtful, but lay back on the pillows. I was tense and he knew it, so he started by caressing my most intimate area with his fingers until I was once again relaxed, floating in that warm lake I had come to know. Exactly when his tongue replaced his fingers I couldn’t tell, but I became aware that he was sucking and licking me in the same way he had done to my nipples. By that time I didn’t care—I was floating far and away on a sea of sensation and just wanted him to carry on. His technique, whether expert or not, was bringing me to peak after peak of pleasure and I didn’t want it to end. After a second, more violent climax, he had gently nudged my legs apart, and lowered himself on me. I felt his penis enter me, gently at first, and then with increasing pressure.

“This may hurt for a second, love,” he warned me, and then thrust deep inside. There was a split second of pain, and then just the wonderful feeling of him moving inside me. Once again I felt myself building to a crescendo, only this time he was coming with me moving in time with my body, mine moving in time with his, until we both cried out, reaching our climax. He slowed, then stopped, and then gently lay down on top of me.

He rested his head against my chest for a minute, then lifted it and opened his eyes. He looked up at me, with the shadow of a grin, and said “Did you like that, sweetheart?”

I laughed gently. “No, I didn’t like it,” I said. He looked at me in astonishment. “I loved it,” I told him, “every bit of it.”

“Every bit?” he asked.

“Yes, every bit,” I confirmed. And I had. It felt fantastic, and I wanted nothing more than to do it all again.

He gently disengaged himself from me, and I felt an unexpected sense of loss as he did so. He moved up the bed to lie beside me and laid his head on the pillow, putting one arm over me holding me tight.

“Happy?” he asked.

“Totally,” I replied. “Can we do it again?”

His eyes flew to my face. “What, now?”

I nodded. He laughed and pulled me closer. “Not right now,” he said. “I need to recover first. And I don’t want you to get sore. We mustn’t overdo it on our first time.”

“I’m not sore,” I told him. I have to confess that, innocent as I was, I didn’t know what he meant.

“No, but you might be if we over do it, love,” he told me. “Let’s just let nature take its course, and see what happens.”

I was disappointed, but nodded. He pulled me closer, and we snuggled up together. One thing was still puzzling me, though.

“Robin,” I said hesitantly. “Can you tell me something?”

“What is it, love,” he asked sleepily.

“Well, you’re not much older than I am, but you seem to have had much more experience of this than I have.”

“Well?” he asked.

“I suppose what I want to know is, how did you get so much experience, when you’re still so young?”

Robin sighed. “If I tell you, promise me you won’t be upset?” he said.

“I’ll try,” I told him.

Before saying anything else, Robin propped himself on one arm against the pillows, his other arm still holding me close.

“My family is a bit different to a lot of people’s,” he started. “My father firmly believed that it’s a man’s duty to give pleasure

to the women in his life, and he carried out a tradition that was started a long time ago.”

“What tradition?” I was curious. It was the first time Robin had really spoken about his family.

“In our family, for his sixteenth birthday, each son is given a present from his father. That present consists of lessons from a courtesan in how to please a woman.”

“Courtesan ... you mean a prostitute?”

“No, not a prostitute. A courtesan is much, much more than a prostitute.”

“But your father paid a woman to have sex with you?”

“It sounds odd when you put it like that, but essentially yes.”

“Did you enjoy it?”

“Yes of course I enjoyed it. And I think you enjoyed it too.”

“I wasn’t even there!” I protested.

“No, but you’ve benefitted from her teaching as much as I have.”

I thought about that for a few minutes. “I suppose I did benefit. But it stills seems strange,” I grumbled.

“It probably does. Like I said, my family is a bit different.”

“So what did this ... courtesan ... teach you?” I asked.

“She taught me how to please a woman, exactly how I pleased you tonight. Or pleased might be a better word. She taught me all the things I needed to know to make a woman happy.” He stopped and looked at me. “Are you upset about that?”

I considered the question seriously, with a small frown on my face. After a couple of minutes during which he watched me anxiously, I rolled over to face him.

“No, I’m not upset. I knew you’d had more experience with women. Don’t ask me how, just something I guessed ... so I suppose if anything I should be grateful to her, for teaching you how to please ... pleasure ... me.” I smiled up at him, and kissed him again.

He sagged in relief. “I was hoping you wouldn’t take it the wrong way,” he said. “I was really hoping you wouldn’t get up and walk out. I really didn’t want you to do that.”

“I prefer that explanation to you telling me you’ve had dozens of other girlfriends,” I told him.

“I can appreciate that,” he said. Then his face changed, and he looked at me with a mischievous look in his eyes. “I should also mention that she showed me the ways a woman can please a man,” he said wickedly.

“Oh really,” I said. “Is that so?”

“Yes, that’s right. But that’s the second lesson.”

“Second lesson?” I asked.

“Yes,” he replied. “And you’ve only started the first lesson.”

“Started?” I was a little startled.

“Oh yes,” he whispered, moving his lips gently around my ear, and down my cheek. Meanwhile his hand was exploring elsewhere, gently stroking me and exciting me again. I could feel his passion rising as well, pressing into my body as we lay there close together.

“Well now,” I said huskily, “why don’t we talk about that.”

“I can think of a better way of teaching you than talking about it,” he said, and suiting action to the words, embarked on my second lesson.

* * * * *

A little while later, I was once again lying in Robin’s arms. I was feeling contented, well loved, happier than I could ever have imagined, and just a little sore. It appeared Robin had been right about that, as well as everything else he had shown me. I turned to look at him.

He was lying, asleep on the edge of the bed. He was as tidy asleep as he appeared to be awake. His arm was still draped across me, holding me loosely to him. As I turned he roused briefly, smiled at me, then snuggled back into the pillow and went back to sleep.

I didn’t feel in the least like sleeping. I was warm and relaxed, but didn’t feel at all tired. I felt as if I never wanted this night to end. I still couldn’t believe that Robin had proposed, and that I

was now engaged. I wouldn't feel officially engaged until I had told Elsie and everyone else back home, but I was engaged nonetheless. I knew Frank would want Robin to ask his permission to marry me, but he would be happy enough to give his permission and his blessing. I knew I would have to take Robin home as soon as possible to introduce him to everyone, but I knew Elsie would let Frank know that I was being 'courted' by a 'nice young man'.

I moved on the bed, and Robin woke up again. "What's up?" he asked sleepily.

"I think I'd better go back upstairs," I said. "It will be a bit difficult explaining we're not going out if someone sees me leaving your room."

His grip tightened. "Do you really have to go?" he asked. "I don't want you to leave."

"I know love," I replied. "But I think I really ought to go. I can always come back again."

"True," he said. "But I don't want tonight to end."

"I don't either, but I think I must go."

He sighed, and let me sit up. He got off the bed, and walked over and picked up my dressing gown.

"Here you go love," he said. "We don't want you catching cold now, do we?" He helped me put it on, and then held me briefly. "And of course," he continued, "we don't want anyone else to see what's under that robe."

"Mr. Carstaires, are you jealous?" I asked.

"I have absolutely no reason to be jealous, you little hussy, and you know it. And the same goes for you—you will never be given cause for jealousy by me, my love, I promise." He gave me a lingering kiss, and then pulled away.

"Well if you must go, you must. And if you must, you'd better go quickly, before I forget myself and stop you leaving."

He opened the door, and held it for me. "Off you go, love," he said quietly.

I gave him a quick kiss on the cheek, then walked along the hall and back up to my room. I opened the door quietly and went

in. I shut the door quietly behind me and tiptoed over to the bed, trying not to wake Helen. I climbed into bed and was just pulling the covers over me when I heard Helen's voice.

"Who's a dirty little stop out then," she said, sounding amused.

"Sorry, did I wake you?" I asked.

"Yes, but don't worry, I'm a light sleeper. So, how did it go?" she asked.

"Amazing," I replied. "Fantastic, superb, wonderful, astonishing, ..."

"OK, OK, I get the picture," she said laughing. "I take it you had a good time."

"Sure did," I said, just a bit smugly.

"And now you sound disgustingly smug and pleased with yourself," she said.

"Don't care," I said.

"No, I don't suppose you do," she sighed. "You lucky cow. Why can't I find someone like Robin?"

"You never know," I told her, "you might find someone when you join up."

"Let's hope so," she said. "Bit of a waste of time otherwise."

I laughed. "And they say romance is dead."

"I think you just proved it isn't," she replied. I yawned widely. "I think you'd better get to sleep."

"Actually," I said, climbing out of bed again, "I'd better get to the bathroom and take this thingy out. The doctor told me not to leave it in all night."

I hopped out and went to the bathroom. I got myself sorted out, had a quick wash, and went back to bed. Helen was lying down again, so I got in quietly.

"Good night," she said sleepily.

"Night," I whispered back. I settled down, and within minutes slid into a deep, dreamless sleep.

The next morning it all seemed like a dream. I woke late, unsurprisingly, and lay in bed for a while reflecting on the previous night. I was happy that I'd gone back to Robin's room, and still felt supremely happy that he had proposed. I knew we'd have to speak later about taking him up to Yorkshire so he could ask Frank officially. I wasn't sure how Robin would react to that. It still seemed a fairly old fashioned thing to do, but some of the things Robin had said indicated his family was pretty old fashioned as well. I stretched and thought about getting up. I glanced over at the other bed and saw that Helen had already gone downstairs. I was just thinking of getting up myself when there was a knock at the door.

"Are you up?" I heard Robin call.

"No, but I'm decent," I called back. "The door's open."

The door opened and Robin came in, walking backwards. I saw why as soon as he turned round. He was carrying a tray which in turn was carrying breakfast. I could smell toast and coffee, and could see a small vase with a flower in it.

"Good morning my love," he said cheerfully, pushing the door closed, and coming over to the bed.

He put the tray down on a chair, and pulled the chair closer to the bed. He sat on the side of the bed and leant over to give me a kiss. His quick kiss took quite a bit longer than he probably intended, but he eventually returned to the matter in hand.

"What's all this?" I asked.

"I thought you could with some breakfast," he replied, "so I brought it up for you. Helen told me what you liked, so hopefully you'll enjoy it."

I sat up in bed and the covers, which I'd held up to my shoulders, fell down to my waist. Robin's eyes widened, and I suddenly remembered that I hadn't bothered putting my nightie on before getting into bed, and I was still naked under the covers. I hastily pulled them back up, much to Robin's amusement.

"Don't worry about that, love," he said wickedly, "I saw all that last night."

I blushed. “Yes I know you did,” I told him. “But what would happen if Helen walked in and saw?”

“From what I’ve seen of her, nothing would faze her,” he replied. I laughed.

“You’re probably right, but it would still be embarrassing,” I said.

“I know love, I was only teasing. Would you like your breakfast now?”

“Yes please,” I said, sitting up straighter but making sure the covers were securely tucked around me. He placed the tray across my knees and I got a close look at what he’d brought me. There was toast and coffee, as I’d already worked out, together with a boiled egg and butter and jam.

“The flower was Helen’s idea,” he told me, “and she cooked the boiled egg, too, because she said she knew how you liked them.”

I nodded at this, because my mouth was full of toast. I swallowed. “That’s right,” I said. “It’s about the only thing she cooks better than I do.”

“Oh, so I’m marrying a good cook as well am I?” he said.

“As well as what?” I asked.

For answer, he just gave me another of his wicked looks and once again I felt myself blushing. Whilst I finished my breakfast he sat on the end of the bed and just looked at me, occasionally asking if everything was all right.

I loved the breakfast, but I loved the idea behind it even more. I had been worried about how I would react when I saw him this morning; more, I had been worried about how he would react to me. I’d heard about girls who had slept with their boy-friends and then been dropped by them the next day. I was relieved that Robin seemed as attentive this morning as he had last night. When I had finished eating he came to take the tray away. He picked it up and sat it on the chair again, then sat down next to me on the bed putting his arm around me.

“What do you want to do today?” he asked.

“I don’t know, I hadn’t really thought about it,” I replied. “I want to call Elsie, and tell her about our engagement. Once I’ve done that I have nothing else to do today. Did you have something in mind?”

He shook his head. “Nope, I’m up to date with my work so if there’s somewhere you want to go, or something you want to do, today seems like a good day to do it.”

“Great, I’ll have a think while I’m getting dressed.” He glanced at me sideways, with a suggestive look on his face.

“No, you can’t stay while I’m getting dressed. What would Helen say if she came in and found us doing something?”

He looked regretful. “You’re right, of course,” he said. “I’ll take this downstairs, and wait for you in the kitchen. See you in a bit.” He bent down to pick up the tray, and gave me a quick kiss in passing.

“See you downstairs,” I agreed. I waited until he had left, then got out of bed.

About three quarters of an hour later I was down in the kitchen. Robin and Helen were sitting at the table, having a cup of tea.

“There you are,” said Helen. “I was just persuading lover boy here it would be a bad idea for him to go up and find out where you were.”

“Why a bad idea?” I asked, a little puzzled.

“Bad idea because if he’d gone up there you’d never have come down again,” she said.

“Oh,” I said, and could feel a blush starting. I looked at Robin, and he was grinning at me. I decided to ignore him, and turned back to Helen.

“Thanks for your help with the breakfast,” I said. “That was definitely a Helen egg.”

She smiled. “I thought you’d be able to tell,” she replied.

“Well, if I’m going to be honest, Robin told me you’d helped him with the breakfast, and as soon as I saw the boiled egg, I knew you’d have done it.”

“Listen to the girl,” said Robin. “One day engaged and she’s telling me already I can’t cook.”

“But I don’t know if you can cook,” I teased him. “After all, anyone can do toast. Boiled eggs take skill, experience, and instinct.”

“Carry on like that, my girl,” he said, mock growling, “and I’ll have to take you somewhere and show you what I’m good at.”

“Didn’t you do that last night?” asked Helen, all innocence. I laughed as for once I saw Robin blush.

“Well, if you two ladies have quite finished,” he said with dignity, “I think it’s time we went down to the phone box and let Suzie impart the good news to her family.”

Helen and I laughed. I got up from the table, and Robin also got up and took my hand.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s get going.”

We left the house, and walked down to the phone box. I dialed the number and waited nervously for Elsie to answer it. I was in luck, and she picked it up on the third ring.

“Elsie, is that you?”

“Suzie, sweetheart, how are you? Is anything wrong?” she asked anxiously.

“Absolutely nothing, but I do have something to tell you.”

“Oh, what’s that then?”

“Remember Robin?”

“That nice young man you’re in love with,” she said. I could hear the smile in her voice.

“That’s the one.”

“What about him then?”

“Umm ... we’ve got engaged,” I blurted out. There was silence from the other end. “Say something Elsie, please,” I said.

“I don’t know what to say,” she said. “It’s a bit sudden isn’t it?” she said finally.

“I suppose it is, but it’s going to be a long engagement,” I told her. “We’re not getting married until we’ve both qualified.”

She sighed. "That's a relief. I was thinking you were going to give up on being a vet."

"No, absolutely not, no way," I said emphatically. "I'm not giving up my dream for anything," I told her.

"In that case, my love, I'm very happy for you and I wish you all the happiness in the world. When are you bringing him up to see us?"

"As soon as I can—hopefully in a couple of weeks. We've got a Friday afternoon free then and we can make a real weekend of it."

"That'll be lovely," she said, and I could hear she meant it. "You know he'll have to talk to Frank, don't you?"

"Yes, I know," I said. "I'll tell him about that this afternoon."

"I thought you'd have told him last night, seeing as that's when he proposed."

"I was a little ... um ... busy last night," I said.

"Were you now," she said, with a laugh. "I won't ask what you were doing. I probably wouldn't approve of the answer! So what are you up to today?"

"I don't know yet. We're going to decide after I've finished talking to you."

"Well before you go, can I have a word with your young man?"

"Yes of course," I said. "I'll just get him for you."

I tapped on the glass of the phone box, and indicated that Robin should come and take the phone. I left the box and waited outside. I could see Robin nodding his head, and occasionally saying 'yes'. Finally he laughed, and hung up. He came out of the phone box, and took my hand.

"What did Elsie say?" I asked him.

"Oh, nothing too drastic," he said. "Just the usual—I had to look after you, don't get carried away, respect you, etc. Nothing I didn't expect."

"Didn't she say anything else?"

“Well she did say we should come up as soon as possible and get introduced, and that I’d have to ask Frank formally for permission to marry you.”

“Do you mind about that?” I asked

“What, going to Yorkshire,” he teased.

“No, silly, about asking Frank.”

“No, why should I mind?” he asked. “It’s only what I expected to have to do.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.” He gave me reassuring hug, and we went on down the road.

We spent the rest of the day doing not very much. We wandered around St James’ park, and bought some bread to feed the ducks and swans. We found a café open and had tea and cakes before going back to the house. Once we got back Robin cooked some dinner, as he said “just to show you I can cook,” which was delicious.

We spent most of the evening in the living room with some of our other house mates. Helen was out somewhere with Jamie, the lad she’d been speaking to on our first night in the house. Tom reckoned they’d gone down the pub for a drink.

By eight thirty I was yawning and just about ready to call it a day. I wanted a bath before I went to bed. I was sitting curled up next to Robin on the settee.

“Off to bed, love?” he said. I nodded.

“Yes, but bath before that.”

“Want your back rubbed?” he asked with a smile.

“Love it,” I replied.

“Have to see what we can come up with then,” he replied. “Off you go.”

I stuck my tongue out at him and beat a retreat. Although the shower in our bathroom had been fixed, I decided I wanted a hot bath. I left the bath running while I got undressed and put my dressing gown on. I picked up my toilet stuff and went back to the bathroom and shut the door behind me and locked it. The

bath was just perfect when I tested it, so I took off my dressing gown and climbed in.

I nearly died of shock when a voice said behind me “You really must learn to lock the bathroom door, love.” Robin was standing behind me, grinning.

“How did you get in here?” I asked. “And where were you when I came in?”

“I got in while you were getting undressed,” he said. “As to where I was hiding, you really should check behind the door when you come in.”

I gave him a severe look. “I nearly died of shock when you spoke.”

“Don’t worry, sweet, I’m a trained first aider. I would have given you heart massage and mouth to mouth to bring you round.”

I was relaxing in the hot water. I had put bubble bath in, and the bubbles were nearly up to my chin.

“Not sure about the heart massage,” I said, “but the mouth to mouth bit sounds fun.”

“I don’t know,” he said, coming to kneel behind me in the bath. “Let me show you how it goes.”

He slipped his hands over my shoulders and down until he found my breasts under the water. He gently kneaded them, teasing the nipples with his fingers until I was nearly panting with the sensations he was engendering in me. The hot soapy water made my skin slightly slippery.

“I think you’d better stop that,” I managed to gasp.

“Why, aren’t you enjoying it?” he whispered in my ear.

“Of course I am,” I said. “But it’s not going to help me get to sleep if you keep on doing that.”

“No, I suppose it’s not,” he said regretfully, taking his hands away.

“You can always do what you promised, and scrub my back.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?” he said in a mock injured tone.

However, he picked up my soap and flannel. I leant forward in the bath and he started to soap my back. Even that sent shivers down my spine. He rinsed me off and I leant back again in the water. Robin stood there looking at me, and I thought I recognized the look in his eyes. He knelt down beside the bath again, this time facing me. He leant forward and kissed me on the lips. The kiss became more passionate, and his hand started to wander back into the bath and over my body.

“I think you’d better go,” I said breathlessly, when we broke apart for a minute.

“I think I’d better go too,” he agreed. “Otherwise we won’t get any sleep tonight, and that won’t help us concentrate tomorrow.” He stood up and dried his hands.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said.

“All right my love,” I replied.

He bent down and kissed me once on the lips, and then left. I was left in the bath feeling incredibly aroused, and also frustrated. I began to relax in the hot water and after a few minutes I started to feel relaxed enough to fall asleep. I got out of the bath, dried off, and put on my dressing gown. I went back to my room (checking behind the door, having learnt my lesson), and climbed into bed. I put the light out and fell asleep almost before my head hit the pillow.

Chapter 24

Two weeks later we were on the train heading north to Yorkshire. Those two weeks had passed by quickly. Helen was still at the house, her joining up having been deferred for a week. Robin and I had spent a lot of time together, not all of it in bed, and we were completely happy with each other. We had set out some rules for our time together. Nothing was allowed to interfere with our college work, or our studying. We would have dinner together in the evenings, then go to our own rooms to study and usually go straight to bed—separately. We had spent two more wonderful nights together in Robin's room, on the Friday and Saturday of the previous weekend. I was falling further and further into love with him, and he seemed to be as much in love with me as ever.

As the train moved further north our conversation turned to what the farm was like, what Mr. Edwards was like, and how Frank and Mo would react. I had told Robin about Elsie's ban on any hanky-panky and he had accepted her ban, but not without some grumbling. He had asked whether that would be the case when we were up there working over the holidays, and I had assured him it would. His remarks about how we were going to manage had me in fits of muffled laughter, drawing disapproving looks from some of our fellow passengers. We arrived in Leeds and changed trains for Halifax. The trip to Halifax was quite short, and we arrived in the town at just after five o'clock.

We walked up the stairs from the platform and out to the yard. I looked around and spotted Frank's car parked on the left hand side. I pointed it out to Robin and he picked up our cases as we walked over. Frank was sitting in the front seat, and got out when he saw us coming.

"Now then lass," he said with a big smile, folding me in his arms. "How's thee?" Frank's Yorkshire accent always became more pronounced when he was feeling emotional. He let me go, and held his hand out to Robin.

"You'll likely be Robin then."

"Yes, that's me," replied Robin, shaking his hand.

"Glad to meet you, lad. Let's get them cases into the car and get back for dinner."

He and Robin put the cases in the boot. Frank got into the driving seat, I got into the front with him, and Robin climbed in the back. The ride to the farm was conducted mostly in silence, except when Robin asked about various landmarks which we passed. We arrived at the farm, and Frank parked in his accustomed place in the farm yard.

"Here we go then," he said, as we all climbed out. "You take Robin in, lass, I'll fetch the cases. Elsie's waiting for you."

I took Robin's hand and led him across the farmyard towards the house. We went into the kitchen, and there were Elsie, Mo, and the children. Elsie turned to the door as we came in and I ran across the floor towards her. She gave me a great hug, then held me at arms' length.

"You're looking well, lass," she said. "Getting engaged obviously suits you."

I laughed. Robin was still standing just by the door and I went back to him and, taking his hand, led him across the kitchen.

"Here you go, Robin," I said. "You know Elsie, don't you?" He nodded, and held his hand out. "Glad to meet you again, Elsie," he said.

"Oh fiddle," she said and, ignoring his hand, gave him a big hug as well. When she let him go, she presented him to Mo, who

did shake his hand. By this time, Frank had come in with the cases, which he left by the door to the stairs. He came over to the kitchen table.

“Now then young fella,” he said, “let’s have a crack and get acquainted.” He indicated a chair on the other side of the table, and Robin sat down. Elsie put the kettle on the range and when I went to sit down at the table, shook her head at me and gestured for me to come and sit by the fire. I obeyed her unspoken request, but looked backwards towards the table as I did so.

“Come and sit here, lass,” she said, “and leave them to it.” I gave Mo a quick hug, and then the children, especially young Suzie.

I sat down opposite Mo and we started catching up on all the news. I still cast anxious glances towards the table where Frank and Robin were still talking quietly.

“What’s that all about?” I whispered to Elsie, after she’d passed tea around.

“Frank’s just making sure he’s a nice young man,” said Elsie.

“But surely you’ve told Frank all about him.”

“Yes of course I have,” she said. “But you know Frank – likes to make up his own mind about people, and thinks women have too liberal a view of young men.”

She smiled at me, and I smiled back. I was, of course, quite familiar with Frank’s views of women. These were very old-fashioned, protective, and regarding us as being not quite as intelligent as men. In spite of my academic successes and his support of me going to university, I knew that he still regarded education for women as largely a waste of time, because they would ultimately get married and stay at home having children. Frank also had very strong views on the role of a man in marriage. He was supposed to support his wife, look after her, provide for her, and make a home for her.

“I gather Frank is trying to find out whether Robin will be able to provide for me,” I said to Elsie. She nodded.

“Yes, he’s doing what he can to make sure young Robin will be able to look after you.”

“Doesn’t he realize I’ll be able to look after myself, once I’m qualified?” I asked.

“Of course not. Women aren’t supposed to be self-sufficient, love. We need to be looked after, so that we can look after them.” I laughed.

“That sounds like Frank,” I said fondly. “Where are we sleeping, by the way?”

Elsie gave me a hard look. “You’re in your old room,” she said, “and Robin is in one of the guest rooms, next to me and Mo.”

She was looking at me as if daring me to protest as us being so far apart. I knew exactly why Elsie had chosen that particular room. The floor boards in that part of the house were old and needed replacing, and as a result were extremely creaky. If you trod on them they made the most appalling noise. Elsie was ensuring that there would be no nocturnal prowling while Robin and I were under the same roof. I looked at her innocently, and she returned the gaze just as innocently. Mo was looking backwards and forwards between us, obviously aware that something was going on, but equally obviously not aware of what it was.

A scraping of chairs announced the end of Frank and Robin’s conference. They were both coming over to the fire. Frank’s face was its usual impassive self, giving nothing away, and Robin’s looked serious enough, but I knew him well enough to see the amusement lurking beneath. They sat down and the conversation became general. Robin gave no sign that he was at all flustered by all the attention; in fact, he seemed to be almost reveling in it. Eventually Elsie said she would show him to his room. I jumped up and offered to show him the way, but Elsie was quite insistent that she would take him upstairs. She was also quite firm in suggesting that I should go up to my old room, and freshen up.

Elsie had told me that one of the old guest rooms had been converted into a second bathroom, as with three adults and three children in the house one was not enough. The second bathroom was in the room opposite Robin’s, so there would be no need for him to travel far if he needed one. I, of course, was expected to

use the old bathroom, which was just up from my room. Elsie was taking no chances that we would be able to get together over the weekend.

My room was unchanged. Elsie had promised it would not be touched whilst I was at university, as I would be coming home during the holidays to work with Mr. Edwards. I unpacked and then freshened up. When I returned to the kitchen Elsie was busy getting dinner ready. I offered to help but she had everything in hand, and she suggested I should sit and chat to Mo whilst she got on with it. Frank had already returned to his duties around the farm and would come back in about half an hour. I was still chatting to Mo when Robin came back into the kitchen, and came over to sit with us. I was pleased that he and Mo showed every sign of getting on extremely well, and seemed to be starting a genuine friendship. Mo was very pleased that Robin would be coming to help Mr. Edwards out as well as me, and immediately offered him their hospitality when he was up here. Robin of course accepted, and the two men continued to chat.

Dinner was one of Elsie's best. She had certainly pulled out all the stops. She had even made her famous Yorkshire curd tart for dessert. Robin tucked in, and appeared to enjoy the whole meal. Elsie had put us at opposite ends of the table. I was next to Frank, and Robin was next to Mo. The children came in between. It was a bit of a squash with all eight of us sitting round the table, but we managed.

After dinner, Elsie suggested that I show Robin round the farm. Frank offered to do the 'guided tour', but Elsie said he was looking tired, and why not let the young people stretch their legs for a bit? Frank agreed, only saying that I would be bound to miss out the important bits, and he would give Robin a proper tour the next day. I smiled at this, and we went outside.

We wandered around the farm yard for a bit, hands in pockets, but shoulders almost touching. I showed him Mo's dogs in the barn, and he was very enthusiastic about his breeding program. We wandered over to the other barn, and I showed him inside.

“What’s this used for?” Robin asked curiously.

“Not a lot. This used to be our play barn when we were kids,” I explained. “We had a big pile of straw on the floor, and we used to jump off from that loft there. It was great fun. Kept us amused for hours.”

“I can imagine. You said there was another level above here?”

Something in his voice made me look at him sharply, but the light level in the barn wasn’t sufficient for me to make out his face clearly.

“Yes I did, but we’re not going up there,” I told him. “I promised Elsie we’d behave ourselves this weekend, and I’m not going to break that promise.”

“I’m not asking you to.” he replied calmly.

“So what are you asking for then?” I asked.

“It’s a secret,” he told me, completely straight faced.

“Oh you,” I said, elbowing him in the ribs.

“Now that unprovoked attack deserves a penalty,” he said, taking hold of my arms. “And I know just what you need.” He bent his head and kissed me. The kiss lasted several minutes, during which we both got thoroughly mussed. We finally separated, then he took hold of my hand, and calmly walked back into the farmyard.

“You, you, you ...” I sputtered as we walked back across the yard.

“Me what?” he asked innocently. “All I did was kiss you.”

“You know very well what,” I said crossly.

“Yes, but you love me really, don’t you?” he said with a grin.

I couldn’t stay angry for long—which he knew—and by the time we got back to the kitchen door I was back to my normal self. He stopped me just outside, and said “Better check everything’s where it should be.”

We checked that our clothing was where it should be, and went into the kitchen. Elsie looked up as we came in, and smiled.

“Enjoy your walk,” she asked.

“Yes, thank you,” replied Robin. “Suzie was showing me the play barn, and telling me about how they used to jump out of the loft.”

“Yes, that’s right,” Elsie laughed. “They used to scare me rigid doing that.”

“I’m not surprised,” Robin agreed. “It looks far too high for me.”

“It looks a bit high for me these days,” I admitted. “I don’t know how I ever dared jump off there.”

“Oh, children think differently,” said Elsie. “My lot do it now. I did think about forbidding them, but what can you do? At least Frank makes sure there’s plenty of straw about for them to land on.”

Robin went over to Mo and started chatting to him about the dogs again. I went over and sat by Elsie. She was knitting, as usual, and I was completely fascinated watching her, as I had been when a child.

“You weren’t out long,” she said quietly.

“Well, there’s not much to see in the dark,” I replied. “We went and saw the dogs, and the chickens, and then we wandered into the play barn.”

“Just a word of advice,” Elsie said, still in a quiet voice.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Next time you ‘just wander’ into the play barn, make sure you take all the straw out of your hair before you come out.”

My hands flew to my head, searching for straw. Elsie smiled at me, and said “Guilty conscience, have we?”

I looked at her indignantly. “We only had a kiss,” I said defensively. “I told him I wasn’t going to go into the hay loft with him. I told him I’d promised you, and I wasn’t going to break that promise.”

She relaxed. “That’s all I wanted to hear, love,” she said. “You’re a good girl, and I trust you.”

“I know,” I replied. “I won’t let you down.”

“Maybe we should get a bolt for your door,” she said.

“Why not his?” I countered.

“I can trust you not to go into his room,” she replied with a smile. “I’m not so sure about the other way around.”

I laughed. It was wonderful to be home, surrounded by my family. Robin appeared to be making a good impression on everyone—even Frank.

“Do you know what Frank and Robin were talking about before dinner? The specifics, I mean. I know in general what they were discussing.”

Elsie shook her head. “Frank hasn’t told me anything yet,” she said quietly. “I think the signs are good though, as long as you two behave yourselves this weekend.”

“I’m sure we’ll manage,” I said. “It’s coming up for the holidays that’s going to be difficult.”

“Well as long as you’re discreet, there shouldn’t be a problem,” Elsie replied. “And that reminds me, Mr. Edwards is calling around tomorrow. Frank’s got a sheep with a bad foot he wants looking at, and Mo wants him to check over the latest litter of puppies.”

“Brilliant!” I exclaimed. “We can introduce Robin to him, and ask how he feels about having two apprentices instead of one.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Elsie asked. “You know what they say about absence making the heart grow fonder. If you spend all your time together at college, and during the holidays, and in the house, aren’t you worried you’ll get tired of each other?”

“It’s a good question,” I replied. “But then, marriage is for life, isn’t it? So if we can’t spend the next six years together, it doesn’t bode well for a lifelong commitment, does it?”

“That’s true enough, I suppose,” she said thoughtfully. “And I suppose you’ll be busy enough studying as well. Or do you do that together as well?”

I shook my head. “No, nothing interrupts our studying. Most nights we have dinner then go to our rooms and study. We don’t

often see each other after dinner during the week, just at week-ends when everything's done."

"Well, if you can keep that up, you shouldn't have any problems qualifying," she said, sounding a bit relieved.

Frank came in just then and joined us by the fire, and Elsie was suddenly bustling about putting the children to bed. Little Suzie came over for a goodnight kiss, followed by Frank and Elsie, and then they wanted the same from Robin, who complied willingly. With the children in bed the talk around the fire quickly moved to our engagement. Frank was sitting lighting his pipe. When he had it going to his satisfaction, he looked at me and said "So, you're planning on getting married then."

"Yes, that's right," I said nervously. "If you approve, of course."

"Always approve of folks getting married," he replied. "Of course, what I don't approve of is any funny goings on beforehand."

I could feel myself start to blush, and not for the first time cursed the fact that I was so ready to give myself away.

"However, there's none of that going on, so that's all right," Frank continued. "Now, I've had a good word with this young lad here," he said, indicating Robin with a nod of the head, "and I'm satisfied he'll do right by our Suzie. So, just to make it official, I'm telling you all that I've given my consent to the wedding."

I looked at Robin and smiled, and saw him smiling back at me. Elsie and Mo were also smiling, both at us and at each other.

"This calls for a celebration," Elsie announced, and went into the scullery for some of her famous home-made elderflower champagne. Mo went and fetched the glasses, and Frank poured the wine.

"A toast!" declared Mo. "To Suzie and Robin, may they always be happy, and always be together."

"Suzie and Robin," the others repeated, and we all drank. I looked over at Robin, and saw that he had taken something out of his pocket. He walked over to me, and knelt on the floor in front of me.

“What are you doing?” I asked him.

“Well,” he said casually, opening the box, “no engagement is complete without a ring, or a proper proposal. So Suzie, in the presence of your family, I’m asking you to marry me. Will you be my wife?”

“Of course I will,” I replied, more touched than I could ever imagine.

“Then in that case, I have this for you,” he said, sliding a ring onto my finger.

‘This’ was the most beautiful sapphire and diamond engagement ring.

“Oh Robin,” I breathed, “it’s beautiful. Where did you get this? And when? I don’t remember you going shopping.”

He leant over and kissed me. “It’s a family ring,” he said. “It belonged originally to my great-grandmother. All the new brides in the family wear it.”

“But ... what about your mother?” I asked him. “Surely she should be wearing this?”

He shook his head. “No, that’s the whole point. Now my father’s dead, it passes down to the next bride in the family. And as my brother isn’t married, that’s you.”

I leant forward and kissed him again. “Thank you darling,” I said. “It’s a beautiful ring.”

Elsie leant across to have a look, and said how beautiful it was. Robin was still kneeling on the floor in front of us, and Elsie leant forward and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek.

“Beautifully done, lad,” she said, with tears in her eyes.

Robin smiled at her, then took my hand and kissed it. He stood up, and went back to his chair next to Mo. I spent the next hour or so sitting in a haze of happiness, not really taking part in the conversation. I was content to sit and look at Robin, smiling whenever he looked in my direction. Frank was asking him about life at the college, and Mo was asking why he wanted to move up to Yorkshire. Elsie was busy knitting, but put in the odd comment here and there.

“I think our Suzie’s falling asleep.” Elsie’s voice woke me from my daze.

“Hmm, what?” I asked.

“I said, I think you’re falling asleep. It’s time you were off to bed.”

“All right,” I said. “I am feeling a bit tired.” I went to stand up, and Robin was there giving me his hand.

“Take her upstairs, lad,” said Elsie, “but you’d better be back down here in five minutes, or else I’ll be after you.”

Robin grinned at her. “Five minutes it is then,” he replied.

I said ‘good night’ to the others, and received a chorus of ‘good nights’ in return. We walked across to the door and Robin opened it. Once out of sight Robin’s arms went round me, and we were kissing again.

“I don’t think I can stand to be this near you and not be able to touch you,” he whispered.

“I know, it’s going to be difficult,” I whispered back. “Come on, let’s go upstairs.”

We scampered up the stairs, and into my bedroom. We fell on the bed and embraced again, giggling. After a few minutes of passionate kissing Robin reluctantly got up, and said his good nights, then left and shut the door. I heard him going downstairs and waited until I heard the bottom door open and shut before getting ready for bed. I climbed into my old bed, and drifted off to sleep.

* * * * *

The next morning dawned bright and clear, and after breakfast Frank took Robin for what he called a ‘proper’ tour of the farm. Mr. Edwards was expected at sometime during the morning, but as usual had given no specific time for his arrival. I stayed in with Elsie and we chatted as we prepared vegetables for lunch and for dinner that night. The vegetables for the evening meal were put into bowls of cold water and carried into the scullery, which stayed cold and would keep them fresh. That done I helped her clean the

house, after which she asked if I fancied a cake making. As she said I could take the rest of it back to London with me, I gave her an enthusiastic reply. She put her pinny on, and we chatted some more as she made one of her favorite cakes.

Half way through this process we heard a car drawing up outside, and when I looked through the window, I saw it was Mr. Edwards arriving. I went out to meet him.

“Now then, young Suzie,” he said, smiling at me. “What’s this I hear about you getting engaged? Not leaving vet school already are you?”

“No, nothing like that,” I told him, smiling at him in return. “It’s going to be a long engagement, we’re not getting married until we’ve both qualified.”

“And what will you be doing after that?” he asked. I wasn’t sure, but I thought he sounded a little anxious.

“Well, we wanted to speak to you about that,” I said as we walked across the farm yard to the dogs’ barn. “We were wondering if it would be all right for Robin to come up and see practice with you as well as me, during the holidays. We would love to both move up here and this would give us the ideal opportunity to learn about the district before we do. If you think there’s enough work in the area,” I added. I actually meant ‘if there’s enough work in your practice’, but didn’t come straight out and say it. I was sure he would catch my meaning soon enough. He did.

“Well,” he said thoughtfully, as we reached the barn, “there’s plenty of work at the moment, and likely to be more in the future. I’m sure there’ll be enough work for three vets for a couple of years, before I retire for good and leave you young people to it. My nephew has just told me he’s going to emigrating to Canada when he’s qualified, says he can get a better job over there, so he won’t be joining the practice now. I don’t see any reason why the pair of you shouldn’t come up here.”

I’m sure he was most surprised when I threw my arms round his neck, and kissed his cheek.

“Thank you so much, Mr. Edwards,” I said, tears in my eyes.

“Now, now,” he said patting my arm. “That’s no way to carry on, lass. I’m not doing you any favors, you know; you’ll be expected to work, and to buy your way in. And that goes for your young man as well.”

“I know, Mr. Edwards,” I agreed, “but at least I know we can move up here together.”

“And that’s another thing,” he said, after clearing his throat severely. “If we’re going to be working together, no more of that ‘Mr. Edwards’ stuff. It was fine when you were a youngster, but now you’re an adult you can call me Huw. Now, where’s these pups Mo wants me to look at?”

“It’s this litter here,” I said, leading the way. Mo had told me which pups were in need of a looking at before he left just after breakfast.

Huw wasn’t long in checking them over. He pronounced them to be a ‘fine, healthy litter, like Mo usually gets’, and then asked where the lame sheep was. I took him over to the old calf rearing house which now doubled as a sort of hospital wing for animals that needed attention, and we found Frank and Robin already in there, looking over some other sheep Frank had brought in the night before. I introduced Robin and Huw.

“So you’re the young fella that wants to take over my practice then,” Huw asked as he shook hands.

“That’s me,” replied Robin cheerfully. “Ready and raring to go.”

Huw laughed at him. “You wait until you’ve done your next six years,” he chuckled, “and all the practice during your holidays. You might change your mind yet!”

“No chance of that, Huw,” replied Robin. “If I’m going to marry this beautiful lass, then I’m going to have to move up here with her. It would be a crime to deprive Yorkshire of one of its more beautiful natural sights.”

“Well, you’ve certainly got the gift of the gab,” Huw answered him. “Now let’s see if you’ve learnt anything yet, and have a look at this sheep. No, I know you’ve not done any clinical work yet,” he forestalled Robin’s protest, “but it’s never too

early to learn. You too, young lady, let's see what you've picked up down in London."

We all solemnly examined the sheep, and then the sheep in the next two pens. We checked their temperatures, their eyes, their feet, and probed and prodded their stomachs. One thing I was sure of when we had finished was that whatever was wrong with these would probably spread through the rest of the flock in fairly short order.

"So, what's the problem," Frank asked when we'd finished.

"Nothing too serious, just a touch of scour," Huw replied. "I'll make you up a drench. And make sure you give it to all the others as well, stop it spreading. I'll drop it back up this afternoon. If you're not around, I'll leave it on the kitchen window sill as usual."

Huw packed up his tools, and washed his hands in the bucket of water Frank had provided. Robin and I followed suit.

"Not bad you two," Huw remarked as we all trooped across the farm yard back to the house. "Not bad at all, considering you've never seen that before. Reckon you two'll make pretty good vets in a few years."

Robin grinned. "Thank you, Huw," he replied. "Does that mean I get the job?"

"Cheeky bugger," grunted Huw. "Yes, you can come and see practice, young fella me lad. But don't be distracting this young lass from her studies. I'm going to need both of you, and I'd rather have this pretty lass in the surgery with me than you. She's easier on the eyes."

We all laughed, and Huw got into his car. "Right, see you this afternoon," he said, before driving off.

Frank lead us into the kitchen. Elsie had just taken lunch out of the oven and a delicious smell of meat and potato pie filled the air.

"There you are, just in time," she said. "Mo's just finishing up outside, so I might as well dish up."

Lunch over, Frank once again took Robin off around the farm with him. Mo had gone to a trial locally, taking two of his

best dogs, and Elsie and I sat by the fire chatting. The evening followed much the same pattern as the Friday night with us all sitting and chatting until bedtime.

Sunday morning came all too soon, and we were up early. Mo was to run us to the station, and after Elsie had cooked us breakfast he loaded the bags into the car, we said our good byes, and set off back to London.

The trip back was uneventful, and we spent most of the time just talking quietly about this and that, and nothing in particular. We arrived back at the house at just after five o'clock. I was tired so Robin carried my bag upstairs for me, kissed me tenderly, told me to get an early night, and said he'd see me in the morning. I was only too pleased to do as he suggested, and after a lovely long hot bath I sat in my room in my dressing gown reading for while, before getting into bed. Helen was apparently out again, so I didn't expect to see her before I fell asleep. However just as I was thinking of putting the light out and going to sleep, Helen came into the room. I could tell immediately that she had something important to tell me.

"Where's Robin?" she asked me.

"Downstairs in his room, I think," I replied. "Why do you want to know?"

"I think you ought to go and ask him what he's playing at," she replied.

"Playing at? What do you mean?"

"This is what I mean," she replied, brandishing a magazine at me. "Just take a look at that."

'That' was a photograph. In it, a woman was standing next to a racehorse, and alongside her was Robin, smiling in the way which I knew meant he wasn't happy. The caption underneath spelt out what was happening:

"Lady Merton is seen here congratulating the winning jockey of her horse, Daisy Chain. Lady Merton is accompanied by her younger son, the Honourable Robert Carstairs, at the summer race meeting at Chepstow."

Chapter 25

Robin answered the door as soon as I knocked. He was only wearing a towel, and usually I would have stopped to admire his excellent body but this time I just pushed past him into the room. He shut the door behind me, and regarded me with a puzzled expression.

“What’s the matter, love,” he asked.

“Can you explain this please.” I passed him the magazine, showing him the relevant photograph. He took it, and looked at it, and a sudden look of comprehension flittered over his face.

“Where did you get that?” he asked.

“Helen found it in the pub,” I told him.

“Bloody typical,” he said bitterly.

“So what about it?” I demanded.

“It’s a photo of me and my mother,” he replied, shrugging.

“Your mother ... Lady Merton?” He nodded. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“What difference does it make?” he asked. He took my arm and led me over to the bed. He made me sit down on the edge, and took the magazine away from me. He lifted my chin, and looked me in the eyes. “What difference does it make?” he repeated.

I hesitated. “Well, you’re an honorable,” I finally managed.

“That’s just an accident of birth,” he told me.

“Your father was a lord,” I stated.

“Yes, he was,” he replied calmly. “And my mother is Lady Merton. The dowager Lady Merton to be precise, since my father died and my brother George inherited the title.”

“So you’re not just an ordinary person,” I muttered.

“Of course I am, my sweet. I’m still the same old Robin. I still want to be a vet, and I still want to marry you.”

I had a sudden burst of realization. “That’s why you said there might be a problem with your mother, isn’t it? You think she won’t want you to marry me.”

He sighed, and put his arms around me. “You’re right, she isn’t going to want me to marry you. My mother is a raging snob, and thinks unless your family is as old as ours you’re not the right sort of people.”

I tried to pull myself out of his embrace but he was suddenly holding me tightly, and I couldn’t move away.

“Fortunately,” he said cheerfully, kissing the top of my head, “you’re not marrying my mother. You’re marrying me, and I don’t care one jot if she wants me to or not. You’re the woman I love, and that’s all that matters to me.”

“Really?” I asked him, hating myself for my voice sounding pathetic.

“Yes, really,” he repeated. “I’m still your Robin, and you’re still my Suzie, we’re engaged to be married, and I love you more than anything else in the world.” The quiet sincerity in his voice calmed me, and I relaxed in his arms. He felt me settle down and turned my face towards him, and kissed me lightly on the lips.

“All right now,” he asked. I nodded. “Good,” he went on. “And now I think you’d better go back up to your room.”

“Don’t you want me to stay?” I asked.

“Silly girl,” he said. “Of course I want you to stay. After this weekend, more than anything. But we have college in the morning and if you don’t go to bed now you’ll not get up in time in the morning.” He stood up, and held out his hand.

“I’m sorry it came as such a shock, love,” he said. “I’ve been wanting to tell you, but I never seemed to find the right time.”

“You should have told me earlier,” I told him, “but I can understand why you haven’t. It must have been difficult for you, knowing your mother wouldn’t like it.”

“I’m glad you understand,” he said gratefully. He pulled me close, and gave me a kiss. “Sure I’m forgiven?”

I nodded. “Yes, I’m sure.”

“Good,” he said. “Now, get yourself off to bed before I forget all my noble resolutions, and we end up not sleeping tonight.”

He opened the door, and ushered me out. “Good night love,” he said.

I turned round, and echoed “good night.” I walked back upstairs to the bedroom. Helen was sitting up in bed when I got there.

“What did he say?” she demanded.

“What could he say?” I shrugged.

“Did he say why he didn’t tell you?”

“Apparently his mother is a raging snob, and won’t be happy that he’s marrying me.”

“That’s a bit of a slap in the face,” she commented. “I take it he told you it didn’t matter.”

“Yes. He said he was the one marrying me, not his mother, and he doesn’t give a damn whether she thinks I’m the right sort of person or not.”

“Well that sounds promising at any rate.”

“He hasn’t changed, you know. He’s still Robin.”

“The honorable Robin, you mean.”

“All right, the honorable Robin.”

“But he still loves you, you’re still engaged, and you’re still going to marry him.”

“Yes.”

“Well that’s all right then,” she said.

“You’ve changed your tune,” I said somewhat bitchily, I’ll admit.

“No I haven’t,” she said indignantly.

“You sent me down to ask him about the photograph,” I protested.

“Yes, but I never said you should change the way you feel about him.”

“You are so infuriating,” I half shouted at her. She just laughed at me.

“You’ve known me all these years and you’ve only just realized that?”

I was so incensed I did something I hadn’t done since I was a child. I stalked over to my bed, picked up a pillow, and threw it at her. She laughed and dodged, then picked it up and threw it back. Next minute, she was springing out of bed with her pillow held over her head, and the pillow felt was on. After five minutes, we were laughing, out of breath, and friends again. We collapsed on my bed, and caught our breath.

“Oh, that feels better,” I said.

“Certainly does,” she agreed. She sighed. “Come on, let’s get to bed.” We picked ourselves up, and climbed into our respective beds. We got ourselves settled down, and turned out the lights.

“Goodnight,” I said.

“Goodnight,” she replied.

I lay down and tried to get comfortable, but just couldn’t relax. It didn’t seem to matter which way I lay, I just couldn’t get comfortable. I tossed and turned for what seemed like hours, but probably wasn’t any longer than thirty minutes or so.

“For heaven’s sake,” came Helen’s voice. “Can’t you sleep?”

“No, I can’t get comfortable.”

“I’d noticed,” she replied dryly. “Every time you move, that damn bed squeaks.”

“Sorry, I’ll try and keep still.”

“Please,” she said.

I lay there for another few minutes, then decided I wasn’t going to get to sleep just yet, and a cup of tea might help. I got quietly out of bed, put on my dressing gown, and padded down to the kitchen. I opened the door and found Robin sitting at the table, also wearing just a dressing gown.

“Hello my love,” he said. “Couldn’t you sleep either?” I shook my head. “Come and have a cup of tea.”

He got up and fetched another cup, and then poured from the pot that was on the table. I sat down at the table, and took the cup he offered me. We sat there drinking tea in companionable silence, with our arms and knees touching as we sat side by side. I put my cup down on the table, and Robin’s fingers brushed the back of my hand. He intertwined his fingers in mine, and picked our hands off the table. He gently kissed the back of my hand, then just held it gently.

“Are you all right?” he asked quietly.

“Yes, I think so,” I replied as quietly.

“Are you upset?”

“No, not really. I just wish you’d told me earlier, that’s all.”

“You think I haven’t been honest with you.” He phrased it as a statement, rather than a question.

“It’s not that. I think I’ve just realized how little I actually know about you.”

“Well, I don’t know much about you, really.”

“At least you’ve met my family, and know where I come from,” I retorted.

“But I haven’t met your parents,” he said.

I was silent. He was quite right; he’d met my cousins, who had acted in place of my parents, but he had never met my actual parents. If it came to that, I had no recollection of my actual parents, and I gathered from what Elsie and Frank had told me that my father had died during the war.

“My father’s dead,” I told him. “He died during the war. My mother evacuated me from Coventry to the farm in 1941, after the blitz. She hasn’t been seen since. I have no idea what happened to her. I was only three at the time, and I don’t remember her. I don’t even know what she looked like, as I’ve no photographs. I’ve always regarded Elsie and Frank as my parents.”

Robin put his arm around me, and hugged me. “It doesn’t matter to me who they were,” he assured me. “I love you be-

cause you're you, not because of who your parents were. I suppose that's why I didn't tell you about my family. Lots of people would want to marry me because of my family, whether they liked me for myself or not. I wanted to find a woman who would love me for myself, without knowing anything about me. And I found that woman," he said, smiling at me. "I found you, my own lovely Suzie, who took me for what I was, not who I was."

When he put it like that, I felt ashamed of myself. "I never thought of it like that," I admitted.

"You wouldn't have had any reason to," he said. "That particular stupidity is reserved for those of us with something which other people want, however shallow that might be."

"And what do they want from you?" I asked curiously.

"Remember I told you my brother wouldn't be getting married?" he said. I nodded. "Well, he won't get married because he's homosexual, and he probably wouldn't have children anyway. Rather than inflict a childless marriage on some poor girl, he decided just to stay single. That means at some time in the future I, or my children, will inherit his title. So that makes me a very eligible bachelor, and the target of every unmarried female in our circle. I sometimes think some women would marry for a title even if I were bald, or a hunch-back, or totally mad."

"You're going to inherit the title?" I repeated slowly. He nodded.

"I'll probably never use it," he said. "I've got no use for that sort of nonsense. I will be far happier as Mr. Carstaires, the Yorkshire vet, than I ever would be as Lord Merton."

"Well I certainly don't want to be Lady Merton," I told him. "I wouldn't know what to do."

"That's not a problem, my love," he said, giving me another hug. "Just be yourself."

"It's certainly a lot to take in all of a sudden."

"I imagine it is," he said, ruefully shaking his head. "I know I should have told you before, but I just couldn't bring myself to. I honestly didn't know how you'd react."

“So what’s the problem with your mother?” I asked him.

“Like I said, she’s a raging snob. If I tell her I’m going to marry Miss Suzie Linthwaite from Yorkshire she’ll have a fit. So the easiest thing to do for now is just not tell her. I’ve told George, my brother, and he approves. He’s technically head of the family now father’s dead, and he’s my legal guardian so we could get married tomorrow if you wanted to. My sisters will adore you as well.”

I wasn’t happy with the idea of not telling his mother, but if his brother knew and approved, that was good enough for me. I leant against him on the seat, and found myself relaxing.

“So, am I forgiven?” he asked, gathering me against him, and resting his head on the top of my head.

“That depends,” I said teasingly.

“Depends on what?” he said, picking up on the note in my voice.

“On whether there’s anything else you haven’t told me.”

“Oh you mean like the wife and seven kids I’ve got hidden away in Cornwall?”

“Yes, things like that,” I said.

“I don’t think there’s anything else you need to know,” he replied seriously.

“When can I meet the rest of your family?” I asked.

“Well, George comes up to London fairly frequently, and my sisters love to shop so they come up every chance they get. I’ll give them a ring and see if we can arrange a night out.”

“That would be great,” I said. Suddenly I yawned. “Sorry, I don’t know where that came from.”

“I do,” he said. “You’re tired, and you should be in bed.” He stood up, and held his hand out to help me up. “Come on, I’ll see you up to your room.”

He took my hand, and we walked slowly up the stairs. Just outside my room he put his arm around me and held me tight.

“I’m sorry you were upset,” he said sincerely. “I genuinely never meant to hurt you—I never want to do anything to hurt you—but I didn’t know what else to do.”

I returned his hug. “Not to worry love. It just came as a bit of a shock, that’s all.” He dropped a kiss on the top of my head.

“Now, go and get some sleep,” he ordered.

“Yes sir,” I replied. He opened the door, and I went inside. He blew me a kiss and closed the door behind me. I got into bed and pulled the covers up.

“Are you all sorted out now?” came Helen’s voice from the other bed.

“Yes, it’s all sorted out,” I confirmed.

“Good. Can we get some sleep now?”

I laughed. “Yes of course, silly.” There came a grumbling noise from Helen’s direction, although I couldn’t make out any words. I climbed into bed, made myself comfortable, and drifted off to sleep.

* * * * *

Life continued pretty much as usual for the next few weeks. Robin arranged for his brother and sisters to come to London one weekend, and we all went out for an evening. I had expected to find George rather stuffy, but despite his name he was great fun. George was the eldest child as well as the eldest son, and was nearly ten years older than Robin. Next in age was Clarissa, then came Jessica. Robin was next, and his youngest sister was Henrietta. Henrietta was closest in age to Robin, being just eighteen months younger. Despite the range of ages they were a close-knit family, and they all made me feel welcome. We had a great weekend, spending most of Sunday at London Zoo throwing bread to the ducks on the lake, and attending the chimps’ tea party. We also talked about Robin’s decision to keep the news of our engagement from his mother. It was George who raised the issue. Robin had obviously confided in his brother, and George told me he heartily endorsed his brother’s approach to the matter.

“No sense in upsetting the old girl,” he told me bluntly. “If you give her six years to worry about it, she’ll make Robin’s life

a misery. She can be damned unpleasant when she puts her mind to it, and why put up with that for six years?"

I laughed, and agreed that it would be silly to have to be miserable for no reason.

"Actually," George said later, "I fully approve of Robin's desire to work for a living. We're as poor as church mice, what with the war and death duties and everything, so even if he did inherit there'd be no financial gain. Much better he finds a way to make his living, and then he can decide what do to with the old pile down in Kent when it's his problem. Place is falling apart anyway. It really is an appalling old dump, you know. Costs an arm and a leg to run but Mother won't leave it."

I really liked George. He was devastatingly honest about himself and his family, and admitted to me that he'd found out he was homosexual on his sixteenth birthday when his father had provided him with an instructor in much the same way as he had for Robin.

"Poor girl tried for hours to get me interested," he said, shaking his head. "She was nearly in tears at one point. That's when I realized that I just wasn't interested in women. We made a pact not to tell the old boy, and we parted friends."

Robin's sisters were what I could only describe as 'girly' girls. They were very feminine, and would quite happily spend all day shopping. Don't get me wrong, I love a shopping trip as much as the next woman, but they really took it to extremes. George kept an eye on their spending, but gloomily foretold that he would receive yet another letter from the bank manager complaining about the size of the overdraft following their weekend in London. Their excuse was that as Clarissa was getting married in the summer they needed to make sure they had enough clothes for her trousseau, and for them to wear on 'the day'. I therefore spent most of my time with George and Robin, and we had a wonderful time. The two of them kept me laughing for what seemed like most of the day. They were like a well-

rehearsed comedy act, bouncing one liners off each other and obviously enjoying each other's company.

Once the weekend was over things settled back down into a routine. We still didn't see much of each other in the evenings with all the studying we had to do, but we made sure that weekends were ours, and spent them pretty much together. Helen had finally left to join up, and we had said goodbye to her on the Sunday evening as she would be catching the train from Paddington half way through Monday morning, when we'd be at college.

One effect of Helen's leaving was that we now spent the nights in my room. We pushed the two single beds together and rearranged the furniture, so we had in effect a double bed. This simple change allowed us to experiment further, and Robin laughingly told me I was ready for Lesson 2, which meant I learnt about new ways of pleasing him. Experimenting in this way pleased us both. I got pleasure out of pleasuring Robin, and he obviously enjoyed being pleased in this way. I found I enjoyed oral sex, both giving and receiving, and as we got to know each other even better we both grew in confidence and our love making just got better and better.

Life at college was also exciting. The amount of work was daunting, but I found myself coping with it and enjoying the challenge of learning all the new information. People had found out that Robin and I were a couple, but we suffered relatively little hazing from our fellow students. Part of the reason for this was that the workload left little time for such things, and the other reason was that other couples were forming in the group. Whatever the reason we were more open about our relationship, and hardly anyone took any notice.

We were also excited about seeing practice. Among our fellow students nearly all of them had managed to find somewhere to work during the holidays, mostly local to where they lived. One lad, being more adventurous than the rest, was actually flying out to the Orkney Islands where he was hoping to see practice with the island vet. The fact that Robin and I had both man-

aged to not only get to see practice with my local vet, but had been promised a job at the end of our degrees, excited varying degrees of admiration or jealousy amongst our fellow students. The fact that we were so fortunately situated gave us more stability, as the worry about where to go when we qualified was fortunately missing.

We were really looking forward to going to Yorkshire over the summer holidays. We hadn't been up there since the weekend we had gone to announce our engagement, and I was looking forward to seeing everyone very much. Robin was also pleased to be spending time with me, but wasn't looking forward too much to the enforced celibacy he would be expected to endure. I had told him that we could probably find time to be with each other but he said, quite rightly, that it wouldn't be the same as falling asleep with me, and waking up with me. Robin had suggested that he should give up his room and move in with me altogether, but I wasn't ready for quite such a scandalous move. Robin had said that no-one in the house would care one way or another, but I pointed out that Helen would be expecting to have a bed to stay in when she came home on leave, and to expect her to find somewhere else at short notice wouldn't be fair. Elsie had said she would like to come and visit, and she would expect to use the spare bed in my room. Robin had reluctantly agreed, but it was only when I pointed out that we needed to study and it would be impossible to concentrate if we were together, that he really saw the importance of keeping separate rooms. I was relieved, as I could hear Elsie's comments on our living arrangements if she came down and found we'd moved in together.

Robin was going to have to go home for about a week during the summer holidays as it was his sister's wedding. Clarissa had invited me, but none of us could think of a good way of introducing me to his mother. Robin apparently hadn't been in the habit of taking girls home on a casual friends basis, and for him to suddenly turn up with one would raise his mother's suspicions. In the end it was decided it would be easier all round

if Robin went on his own. However, I had bought Clarissa and her future husband a small present, which Robin would present to them.

I only minded a little about not going with him. Meeting with George and the others had made me feel happier about not telling Robin's mother. Robin's assessment of Lady Merton as an appalling snob had been reinforced by the rest of his family, and I was relieved not to have to face her just yet. I think Robin was actually hoping we could remain engaged and get married without having to tell her anything at all, but I knew that would never happen. We would eventually have to meet her, and to be honest I was dreading it. Odd remarks made by Lady Merton and repeated by George and the others had shown me what I was dealing with. The thought of the future Lady Merton being a 'nobody' with no background and no breeding to speak of would not sit well with her.

I think it was at this time that I first began to wonder about who I really was. I decided to talk it over with Elsie when we went up for the summer. It was just an idle thought, and it soon slipped to the back of my mind under the pressure of revising for the end of year exams. These exams meant that Robin and I spent even less time together than usual, as we were studying even at weekends. However we managed to make sure we spent at least one day (and night) together each week. I was still over the moon about Robin, and I was certain he still felt the same way about me. We didn't have the rows that seemed the lot of every other couple we knew. We didn't always agree with each other, but we seemed to be able to talk things out without arguing. We never let the day end on a bad note, and never took an argument to bed with us. All in all, life was extremely good.

I had arranged with Elsie that we would travel up on the first Saturday of the holidays, and she had replied that Mo would meet us at Halifax station. Mo had said that he would start teaching me to drive over the holidays. Robin had volunteered his services as an instructor, but Mo had told him that nothing soured

a relationship quite as quickly as teaching someone to drive. Robin had given in fairly gracefully and was now teasing me about it, saying he would be the man with the flag who walked in front of the car, warning everyone to keep out of the way. My response to this was to throw a pillow at him, which resulted in an impromptu pillow fight and wresting-cum-tickling match, which soon changed into another prolonged period of love making. I certainly had no complaints in that direction. Robin was an ardent and attentive lover, always making sure I enjoyed our time together as much as, if not more than, he did. Having heard the usual horror stories about wedding nights and the old advice to 'lie back and think of England', I had been half convinced I wouldn't enjoy sex even if Robin did ever suggest it. I was delighted to find that it was a past-time I thoroughly enjoyed. I had no qualms about pre-marital sex as we were both sensible about taking precautions, even though Robin hated 'paddling in his wellies' as he put it when he had to wear a condom. Fortunately these occasions were few and far between. I went back to the clinic regularly to have things checked over, to make sure things were still working, and to get more of the cream. I had to remember on these occasions that I was supposedly married, and to answer to the name of Mrs. Linthwaite.

Finally the day of our last exam came, and we staggered out of the hall at lunchtime feeling weak with relief. All the class promptly decided to have a large party that seemed to involve one of the longest pub crawls ever. Robin and I left the others to it after a couple of hours or so, and went back to the house to pack. Needless to say the packing was slightly delayed, but at last we were ready to set off to Halifax the next morning. We were just settling down for the night when there was a banging on the door. Robin got out of bed and opened it.

"What's up?" he asked the slightly disheveled Tom, who was standing outside.

"You're wanted on the phone," replied Tom, panting a bit and obviously out of breath. The landlord had had a pay phone in-

stalled in the downstairs hall a few months previously, which had meant we no longer had to go out in all weathers to make a call.

“Who, me?” asked Robin.

“Yes, you,” replied Tom, still out of breath.

“What for?”

“How the hell should I know?” replied Tom. “I just answered the damn thing.”

Robin turned round to me. “I’ll be right back love,” he said, then went out, shutting the door behind him. I could hear him talking to Tom as they went back down the stairs, but couldn’t make out what they were saying.

Robin had moved his kettle and things up to my room as he spent most of the weekend there, so I got out of bed and put it on. I got myself a cup of tea ready, and sat on the bed drinking it. I couldn’t figure out what on earth would get Robin out of bed at this time of night, unless it was a family emergency.

About half an hour after he went downstairs, I heard Robin’s footsteps on the stairs. He was walking very slowly, quite unlike his usual exuberant style of walking. He came in and I was shocked at the look on his face. He looked dreadful; ashen-faced, with a lost look in his eyes, and an expression of dazed disbelief.

“Whatever’s the matter love?” I cried out. I got up from the bed and ran to him, putting my arms around him and holding him tight.

“I’ve just had the most dreadful row on the phone with my mother,” he replied.

“You look awful,” I said, slightly more relieved. “What was the row about?” I led him over to the bed, and sat him on it. I left him while I boiled the kettle and made him a coffee. Taking it to him, I sat beside him on the bed and put my arm across his back. He drank a bit of the coffee, and seemed to recover slightly.

“What was it about?” I repeated. He moved his coffee to his other hand, and put his arm around me.

“It was about you, love,” he replied softly.

“About me? What do you mean? She doesn’t even know I exist, does she?”

“She does now,” he said grimly. “Jessica went to a friend’s party, and got a little drunk. Her friend has fancied me for years, but I’ve never been interested. She’s pretty enough but shallow, and I was always sure she wanted me for my title ... or rather, George’s title. She started in on Jess, asking her why I wouldn’t look at her twice. She’d been needling Jess all night, apparently, and Jess finally lost her temper with her and told her she was wasting her time because I was engaged to be married already.”

I thought I could where this was going. I wasn’t wrong. Robin drank some more of his coffee, and continued.

“This friend—who Jess isn’t speaking to any more, by the way—immediately made it her business to go to my mother and ask who I was engaged to marry. My mother naturally denied all knowledge of any engagement, whereupon this girl told her that Jess knew all about it. My mother called Jess in and browbeat her into confessing that she knew about our engagement. My mother hit the roof. Apparently she went completely hysterical, and George had to slap her face to get her to calm down. She then started in on George, who also admitted he knew about us, and told her that as my legal guardian he’d given me permission to marry. Well, that was the final straw, and she stormed out of the room and immediately called me here.” Robin closed his eyes, and shuddered.

“It was dreadful. She’s called me all the filthy names under the sun, and told me never to go home again. She’s talking about getting you thrown out of university, and making sure you won’t be admitted anywhere else. She’s even talking about taking action against Elsie and Frank, although what on earth she thinks she can do is beyond me. And then she started on you.” He took a deep breath, and then spoke through his teeth.

“I’m not even going to repeat what she said about you. I tell you, Suzie, when I think of the hateful, vile things she said, I wanted to kill her. I swear to God, if she’d been in the same room as me

when she was saying them, I would have killed her. I would never have believed my mother would know such language, let alone use it. I tried to shut her up, but she just kept on talking. I finally shouted her down, but she won't listen to reason." He stopped, on the verge of tears. I was devastated by what he was saying, and by his obvious upset. I couldn't think of anything else to do, so just sat there and held him tight. After a few minutes, during which he gathered himself together, he continued.

"After she'd finished, she demanded that I give you up. I refused, point blank, said I would never, could never, give you up, that you were the girl I loved, and the girl I was going to marry, and that nothing she could say would ever change my mind about that. So she told me that I was no longer welcome at home, I wasn't to go to Clarissa's wedding, I wasn't to have any contact with the rest of the family. She never wants to see me again, and she never wants to meet you, or even hear your name in the house." He finished, and drew a shuddering breath. He turned to me, and took me in his arms, and held me so tightly I could barely breathe. He kissed the top of my head, and whispered "But I've still got you, my gorgeous, wonderful Suzie. And I don't care what she says, I'm never going to let you go, I'm never going to even think about letting you go. You're my whole world, and as long as I've got you, I don't need anything else."

Chapter 26

Robin remained upset for several hours after the phone call with his mother. He did go back downstairs and ring his brother, using George's business line, and had a long conversation with him. George told him not to worry, he was still welcome as far as he was concerned and his mother couldn't bar him from the family home. Apparently she lived in a smaller house in the grounds but treated the main house as if it was still her house, and her home. George, whom I didn't think had sufficient strength of character, surprised me by telling Robin that he would tell his mother to move back into the cottage, and not to interfere with the running of his house. I must have looked surprised when Robin repeated this part of the conversation to me, as he told me George had more guts than I imagined and was quite capable of doing what he said.

I suppose if I was noble and self-sacrificing I would have immediately renounced Robin and let him go back to his family. However, it never even crossed my mind that I should do that. Call me selfish, call me what you like, but I loved Robin and I wasn't going to give him up for anyone.

We spent the rest of the night lying in each other's arms, giving and receiving comfort. Although I was upset by what Robin had told me because I hadn't been directly involved, nor been on the receiving end of the call, it hadn't affected me as deeply. Robin finally drifted off to sleep in the small hours of the night,

but I stayed awake all night, thinking over what had happened, and wondering how it would affect us in the long term. It never for a moment entered my head that we would split up over this, but it would undoubtedly have an effect. I also started to consider, more than I had ever done before, exactly who I was. I had decided to talk to Elsie about this anyway, but that had been a vague idea of something to do over the holidays. Now it became a firm resolution. I would make a determined effort to find out once and for all who I was, and where I came from. It probably wouldn't make any difference in the long run, but I would feel better if I knew.

Robin woke up with the alarm, and we made our preparations to travel up to Halifax. We were rather subdued, but by the time we'd got on the train for Leeds the sun was well up, it was a beautiful day, and we had the prospect of eight weeks together working with Huw Edwards. These conspired to lift our spirits, and by the time we arrived in Leeds we were both feeling much better. Robin had cheered up a lot, and was making me laugh as we got off the train. He explained his improved spirits by saying he hardly ever went home anyway, as he couldn't stand the place since his father died and his mother had taken over, so her ban really wouldn't make much difference. He was upset that he wouldn't be at Clarissa's wedding, but George had said that even if he went on his own his mother would probably make a scene, and neither of them wanted to spoil Clarissa's special day. George had promised to explain things to Clarissa, and to make sure she understood that Robin would be there if he could. Robin had said he would post our gift, and George also promised to make sure she got it.

I told Robin that I was now determined to find out who I was. He was surprised but supportive, although he told me it would make no difference to how he felt about me. I told him that I was glad to hear that, but that I wasn't really doing it for him, I was doing it for me. He said that he would give any help he could, and we let the subject close.

Mo was waiting for us at Halifax as promised. All three of us chatted away gaily as he drove us to the farm, with Robin telling Mo about being the flag man while I was learning to drive. Mo retaliated by giving us several hilarious accounts of things he had done while learning to drive, and the trip passed very quickly.

Elsie was at the farm to greet us but Frank was, as usual, busy about the place. She exclaimed at the amount of books we had each brought with us, saying we were obviously working too hard. She gave Robin a searching look as she greeted him with a kiss on the cheek, and I could see that she had decided to have a chat with him later on. I was sure that she would have the whole story out of him before too long, with the bare facts passed on to Mo and Frank. I had never been successful in hiding anything from Elsie when I was a child, and I felt sure she would have the same effect on Robin before too long.

We were shown up to our rooms, which were the same as the last time we had come up. Elsie gave me a sideways look which spoke volumes, and when Robin asked, in his most innocent voice, whether he could have a bedroom nearer to me as it would make it easier to study together, she replied "Certainly not! And don't look at me like that, young man, I know exactly what you've got in mind." Robin had the grace to blush, and meekly followed her down the corridor to his room.

I got freshened up and went downstairs to the kitchen. For once, Elsie was on her own. When I asked where the others were, she said that Mo had taken Robin out to see the dogs. She looked closely at my face, and gestured towards the kitchen table. She produced two cups of tea, and sat opposite me.

"Now then lass, out wi' it," she said. "What's up between thee and Robin."

Startled, I looked at her. "Nothing whatever? Why do you think that anything's wrong?"

"Well, there might be nowt wrong between the two of you, but summat's upset the pair of you."

I took a sip of my tea, and started explaining about the phone call the night before. Elsie sat and nodded as I told her the whole story, including the bit about George's support. She sat in silence as the whole sorry tale poured out, occasionally nodding her head or pursing her lips. When I had finished, she looked at me for a long moment.

"And how do you feel about all that?" she asked finally.

"I don't feel as badly as Robin," I said. "After all, I've never met the woman, and I hope I never have to. But Robin was really upset. I gather it's the first time he's rowed, I mean really rowed, with his mother. They've argued on and off for years from what he's told me, but this time it's serious and it's gone deeper than before. He was really shocked by what she said to him last night and I think it's hit him hard."

Elsie nodded once again. "Aye, it often happens like that," she said. "If, as you say, she's never gone for him like this before, it will take him hard. I take it he never mentioned giving you up?"

"Of course not!" I exclaimed. "Why would he?"

"Why would he indeed," she repeated. "I'm glad to hear he's not repented of getting engaged to you. And what about you ... have you thought of giving him up, so he can please his mother?"

I looked at her. "I suppose if I were to go all noble and self-sacrificing I might do something daft like that," I told her, "but I'm not that noble. I love Robin, and he loves me, and we belong together, come hell or high water."

She smiled. "I'm glad to hear it," she replied. "I didn't bring you up to be a sacrifice to anyone, least of all a harridan like that. You be proud of what you are, and stand up for yourself." And that brought me neatly to the question I wanted to ask her.

"One thing that I have wanted to know," I began, "is who am I?"

Elsie frowned. "What do you mean, who are you? You're Suzie Linthwaite."

“Yes, but I’m not really, am I? I’m Suzie Hennessy, as I found out when I started school. But who is Suzie Hennessy? I don’t remember my father, I can hardly remember my mother, who hasn’t been in touch for over sixteen years. So who am I?”

Elsie regarded me steadily. “That’s a very fair question,” she replied eventually. “It looks like you’ll need to know some things that you’ve never been told. But,” she said, getting up and lifting a hand to stop my next question, “that’ll have to wait until later, when I’ve had chance to find some old papers. Happen it’ll be tonight, if you can stay awake that long, but more likely it’ll be tomorrow. When are you due to see Huw Edwards?”

“He said Monday, after lunch. He’s got rounds first thing, and he said there was no point in us going there until he’d finished those.”

“Right then, I’ll find the papers tomorrow, and we can talk about things on Monday morning. Do you want Robin to know?”

I considered it. “I think he has a right to know, don’t you?”

“That’s my girl,” she smiled at me. “Don’t keep secrets from him, it’ll only cause problems in the end.” She picked up the tea cups, and took them over to the sink. I started helping her with the vegetables for tea.

“Do you remember Alex at all?” she suddenly asked me.

“Not really. Why do you ask?”

“I’m not sure,” she said slowly. “I know we were told he was almost certainly dead, but I’ve had this feeling lately as if he’s going to come back.” She shrugged. “Just pass it off as the wishful thinking of an old woman,” she said.

“Old? You’re not old,” I said indignantly.

She laughed, “No, I suppose not.”

“So why this sudden feeling about Alex?” I asked her.

I hadn’t thought of my brother in years, and was having difficulty in remembering his name, let alone his face. I knew Elsie had an old photograph of him in uniform in the best parlor, and another one on the mantel piece in her bedroom, but it was difficult to make out the features under the glass. I did get the

feeling he looked absolutely nothing like me, but the age difference between us and the poor quality of the photograph made it difficult to tell.

“Like I said, I don’t know. I get these feelings every so often, and I’ve learnt over the years to pay attention to them—but not too much! I’m not expecting him to walk through the door or anything like that, but I do feel that he’s alive somewhere. Like I said, probably just wishful thinking.”

I looked at her sideways. Elsie had always been prone to these ‘feelings’ of hers and she was right, something did usually happen after she had them. However, they were not always accurate. On one occasion she had been convinced that Frank had hurt himself out on the farm, and had insisted I run up to the top field to find out whether he was all right. I had run up there and found him as right as rain, carrying a bale of straw for the animals. My being there had distracted him though, and he stabbed himself in the foot with a pitchfork while tossing the straw around in the shelter. So Elsie’s feeling had been right, but as Frank said, if she’d not sent me up to see what the matter was, there wouldn’t have been anything the matter. Frank didn’t believe in her ‘feelings’, and was as likely to dismiss them out of hand as he was to take any notice of them.

Robin and Mo came in just then, chatting away about the dogs, and the sheep dog trials Mo was looking forward to over the summer. Robin had expressed an interest in going with him some time, and Mo was enthusiastic over the idea. He even suggested that Robin should enter with one of the older dogs, who would know what to do even if Robin didn’t. I think the idea of the dog taking charge if he got into trouble tickled Robin and he agreed, saying with a laugh that it would be a good idea if one member of the team actually knew what was going on.

I put the kettle on again and made some more tea, and we sat round the kitchen table talking while Elsie carried on getting

things ready for the evening meal. She had made a pie, and she was peeling potatoes and carrots to go with it. She plonked a big bag of peas down on the table along with a colander, and told us that we might as well make ourselves useful shelling them while we were having a crack.

I was asking Mo about driving lessons, and Robin was busy being witty at my expense, when a car pulled up in the yard outside. Elsie looked up and said "I wonder who that is?" and went to the door. To our surprise, it was Huw Edwards. He came in and sat down, and I poured him a cup of tea.

"Now then, glad to see you two up here bright and early," he said, blowing on his tea. "The reason I've come up now instead of waiting to see you on Monday is that there's been a bit of a change of plan. Nothing to worry about," he added hastily, as he saw our expressions. "Nothing that's going to stop you seeing practice, so don't worry about that. No, it's just that I've been asked to go and see to his Lordship's horses on Monday, and I was wondering if you'd like to come with me. If you want to come, I'll call in and pick you up while I'm on my rounds, and then we can go straight over to Laughton Hall."

I saw Robin prick up his ears at the mention of Laughton Hall. "Is that Lord Mettlesham's place?" he asked casually.

"Yes, why, do you know him?" asked Huw.

"I think so," replied Robin. "I went to school with his eldest son, Peter."

"Aye, that'll be him," said Huw. "You'll want to come then?" We both nodded, and he said "Right, I'm not sure what time I'll be round, it depends on who says their call is the most urgent as to which way round I'll be running, but I'll pick you up here during the morning. We'll pop over there, sort out the horses and then I'll drop you back here afterwards. Shouldn't be later than about three o'clock." He put down his tea, and left.

"Well then," said Elsie after he'd left. "Talk about getting in with the locals. Which school was it you were at?" she asked Robin casually.

“Eton,” he replied easily. “Dreadful place it was too. I’m surprised I managed to get the exams I needed to be a vet, to be honest.”

Mo laughed. “I know what you mean,” he said. “Harrow wasn’t much better, I hated every minute I was there.”

Elsie turned round to face him. “I never knew you went to Harrow,” she said. “I thought you went to the local grammar school.”

He grinned. “I did—after I’d been to Harrow and done so badly they refused to have me back. Like I said, I hated the place, and couldn’t think of a better way of getting out of it. Saved my parents a fortune when they kicked me out. After I came home I did rather better.”

“I wish I’d tried the same thing,” Robin said admiringly. “Mind you, there’s no guaranteeing I’d have done any better at our local school. And then I’d never have met my Suzie, so maybe there was a reason to go there after all.”

There didn’t seem to be much in the way of an answer to that, so the conversation turned to more general matters. I was starting to feel very sleepy, not having slept the night before and after a while I gave up on the conversation, and just sat there listening to what was being said around me.

I roused when Frank came in and said hello to him, then helped Elsie dish up the meal. It was only then that I noticed that the children weren’t around. When I asked where they were, Elsie said that they’d been invited to a birthday party and would be staying overnight with friends from school.

The meal just about wiped out my reserves, and I did doze off in my chair after the meal. Elsie saw me nodding off, and immediately ordered me up to bed. I was too tired to argue, and got up to go. Robin immediately came over and said he would take me upstairs. Elsie didn’t raise so much as an eyebrow at this, so Robin put his arm round my waist and led me away.

I was so tired when I got up there I would have fallen asleep on the bed in my clothes. Robin gently helped me to undress,

then put my nightie on for me, turned down the bed clothes and gently tucked me in. He dropped a light kiss on my forehead, and wished me a good night. I never even heard him leave.

* * * * *

Sunday dawned bright and clear, with a lovely Yorkshire blue sky, and the smell of summer on the breeze. After a good night's sleep I felt much better. Elsie had kept her word, and found a small pile of papers for me to look through. Robin was out with Frank, and Mo had gone off to a neighboring farm to practice for his up coming sheep dog trial. Consequently we were on our own in the house.

"You might find some surprises in there," Elsie warned me as I started to look through the papers.

"Very true," I commented. "On the other hand, I've had quite a few surprises recently and I've coped with them, so why shouldn't I cope with what's in here?"

"Well, don't say I didn't warn you," she said. She left me to it, and started to make some bread.

The first document I looked at was a letter written in response to one by Frank, asking about our father's whereabouts. It was very non-committal, and just told him to write to him care of, and it would be forwarded.

The second letter was the notification of father's death, together with the information that father had left instructions about what to do after his death together with a will. I looked at the next document, and found the actual will. I picked it up and read it.

"To Whom it May Concern

This is the last Will and Testament of Arthur Henry Hennessy, last of 47 Rochdale Road, Coventry. I declare that I am of sound mind. This will invalidates any previous wills made by myself.

Be it known that I leave one child, Alex Arthur Hennessy, by my wife Rosie.

However, I acknowledge that I have taken responsibility for a second child, Suzanne Henrietta Molyneux, a child not of my body. I hereby give direction that this child is to be raised as if she were my own daughter, and that of my wife (the aforementioned Rosie Hennessy), having equal rights under the law to my estate as my son, the aforementioned Alex Arthur.

I therefore make the following disposition of all my worldly goods:"

I sat and read this document two or three times before I really took in what it was saying. Arthur Hennessy was not my father! That was what I read. He had 'taken responsibility' for me. And my name was neither Hennessy nor Linthwaite, it was Molyneux. To say I was stunned would be putting it mildly.

"Elsie," I croaked out.

"Yes love," she replied calmly.

"You know what's in here?"

"Yes of course I do."

"He's not my father."

"No love, he isn't."

"So who is?"

"We don't know. The only person who might know is your mother, and we haven't heard from her since she rang and asked us to look after you."

"How can I find out? Can I find out?"

"I don't know the answer to that, love. To get an answer, you'd have to first find your mother. And as we haven't seen hair nor hide of her, and neither have her neighbors, where to start looking would be beyond me."

I sat quietly for a few minutes, trying to absorb this. Then, as I often did with a tricky or difficult situation, I deliberately put it on one side to deal with later. I continued to look through the small pile of documents.

Next there were replies to letters Elsie had obviously written, trying to find mother's whereabouts. Her next door neighbor, Mrs. Hepton, had written back to Elsie saying that the house

had been locked up, and then the row of houses had suffered two direct hits by bombs and they had all been flattened. What had happened to my mother, she didn't know. The only person she could think of who might have known was the vicar in the local church, where Rose had attended regularly.

Next I found a letter from the vicar, telling Elsie that yes, he had known Rosie Hennessy well, and was aware that she had left the district. He told Elsie that he was almost certain she had moved down to Devon, just outside of Exeter, but exactly where he wasn't sure.

Elsie had written next to the Council offices in Exeter, hoping that they would have more information, possibly from the electoral register. However without being able to give any more information than the vicar had passed on to her, they were unable to help.

That was the last of the letters. One thing which I had hoped to find, but had been unable to, was my birth certificate.

"Elsie, did mum give you my birth certificate when she sent us up here?" I asked.

"No love, she didn't send it. I've no idea why. She didn't send Alex's either, and you've no idea how much trouble that caused when he wanted to join up. Still, in the end it was just as well he'd lost it, as he was two years too young when he left. Frank had to take him to Leeds and swear he was eighteen."

"Frank lied?" I was astonished. In all the years I had known him, I had never heard Frank even tell a lie.

"Well, we reckoned that if we had told him he couldn't go, Alex would have just run away, and we'd never have heard from him again. Frank reckoned it was the lesser of two evils to lie to the recruiting office and let the lad join up early."

No birth certificate. "Can I get a copy of my birth certificate?" I asked Elsie.

"Yes of course you can pet," she replied. "Lots of people lost documents during the war, so the registry offices are used to providing copies. All you do is go to the local registry office, give

them your name and date of birth, and they'll give you a copy. Well, I say give, you have to pay for it."

"So if I went down to Coventry, they'd let me have a copy."

"I should think so, yes."

I sat and thought for a bit. "I wonder if Robin fancies a day out in Coventry," I mused.

"What would be better for you would be to go to Somerset House," Elsie told me. "They hold copies of everyone's birth certificate, and with you being down in London it'll be easy enough for you to go there and get it."

"That's a good idea," I agreed. "I'm sure Robin will be able to help."

"I'm sure he will." Elsie kneaded the bread in silence for a minute. Then she said, "You're a lucky girl, Suzie. I don't know when I've seen a man more in love than that boy is with you."

I looked up at her, a bit startled.

"I spoke to him last night after you'd gone to bed," she continued. "He told me all about the row with his mother, and what she said about you. I'd like to give her a piece of my mind, I would, after what he told me. Still, I'm not likely to get the chance. But the one thing that came out from what he told me was that there was no way he was going to throw you over just to please his mother. To tell the truth, I was right taken by surprise at what he said. And no," she said with a smile, "I'm not going to tell you. But take it from me, you've got a good one there. You should hang on to him, Suzie. You'll never get another one like him."

I smiled. "I know," I said. "I'm very lucky. I think he's wonderful."

"And how are things between you physically?" she asked. I knew I was blushing bright red. I didn't know how to answer.

"I'm not asking to be nasty, or nosy, you should know that," said Elsie seriously. "But the physical side of a relationship is important, particularly at the start, and if you don't enjoy it or he doesn't make you feel wanted, it can lead to problems later on."

“I’ve got no complaints,” I managed to say, still blushing bright red.

“Yes, but do you enjoy it, or do you just put up with it?”

“I love it,” I confessed. “I have done right from the start.”

“Then that’s all I need to know,” she said briskly. “And now, if you’ve finished looking through those old things, I need the table.”

I cleared away the letters and other documents, and put them in the dresser drawer. Elsie put the bread in the tins and put them to rise by the fire, and then she put a big pile of peas to be shelled in front of me. She sat down with a pile of potatoes. Whilst I shelled and she peeled, we talked about things. We talked about Robin, and extremely frankly about sex. My face was bright red the whole time at first, but as we went on, I found it very comforting to talk to another woman about the subject. Helen and I had discussed things, naturally, but Elsie was older and more experienced, and had a different view of a lot of things. We talked about whether I wanted children, and how I would fit them in around a career. We talked about everything under the sun. I was finding that as I got older, Elsie was changing from being a mother figure to being a friend as well.

Robin and Frank came in just before lunch. I went over to the dresser and fetched the letters and things, and showed them all to Robin. He was as intrigued as I was.

“Molyneux, eh?” he said ruminatively. “I used to know a family called that.”

“Is that from Eton again?” Elsie asked dryly.

“No, I seem to remember that my parents used to visit them. They lived down south somewhere, Wiltshire I think it was. I remember being told that something had happened to the family, some tragedy, but I don’t know exactly what.”

“Probably nothing to do with Suzie then,” Elsie said dismissively. “She was born in, or near, Coventry, as far as we know.”

“You’re probably right,” agreed Robin. “Now, what’s for lunch?”

Chapter 27

The summer passed, in the main, uneventfully. We went out everyday with Huw, and saw plenty of practice. We had all sorts to deal with—from hamsters up to farm horses. There were still a few of these left around, even though mechanization had taken nearly all them all out of the fields. The visit to Laughton Hall had been a success. Lord Mettlesham had been in the stable yard when we arrived, and had recognized Robin as soon as he got out of the car. Once Robin had explained what he was doing, Lord Mettlesham had given his complete approval. Robin told him that he was hoping to move up and join Huw's practice, and he was tickled pink. After that, the visit was bound to be a success.

Life settled down to a peaceful routine. We saw practice, we went to sheep dog trials with Mo, helped out around the farm, I helped Elsie in the house, and even went back to collecting the eggs from the barn. I loved seeing practice, and the fact that I knew most of the farmers we visited certainly helped. I also enjoyed working in the clinic with the small animals. Robin seemed to enjoy farm and horse work best, although he could charm the most inveterate dragon in the surgery. He wasn't bad with the pets, either.

We had decided to go to Somerset House when we got back after the holidays. Although we didn't know what the new timetable would be, we were confident that we should be able to fit a trip in one day during the week. In the meantime, life was good,

it was summer in Yorkshire, and we just enjoyed ourselves. Huw wasn't a hard task master, and we managed to get several afternoons off. Although some of these were spent with Mo teaching me to drive, we did manage to get some time alone. I'm sure Elsie was aware of what was going on, but as long as we didn't do anything in the house, or on the farm, she was happy enough to let us get on with it.

That's not to say that we always obeyed that prohibition. On one occasion Robin and I were left alone in the house overnight, unavoidably and not by design. Elsie and Mo were taking the children to stay with their grandparents in Scarborough, and had expected to be back the same afternoon. However, Mo's car got a flat tire, and a replacement couldn't be found until the next day so they had to spend the night in Scarborough. Frank was also away, most unusually for him, helping a neighbor with a difficult delivery. Huw was unavailable having been called away to another farm, so Frank volunteered to give a hand. He was a very experienced stockman, and was regarded as being almost as good a vet himself.

So we had the house to ourselves, and made the most of the opportunity. To be made love to in my own bed, at home, was an exquisite moment. We took some precautions to avoid making it obvious what we had been up to and we actually got away with it, although Elsie was giving us some suspicious looks when she got back. Frank never said anything about the fact we'd been alone in the house overnight, although generally he was a stickler for observing the proprieties. I was never sure whether Frank guessed that we were already sleeping together; he never gave any sign that he knew, but then Frank had always been good at not letting on.

Robin phoned George several times during the summer, and also spoke to Clarissa and Jessica. Jessica had been so upset by her part in the row between Robin and his mother that she had refused to speak to Robin at first, but after some persuasion from George she spoke to him. Robin forgave her and told her

that it wasn't really her fault, and his mother would have found out eventually. Henrietta also spoke to Robin, and gave him the lowdown on his mother's moods, as she was still living with her in the cottage. George told Robin that his mother was still violently opposed to our marriage, and wouldn't even let his name be mentioned in her presence. Robin reacted better to this than I had expected, merely shrugging his shoulders and saying that if she felt that way, she'd best be left to get on with it. After that he didn't mention the matter at all.

All good things must come to an end, as the saying goes, and we had to prepare to return to London. We were looking forward to getting back to our own routine, and to being able to share a bedroom again, but we were also sad to be leaving Yorkshire and the family. We would be back at Christmas seeing practice again, and as this was a relatively short term it wouldn't be too long to wait.

Elsie and Mo took us down to the station. Frank was dealing with a problem on the farm and couldn't come, but he gave us both a hug before we left and said he was looking forward to seeing us again. He told Robin to make sure he looked after me, and told me to make sure I didn't get distracted from studying.

We left Halifax for Leeds, and then Leeds for London. We arrived back late in the afternoon. We had no food in the house, so we decided to have fish and chips for tea. We had the next day, Sunday, to get everything ready for college, and we could get some food in from the local shop which was open for a couple of hours on Sunday morning. We ate our fish and chips in the kitchen, and then made for our rooms upstairs. We had just dumped our cases in the hall way when we arrived so we picked up our stuff and wandered, or maybe staggered, upstairs with them. I had further to go with my bags, so Robin dropped his off outside his door, and then gave me a hand to carry mine up the rest of the stairs to the attic.

When we arrived in the bedroom, Robin took the cases off me and put them down. He put his arms around me, and started

kissing me passionately. As I responded, he whispered in my ear “Oh, I’ve been waiting for this.” He started to unbutton my coat, and took it off and dropped it on the floor. He was just starting to undo my blouse, when we were interrupted.

“Before you two love birds starting ripping each other’s clothes off, you really ought to check you’re alone, you know.”

We sprang apart, and turned around. Helen was sitting on one of the beds, book in hand, with a cup of coffee.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“Well that’s a nice welcome,” she replied with a grin. “I’m on leave, so I’ve come back here; as we agreed, if you remember.”

“Yes, I remember,” I said. “But I thought you said it would be August when you were here?”

“It was going to be,” she said, “but another girl asked me if I’d swap. She’d drawn retard leave and wanted main leave, and as I wasn’t going anywhere in particular I agreed to change. I arrived on Saturday.”

“Well, it’s lovely to see you,” I said warmly. “How long can you stop?”

“Two weeks,” she replied. Behind me, Robin gave a mock groan. I elbowed him in the chest, and he stopped.

“In that case,” I said, “we’ll drop the cases off here, and go down to Robin’s room. I’ll be back a bit later on.”

“Have fun children,” she replied archly, giving me a knowing look. I winked back at her, and we left for Robin’s room.

When we got there, we wasted no time in falling into bed. It was so nice to be able to take our time and not worry about anything but pleasing each other. Afterwards it was equally as nice to be able to lie together without having to worry about getting up and getting dressed to be on time for our next appointment.

“I’ve just remembered something,” I said after a while.

“And what’s that my love,” Robin replied, running his hand gently up and down my side.

“All that food Elsie gave us to bring back—it’s still in my case in the attic.”

His hand was certainly having an effect on me, and I was finding it difficult to concentrate, particularly since he was now also showering me with gentle kisses, starting at my mouth and moving down.

“It’ll keep for a bit,” he said.

“Are you sure we shouldn’t go and get it?” I asked breathlessly. His kisses had now reached my breasts, and were definitely taking my mind off suitcases.

“Positive,” he said. “Besides, I’ve got better things to do right now,” and he suited actions to words, making me completely forget about such things.

Some time later I dressed in his spare dressing gown, and went up to retrieve all the little parcels Elsie had made up for us. When I got into the bedroom I found that Helen had been an absolute darling, and had unpacked for me. All the food stuffs were neatly arranged on the bed. I noticed that although both beds were still on the same side of the room, she had moved them apart slightly. Looking at the arrangement I thought it was easier to leave them that way—it would certainly be easier to rearrange the room if Elsie came to stay—and wondered why I hadn’t thought of it before. I quickly slipped into my own dressing gown, and picked up the food to take downstairs. Just as I got to the door it opened, and Helen came in.

“Ah, there you are,” she said as she came in. “I was beginning to think you were never going to surface.”

“Sorry,” I said a bit sheepishly. “We ... um ... got a bit carried away.”

“Hey, don’t apologize to me, I’m not your mother.”

I gave her a quick hug with my spare arm. “Well, it’s nice to see you,” I said. “I’m just going to put these downstairs, then I’ll pop back up and we can have a cup of tea and good long chat to catch up on things.”

“I’ll fill the kettle,” she replied. “Oh, and there’s some chocolate biscuits in the fridge with my name on. You may as well bring those back up as well. Will lover boy be joining us?”

“Probably,” I called back as I went down the stairs.

Robin was in the kitchen when I got down there, so I told him we were having a coffee upstairs. I collected the biscuits, and he said he’d join us shortly.

I scampered back upstairs, and found Helen had made the coffee. I told her Robin would be joining us. I sat on one bed and Helen sat on the other, and we started to catch up on all our news. Helen told me all about her training and the lifestyle, and how much she was enjoying herself. I told her all about Robin’s bust up with his mother. She was quite shocked and instantly on our side. Half way through Robin came in and sat down on the bed beside me. He gave Helen his side of the story, and we chatted about that for several minutes. Then I told Helen about Elsie showing me the documents she’d kept, and about finding out my ‘real’ name. She was intrigued, and asked to come to Somerset House with us. We agreed, and we made plans for when Robin and I would be free.

“So why all the sudden interest?” Helen asked at one point. “Surely it doesn’t matter what you’re called.”

“No,” I replied, “it doesn’t matter a jot, but if we get married I’m going to need a copy of my birth certificate. And it might come in useful before then, so I might as well go and get a copy now, and then it’s done.”

“Good point,” Helen conceded.

The conversation then turned to more general things. Helen was fascinated to learn all about what we’d done in Yorkshire, and I was equally fascinated to hear more about her training. After a nearly an hour of catching up we all discovered we were hungry, and went down to the kitchen to raid some of Elsie’s bacon, sausages and eggs for a snack. After that, I was just about ready for bed.

“Tell you what,” Helen suggested, “so you two love birds don’t miss out on your sex life, how about I sleep in Robin’s room, and you can have your double bed back.”

Robin agreed enthusiastically to this idea, and took Helen off to his room. I went back upstairs and ran a bath. It’s a good job it was a big bath, because when he returned Robin insisted

on joining me in it. I found it was amazing how much fun two people could have with a large amount of hot soapy water, even if it did mean that we had to use all our clean towels to mop up the floor again afterwards.

Sunday was spent (by me) doing washing. Elsie had done a load for us before we left, but we still seemed to have a lot of dirty clothes—not to mention all the towels from upstairs.

Helen had discovered the garden at the back of the house, and decided that it was nice enough to sit in. She explored the cellar and found a couple of old chairs and took them outside. She spent most of the day outside with her book, and seemingly endless cups of coffee.

On Monday, Robin and I started back at college. We were issued with our new timetables, and apart from groaning at the amount of new subjects we had, discovered that Thursday afternoon lectures finished earlier than usual. We checked travel arrangements, and discovered that if we took the tube we would get to Somerset House about half an hour before it closed. When we got home that evening we told Helen we would be going on Thursday afternoon, and she immediately said she'd meet us at college and go with us.

Needless to say, I was quite excited about the trip, as it promised to answer some of the questions I wanted answered.

I waited impatiently for Thursday to roll around. I found studying a useful anodyne to the itch that plagued me, and concentrated for all I was worth on my work. It also had the useful effect of making the time go more quickly. Thursday eventually arrived and I was in a fever of impatience all day. When lectures were over I grabbed Robin and would have had him running to the tube station if he hadn't flatly refused. There was plenty of time to catch the train he said, and anyway we had to wait for Helen. Helen fortunately turned up in plenty of time (which was likely a first), and we all set off together. I couldn't sit still on the journey to Somerset House, and just about jumped off the train when we got to Temple tube station.

I had never been in that part of London before, and would have gone charging off in the wrong direction if Helen hadn't been there. She had spent the day getting directions to the place, and was able to take us straight there.

When we arrived I was momentarily daunted by the size of the place. However, with Robin on one side and Helen on the other, I walked up the steps and into the building. I approached the desk, and told the woman there that I wanted a copy of my birth certificate. She directed us to the relevant area and we were confronted by another reception desk.

"Can I help you?" asked the nice looking woman on the other side of the desk.

"Yes, please, I need a copy of my birth certificate."

"I see. I'll need you to fill in this request form with the relevant information. There's a desk over there. When you've completed the form, bring it back to the desk and I'll see what we can do for you." She handed me the form, and we went over to the desk. It didn't take long to fill it out (Helen had to lend me a pen—I had apparently left mine at college in my rush to leave), and we returned to the desk.

"Please take a seat," the woman said. "This shouldn't take long. I'll give you a call when I've found it."

We sat down, and I looked around. If the grandeur of the place wasn't enough to keep you quiet, the library-like air was certainly enough to banish any ideas of airy chit-chat.

After about ten minutes, I heard my name called.

"Miss Linthwaite," she called.

"Yes, that's me," I replied, jumping to my feet.

"I'm sorry, Miss Linthwaite," she said. "We can't find any record for the names and date of birth in Coventry."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Yes, we checked several different spellings, and looked around the dates you gave us, but there's no record of your birth for Coventry. Are you sure you were born there?"

"I think so," I replied.

“Well, I’ll go and have another look,” she said, “but I’m sure we won’t find anything different.” She toddled off out of sight, and I went and sat back down with Robin and Helen.

“What does she mean, she couldn’t find anything,” Helen said crossly. “She probably couldn’t be bothered looking at this time in the afternoon.”

“Shhh, keep your voice down, she’ll hear,” I hissed.

“Don’t mind if she does,” Helen said defiantly, with a toss of her head.

“I do,” I replied. “I want to get my birth certificate.”

Robin was silent, but he was looking concerned. Another ten minutes went by before the woman came back. I went over to the desk to meet her.

“No, I’m sorry Miss Linthwaite,” she repeated. “There’s definitely no record of your birth in Coventry on that date.”

“Can you look anywhere else?” I asked.

“Certainly, if you can give me a town to look for,” she replied. I looked at her helplessly.

“But I must have been born somewhere,” I said.

“Obviously,” she replied, “but we don’t have the resources to look through the birth records for the whole country, I’m afraid. You’ll have to come back with further information.”

I thanked her, and went back to Robin and Helen.

“Come on,” I said drearily. “We might as well go.”

We trailed out into the street, and stood looking at each other.

“Now what do we do?” I asked. Helen shrugged, but Robin was looking thoughtful.

“Why don’t you write to that Mrs. Hepton, the one that used to live next door to your mother,” he suggested. “Elsie will give you the address. You can ring her tonight.”

“You think she might know?” I asked a bit doubtfully.

“Well, it’s worth a try,” he replied. “And I can’t think of anyone else to try, can you?”

“No,” I said dismally. He put his arm round me and gave me a hug.

“Come on love, cheer up, there’s bound to be an easy explanation for this. Perhaps you were just born somewhere else.”

“Yes, that’ll be it,” Helen chimed in. “I’m sure this Mrs. Hepton will be able to tell you more about it.”

We made our way back to the house. I was quiet on the way back, and the other two chatted casually between themselves. We got back in and Robin fixed us some tea. Robin and Helen went upstairs, and I went to ring Elsie.

“Hello love, how’s it going? I didn’t expect to hear from you again until the weekend.”

I filled Elsie in on what had happened at Somerset House, and she readily agreed that Mrs. Hepton would be the best person to contact. She bustled away and got the address, and read it out to me. We chatted about this and that for a few minutes longer and then I hung up. I went back to my room, and found Robin and Helen chatting.

“Come and sit down, love,” Robin said, shifting along my bed slightly. I went and sat down next to him and leant against him. He put his arm around me.

“Did you get the address?” he asked.

“Yes, it’s here,” I replied.

“You don’t seem very pleased,” Helen remarked.

“I’m not really,” I explained. “It was such a let down at Somerset House, I was so sure I’d be able to get my birth certificate there. And now it looks like your mother was right,” I said to Robin.

“What do you mean?” he asked, a puzzled look on his face.

“You are going to marry a nameless nobody after all.”

Robin looked cross. “Don’t you dare say that about yourself,” he said, giving me a shake. “You’ve got a very good name, a Yorkshire name, and even if it isn’t your proper name it’s still your name. You’re not nameless, and you’re not a nobody, and I don’t ever want to hear you say that again, do you hear?”

I burst into tears. The let down of Somerset House and his concern about me were too much for my nerves, and I couldn’t

help it. Robin pulled me close, and rested his chin on the top of my head. He rocked me backwards and forwards until I managed to stop crying.

“Sorry about that,” I apologized. Helen handed me a hankie, and I blew my nose.

“Don’t be daft,” Helen said. “You’re entitled to be upset. Anyone would be.”

“It’s not the end, sweetheart,” Robin said comfortingly. “It may just take a bit longer than we thought, that’s all.”

“Didn’t you mention a vicar?” asked Helen.

“Yes, that’s right,” I sniffed.

“Well, surely there must be a baptismal record,” Helen went on.

Robin leapt up, and gave the astonished Helen a great smacking kiss. “The girl’s a genius!” he exclaimed. “Of course, there must be a record in your local church.”

“But I can’t get up there,” I said, “not for ages yet.”

“No,” replied Helen, “but I can. I’ve still got another week’s leave, don’t forget. There’s no reason why I can’t take a couple of days and go and find out for you.”

“Would you really do that for me?” I asked, astonished.

“Of course I would, you goose,” she replied. “In fact, if I go up tomorrow, I can go and see Mrs Hepton instead of you writing to her, and go and see that vicar.”

“Oh Helen, you’re brilliant,” I said, tears coming to my eyes again.

“Don’t start crying again,” she said robustly. “No need for that.”

“Sorry,” I apologized again.

“And stop saying ‘sorry’, as well.”

“Sor . . . OK,” I said.

Robin looked over at her. “Thank you from me as well,” he told her. “Will you be OK for money, to get up and back?”

“Of course,” she replied. “I’m a woman of means, don’t forget. I’ve had the settlement of mother’s will and I’ve got the rent

from my house, as well as my Navy salary, so I'm doing fine. Probably better than you are," she said cheekily.

"I wouldn't take that bet," said Robin. "I only get my allowance from George."

"Well, you'll be a working man soon enough," she said. "And married to a working wife as well!"

We spent the rest of the evening talking about what Helen would do when she got to Coventry. Robin suggested she went to Mrs. Hepton's first, and got the name and address of the church, and the vicar, from her. We were still chatting when it was time for bed, and I was feeling much better about things. Helen once again went and slept in Robin's room, so we could enjoy our double bed again.

We were all up bright and early, and Helen appeared to be quite excited about her trip. I had written her a note for Mrs. Hepton, and hoped that this would encourage her to be more forthcoming. I had given her as much information as I could, and hoped that this would be enough.

Robin and I left for college before Helen needed to leave, and we wished her good luck before we left. I was hopeful, but wasn't pinning all my hopes on the fact that she would be successful. She had promised to give us a ring that evening, letting us know what she had found out. Robin had had a brainwave, and suggested she rang Elsie for the name of the solicitor who had held Alex's father's will. We hoped that he might have even more information.

Considering that I had a lot on my mind, the day passed extremely quickly. I seemed to have one of those days where nothing went wrong, and I romped through my classes, surpassing even Robin in some areas. We treated ourselves to fish and chips on the way home, and sat eating them from the paper in the kitchen. I was half way through mine when I got called to the phone.

I picked up the receiver, and said "Hello, is that you Helen?"

"No, love, it's Elsie."

"Elsie, what a lovely surprise. Is anything wrong?"

“No love, nothing’s wrong. I just had a thought. Helen’s just rung me from Coventry, asking for the name of your mother’s vicar. Apparently Mrs. Hepton couldn’t remember his name, and there’s a new vicar there who doesn’t know where his predecessor now lives.”

“Oh rats,” I exclaimed. “We were hoping he’d have some information about my christening.”

“Yes, so Helen said. There’ll still be a record, but she’ll need to get the right church. No, my thought was for her to contact the local doctors. No matter what else might happen, you have to have a doctor.”

“That’s brilliant,” I congratulated her. “I would never have thought of that.”

She sounded pleased. “There you are, not just a pretty face after all.”

I laughed, and we chatted for a couple more minutes before she hung up. I went back to the kitchen and told Robin about Elsie’s suggestion. He agreed with me that it was a brilliant idea. Just as soon as I’d settled down with Robin again, someone was yelling down the hall that I was wanted on the phone again. This time it was Helen.

“Helen, I’ve just been speaking to Elsie. She told me what she suggested. It sounds brilliant.”

“Yes, she’s a clever old stick,” said Helen irreverently.

“Where are you staying tonight?” I asked her. Where she would stay hadn’t occurred to me until now.

“I found a small hotel, more like a bed and breakfast really,” she said. “Nothing fancy, and not too expensive. It’s great, actually,” she suddenly giggled. “The hot water goes off at nine o’clock, and breakfast is at eight thirty sharp, otherwise I don’t have any. I told the landlady I was looking for a long lost relative, and she was fascinated.”

“Well, as long as it’s safe.”

“Of course it’s safe. I’ve got a lock on my door, and there’s only a couple of other guests. I’ll be fine.”

We said our goodnights, and I went back to the kitchen, rather hoping that no-one else would ring. It was Tom who'd answered the phone all night, as he'd been the only one in the living room, watching the newly installed television. When I got back to the kitchen, I found it empty, Robin had obviously decided to go to bed, and I thought that an excellent idea.

Robin was already in bed when I got back. I undressed and crawled in beside him. He put his arm around me, and pulled me close. We just lay there for a while discussing what Helen had said, and whether she had any chance of finding out anything at all. Robin was hopeful, but I was half convinced that he was only being that way for my sake. After a while our simple hug turned into something else, and I forgot my worries in the physical pleasure that making love to Robin always gave me. I slept well, and woke feeling a lot more refreshed.

As it was Saturday, we had nothing much to do. We hadn't got any major essays to study for so we had an easy day, did a bit of shopping, and just stayed around the house. Helen phoned later to say that she would be stopping over one extra night, and we should expect her the following day. I wanted to know why she was staying over, but she came over all mysterious and wouldn't tell me.

Robin cooked a great meal that night. In fact it was so good, several other people from the house came down for tasters. In the end Robin just threw a whole load more food in the pan, and cooked a meal for everyone. We had a great evening; we just dumped the cooking pan in the middle of the kitchen table, and everyone just dipped in with bread, or garlic bread, whichever took their fancy. Some of the other guys went and brought down some beer and wine, and we all got pleasantly tipsy.

On Sunday we slept a bit late, and finally dragged ourselves out of bed around mid-morning. We were still making up for the eight weeks we'd slept apart over the summer, and relished every time we woke up together. Helen was due back later in the afternoon, so we wandered down to the local pub at lunch time

and Robin treated me to the local specialty, home-made pie and chips. The landlady cooked it herself and it was fantastic, almost as good as Elsie's. After a couple more drinks, we wandered back to the house to wait for Helen. I was feeling incredibly anxious, and as the afternoon wore on, I got more and more convinced that it had all been a waste of time and she wouldn't have found out anything new.

Robin was a real brick, and kept trying to distract me with various things. He insisted that we run through some of the work we'd done during the week, in a sort of test, and that took my mind off things for a while, but by the time we heard the unmistakable sounds of Helen's arrival, I was a nervous wreck. Robin went down to help with the suitcase and fetched Helen a cup of tea. I was sitting on the edge of the bed, and jumped up as soon as I saw her.

"Helen, at last," I exclaimed.

"Wow, what a greeting," she said with a grin. "I've only been gone two days."

"Did you find anything?" I demanded.

"I found plenty," she said.

"Good news or bad?"

"Bit of both," she replied.

"So what did you find?"

"Let me get sorted out, and I'll tell you," she promised. She kicked off her shoes, and with a sigh settled back on the bed. She took the cup of tea Robin had made for her, and looked over at me.

"Are you sitting comfortably?" she asked, in mimicry of the well-known children's show 'Listen with Mother'. I nodded. "Then I'll begin."

Chapter 28

Helen sat back on the bed, and took a drink of tea.

“OK then,” she began, “this is what I learnt.”

“I started off with Mrs. Hepton. The address Elsie gave me has been demolished now as part of the post-war clearances, but the old corner shop is still there, owned by the same people, and they told me where I could find her.”

“Did you have any trouble getting her to talk to you?” I asked.

“Quite the opposite—I had trouble getting a word in edge-ways! I told her who I was, and why I was there, and showed her your note, Suzie. That didn’t carry much weight as she didn’t know your handwriting, and she quite rightly pointed out it could have been written by anyone. So I had the bright idea of getting her to ring Elsie, and talk to her. I gave her Elsie’s number, and they chatted for what seemed like hours—you know how older people go on—but eventually Elsie talked her into telling me what I wanted to know.

“She remembered your mother quite clearly—or perhaps I should say, she remembered Mrs. Hennessy quite clearly.” She paused here, and looked over at me.

“You mean ... she’s not my mother?” I asked. I was astonished—it seemed that nothing about my identity was going to be as I had thought. I’d adjusted to the fact that Mr. Hennessy wasn’t my father, but now it appeared I didn’t know who my mother was either.

“That’s exactly what I mean,” Helen nodded. “It turns out that she and Mrs. Hennessy had a conversation over the back fence one morning, and Mrs. Hennessy was talking about a young woman she used to work for—I gather she was some sort of nanny, or maybe a lady’s maid—anyway, this young woman was in trouble, in the old-fashioned sense of the word.”

“You mean she was pregnant,” Robin put in.

Helen nodded. “Yes, she was pregnant and unmarried. She had apparently got in touch with your moth ... I mean, Mrs. Hennessy, and asked her for help. Mrs. Hennessy told Mrs. Hepton that she was going to see her ‘young lady’ as she called her, and was going to see what she could do. She asked Mrs. Hepton to look after Alex for her while she was away. She was away for three days, and when she came back, she had you with her.”

“Did Mrs. Hepton know the young lady’s name?” I asked.

“Unfortunately, she couldn’t remember ever having heard Mrs. Hennessy give the name of the young woman concerned, but she did think she was one of the ‘best’ families in either Warwickshire or Leicestershire, because that’s where Mrs. Hennessy told her they’d come from when they moved in next door. Alex was only little at the time, she thinks about six or seven years old. However, she did remember your moth ... I mean, Mrs. Hennessy, telling her that the house Mrs. Hepton had visited as part of a coach tour holiday was the house she had worked in when she was younger. Mrs. Hepton still had the itinerary for the holiday, and she let me keep it.”

“So which house was it?” asked Robin.

“That’s the problem. It was a coach tour of stately homes all around the country. It started in Derbyshire, and worked its way down to Kent, then dropped everyone off in London to catch the train back. It could be anyone of three houses.”

“Which three?” asked Robin. “I might be able to help here.”

“I always knew you’d come in handy one day,” I remarked.

“Quiet woman,” he replied. “I’m working.” I wasn’t going to let him get away with that one, so we had a brief scuffle on the bed.

“When you’re quite ready,” said Helen, sounding just like an old school marm, “I’ll tell you the names of the houses.”

“Sorry,” I apologized. Robin echoed my apology, but didn’t look particularly repentant.

I looked at what Helen had written down. “That’s not right.”

“What’s not right?” asked Robin, who had taken the coach tour itinerary from Helen, and was looking at the houses mentioned again.

“My birthday. According to this I was born in May, not March.”

“But we always did your birthday on 24 March,” said Helen.

“Yes, I know. Why would they change the date?”

“No wonder that woman couldn’t find your birth certificate,” Helen commented. “Wrong name, wrong date. You’ll have to go back and try again.”

“I don’t know if I could face it again,” I said. “All that build up, and then another let down. I’m beginning to wish I’d never started this.”

“But you can’t give up now, sweetheart,” said Robin. “You’re so close. This could be what you’ve been looking for.”

“Yes,” I said slowly, “it is, but suppose it doesn’t bring me anything but more trouble?”

“How could it bring you more trouble?” asked Robin in surprise. “It will tell you who you are, at the very least.”

“I know. That may be part of the problem. Suppose I don’t like what I find out? You can’t just forget it if it turns out to be bad news.”

“How could it be bad news?”

“Well, she could turn out to be your sister,” said Helen mischievously.

“Don’t joke about this, please,” I said with a shudder. “You might turn out to be right.”

“Impossible,” said Robin firmly.

“This is all getting incredibly morbid,” interjected Helen from the other side of the room. “I think it’s more likely that this

young girl succumbed to someone's wicked wiles, and ended up pregnant like that."

"Like someone else I know," said Robin with a grin.

"I'm not pregnant," I replied indignantly.

"No, but you succumbed to my wicked wiles," he said lecherously, and started nibbling my neck.

"Will you two stop that," said Helen crossly. "We're still trying to decide what to do here."

Robin sat up straight, tried to look serious, and failed dismally in the attempt. Helen looked at his face, and started to laugh herself. Robin pulled an even more ludicrous face and that started me laughing. Once we had started, I don't think any of us could stop. The laughter acted as a release, for me at any rate, and we collapsed in gales of laughter for several minutes. After it had finally died away, we started to think again about what to do.

"You can't get over the fact that someone will have to go to Somerset House and ask for a copy of the birth certificate," said Helen pragmatically, after we had gone over the same ground again.

"I don't think I can face it again," I said. "Seriously, I'm not just saying that."

"Well I don't think I can go," said Robin. "They might find it bit suspicious if I turn up asking for a girl's birth certificate. And I've got the same problem with times as you."

"Looks like there's only one candidate then," said Helen resignedly. "I'll go in the morning, then."

"Will you really go and do that for me?" I asked Helen.

"Yes of course I'll go for you. At least if I have the right name and the right date, we stand more chance of getting a result."

"Yes," said Robin, "all we need now is a place. And that brings us back to this." He gestured with the travel brochure. "You two stay here, I'm just going to ring George and see what he can remember about these places. He can always ask my mother if he doesn't know."

"Will she tell him if she knows it's for you?" I asked.

“Don’t worry, love,” he said, “I’ll tell him not to tell her it’s me that’s asking.” He got up and left, and we heard his footsteps clattering off down the stairs.

“I know this is all very personal for you,” said Helen, “but it’s exciting all the same. It’s like a detective novel . . . only we’re the detectives.”

“I know what you mean,” I replied with a smile. “And yes, it is exciting. It’s also a little bit frightening.”

“Frightening?” echoed Helen, in surprise. “What’s frightening about it?”

“Suppose I don’t like what we find,” I said.

“Don’t worry, it’ll be fine,” she reassured me, coming over and giving me a hug. I returned it, and smiled gratefully at her.

“I just hope we can get to the bottom of this.”

“Well, I’ll toddle off to Somerset House again tomorrow and see what I can find out,” she said. “I’ll ask them to check that other date, your other name, and Warwick and Leicester registry records. I’m sure we’ll find something.”

“What happens if I can’t get a birth certificate?” I asked. “I don’t think you can get married unless you have one.”

“I don’t know,” replied Helen. “I’m sure there’ll be a way round it, though.”

“I hope so,” I said. “I don’t want to be in the position where I can’t marry Robin because I don’t have a birth certificate.”

“Would it really make that much difference?” Helen asked. “I mean, you’re doing pretty much everything a married couple does already. If you just started calling yourself Suzie Carstaires, told everyone you’d got married down here, and everyone up there acted as if it were true, would it really make that much difference?”

“It would to me,” I said firmly. “I want to do everything properly, and that includes getting married properly, in a church, with Frank to give me away, and you as my bridesmaid, along with young Suzie and young Elsie, with my Elsie to do my reception. I want my children to know that their parents are mar-

ried, and above all I want them to know who they are, right from the start.”

“Whew,” said Helen, “that was quite a speech! But I know what you mean,” she added hastily, as I opened my mouth to say something else. “I think it’s important to know who you are, and I can appreciate that you’d be more determined about that than most people.”

Robin came back in with a big smile on his face.

“What did you find out?” Helen and I asked almost in unison.

“George was a mine of useful information,” he said. “I gave him the names of the houses, and he told me who lived in each one.”

“And which one did the Molyneux’s live in?” I asked.

“Neither of them,” he replied cheerfully.

“So why are you looking so pleased?” asked Helen.

“Because my clever girl here,” he said, sitting down beside me and kissing me on the cheek, “hit the nail right on the head. The Molyneux’s didn’t live in any of them, but they were related to one of them—the Howards, from Abbeythorpe Place. So we can assume that whoever was your mother was visiting Abbeythorpe Place when she asked Mrs Hennessy to go over and see her.”

“What’s the nearest town to Abbeythorpe,” I asked.

“It’s near the village of Burton Hastings,” said Helen, who had picked up the itinerary again. “I suppose it would come under Leicester.”

“Maybe you’d better try that then, when you go back to Somerset House tomorrow,” said Robin.

“I’ll write that down,” said Helen, hunting for a pen, “otherwise I’ll forget it.”

I couldn’t believe that it was going to be that easy. I was half convinced that Helen wouldn’t find anything when she went back to Somerset House. However, I couldn’t think of anything else to try, so I didn’t say anything. Helen had done so much for me already, I thought it would be churlish of me to cast any doubts on what she was going to do tomorrow.

“Looks like we might get some answers tomorrow,” said Robin, putting his arms around me. “We might finally find out who you are. I nodded, and leant against him.”

“Hey, come on, this isn’t like you,” he said, giving me a little shake.

“I know,” I said with a sigh. “But after what happened at Somerset House, I don’t want to get my hopes up and be disappointed again.”

“I understand, sweetheart,” he said.

“Well,” said Helen, “I think I’ll go have a bath, and then pop downstairs for a bit to eat.” I smiled at her. I knew she was giving us time to be alone, and was being as discreet as she knew how. She bustled about getting everything she needed, and then with a cheery “see you later,” left the room.

We sat there for a few minutes, Robin just holding me and rocking me in his arms. He had an unfailing instinct about when to just hold me, and when to take things further, and he obviously felt this would not be the time for that. It was one of the reasons why I loved him so much. He didn’t just want me for sex, he genuinely cared about me and about my welfare, and my feelings. After a while he gave me a small nudge.

“Come on love,” he said, “let’s go downstairs for a bite to eat. You can make Helen’s tea for her.” I smiled, and agreed.

We went downstairs, and talking to the other people in the kitchen, and later Helen, cheered me up quite a bit. By the time it was getting around towards bedtime I felt a lot happier, and was ready for some of Robin’s excellent loving.

I slept extremely well, and woke on Monday feeling much more optimistic. Helen was still asleep (in Robin’s bed) when we had to leave for college, so we left her to it. Although not sanguine about her chances of finding my elusive birth certificate, I was resigned to whatever she might find. I was sure that Helen would do her best on my behalf, and was content to wait until the evening to find out what information she had managed to dig out of the vaults at Somerset House.

Lectures that day were tough. Apart from all the subjects we had had the year before, we had several new ones to tackle and I found it quite heavy going. Robin found the whole curriculum a breeze, and seemed to fly through the most difficult of subjects without breaking into a sweat. This was occasionally annoying but I was able to apply myself and keep up with him. Our routine of separate study helped with this, as neither of us was distracted from our studies.

On this particular evening I was working through a text on physiology, and was finding it hard going. Helen had phoned earlier and said that she would be late back but hadn't given any details, so I was on my own. After about an hour of plowing through the dry text, I pushed the book away and rubbed my eyes.

I started thinking about what would happen if Helen did manage to find out any information regarding my birth. Would I want to meet my actual mother? Would I want to meet my father? How come my mother had given me away, given me to her old nurse to look after? I knew the answers to these questions could only be answered by my mother, but I wasn't at all sure I wanted to meet a woman who could give away her own child.

I had always known that Elsie wasn't my mother—she had always been scrupulous in ensuring that I knew that—but she was the closest thing to a mother I had ever known, and I didn't know how she'd react if I decided to go chasing after this elusive person. I couldn't know whether my mother had ever tried to find me again. If she had come to Coventry after the war, there would have been no one there to tell her where I'd gone. On the other hand, it shouldn't be impossible for her to find me—after all, Helen had managed to track down quite a lot of information in just two days, and she had very little to go on. It didn't seem to me that there was any reason why I couldn't have been found if I had been wanted. I don't know how long I sat lost in my thoughts, but they were shattered by the tempestuous arrival of Helen. She came in looking like the cat that had eaten the canary.

“Hello,” she said. “Guess what I’ve got here?”

“You’re not telling me you found it,” I said, astonished.

“I certainly did,” she replied triumphantly.

I sat down, feeling as if someone had just pulled a plug in my stomach. I could almost feel everything draining away through the hole.

“Have you told Robin?” I managed to ask.

“Yes, I told him on the way up. He’ll be here in a minute. Come and sit over here,” she said, pulling me to my feet and steering me over to the bed. She sat me down again and took her coat off, throwing it on my chair.

“You don’t seem very excited,” she said, almost accusingly.

“I don’t know how I feel,” I told her. “I never expected you to find it, so I don’t know how to react.”

“I suppose I can understand that,” she said. The door opened just then and Robin came in.

“Have you given it to her yet?” he asked.

Helen shook her head. “Not yet. I thought she’d like to be sitting down first.”

“Good thinking,” said Robin, as he came over and sat down next to me.

“Well Suzie, here it is ... here’s the answer to your questions,” Helen said dramatically, as she handed me a plain brown envelope. I took it, and sat there looking at it.

“Did you read it?” I asked her. Helen looked at me, and then shook her head.

“No, she just put in the envelope and handed it to me.”

“So you don’t know what’s on here,” I repeated. Helen shook her head impatiently.

“No, I told you, I just confirmed your name, and then the woman put it in the envelope and I haven’t taken it out since.”

I held the envelope in my hands, looking at it. Such a small thing to hold something so important, I thought. In this plain brown envelope I held the answers to all my questions. I found myself suddenly reluctant to open it. Did I really want to know

what was in here? Was I really ready to know what was written here? Would this really make me happy, or would it just get me all upset again? Putting these thoughts together with my previous thoughts about my mother, I couldn't summon up either the will or the nerve to open the envelope.

"Come on love," Robin urged. "Open it up and find out what it says."

"Yes, come on," said Helen. "It took me a long time to get that for you."

I looked round at them both. "I don't know if I want to," I heard myself saying.

"What?" The exclamation came from both Robin and Helen, simultaneously.

"What do you mean, you don't know if you want to open it?" Helen asked.

"I don't know if I want to know what it says," I said. "I mean, this will tell me who my mother is, but what sort of woman gives up her own child, no matter to whom, and never tries to find it again?"

"The sort of woman who doesn't have any choice, perhaps," said Robin quietly. "You never know, it could be some poor girl who got pregnant, and couldn't tell her parents about it, and could only think of one thing to do—give the child to someone she trusted, someone she loved, who she thought would be able to look after her precious baby."

I hadn't thought about it quite like that. "Do you really think that could be the case?" I asked.

Robin nodded. "Just imagine what my mother would say if, for instance, Henrietta got herself pregnant without being married. Henrietta would probably keep her condition secret, and rely on us, the rest of her family, to help her out."

"And what would you do?" I asked. I was still turning the envelope over in my hands, looking at the outside.

"Well, we'd probably take her away for a while. Let her go and stay with Clarissa, or Jessica (if she was married), or even

come and stay with us. She could have the baby and then return home, and mother need never know.”

“And what about the baby? What would you do with the baby?”

“We’d have to put it up for adoption. Or else ask someone close, someone we could trust, to look after it and bring it up as their own.”

I thought about this. How would I react if I found myself pregnant? I couldn’t picture it. I knew Elsie and Frank would be desperately disappointed, but I just couldn’t picture them throwing me out of the house, or not supporting me. It just wouldn’t happen. Could it really happen to someone else? Would parents really act like that? I just couldn’t get my mind round it.

“Maybe she was raped,” put in Helen unexpectedly.

“What?” I exclaimed, surprised.

“Maybe she was raped,” repeated Helen. “Maybe she just didn’t want to be reminded of what happened, or maybe the family was too ashamed to face up to it, and just told her to give the baby away.”

“Oh great,” I said bitterly. “Now I’m the result of rape, and a reminder of something that she’d rather forget.”

“Oh come on,” said Robin, “I think we’re getting a bit far fetched here. Let’s not start getting upset before we know the facts.”

“Yes, come on Suzie, open the damn thing will you? I want to know why I went to Coventry, and spent my day at Somerset House.”

I knew they wanted me to open it, I could feel them willing me on, but still I hesitated. I turned it over in my hands, and over again. ‘Miss Susanne Molyneux’ was written on the front of the envelope, a name I had never even heard until a few weeks ago, and now I was being told it was mine, my original name, the name someone had wanted to forget all about by hiding it with ‘Hennessy’. I didn’t want to be ‘Suanne Molyneux’, I didn’t want any of the baggage that might come with that name,

I desperately wanted to be plain Suzie Linthwaite and, in a few years, Suzie Carstaires. What was in that envelope might change things forever, and I didn't want them changed.

I suddenly knew what Elsie had meant when she warned me I might get more than I bargained for by looking for my birth certificate. The fact that I would need one if I ever wanted to get married was now the only reason I wanted to look inside the envelope, but still I couldn't bring myself to open it. I looked up at Helen, who was watching me with impatience and barely restrained eagerness and curiosity, and at Robin, who was also watching me, but with sympathy, and I looked back down at the envelope.

"No," I said suddenly. "I can't do it. I just can't bring myself to open this thing." I made an instinctive gesture as if to throw it away, but didn't actually let go. Instead I handed it to Robin, and said "Go on, you do it. Open it for me, please."

He looked at me, and then nodded. He slowly and carefully opened the flap on the envelope, and started to pull out what was inside.

"For heaven's sake," Helen nearly shouted, "just open it and get it over with."

Robin glanced towards me and I nodded. He pulled it completely clear of the envelope, and I drew a deep breath as he unfolded it. The tension in the room was palpable. He looked at the certificate, and then started to read out what was on there.

"Certificate of Birth, Registered in the County of Leicestershire," he read. "Name of Child ... Susanne Henrietta Molyneux." No surprises there then.

He took a deep breath, and looked at the names of the parents.

"Good god," he said.

PART FIVE — ALEX

Chapter 29

Al pushed his chair back from his desk, stood up, and stretched. He walked across to the window of his office and stood looking down through the swirling snow. His back ached, and he checked his watch. Six thirty. Bridget would tell him off again for being late home. He walked back to his desk, and pressed the intercom button.

“Yes sir?” responded Mary, his personal assistant.

“Will you call my car round, please, Mary,” he asked.

“Yes sir. Will there be anything else?”

“No, it’s OK, you can go now Mary.”

“Thank you sir. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Yes, see you in the morning.” The intercom clicked off, and he picked up his briefcase. He walked to the door, picking up his coat and hat on the way, and left the office. Mary was just putting her coat on when he came out. He smiled when he saw her.

“Can I give you a lift?” he asked. She returned his smile.

“No, thank you, Mr. Henderson,” she replied. “My husband is picking me up outside. I’ve just given him a call.”

“All right then,” he said. “You take care in this weather, and if it’s bad in the morning, don’t bother coming in. We’ll manage without you—somehow!”

Al considered himself lucky to have found Mary. She was a plump Irish woman, probably in her mid forties, with a kind, smiling face, and bright red hair drawn back into a bun. He had

found her—literally found her—when he had first rented this office, back when he'd first gone into partnership with Arthur McCluskey. That first venture had prospered, and so had his own business which he had built on the back of that first business deal. Mary had been employed as a cleaner when he first thought about taking an office here, and if he hadn't come back one night unexpectedly and found her sitting in the other office typing a letter of application for another job, he would never have thought about employing her. Impressed with her typing speed and her good command of English, he had hired her on the spot as his secretary. Within a very short space of time she had been promoted to personal assistant, and he had never regretted it. She was privy to most of his business dealings, and he had complete confidence in her.

He took the lift down to the ground floor, and waited in the lobby for his car to arrive. Arthur had told him on several occasions that he should get a bigger, smarter, newer office building, but Al felt comfortable in this old building. He had completely modernized the inside, but left the outside with all its original features. As a result the building gave most people a shock when they looked at the outside, and then walked into the bright, modern exterior. Every time he came in, he loved the look and the feel of the place, and wouldn't consider moving elsewhere.

He heard a horn sound, and looked up to see his car standing at the curb. He dashed outside, nodding to the security man on the front desk, and ran to the car. His chauffeur, Hank, opened the door and let him into the comfort of the back seat. He settled down onto the red leather, and sighed in relief.

"Home sir?" asked Hank, looking in the rear view mirror.

"Home," he confirmed, and relaxed.

As Hank wove the car through the early evening traffic, Al took a sheaf of papers out of his briefcase and started to study them. He was considering taking over another garage, and was checking over its accounts. Rob and Charlie had both checked out the premises, and Ted had looked over the workforce. They

had all agreed it would take a lot of work to make it profitable, but they seemed confident enough that it could be done.

Al was incredibly pleased that although his business world had diversified, and he was now the owner and director of a large company which covered many areas of business, he had managed to take his old business partners with him, and they were still partners and still good friends. Once Al had started to spread his wings they had talked about how they would run things, and had come to a very amicable arrangement. It had been decided that Rob, Charlie and Ted would handle all the motor industry side of the business, leaving Al free to deal with anything else. It had worked well. Rob in particular had blossomed into a very good businessman, much to his own surprise, and was more than capable of running the large garage chain that they had toasted so long ago ... Black and White Motors.

It had been hard during the war years, with the government's restrictions on the buying and selling of new cars, tires and car parts, but they had managed to survive and to expand, gradually buying up small businesses, turning them round into profitable ventures and amalgamating them into one big business. From their humble beginnings they were certainly well on their way to owning most of the motor repair business in Philadelphia and the surrounding area. They were known as a good team to work for, but one that didn't suffer fools gladly. From owning and operating the garages themselves, they had taken to franchising some of the businesses out. They gained the premises and the staff, and the new businesses gained the protection of a well-known and well-respected name.

Al looked up as Hank turned onto a quiet residential street, and put the papers away in his briefcase. He would recommend to Rob that they took the garage on, and add it to their business. The car turned into his driveway and pulled up in front of his house. The snow was still falling and the lights on the front of the house were partially obscured by the swirling flakes. Hank opened the door, and he got out.

“Take yourself off home, Hank,” he said. “Looking at this I don’t think we’ll be going in to the office tomorrow. Give me a call at about eight o’clock, and I’ll make my decision then.”

“Very good sir,” said Hank, touching his hand to his cap. He turned and walked back around the car, got in, and drove off round the back of the house. He had a small cottage in the grounds of the main house, which he shared with his wife, three cats and one large dog. Like Mary, Al valued his chauffeur’s professionalism, loyalty and honesty, and made sure that he was happy, and therefore willing to stay with him. Al took that attitude with all the staff he employed. He paid them above average wages, and expected their loyalty in return. He hadn’t often made a mistake although in the early days he had occasionally been too trusting, and had had to make difficult decisions about some of the people he had employed. However, he had always paid them off well, to ensure that they wouldn’t hold a grudge, and wouldn’t come back to haunt him. So far this technique had worked well and none of his ex-workers in the city had anything but a good word for him.

He walked up the steps into the house, and was met by his butler, Watkins. Watkins made Al feel right at home, although he wasn’t a conventional butler. He was English, and still spoke with a distinctive Yorkshire accent. Al had no trouble understanding him even when he spoke in his broadest dialect, which he did occasionally to entertain the children. He was just taking his coat off, assisted by Watkins, when Bridget appeared on the landing looking down into the hall.

“There you are,” she said. “I was just about to ring the office and remind you to come home.”

He smiled up at her, and once again admired her beauty. He had been smitten with her from the first moment he had met her, and had wooed and won her, after a considerable length of time. She had refused to even entertain his suit at first, telling him that she wasn’t going to marry a grease monkey, no matter how much money he made. However he had persevered, and as he had pro-

gressed from grease monkey to successful businessman, she had slowly realized that he wasn't going to go away, and over time he had changed her feelings towards him. Once she had finally admitted that she loved him he had proposed, and been accepted. When he had asked Arthur for her hand in marriage, his only comment had been "took your time, didn't you?"

They had been married now for just over ten years, and had two children, Arthur and Frank. Al had wanted a third child, hoping for a daughter, but Bridget had had such a hard time with little Frankie that the doctor had warned that she shouldn't try and have another baby. They had reluctantly agreed that they wouldn't try for another, and settled for the two lovely boys they had.

"Where are the boys?" he asked.

"In the bath," she replied, coming down the stairs into the hall. "They're with Susan, and they've sent me downstairs to see if you were coming home." She came up to him as she spoke, and he took her in his arms. He kissed her, taking his time, and enjoying every second. She responded warmly, as she had always done once she had learned to enjoy the physical side of their marriage, but broke away far too soon for his taste.

"Come on," she said, "if you want to see the boys get ready for bed." She smiled as she drew away, and started walking towards the stairs. He followed, marveling as always at how gracefully she moved. They went up to the nursery and went into the bathroom.

"Daddy, daddy," Arthur called out, catching sight of his father.

"Yes, I'm here." Laughing, Al went into the bathroom and tousled the heads of both boys.

"Come and play, Daddy," said Frankie.

"Not tonight," Al replied, "I haven't had time to change yet, and by the time I do you two will be ready for bed."

"Oh," Frankie said, looking disappointed. "Read a story then, instead," he bargained.

"Yes, I'll read you a story," Al agreed. "Which one do you want?"

“Snow White,” shouted Frankie.

“No, Red Riding Hood,” said Arthur.

“Well, you think about it, and I’ll go and get changed,” said Al.

He bent down and rubbed their heads again, winked at Susan, the nanny, and went off to his bedroom. Once there he quickly took off his suit, and changed into more comfortable clothing. Feeling a lot more relaxed, he went back to the nursery where Arthur and Frankie, now dressed in pajamas and dressing gowns, were waiting eagerly for their story. As soon as he put his head round the door, they shouted with excitement, and ran over to him. They grabbed one hand each and dragged him over to the fireplace. To one side of the fireplace was a large leather arm chair. They dragged him over to the chair, and once he sat down in it they climbed on to his lap and settled down, one each side. The chair was large enough to accommodate them all comfortably, and Al settled down with an arm around each child.

“So which story did you decide on?” he asked.

“We haven’t decided yet,” they confided, as they settled down.

“OK, so I guess it’s up to me to decide,” he said. “How about ... Sleeping Beauty?”

“Oooh, yes please,” said Frankie, “we haven’t had that one for ages.”

“OK then, here we go.”

He started on the age-old tale of the young princess, making sure that he did all the voices properly, otherwise his sons would protest and he’d have to go back and do it over again.

He enjoyed this time with his family, and tried to make sure that he was home in the evenings to spend time with them. He didn’t always manage it, but Bridget knew he tried, and appreciated it because he made the effort.

As the story progressed, the two boys started to fall asleep on his lap. He started to speak in an ever quieter voice, until he was sure they were both asleep. He then nodded to the nanny, who came over and took one of the boys whilst he picked up the

other, and they carried them off to bed. After tucking them in, he kissed them on their brows and then went back downstairs to the living room where he knew his wife would be waiting. As he came in, she came to meet him and handed him a glass of whiskey. He had this specially imported from Scotland, and it was the one vice he allowed himself. He took a sip.

“Oh, that’s good,” he said, savoring the slightly smoky taste of the whiskey. He smiled at Bridget, and she smiled back.

“Both asleep?” she asked with a tilt of her head in the direction of the nursery.

“Yes, and quite quickly too,” he said.

“I’m not surprised, they’ve been playing out in the snow all afternoon.”

“That would explain it,” he agreed. He settled down in one of the chairs, situated by the large open fire, and stretched out. Bridget came and stood by the fire.

“Come here,” he said softly. She turned and looked at him, eyebrows raised. She waited for a couple of minutes, and then went over and sank gracefully down onto his lap. He put his arms around her, and pulled her in tight to him.

“Still as beautiful as ever,” he murmured, then pulled her head down and kissed her on the lips. His hand was behind her head, and caressed the back of her neck. The kiss deepened, and she leant in closer. His other hand started to caress her side, moving upwards until he was gently brushing the side of her breast. He then moved it down, until he found the hem of her dress, and slowly slid his hand up her thigh, until he was brushing against the soft skin of her inner thighs. She moaned slightly, and her legs, seemingly of their own volition, moved slightly further apart. He moved gently in between then, and discovered that she wasn’t wearing any underwear. His hand moved until it was resting on her mound, then he turned it slightly so that his fingers were caressing her most intimate area. After enjoying this for a few moments, she reluctantly moved away slightly, looking slightly unfocused.

“We’d better wait,” she murmured. “They’ll be coming to call us for dinner soon.”

Regretfully he let her go, and she straightened up to a sitting position. Briefly she rested her hand on the bulge in his trousers, caressing it through the cloth, and then stood up.

“Every time,” he said, “you do it to me every time.”

She smiled. “I should think so too,” she said. “It wouldn’t be much of a marriage if you didn’t get turned on by your wife.”

“True,” he said, standing up and coming over to where she stood by the mantelpiece. He put his arms around her, grasping her buttocks, and pulled her into him. “Feel that?” he asked tightly. “That’s what you do to me, and that’s what you’re going to get later.” He let her go, after squeezing her again. “Shameless hussy,” he grinned.

She blushed slightly. “I thought you might enjoy it,” she murmured.

“Too right I’m going to enjoy it,” he growled at her. “Just as soon as we’ve finished dinner.”

Just as he spoke, the door opened and Watkins entered. “Dinner is served, Sir,” he said.

“Right, just coming,” said Al. Bridget smiled at the butler, and together they walked across the hall to the dining room.

Dinner was, as usual, superb. Al had no truck with what he called ‘fancy foreign chefs’, but he enjoyed good food and didn’t mind paying for a good chef to cook it for him. Surprisingly though, the one who reigned over his kitchen was actually a woman—Mrs. Watkins, to be precise. She was a superb cook, knew all Al’s likes and dislikes, and cooked accordingly. Bridget had been a little dubious at first, but had soon been won over by the older woman, who not only produced fantastic food but let her mistress loose in the kitchen, and taught her to cook.

After dinner, they returned to the living room where coffee was served. Once that was out of the way, Al told Watkins he wouldn’t be needed any more that night, and firmly closed the door. As he walked down the passage to the kitchen area, Wat-

kins had a grin on his face—he knew exactly what his master and mistress would be getting up to in the living room.

As it happened, he wasn't far off the mark. Bridget had sat down in one of the chairs, with a coffee on the table next to her. Before she had chance to drink it, Al was kneeling on the floor in front of her, kissing her. She responded, anticipating what was to come. Al's fingers were busy working their way up her legs, and were soon caressing her inner thighs. She moaned deep in her throat, and moved her legs apart to allow him easier access. Al broke off the kiss, and slowly pushed the skirt of her dress above her knees, and then on up as far as it would reach.

Underneath she was wearing only a suspender belt, and it provided the perfect frame for her mound, and her soft feminine flesh. Al paused for a moment to admire the view, and then bent down and kissed her at the top of her slit. She lay back in the chair, already aroused, and waited for what she knew was going to come next. It had taken her some time to get used to the idea of Al's being interested in kissing this area, but she had embraced it enthusiastically after Al had shown her how much pleasure it could bring.

Al caressed her again, opening her up to his view. He let his glance dwell on her soft, moist folds, and then bent his head and ran his tongue lightly up and down. He heard Bridget gasp, and her hands grasped the back of his head, guiding him to where she needed to feel his touch. He licked her again, and tasted her arousal. He pushed his tongue deeper into her, moving it backwards and forwards whilst his fingers played with her nub. She began to pant, and then to keen slightly, as he worked tongue and fingers together to bring her to a climax. She suddenly leapt slightly in the chair, and he knew she had reached her first climax. He continued to lick her, and then ran his tongue up her slit again. His fingers and tongue changed places, and he smiled as he felt how wet she had become. His fingers found her opening and he moved them in and out, whilst his tongue took over licking her nodule, and then sucking on it gently. In a surprisingly

short space of time, she climaxed again and, with one final kiss, he gently replaced her skirt.

When he looked up at her, she was lying in the chair, looking slightly disheveled. "Did you enjoy that?" he asked with a grin.

"You know I did," she replied dreamily.

"Good," he replied, "because I haven't finished yet."

He held his hands out and pulled her to her feet. She staggered slightly as she stood up, and he reached out to steady her. He then pulled her into his embrace, and began to kiss her again. She returned his kisses eagerly, dropping her hands to caress the bulge in his trousers. She started to undo his belt, and then his flies, pushing her hands down the front of his trousers to caress his waiting erection. His trousers slid to the floor, and she pushed her hands inside his boxer shorts, and fondled his erect penis. He groaned, and she started to slide her hand up and down his shaft, rubbing the tip gently on every stroke.

"You'd better stop doing that," he said huskily. "I'm just a little bit too ready."

She took her hands away, and pushed his boxers down to join his trousers, and then gently pushed him down into the chair.

"My turn," she said wickedly.

He subsided into the chair, and she settled herself down in front of him. She took hold of his penis, and gently flicked her tongue backwards and forwards across the tip. He jumped slightly with each touch of her tongue, and she smiled at the effect she was having on him. She changed position, and kneeling up slightly, took the head of his penis in her mouth. She sucked gently, and he groaned. She took more of him into her mouth, and started to work her head backwards and forwards, still sucking. She moved her hands up and gently caressed his testicles, enjoying the feel of his skin on her hands.

She had been horrified the first time he had suggested this, she remembered. She had resisted the idea for a long time, but had eventually, and reluctantly, given it a try. To her astonishment, she found she enjoyed acting like the worst sort of tart (to

her way of thinking), finding that her wanton behavior actually turned her on and made her feel highly aroused, and heightened her enjoyment of their sexual antics.

“Please, no more,” he finally managed, struggling to sit up.

“Spoil sport,” she pouted, as she sat back on her heels.

“Oh, I haven’t finished,” he assured her. “I just don’t want to finish too soon.” He looked at her leaning back on her hands on the rug.

“How does that dress come off?” he asked.

“Like this,” she replied and, reaching up, began to undo some hidden buttons down the front. He watched her undoing the buttons, finding her movements unbelievable sexy. She finished with the buttons, and he moved out of the chair to kneel on the rug in front of her.

“Let me,” he murmured, and gently pushed it back off her shoulders and around her waist. He reached behind her, and gently undid her bra. He pulled it off, and let his eyes linger on her breasts. They were full, slightly voluptuous, and surprisingly large given her slender frame. He dropped the bra on the floor, and bent forward to take one of her nipples in his mouth. She arched her back to bring it forward, and shut her eyes as she felt his hot mouth on her flesh. He started to suck, and she moaned. His other hand came up to caress her other breast, cupping it and gently rubbing the nipple with his thumb. She moved backwards, until she had lowered herself down to the rug, and was lying on the floor. He followed her down, never letting her nipple out of his mouth, until he was kneeling over her. He pulled her skirt up to her waist again, and moved his free hand between her legs. She felt incredible sensations as he suckled at her nipples, and fondled her between her legs. Her breath came in short ragged pants, and she climaxed once again. He moved between her legs, and maneuvered himself between her legs. He opened her up to his gaze, and then pushed himself gently inside her.

He started to move in and out, the feeling of her exciting him and bringing him to a higher pitch. He started to move faster and

she followed his every move. His movements became more frenzied, and he finally reached orgasm with a cry, and heard her reach her climax at the same time. He slowed, and finally stopped moving. He lowered himself down gently, until he was lying on top of her, but taking his weight on his elbows. He lowered his head and kissed her on the lips, and then kissed her neck.

“Thank you my love,” he said quietly into her ear.

“No, thank you,” she replied.

They lay quietly together for a while, until he felt himself disengage from her. He rolled onto his side, and put his arm across her body. He propped himself up on his elbow, and watched the play of the firelight across her body, enjoying how the shadows first highlighted and then hid her nipples, revealing other areas to his sight.

“My god, but you’re beautiful,” he said, gazing at her. He started to gently caress her stomach again.

“You’re not too bad yourself,” she replied with a smile, raising a hand and brushing his hair out of his eyes. “Should we get up?” she asked.

“Why, are you uncomfortable?” he asked, concerned that he was being selfish by lying with his arm over her.

“Not at all,” she replied. “Just though I’d ask.”

“Hussy,” he replied.

She smiled back at him, and reached up to kiss him again. He felt himself becoming aroused again, and prepared to enjoy himself, and her, again. His caressing hand became more purposeful in its wanderings, and drifted gently downwards again. She opened her legs to his insistent fingers, and he started to gently stroke her and play with her folds as she lay there. He kissed her breasts again, and started to suckle them alternately, moving his head between them. He then moved his tongue in circles around the nipples, eliciting little gasps of excitement and pleasure from her. He moved his tongue down between her breasts, across her stomach and around her belly button. As he moved further down, she moved her legs wide apart, and used her hands to open her-

self up to his gaze. As he watched, she started to play with herself, exciting him even further. He watched for a few moments, and then had to join in. As she caressed herself towards orgasm, he inserted his fingers into her, and started to move them up and down. Together they brought her to another shuddering climax, and she relaxed totally. He once again entered her, and within a very few minutes, he had also climaxed. This time he withdrew quickly, and once again lay on the floor next to her.

After a few minutes, she stirred and made to sit up. He lifted his arm, and she slowly got up.

“All right?” he asked.

“Oh yes,” she replied with a smile. Under his gaze, she slowly retrieved her bra, and got herself dressed again. He found his boxers and trousers on the floor, and did the same. When they were both dressed, they sat on the couch, with her leaning against him.

“Oh I love you,” he murmured into her hair. “Do you have any idea how much?”

“And I love you,” she replied. “You’ve taught me so much about myself.”

He settled further down in the chair feeling happy, fulfilled and totally contented. He wondered whether to tell her about his surprise yet, and thought it would be a good time to do so.

“I’ve been meaning to tell you,” he began.

“Tell me what?” she asked sleepily. “That you’ve got another woman?”

“You know I have,” he replied. “She’s called Mary.”

She laughed softly. “If it’s only Mary I’ve got nothing to worry about. Now, what did you want to tell me?”

“I thought we deserved a bit of a break,” he said, “so I’ve booked us a holiday.”

“A holiday?” she said in surprise. “You’ve never wanted to take a holiday before.”

“I know,” he replied, “but I’ve been thinking I need to take a break. And I want to take it with you.”

“What about the boys?” she asked.

“I thought they could stay here,” he said. “They’ll be fine with Suzie to look after them, and Watkins to spoil them.”

She thought about it for a while. Although it wouldn’t be the first time they had left the boys, she never really enjoyed it, and Al knew this. However, the thought of having Al all to herself for an unspecified amount of time was undeniably attractive.

“OK,” she agreed, surprising both herself and him. Al had never thought she’d be so amenable to leaving the boys. “When do we go?”

“In a couple of weeks. I thought you might like to go skiing.”

“Oh Al, I’d love to,” she said. “It’s ages since we’ve been. Where are we going?”

“Aspen, where else,” he replied, naming the exclusive resort in Colorado he knew she loved.

“Fantastic,” she approved. “That’s going to be great.”

“Isn’t it?” he said, pleased, and giving her a little squeeze.

She yawned suddenly, and muffled it against his chest. “You’re tired,” he said.

“Are you surprised?” she asked archly. He grinned.

“No, not really. Shall we go up to bed?” he asked.

“Why not?” she replied. “I could do with a shower before I turn in.”

“Hmmm, sounds like a great idea,” he said.

“I rather thought you’d like it,” she murmured. “Shall we go?”

“Let’s.” He got to his feet, and offered her his hand. She took it and he helped her up from the chair. He checked the fire was safe, and put the fire guard in front of it. He put the lights out as he went past, and then switched the main light off as he left the room. He put his arm round his wife, and together they went upstairs.

Chapter 30

Three weeks later, Al stood at the head of one of Aspen's best ski runs, leaning on his ski poles and looking at the fantastic view. He and Bridget had booked into their hotel the day previously, having flown down from Philadelphia. Having checked in they had gone round the resort before getting their evening meal.

This morning they had breakfasted and then headed immediately for the slopes. Al had already been down the slope twice, and was now ready for his third trip. Bridget had also done two runs but was now heading back to the hotel, having had enough for the first morning.

Al waited until a party of five had gone past, and then started off down the slope himself. The snow was fresh, the air was clear and cold, and the sun was bright. Al loved skiing, and had taken to it like a duck to water since he first tried it on their honeymoon. Arthur had been the result of that honeymoon, being born almost nine months to the day after their wedding.

Al was enjoying the rush of the cold air past his face, and the thrill of travelling downhill at nearly thirty miles an hour. His knees bent and flexed as he skied expertly down the piste, keeping an eye out for other skiers and trying to pick out the best path. He flew downhill feeling exhilaration in every swoop and glide. He hit the steeper, lower, part of the slope and picked up speed. He saw the end of the run approaching and started to make turns, slowing his speed. He stopped neatly at the bottom,

and decided to go again. He checked his watch and reckoned that if he went straight back up, he would just about have time before lunch. He looked over towards the ski lift, and saw that the party of five he had seen at the top of the slope were also on their way back up. At the last minute, he decided to go over to the next slope and leave this one to them. He had been watching them ski all morning, and wasn't happy with either their skill level or their attitude towards other skiers. He didn't feel that they could ski sufficiently well to tackle this particular slope, and preferred to be out of their way.

He reached the top of the lift and moved over to the other run, this one marked as black for the most experienced skiers. He checked out the route, checked his equipment, and then set off.

It was apparent that not many people had been skiing down this particular run today. The snow was mostly fresh, with only a few signs of skis criss-crossing it. Al smiled at the thought of having all that wonderful snow to himself, and set off downhill. The run was quite tricky, weaving in and out of the trees and required a greater level of concentration than the other run he'd tried that morning. It was well within his capabilities, though, and he was enjoying himself.

Suddenly there was a shout from behind him. Al took a quick look over his shoulder, and saw that the party of five skiers he had seen before had decided to come down this run, and one of them was getting into trouble. Al was too far ahead to be of any assistance, and would have found it difficult to stop in that particular spot anyway. He decided his best course of action would be to get down the slope as quickly as possible and to alert the ski rangers to the problem above, and then let them deal with it.

He hunched lower, trying to increase his speed and get down the hill as fast as possible. He heard another shout from behind, and took another quick look over his shoulder to see one of the skiers almost on top of him. Before he had time to react he felt a tremendous impact in the back, throwing him completely off course, and almost off his feet. He lost his concentration and his

balance and next thing he knew he was being pushed face down in the snow. A weight landed on his back, forcing him deeper into the fresh snow on the side of the piste. He tried to breathe but felt his mouth and nose fill with snow as he inhaled. He tried to cough, to clear the stuff out of his mouth, but only managed to draw more in. He could feel the snow being drawn deeper and deeper into his mouth, nose and lungs. As he started to suffocate, his vision started to turn black around the edges, and he started to lose consciousness. The last thing he remembered was voices, shouting in alarm, and then everything went black.

* * * * *

The ship shuddered in the water as another torpedo slammed into the hull. There was a muffled explosion deep inside the ship, and splinters and fragments of metal shot in all directions. Alex sheltered behind one of the upper deck gun emplacements as he tried to carry out the repairs he had been assigned to. Even as he worked, he wondered why anyone was bothering, the ship was clearly on its last legs, and couldn't last much longer. There were dead bodies scattered all along the deck, the bridge was a shambles, and he couldn't see the other end of the ship for all the black, billowing smoke coming from all parts of the ship.

He felt another explosion deep beneath his feet, and then a hand grabbed his shoulder. He turned and looked up into the face of the Chief Engineer.

"Come on laddie," he shouted above the noise. "Time to go. The old girl's had it. We've had the order to abandon."

Alex stood up and they made their way across the sloping deck to the lifeboats. Several pairs of empty davits bore mute witness to the truth of the chief's words. They joined a small crowd of men waiting to get into the lifeboats.

"Come on, heave away there," shouted a voice. The Bo'sun came along the deck, organizing the men into teams to get the boats launched. "You there, get hold of this rope and steady her

down.” He thrust the rope into Alex’s hands, and moved on to the next boat. Alex could hear him bellowing instructions as he went.

With men steadying her down the ship’s side with oars, the boat soon entered the water. As soon as it was down, the two men inside cast off the ropes, and men from the ship started clambering down the swinging ropes to the boat. The sea was covered with fuel and oil, and every man there was aware that if they got covered in that and the ship caught fire, they would burn before they could get the filthy stuff off. Al flinched as another shell came screaming overhead. His hands slipped on the rope, and he slid the last few feet into the lifeboat, burning his hands and stripping the skin from them. He found a seat in the boat, and someone shoved an oar into his bleeding hands. “Here, mate, grab onto this and get ready to row.”

After what seemed an age but was in reality only a few minutes, the boat was full and ready to go. One of the seamen assigned to the boat, one of the two who had been in it when it launched, took charge.

“Altogether now lads,” he called, “one, two, one, two.” As he called time, the oars dipped in and out of the water, gradually propelling the lifeboat away from the stricken ship.

They were only a few hundred yards from the ship when the end came. One final torpedo struck the ship squarely amidships and exploded, tearing an enormous hole in her side just below the water line. Alex ducked along with the others as more splinters went flying overhead. One of the men in the boat gave an odd sort of strangled gasp, and let go of his oar. Alex looked over, and saw that his arm had been completely severed by a flying fragment of white hot metal, and had dropped into the water alongside the lifeboat. Two of the other men grabbed the casualty, and tried to stop the bleeding, desperately pressing anything they could find over the wound. Before they could do anything the man had died, slipping away in front of Alex’s eyes. He went limp, and fell forward onto the man in front of him. The

men who had been trying to help him picked him up gently, and pushed him over the side. Although shocked at the apparent callousness of the two men, Alex knew that if they were to survive they had to dispose of the man's body, but the action still shook something deep inside him. There was another massive explosion from the ship, and she split almost in two. As Alex and the others watched the sea rushed in, she capsized, and went down in a matter of seconds.

"I hope those other poor bastards got off all right," muttered one of the men next to Alex. Alex nodded his head.

"Right you lot," said the seaman in charge. "Let's get out of here before Jerry decides to take a pot shot at us. A one, a two, a one, a two."

Alex picked up the rhythm of the count, and started pulling on his oar. His hand was raw and bleeding from the rope burns, but he knew that to stop meant almost certain death, either from fire, torpedo, or exposure and dehydration on the sea. They rowed for what seemed like hours, he didn't know in which direction, all they knew was that it was away from the danger area, towards safety—insofar as any area on this sea could be called safe.

The rest of the convoy they had been travelling with had obeyed orders and scattered as soon as the U-boat attack began, so they couldn't see any other ships around. Having opened the lockers in the bow of the lifeboat, the seaman there had found the emergency rations, fishing lines, and a compass. Unfortunately they had no way of determining their position, and that made it difficult to decide on a course. All Alex knew was that they had passed Gibraltar three days ago, and they were now in the North Atlantic. Finally, after extensive debate, they had decided to sail east and hope they struck land. Unless they were carried through the Straits at night, they should have a better chance of hitting land by going east than in any other direction.

They rowed for several more hours, and then rested. Alex's hands were red raw and he wasn't able to carry on. They found some bandages in a first aid kit, and after washing his hands in

sea water, and dressing them with Vaseline, they were bound up. Alex changed places with one of the others, and collapsed into the bottom of the boat.

Night fell and they were able to relax, as it was highly unlikely they would be spotted by any U-boats during the night. One person was on watch keeping a lookout for any passing ships. They had a torch which they could use to attract attention; they just hoped it would be the right sort of attention. In the early hours of the morning, the lookout shouted.

“A ship, I can hear a ship!” They all roused, and listened out for the sound of engines. Sure enough, the deep noise of a ship’s engines could be heard.

“That must be close, to hear it like that,” one of them remarked. “Get the torch out and start signaling.”

“Which way?” one of them asked.

“Shine it all round, like a lighthouse,” was the reply. “Just make sure they see it.”

“Haven’t we got any rockets?” someone suggested.

There was a frantic rummaging around in the lockers. “Got one,” came a voice.

“Well come on then, get the damn thing lit.” There was a rustle of waxed paper, and then the scraping noise of the igniter tab being pulled. There was a sudden hissing, and a bright red light suddenly shone out.

“Jesus Christ,” someone exclaimed. “They’re right on top of us!”

It was true. The engine noise was loud because the ship, whatever it was, was about 500 yards away and closing fast.

“Wave that bloody flare,” someone shouted. The light started to be waved frantically. Faintly across the water, they could hear shouts from the ship, and suddenly the engine note changed.

“They’ve seen us!”

“Yes, but can they miss us,” came the worried response.

They waited, each man holding his breath, as slowly, slowly, the outline of the ship against the faint star light changed.

They could hear the shouted commands more clearly now, and started to breath easier. The ship was still incredibly close, and they could clearly hear the sound of the engine room telegraph signaling 'dead slow'. They understood the ship wouldn't stop completely due to the danger, but they would slow sufficiently to launch a boat to pick them up. They saw and heard a boat being launched, and within seconds they heard the sound of an engine coming across the water. The other boat was soon alongside.

"Hi guys, need a lift?" The voice was unmistakably American. There were sighs of relief. "Come on, one at a time, and get a move on."

They clambered over the gunwales into the Americans' boat, and were soon being carried over to the ship. Within a very short space of time they were standing on the deck. They looked around, and Alex saw that it was one of the new Liberty ships. They stood there, waiting to hear what to do next. Several ratings arrived, and led them below decks and showed them bunks where they could sleep. They were first examined by the ship's doctor, and Alex's hands were properly cleaned and redressed. They could feel the ship picking up speed as they finally fell into bunks, and one by one fell asleep.

Two days later they were all feeling much better, and enjoying the food on board. As it was a merchant ship the accommodations were better than they were accustomed to in the Navy, and they made the most of it. Although hoping to be returned to the UK the captain interviewed them all and said that they were heading towards the USA, and they would be repatriated from there. At the very least, the feelings went in their bull session after seeing the captain, they could regard this as being a holiday of sorts although they had all volunteered to help out during the voyage, an offer the captain had had no hesitation in accepting. They were assigned watches and quickly settled into the ship's routine. Things went on peacefully for a week, and then there was another alarm. U-boats had been spotted. The ship went to action stations, and Alex found his assigned station. His heart

was pounding and his palms were sweating, and he suddenly realized he was afraid. It hadn't been so bad on his own ship because they could fight back, but here they were sitting ducks. With no armament and a slow top speed, the Liberty ships had been designed as the world's first disposable merchant ship.

They didn't have long to wait. There were two thumps from below decks, quickly followed by two explosions. The ship lurched, and began to settle in the water.

"Abandon ship" came the cry, and there was instant movement all over the ship. The lifeboats were lowered, and men piled into them. Alex could feel the ship starting to sink, and ran for a lifeboat. There was a massive explosion, and the deck erupted in front of him. A blast of heat and a sheet of flame effectively blocked his route, and he doubled back desperately to find another way round. The fire spread with incredible speed, and he found himself cut off. He spotted one of the emergency flotation devices which were scattered over the ship and grabbed off its mounting. He ran to the ship's rail and jumped over, just feet ahead of the flames. He hit the water just as another massive explosion ripped the ship apart. Within seconds it was gone, sinking with amazing speed. He could hear voices from survivors in the lifeboats and set off swimming in that direction, using the flotation device to keep him afloat. He called out, and within minutes was being pulled into the lifeboat.

"Thanks mate," he gasped out.

"OK limey," came the response. Alex did a quick head count. Apart from himself there were only four others in the boat. They drifted in silence, each alone with his own thoughts. Some of the men appeared to be in shock, and Alex didn't blame them. The suddenness of the attack and the rapidity with which the ship had blown up and sunk meant that most of them had been taken completely by surprise. Alex was surprised by how calm he felt. He supposed, in a slightly detached way, that he was also suffering from shock.

The night crawled by, with no sound from any of the other boats which had made it away in time. Everyone was quiet. This lifeboat didn't appear to have the same level of kitting out that his previous one had had, and there was only a small amount of food and water. This was shared out at intervals. The weather, which had been a little choppy and overcast cleared, and the sun began to beat down. The lack of water became a serious concern. It wasn't long before the fights started between the survivors. Alex kept his head down and sat at the rear of the boat, hoping they would overlook him.

One seaman went mad, from what cause Alex didn't know and, insisting that he could see land, jumped overboard and started swimming. He hadn't quite got out of sight before he sank. Two of the others had another fight, and one knifed the other in the arm. The cut was deep and bled profusely. Alex bound it up for him, but doubted that it would heal. He was proved right over the next two days, as the wound festered. By the fourth day gangrene had set in, and he only lasted another couple of days after that. They threw the body over the side. That left three of them. The one with the knife took charge of the boat, issuing food and drink when he decided, and not letting the other two near them. The third man just gave up and after three days without water was delirious. He died as well after another day, and his body was also unceremoniously dumped over the side of the boat. That left the two of them. Alex wasn't scared of the other man, but was wary of his knife. They sat at opposite ends of the boat, and stared at each other.

That night Alex was woken by the violent rocking of the boat. He started up, and rolled to one side. The knife thudded into the thwart next to his head. Alex tried to get to his feet but found himself pinned down by the other man leaning on his shoulders as he tried to get his knife out of the wood. He had thrust it down with such force that it was now stuck in the wood and he couldn't free it. Alex wriggled around, and managed to get out from under him. At the same time, the knife finally came

free and he was attacked again. Alex got to his feet and, crouching, ran for the other end of the boat. Halfway down he tripped over the oars in the bottom of the boat and fell, measuring his length. He turned onto his back, and saw his attacker coming after him with the knife raised, ready to stab again. Without thinking, Alex raised his legs, knees bent, and kicked both legs out at the other man. He connected with his midriff and straightened his legs, and the other man was catapulted into the air and over the side of the boat. Alex heard the splash as he hit the water and his cries as he tried to keep afloat. Alex lay in the bottom of the boat and listened as the cries gradually became fainter, and then died away altogether. His racing pulse gradually slowed down, and he pulled himself up into a sitting position.

The violent fight, short though it had been, had exhausted his bodily reserves which had been much reduced by his recent privations. He found the food locker and discovered that the knife fighter had eaten nearly all of the dried rations which should have lasted for several days yet. The water was still there, and Alex took a long drink.

Several days later he was badly sun burnt, dehydrated, and hungrier than he had ever been in his life before. He had seen no sign of a ship, and spent most of the day drifting in his mind. When lucid, he knew he was probably going to die, and spared some time thinking of Frank and Elsie at home, and little Suzie. Days drifted into each other, and he no longer knew how long he had been adrift. Several times he thought he had seen ships, but had no means to signal to them. It would appear that knife man had thrown anything that wasn't edible overboard. Alex no longer cared. He lay in the bottom of the boat, staring up at the sun, sinking in and out of consciousness. He only knew it was night time because the sun no longer hurt his eyes. Then came a change. The boat rocked violently, and something blocked out the sun.

"Come on, lift him gently," he heard a voice say.

"Frank, is that you?" he asked.

"No mate, you're safe now."

He lifted his head, stared through swollen eyes, and made out a couple of hazy shapes. He sagged back, and everything went black.

* * * * *

Alex woke in hospital. He moved his head to the side, and immediately wished he hadn't, as a searing pain shot from the back of his neck straight up through his skull. He felt as if it had gone right through the top of his head. He groaned and a nurse immediately put her head round the door.

"Ah, you're awake Mr. Henderson," she said. "I'll just go and get the doctor."

Alex wanted to call out and tell her she had his name wrong, but didn't have the energy.

He lay in bed, considering what had happened. It would appear that he had regained his memories of his former life, and after fifteen years he finally knew who he was. Al Henderson had regained the knowledge of Alex Hennessy that had been lost to him following the traumas of his two sinkings and rescues. The question was, which one should he now be? He had been Al Henderson for nearly as long as he had been Alex Hennessy, and he didn't know how to reconcile the two. He heard a noise by the door, and carefully and slowly turned his head. Bridget was there, with the doctor.

"Al, you're awake," she cried, and came running over to the bed. She bent down and kissed him on the lips. The doctor came over as well.

"Careful Mrs. Henderson," he said. "He's got some damage to his neck and we don't want to make it any worse."

She glanced guiltily at Alex, and backed away from the bed. He gave her a smile which she returned, and then turned his attention to the doctor.

"There's something I need to tell you," he said quietly. The doctor shot him a glance, and nodded. He turned to Bridget and said

“It might be as well if you waited outside. I’ll call you in when I’ve finished.” Bridget nodded, blew Alex a kiss, and went outside.

“What seems to be the problem, Mr. Henderson?” asked the doctor.

“When I arrived in America,” Alex began, “I had complete amnesia regarding my previous life. Being almost suffocated in the snow seems to have brought those memories back.”

“Congratulations,” said the doctor. “That’s a remarkable recovery.”

“Yes,” said Alex, “but how long do you think this will last?”

“It should be permanent,” said the doctor. “I’m no neurologist, but I do know a bit about things like this, and I would say it should stay with you. Will that be a problem?”

“How do I decided who I am?” said Alex. “I have two lives which I need to reconcile. Do I stay as Al Henderson, or go back to being Alex Hennessy?”

“Now that I can’t help you with,” the doctor said with a smile. “I’m afraid you’re going to have to cope with that on your own.”

Alex nodded, feeling both relieved and frustrated. Relieved that his memories had finally returned, and should now stay with him, and frustrated because he didn’t know what to do.

The doctor finished his examination, and said cheerfully, “Well, apart from extensive bruising and a painful neck, which should ease off in a few days, I’d say you’d been remarkably lucky. Being nearly suffocated doesn’t seem to have done you any harm.” He nodded to Alex, and moved towards the door. “Have one more day of bed rest, and then you can be discharged,” he said. “I’ll send your wife in now.” He disappeared, and Bridget came back in.

“The doctor tells my you’re going to fine,” she said. “He wants you to stay in here for another day, just to be on the safe side, but then you can come back to the hotel.” She came and sat on the edge of the bed, and took his hand. “I’d like to shoot that idiot who ploughed into you on the ski run,” she said. “The

rangers found him and banned him from the resort. He's only been skiing a couple of times before, and wanted to show off to his friends. He could have killed you."

"Well, he has done something permanent to me," replied Alex. "You know when we first met I told you I had amnesia, and couldn't remember anything about who I was before I came to America."

She nodded, still holding his hand and watching his face anxiously.

"Well, it seems that the idiot has given me my memory back. The second trauma has cancelled out the effect of the first."

"So you can remember who you are?" she said.

"It seems so. I just have to decide who I want to be now." He saw she was looking worried, and smiled up at her. "Don't worry love, I'll still be wanting you as my wife. You're still the best thing that ever happened to me." He gently turned his hand in hers, and brought hers to his lips. "You're still my beautiful Bridget," he said softly.

She smiled back, relieved of one worry. "So if you can remember now, who are you really?" she asked.

Alex started to tell her all about his early life, being evacuated from Coventry, the farm, Frank and Elsie ("so that's where that name came from," she murmured. "I always wondered why you insisted on it.") He told her about going to school, finding out that Suzie wasn't his sister, that his father was dead, and deciding to join the Navy. He told her all about lying about his age so that he could join up, about his training and his all too brief career. He told her about being sunk twice, and finally rescued, and how he woke up in the Seaman's Mission hospital.

"And you know the rest," he said in conclusion. "Now all I have to do is decide whether to live my life as Al Henderson, or Alex Hennessy."

"I think first of all you need to rest," said Bridget, leaning forward and kissing his brow. "We can think about what to do tomorrow, when you're discharged."

“OK honey,” he agreed. “We’ll talk about it tomorrow.”

“And I’ll call Daddy and tell him what’s happened. He might have some good advice on what you should do.”

“Good idea,” Alex nodded.

“OK then, I’ll see you later.”

“Bye, love,” he called to her as she left the room. Once she had gone, Alex fell to worrying over his problem again. Then it suddenly hit him—Frank and Elsie, and even young Suzie, all thought him dead. He would have to get in touch and tell them that he wasn’t. That would come as a shock. It would probably shock them further to find out that he was a successful businessman, with a wife and children.

He sighed and closed his eyes, hoping to fall asleep again, but fate conspired against him. After several attempts to relax, he rang for the nurse and asked her to fetch him a telephone. Bridget was going to phone her father, but Al thought he’d rather speak to his lawyer. He had a lot of respect for Arthur McCluskey, but this situation was rather outside his field of expertise and he wanted good, hard advice about what to do.

The nurse brought him the phone, plugged it in, and left. At least I don’t have to worry about paying the bill, he thought wryly. He rang his lawyer’s direct line and was lucky enough to find him still in the office, despite the late hour. He arranged for him to fly out and meet him the following day at the hotel. Having arranged that he felt a little better, and once again tried to sleep. This time he was successful, and he drifted away quite quickly.

It wasn’t exactly what you’d call a restful sleep, though. Having unlocked his memories, his brain seemed determined to run through all his previous recollections, almost like a librarian cataloguing and sorting a library full of books. He awoke in the early hours of the morning feeling as though he hadn’t slept at all. He lay awake for a while staring at the ceiling, before finally falling asleep again. This time it was a more relaxing sleep, as if his brain had finished sorting the information it had recently regained. He still dreamed, but more peacefully, about Frank and Elsie and his life at the farm.

Chapter 31

Alex woke up when the nurse came in with his breakfast. He looked at what they had brought—pancakes, bacon, coffee, syrup and a fried egg—and suddenly had a craving for one of Elsie’s cooked breakfasts. He sighed and supposed he’d have to get used to this happening now, as he started finding out Alex’s likes and dislikes as well as Al’s. He ate his breakfast and afterwards waited impatiently for the doctor to come round and tell him he could go. When the doctor finally made an appearance, Alex was just about ready to climb the walls. After a brief examination he was pronounced to be fit and relatively healthy, and was told he could go. He was given advice and drugs for his stiff neck, warned not to ski for another couple of days, and then discharged. He immediately asked for a cab and had himself driven back to the hotel.

Once back there he found Bridget waiting for him in their suite. Her father had been told of what had happened, and had insisted on flying out to see for himself. Alex told her that he’d asked his lawyer to come out as well, and said they would probably be on the same flight. They decided to wait for them in the hotel. They sat in their living room, snuggled up on the sofa, and Alex soon demonstrated both his return to health, and his feelings for Bridget. After a highly satisfactory love-making they took a shower together, and afterwards, dressed and refreshed, waited for a call to tell them their expected visitors had arrived.

The call came about an hour later, and a few minutes after that there was a knock at the door. Alex walked over to open it, and found his father in law and his lawyer standing outside. He invited them in, asked them to sit down, and offered them a drink.

“Now then, young Al,” said Arthur. “Me and this fella here,” he jerked his thumb at Alex’s lawyer, “had some discussions on the plane. Now don’t be worried about him breaking your confidence,” he went on, as Alex turned to him with a raised eyebrow, “and don’t give me that look neither. You’re a mighty smart businessman, Al, but you’re still a young whipper snapper as far as I’m concerned, and you don’t know everything yet, not by a long chalk. Anyway,” he continued, satisfied that Alex wasn’t going to say anything further, “we had a chat, and found we were both of the same mind.” Alex looked at his lawyer, Peter Dwyer, who nodded confirmation.

“And what was that?” he asked politely.

“Well, it’s this way, Al,” began Peter. “You’re an American citizen now, you were granted citizenship several years ago, but it was granted in the name of Al Henderson. You’ve been known as that for the past several years, all your business dealings are done in that name, everyone associates you with that name and everything else it stands for. If you change it now, apart from all the paperwork it will generate, it could affect your businesses. People trust Al Henderson ... they don’t know Alex Hennessy.”

“So you’re saying I should say as Al Henderson,” Alex confirmed.

“Yes, that’s my advice,” replied Peter. “By all means change your name to Alex if you wish—you can just tell people Al was short for Alex, and now you want to be called Alex—but don’t change everything.”

“And what do you think Arthur?” Alex asked.

“I agree,” he said. “Changing your name wouldn’t be to your advantage in business. What you do socially and in the family is entirely up to you, but keep things as they are in your business life.”

“Well, I’d actually reached that conclusion myself,” Alex confessed. “However, I would like you to call me Alex. ‘Al’ never seemed to really fit for some reason, and now I know why. When I joined up all my messmates called me ‘Al’ for short, and I hated it. Now I know what my real name is it seems a shame not to use it.”

“OK ... Alex,” Arthur replied. “I think we can accommodate that.”

“Good,” said Alex. “And thank you,” he added.

“And now, suppose you tell us all about this Alex character that my daughter seems to find herself married to. I know Al Henderson, but I don’t know Alex Hennessy and I’d like to meet the guy.”

Alex laughed, and settled himself on the sofa next to Bridget. Arthur and Peter made themselves comfortable in their armchairs, and Alex set off.

“Are you sitting comfortably?” he asked. Surprised, they nodded. “Then I’ll begin.” At their mystified looks, he laughed and said “Sorry, that’s a piece from my childhood. A children’s program called Listen with Mother. It always used to start like that.”

He then went on to recount the story of his life as he had done with Bridget the day before. He found that the more he talked about his past the more real it became for him, and the more vivid the recollections. When he mentioned Yorkshire, Arthur interrupted him.

“Great place, Yorkshire,” he said. Nodding to Bridget he went on. “Your mother and I spent several holidays over there. She loved the place, and always wanted to go back. Seems like we might have an excuse now.”

Alex talked until it was time for dinner, which they ate in the suite. Afterwards Alex continued, describing life in the Navy and how he came to be rescued and brought to America.

“And the rest you know,” he concluded. “So, here I am, Alex and Al, and I have to find some way of bringing them together.”

“I don’t think you have much a problem there,” Arthur put in. “Obviously you’ll have to write to your folks back home and

let them know you're alive after all this time, but otherwise I wouldn't think it will cause a problem. Equally obviously you'll have to go over there to see them, but you'll be taking a holiday in the summer as usual I suppose?" Alex looked at Bridget, who nodded confirmation. "Well then, just take your holiday in England, and go see 'em. I'm sure they'd love to see you, Bridget and the kids just as soon as they know you have a family."

"When was the last time you were over there, Dad?" Bridget asked.

"It would be just before the war," he replied. "1937 was it? Yes, I think it was. I was invited over by an old business partner by the name of William Molyneux to stay with his family while we discussed going into business together. It was obvious there was going to be a war, and we wanted to make sure we could take advantage of it. I stayed there for about six weeks, but then something happened to his young daughter, a lovely girl called Annabelle, and I had to cut the visit short."

"What happened?" Bridget asked curiously.

"Silly little idiot got herself pregnant," Arthur said, snorting in disgust. "Some fortune hunter came sniffing round, and apparently she couldn't resist him. I can tell you something," he went on, "if anyone of his type had come around you, my girl, I'd have taken a shotgun to him. It was obvious he was only after her money, and thought he could get it by seducing her. Well he succeeded in one respect, he did seduce her but he still didn't get her money. She vanished. Left a note for her mother saying that she was going to live somewhere 'far away', and they wouldn't be able to find her. Silly girl."

"I suppose that sort of thing happens fairly often," Bridget put in. "I feel sorry for the poor girl, though. Did anyone try to find her?"

"No idea," her father replied briefly. "As I said, they were all in such an uproar I thought it best to cut my visit short. In the event we never did get our business started. Pity, it would have been extremely useful."

“Oh, you don’t need the money, Dad,” Bridget told him lovingly. “You’ve got enough all ready.”

“It’s not the money, my girl,” her father told her. “It was the business connections I was after. It would have been extremely useful to have had connections on the other side of the Atlantic.”

Alex had got up and wandered over to the window. He turned round and said “Maybe I could help supply those now.”

Arthur snorted. “All due respect to your family, but I scarcely think a Yorkshire farmer would have the sort of connections I’d need to get into business over there.”

Alex shrugged. “No, you’re probably right,” he conceded.

Bridget looked over at him. “You need to get to bed,” she told him. “The doctor told you to rest, remember?”

Alex looked at her in a certain way, and she suddenly blushed, vividly. “I remember dear,” he replied. “And you’re right, I am feeling a bit tired. Perhaps we can continue this in the morning?” he asked.

“All right by me,” Arthur agreed. He got up to go. Bridget went over to him and he gave her a hug and kissed her cheek. “See you in the morning,” he said.

“Good night Dad,” she replied affectionately.

“Come on, young Peter,” Arthur said. “Time to leave these two to it.” Peter also got up, nodded to Alex, and the two of them left.

“Come on you, let’s get you into bed,” said Bridget.

“I thought you’d never ask,” Alex replied, grinning at her.

“That’s enough of that,” she said severely. “You’re too tired to be thinking of that tonight. Especially after this afternoon,” she added.

“You’re right love, I am,” Alex admitted. “I think an early night would do me the world of good.”

He came over to her, put his arms around her, kissed her, and turned to go to the bedroom. Bridget switched off the lights, and followed him.

The next morning was bright and clear, a perfect skiing day. Bridget, however, was having none of Alex going skiing again so soon. She reminded him that the doctor had told him not to go for at least a couple more days. Grumbling, Alex finally agreed to let it go and instead devoted the morning to composing a letter to Elsie and Frank. This proved to be extraordinarily difficult. He didn't know how to start. 'Dear Elsie and Frank, hello I'm not dead' didn't really seem right, and he couldn't think how else to break the news. In the end he enlisted Bridget's help, and between them they managed to compose something which did the trick. Alex wanted to go out and post it straight away, but Bridget persuaded him to wait another day, and re-read the letter before he sent it. As she pointed out, they'd thought him dead for over fifteen years so another day wasn't going to make that much difference.

Alex was forced to admit that she was right. When he read the letter again he found several areas where he could put things better, give better explanations, and rephrase things. He rewrote it, then copied it neatly and walked down to the post office to mail it. He just hoped it wouldn't be too much of a shock to them when it arrived. He had put a phone number in the letter, but wasn't sure if they had the telephone in yet so wasn't expecting a call, but he did hope for a letter.

The next day Alex was back on the slopes, enjoying the skiing again. The weather stayed clear for another four days but then closed in, so they decided they might as well head back to Philadelphia as wait for it to clear again. They were both missing the children, and Alex wanted to organize their trip to England in the summer. He had told Elsie and Frank he would be visiting and he wanted to come and see them. He was disappointed when several weeks went by without hearing anything, but then one evening the phone suddenly rang. Watkins picked it up, and then put the call through to Alex's study.

"Call from England for you, sir," he announced. "Probably from Yorkshire, if I might venture a guess."

Heart pounding, Alex told him to put the call through. "Hello," he said.

"Alex, is that you?" came a voice he recognized.

"Yes, it's me," he replied. "Hello Elsie, how are you?"

Through the phone lines he could hear a muffled crying. "I knew you weren't dead," she said. "I knew it. But it's been so long since we heard anything. How are you, love?"

Alex found he was having difficulty speaking. He was nearly crying as well. "I'm fine, Elsie, just fine," he told her.

The call lasted nearly an hour, with them both catching up on their news. Elsie knew that he was married as he'd put it in her letter, but he was astonished to find out that she was now married and the mother of three children. He asked after Frank, and then finally, Suzie.

"How's my little sister doing?" he asked.

"You know she's not your sister, Alex," replied Elsie.

"No, but that's how I think about her," he responded. "What's she up to?"

Elsie told him about Suzie, how she was studying to be a vet, and all about Robin.

"They'll be getting married as soon as they both qualify," Elsie told him. "But she's on a hunt for her proper parents at the moment, and it's not going too well. She's discovered that she's called Molyneux, though."

Alex felt a tremor run through him. "That's a coincidence," he said slowly. "My father in law was telling me a few weeks ago that he spent some time with a family named Molyneux just before the war. 1937 I think he said. He had to come back early because of an upset in the family."

"What sort of upset," Elsie asked curiously.

"Apparently his daughter got herself pregnant, gave birth, and then disappeared somewhere."

There was a long silence on the phone. "Elsie, are you still there?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm still here," she replied, a curious note in her voice.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

“Alex, when are you coming over?”

“At the end of July,” he replied. “We’ll be over in the last week, and want to spend most of August over there. Why?”

“Could you bring your father in law with you?” she asked.

“Yes, I’m sure he’d love to come. Why?”

“Because I think he might be able to answer some of Suzie’s questions,” she said slowly.

“Oh surely not,” Alex laughed. “Just because of the name? It can’t be the same family.”

“I think you’ll find it is,” replied Elsie. “Think on, Alex; the timing’s right, the name’s right, the circumstances are identical. It has to be the same.”

“I think you’re barking up the wrong tree, Elsie, but yes, we’ll bring Arthur with us.”

“That’s a good lad,” she responded. “Now, tell me more about Bridget.”

They chatted for a few more minutes and then Alex asked the question he’d been avoiding. “Did you ever hear anything more from my mother?” he asked. There was a brief silence.

“Nay, lad, we never did hear another word from her,” Elsie said softly. “I’m sorry, lad, but we never did.”

Alex fought down an unexpected feeling of sadness. “That’s OK Elsie,” he finally replied. “I wasn’t really expecting you to have heard anything. That was some disappearing trick though, wasn’t it.”

“It certainly was, lad, it certainly was.”

“Hey, look at the time,” Alex suddenly exclaimed. “This call must be costing you a fortune.”

“It was worth it just to hear your voice again, lad,” came Elsie’s reply. “We’re all looking forward to seeing you and your family in the summer. And don’t forget, bring your father in law as well.”

“I will,” he promised. They said their goodbyes, and then hung up. Alex sat for a while, thinking about the call, then went

through into the living room where Bridget was sitting reading. She was dressed in her favorite dressing gown made from rose silk, and Alex paused for a minute to appreciate the lovely picture she presented, curled up on one end of the sofa. He loved the way the silk outlined her body underneath, and clung around her breasts and waist, and felt a familiar stirring in his groin. He walked over and kissed her, then sat down in a chair facing her.

“Who was that on the phone?” she asked, putting a marker in her book and laying it on the nearest table.

“It was Elsie,” he replied. “She finally rang me back.”

“You should have called me, I’d love to speak to her.”

“I’m sure you’ll get another chance, love,” he replied.

When she had put her book down, the stretch had opened the front of her robe, and he could just see the curve of one round breast in the opening. Bridget saw him staring and glanced down. She pulled the robe shut again, and smiled when she saw the disappointment on his face.

“Later,” was all she said.

“She wants us to take your father when we go to England,” he told her.

“What on earth for?” she asked in complete astonishment.

“You remember that story he told about staying in England in 1937?” he said. Bridget nodded. “Elsie seems to think it might have something to do with Suzie. It seems she has the same name, and the dates certainly fit.”

“What are you talking about,” Bridget asked.

Alex explained about Suzie and how she wasn’t really his sister. He explained all about Suzie’s search to find out who she was, and how there were several coincidences between her story, and Bridget’s father’s story. He also added that he thought it was nonsense, and that Elsie was on the wrong track entirely, but Bridget disagreed.

“At the very least,” she said practically, “Daddy will enjoy the trip, and you never know, he might even be able to shed some light on this. Elsie’s right, there are a lot of coincidences.”

“I suppose there are a couple,” he admitted.

He was silent for a couple of minutes, and then looked over at her in a way she had learnt to recognize. She started to feel aroused herself, and quite deliberately pulled the sash of her robe undone, and opened the front. She changed her position on the sofa, and let his eyes drink their fill of her body. She could see his arousal begin, and lay back on the cushions. Alex got up but before he could reach her, she said “Don’t you think it would be a good idea to lock the door, love? Watkins hasn’t gone to bed yet.”

He nodded, and walked over to shut and lock the door to the room. When he turned around, Bridget had shed her robe completely, and was lying naked on the sofa. She was gently stroking one hand across her breasts, and the other across her groin. He could see her nipples standing proud, and couldn’t wait to feel them himself. He crossed the floor in a few quick strides, and knelt down beside her. “Hussy,” he murmured before he bent his head and kissed her.

The kiss lasted a long time, and his hands were busy during it. He caressed her silken skin, gently touching her breasts, and rubbing the palms of his hands against her enlarged nipples. He finished the kiss, and looked down at her. Her eyes were closed, and she was panting slightly. He bent down and took one of her nipples in his mouth, and she gasped with pleasure. His hand began to move downwards in slow, languid strokes, moving ever lower with each one. He brushed gently across the hair on her mound, and heard her moan gently. He circled the area slowly, moving ever closer to her hidden treasure until her legs opened, almost of their own volition, and he could finally access her secret centre. He brushed his fingers lightly over this sensitive area, and she arched her back, begging mutely for his touch. Instead of continuing, he instead started to move down her body, showering her with feather light kisses all the while, until he reached his goal. He gently slid her legs around until he could comfortably kneel between them, then opened her folds with his hands, and gazed down at the moistness revealed there.

He enjoyed the sight for a minute, gently blowing up and down as he did so. Bridget moaned again, her hands finding his head. "Please," she whispered, and he bent his head and licked her. Bridget jerked in response, and he started to lick and kiss her all over that area. He moved the fingers of one hand, and inserted his fingers inside her. She began to move in time with the movements of his fingers, and her breathing became faster. He sucked hard on her nodule, and she climaxed suddenly, bathing his fingers in her warm wetness. He withdrew, and saw her gazing down at him, with a smile of pure pleasure on her face. He started to kiss her again, moving upwards this time, until he was once more kneeling beside her, kissing her breasts and sucking on her nipples. His free hand was still moving in and out of her, his thumb rubbing her nodule at the same time. With a shuddering gasp, she climaxed again. Alex stood up and, gazing down at her, began to remove his clothes. By the time he had removed his shirt, she was already reaching for his belt, and her quick fingers soon had his trousers undone. They fell to the floor around his ankles, and she reached out and pulled his boxer shorts down until his fully erect penis was visible to her. She leant forward, and took it in her mouth. Alex also leant forward, and took her full breasts in his hands as she worked her head backwards and forwards along his shaft. She was sucking hard as she moved, and Alex knew he couldn't last much longer. He stepped back, and saw her smile in satisfaction as he did so. She lay back on the sofa. Alex moved until he could kneel on the sofa between her legs, and then slowly entered her. He started moving backwards and forwards, reveling in the feel of her warmth and tightness. She started to move beneath him, urging him on, and he went with her, stroke for stroke, until he felt as if he would burst. He felt her start to climax, and with a juddering sigh he let himself go as well. He slowed, and then stopped, and looked down at her. She was lying with her eyes closed, her mouth slightly open, with a rosy flush suffusing her skin. He bent down and kissed her slowly and lovingly.

“Woman, you’re incredible,” he whispered.

“Only because you taught me,” she replied. “Don’t you remember how long it took for me to figure out that the things you wanted me to do would give me pleasure as well?”

Alex gave a short, soft laugh. “I do indeed my love,” he said fondly. “You were like a little nun when we married. I’d never have guessed that you would be so passionate when we first made love.”

She giggled. “Good, isn’t it?”

He slowly lowered himself on top of her. “It sure is,” he murmured into her ear. “You can do it to me every time, you know.”

“Of course I know,” she murmured back. “It wouldn’t be any fun if I didn’t.”

He laughed. “I think I’d better go and have a shower,” he told her. “You’ve got me in quite a state.”

“Shall I join you?” she asked.

“Naturally,” he responded, getting up from the sofa. “It’s about time you earned your keep and acted as my bath slave.”

“Beast,” she said, getting up and slowly putting her robe back on. “Are you going to walk around the house like that?” she asked, as he put his boxers on, but just picked up the rest of his clothes.

“Why not, I’m decent,” he replied.

“But everyone will know what we’ve been doing,” she said.

“Sweetheart, they know anyway,” he assured her. “It’s no secret, now is it?”

“I suppose not. But why flaunt it?”

“Why not?” he asked her. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

She sighed. “No, it just seems, oh I don’t know, a bit wrong, that’s all.”

“Nothing of the sort,” he said briskly. “I don’t mind people knowing I find my wife sexy enough to make love to in the living room.”

She blushed at the compliment. “Well, if you put it like that,” she said.

“I do. Now come on, let’s get upstairs and have that shower.”

He opened the door for her, and they walked upstairs together.

“Don’t forget you’ve got a busy day tomorrow,” he reminded Bridget later, lying in bed.

“Oh, what am I supposed to be doing?” she asked.

“You’ve got a trip to England to arrange,” he told her. “And don’t forget to invite your father.”

Chapter 32

It was July. Alex had nearly finished making the arrangements for his business during his planned absence. He had had Mary running around like a headless chicken over the last couple of weeks making sure everything was in place, and that everyone knew what everyone else was going to be doing, and who had responsibility for what. Alex had never been away for so long before, and certainly had never been so far. He would be contactable by phone, but the time difference would make that difficult. His lawyer had been briefed, as had his stock broker. He was leaving Rob in overall charge of things because he respected his judgment, and knew that Rob would do things his way. Mary would be there to help out. Alex was well aware of the fact that she knew almost as much about running his business as he did, and had told Rob to rely on her judgment on matters to do with the day to day running of the place. Reluctant at first, after a week spent in her company Rob was more than happy to trust her judgment.

It had been a strange few months, Alex reflected. Rob, Ted and Charlie had been excited to learn he had his memories back, and Hester had been over the moon for him. He had had to spend hours telling them about his former life, and they had been enthralled by tales of life on the farm, finding them almost as unbelievable as the fairy tales he spun for his children.

Arthur and Frankie had gone wild with excitement when they had found out they would be flying to England. No one they knew

had ever been so far on a plane, they told him. The nanny, Susan, had asked to be left at home as she didn't ever want to get on 'one of them unnatural things.' Alex and Bridget had given her a holiday, and had asked Mary to find them a temporary nanny. Mary had suggested that they find one once they got to London, a suggestion which had found favor with both of them.

Now it was the day before their departure, and Alex was feeling a strange mix of emotions. He was excited to be returning to the land of his birth once again, and couldn't wait to see it. He was nervous of his forthcoming meeting with Elsie and Frank, and worried that they might not like Bridget. Bridget could occasionally be very reserved, usually when she was in an unfamiliar situation or feeling shy, and that could give the wrong impression to people. However, Alex knew from past experience how much at home Elsie could make people feel, and he was sure Bridget would soon settle down when they got to the farm.

Alex was also looking forward to meeting Suzie. Elsie had said that she had grown up to be a beautiful young woman, and that she was engaged to be married to her young fellow student. Elsie had also let slip that young Robin was likely to inherit a title and an estate when his older brother died, and Bridget had been thrilled at the thought of meeting 'a real, live, lord' whilst in England. Alex wasn't sure if he would approve of this scion of the nobility, but didn't want to form any preconceived notions about him. After all, Suzie wasn't really his sister, and what she did was no concern of his, but he wanted to see her again, and falling out with her fiancée would be a sure fire way to spoil the visit, especially as they would all be staying at the farm house over the summer, with Suzie and Robin seeing practice there.

Alex had asked Elsie if there would be sufficient room for all of them, and she had laughed. "Have you forgotten the size of the place?" she'd teased him when he mentioned it. There would be plenty of room, she assured him.

They were flying into London to start with. Bridget wanted to spend some time in the shops, and Alex had agreed it would be a

shame to miss the opportunity. He proposed taking the boys to see the sights whilst Bridget bankrupted him shopping in Bond Street, which she thought was a great idea. After a week in London they would travel up to the farm and stay there for another two weeks, before returning to London for a few days before flying back. They were flying from New York and would be spending the night before, and the night after, the trip in a hotel there before returning to Philadelphia. Alex had asked Hank, his chauffeur, to stay in New York to meet them and drive them back, and Hank had enthusiastically agreed. He was delighted to be given the chance to see New York at his employer's expense, and had told Alex this. Alex had laughed and booked him into a top class hotel so that he could thoroughly enjoy the experience. When Bridget had asked him why, Alex told her that it wasn't that expensive and if it meant Hank having a good time at least he would be where they needed him, and it was a way to keep good staff.

So they were all packed and ready to go, and Alex was waiting for Hank to bring Arthur to the house so that they could all set off together in the morning for New York. Arthur had intended to meet them there, but Bridget had reminded him of his appalling record of time-keeping, and had told him she would be quite stressed enough by organizing this trip and didn't need anything else to worry about, and he would be at their house the night before they left. Arthur had given in, not very gracefully, and agreed that if Alex's car would pick him up he would spend the night with them. Much relieved, Bridget had asked Mrs. Watkins to cook all her father's favorite dishes for dinner by way of a thank you. Alex and Bridget were now in their living room awaiting his arrival. Alex moved over to where Bridget sat on the sofa, and sat down. He nuzzled her neck, and caressed her breast through the fabric of her gown.

"If you're going to start that," she told him tartly, "you'd better go and sit over there. There isn't time now, you know there isn't."

Regretfully Alex agreed, and moved himself to the other end of the sofa. "Is this far enough away my love?" he asked.

“Only just,” she said severely, but with the glimmer of a smile.

“Good, I’ll just ogle you from here then,” he replied. He looked more closely at her dress.

“Just how do you get into that thing?” he asked, puzzled.

She smile impishly at him. “You’ll just have to wait until later,” she teased.

“I suppose I can always rip it off if I have to,” he muttered under his breath.

“I heard that,” she replied. “And if you rip this dress off you’ll never hear the end of it. I had this made specially.”

“Spending all my money again,” he grumbled.

Bridget smiled. She knew Alex made far more than she could spend, and also knew that he liked to pretend she was bankrupting him in the process. She also knew he liked her to dress well. His preference was also for sheer, sexy lingerie, so she was able to indulge her own passion for this without a twinge of guilt. What he liked most of all, though, was when they went anywhere and she didn’t wear any panties. He always said he got a real kick out of seeing her dressed with such propriety, but knowing she was nearly naked underneath. She laughed and called him a pervert whenever he said this, but she secretly admitted she found it as exciting as he did. On a couple of occasions they had also indulged in some discreet love making during some boring evenings, with her sitting on his lap, apparently all prim and proper, but in actual fact open to his touch and with him taking full advantage of it.

However as they were expecting her father tonight, she had forgone that illicit pleasure and was fully dressed. Alex had expressed his disappointment, but she had been firm with him. It wouldn’t feel right, she told him, to be doing that sort of thing in front of her father. Alex had grumbled, but had seen her point of view.

They now sat and waited for Arthur’s arrival. They discussed the final arrangements for the journey, and checked with each

other that everything had been done. Alex had been more than happy to leave the details to Bridget. She was an excellent organizer and had a flair for thinking of things which might escape other people. He had told her on one occasion that he wished she would come and work for him as his PA, but she had turned him down saying with them both in the same office it would be impossible to get him to concentrate on work.

They heard a knock at the door, and a couple of seconds later Watkins was showing Arthur into the living room.

“Take my bags upstairs, there’s a good fellow,” said Arthur as he came in.

“Certainly sir,” the butler replied, closing the door behind him.

Arthur came over and kissed Bridget, shaking hands with Alex. Alex offered him a drink and the evening got off to a good start. Dinner was served promptly at eight, and Arthur was tickled pink that Bridget had had all his favorites prepared. He praised Mrs. Watkins’ cooking, saying that if he could afford her salary he’d pinch her from Alex and Bridget, and open her a restaurant.

The rest of the evening passed in a very pleasant manner, with them discussing what they were going to do in England. Arthur concurred with Alex that taking the children round the sights would be ‘a damned sight more entertaining’ than going shopping with Bridget. They went to bed just before midnight.

They were all up bright and early the next morning. Susan had the children ready just after breakfast, and was ready herself just afterwards. Although she wouldn’t be going with them the whole way, she was coming to New York with them to help look after the children. She then had a few days off before returning to the house. She would be taking her main holiday whilst Alex and Bridget were away, and would be back there waiting for them on their return.

They set off in good time and arrived in New York on schedule. They all checked into their hotel, including Hank, who was to stay over and take them to the airport the next day.

There was time for a couple of hours sightseeing, and Bridget took advantage of Macey's and Bloomingdale's to pick up some items which, she assured Alex, she had forgotten to pack. Alex warned her about the luggage allowance, but she pointed out that was per person, and the children only had one large case between them so she would have plenty to spare. Giving up, Alex left her to it.

They dined early, and also had an early night. The children found it difficult to settle as they were excited to be travelling, and flying the next day. However, they finally settled down and eventually went to sleep. Bridget freely admitted she wouldn't have been able to cope without Susan being there, and said she wished she were coming on the plane. Finally, the next morning, they set off for the airport. Hank negotiated the New York traffic with surprising ease, and had them there in excellent time. They said good bye to him, and went to check in.

Once through into the airport departure lounge there was nothing to do but sit and wait until their flight was called. Alex had decided to fly first class, and they would be boarding first. The flight was called and they were escorted to their seats by the hostess. They settled in and made themselves comfortable.

The flight was a long one, but it went smoothly and almost before they knew it they were touching down at Heathrow. They all disembarked, and Alex tracked down the car and chauffeur arranged to collect them from the airport. They travelled into London, and finally arrived at their hotel. By this time the children were so tired all they wanted to do was go to bed. The hotel offered an excellent baby-sitting service, so Alex, Arthur and Bridget settled them down, and then went down to dinner, leaving them in the hands of the hotel's baby sitter.

The food was excellent and Bridget, who had steeled herself for the dreadful English food, was pleasantly surprised. Alex told her that she had paid too much attention to magazine articles which compared English and French food always to the detriment of the English, and Arthur agreed.

The seven days they spent in London were enjoyed by all of them. Alex and Arthur took the boys around all the major attractions. They especially loved the Tower of London, and were fascinated by the Warders' tales. They were amazed at the size of the ravens in the tower, and loved the views of London that could be obtained from various locations around the Tower. Their next favorite was the Imperial War Museum, which the boys found awe-inspiring. They rated the British Museum as wonderful, but not terribly exciting. They loved the trip on the river, but the best day they spent was all the way out at Whipsnade Park. They set off early in the morning and spent the whole day there, including lunch provided by the hotel. They arrived back in the early evening with the boys fast asleep, one sitting in Arthur's lap, and the other in Alex's as they were driven back to the hotel.

After three days of shopping, Bridget declared herself all shopped out, so on the Friday they had a family day. They took a boat trip down the river to Greenwich, and spent the day walking round the Maritime Museum, marveling at the meridian line, and exploring the Royal Observatory. They picnicked on the lawns, ran around the park, and had a fantastic day out. The weather had been splendid all week, and they were looking forward to the drive to Yorkshire on the next day.

Alex had hired a car, and was proposing to drive all the way himself. Bridget had protested initially, but Arthur had said that he would help with the driving if necessary. Bridget still wasn't totally happy and had more than once suggested they travelled by train, but Alex had told her if they didn't have a car available at the farm they wouldn't be able to get out and about. The prospect of being stuck in one place for two weeks had finally tipped the balance, and Bridget had agreed to the hire car.

They set off after breakfast, and Alex quickly got the hang of driving on what was, to him, the wrong side of the road. He made it onto the Great North Road, and they settled down for the long drive. They stopped for a break at around lunchtime, and they were all glad of the opportunity to stretch their legs.

Once back in the car Alex pressed on, and they got to Leeds at about three o'clock. They decided to carry on, and Alex picked up the road to Halifax. Alex was getting excited as he picked out recognized landmarks, and pointed them out to the others. They arrived in the town about forty minutes after leaving Leeds, and drove across the North Bridge. Alex successfully navigated the town and they were finally on the last stretch, heading out in to the countryside. Bridget was completely charmed by the 'quaint' aspects of the town, and said she wanted to come back and explore it properly. Arthur was equally captivated by the countryside, which he remembered from previous trips. Alex was surprised as he didn't think Arthur had been to Halifax before, but Arthur explained that it was just Yorkshire, he loved the county best of all he had seen of England.

Alex's excitement was mounting. He recognized each twist and turn in the road, and could remember the route to the farm. He seemed to recognize each individual hedge, and was eagerly looking out for the entrance to the farm's lane. He saw it, and turned. If he could have done, he would have driven as fast as possible. However, the lane was still a typical farm lane and he had to slow down. His heart was beating so fast he thought it would burst out of his chest and suffocate him. He saw the familiar farm buildings, with the house standing a little to one side.

"Is that the farm, Daddy?" little Arthur asked from the back seat.

"Yes, sweetheart, that's the farm," he replied. Everyone was craning their necks trying to get a good view. Finally Alex drew into the farmyard and pulled the car over to one side, taking care to leave a space for Frank's car. He switched off the engine, and sat for a second. Then everyone wanted to climb out at once and within seconds they were standing in the farm yard. Alex breathed in the old, familiar smells, which brought back a rush of memories. He heard the barking of dogs from one of the barns, and noted a new car sitting on the other side of the yard. He looked around, drinking in all the familiar sights. Bridget and

Arthur, with the two boys, were standing by the car, giving him time to remember.

They all turned at the sound of the kitchen door opening. Alex turned, and there was Elsie, standing looking at him. As she took in the sight of him, one hand went to her mouth, and she almost whispered, "Alex, is that really you?"

And then she was coming forward, almost running, laughing and crying at the same time. He took several steps towards her, and then he was caught in her arms, and being comprehensively hugged.

"Oh Alex, it *is* you," she said. and then could only say his name, over and over. Alex was equally overwhelmed, crying and hugging her back as hard as he could. For several moments they clung to each other, and then separated.

"Oh, let me look at you," Elsie said, sniffing back her tears, and rubbing her eyes. Alex stood back, and looked at her.

Elsie saw a tall young man, taller than she was now. She saw the face of the boy in the man he had become, but she would have recognized him anywhere. She let her eyes roam lovingly over his face, recognizing individual features. Alex saw the equally familiar features; older now, and with more lines, but still the same Elsie who had been so kind to him, and had looked after him all those years ago. She was smaller than he remembered, and it seemed strange to look down on her. He hadn't realized he had grown so tall.

"And is this your family?" Elsie said, turning to where the others stood, watching the reunion. Bridget was wiping her eyes with a handkerchief, and Arthur was looking suspiciously watery-eyed, but the children stood wide-eyed, amazed to see their father hugging and kissing another woman.

"Yes, come and meet them," he said, taking her arm and leading her forward.

"This is Bridget, my wife," he started.

Elsie came forward and gave her a hug. Bridget looked a little startled, but returned the hug quite happily. Elsie kissed her on the

cheek. "Welcome, my dear," she said. "I never thought I'd get to meet Alex's wife." Bridget kissed her back, but said nothing.

"These are the children," Alex moved along. "This is Arthur, the eldest."

Arthur put his hand out, very formally. Elsie shook it solemnly, and then gave him a hug.

"Hello Arthur," she said. "I hope you'll enjoy being on the farm." The little boy looked a little uncertain, and moved closer to his mother.

"And this is Frankie," Alex continued. Frankie didn't bother shaking hands, he just held his arms out for a hug. Elsie bent down and picked him up, kissing him on the cheek. Frankie nestled closer, and kissed her back.

"Hello Frankie," Elsie said, and Frankie giggled. She bent and put him down. "We'll have some tea and biscuits in a bit," she said. "Would you like that?"

"What's biscuits?" he asked. Elsie looked momentarily disconcerted, but Bridget said "Cookies, sweetheart," and his face brightened.

"I like cookies," he announced, and Elsie laughed.

"I'm sure you do," she said.

Finally Alex turned to Arthur. "And this is my father in law, Arthur McCluskey."

Elsie put her hand out. "Pleased to meet you Mr. McCluskey," she said.

"Please, call me Arthur," he replied. "Everyone else does."

"Arthur, then," Elsie agreed. "Come in the house, all of you, and let's get you settled in."

Elsie took Alex's arm, and Arthur took Bridget's, with young Arthur taking his hand, and Frankie taking Bridget's.

"Where are the others?" Alex asked as they crossed the yard.

"Well, Mo's out at a sheep dog trial. He would have stayed to meet you but I told him I wanted you all to myself for a couple of hours before I had to share you with the others. Frank's taken

some sheep to market for the same reason. The children have gone with Mo.”

“And what about young Suzie, and her young man?” he asked.

“They’re out with the vet, Huw Edwards. One of the farmers rang in with a difficult calving, so they’ve all gone off to sort that. Heaven knows when they’ll be back.”

“I can’t wait to see Frank again,” Alex said as she ushered him into the well-remembered kitchen. He stood for a moment, looking round. “Nothing’s changed,” he said in surprise.

“Well, not quite,” Elsie told him as she urged him forward, allowing the rest of them to come inside.

“What a wonderful kitchen,” Bridget exclaimed. “It’s just how I imagined a farm kitchen would be.” Elsie smiled at her, and gestured for her to take a seat at the table. She sat down, and the two children went to stand beside her.

“That’s right,” approved Elsie. “Get yourselves sat down, and we’ll have a cup of tea before I take you up to your rooms.”

Alex sat down, continuing to look around. Now he had the leisure to observe he noticed that there were changes. The table, for a start, was bigger than he remembered, but with the number of people now living on the farm, he supposed it would have to be. Another thing that was new was the telephone in the corner. He remembered Frank being against having any modern contraptions in the house, and supposed they must have had it installed when Suzie left home. He also noticed the electrical fittings, and realized that the whole house must have been wired.

“When did you get the electric in?” he asked.

“Oh, that was when Mo and I got married. Mo refused to live in the house until it was easier for me to look after, so Frank gave in and had it done. We started off with only the downstairs and the milking parlor being done, but the whole farm’s been done now, and we have lights in the barns as well.”

“And the telephone?” he asked.

“Oh, that was when Suzie left home,” Elsie replied, confirming his guess. “It just made it so much easier for us to keep in touch.”

Elsie brewed the tea, and poured it out. She put a plate of biscuits on the table, and a large cake, and urged them to help themselves.

“Could the boys have some milk, please?” Bridget asked.

“Yes of course, unless they’d prefer fruit squash?” Bridget held a short, whispered conversation with the boys. “Arthur would like squash, but Frankie would prefer milk,” she said.

Elsie smiled and nodded and produced the requested refreshments. She sat down at the table and they started chatting. Elsie and Alex did most of the talking, with the others interjecting things as they felt necessary. Alex didn’t say much about what had happened to him as he knew he would have to tell everyone, and he said he’d rather only do it once.

Mo arrived about half an hour later with the children, and there was a happy cacophony of greetings, and introductions. During the inevitable racket the noise of another arrival went unheard. No one knew anyone else had arrived until the door opened. Alex turned round, and saw Frank standing there in the doorway. For a moment no one moved, until Alex walked forward, and Frank came to meet him. They stood for a second face to face, and then Frank’s face crumpled, and they were hugging each other.

“Alex, lad,” was all Frank could say. “Frank,” Alex kept repeating. After several minutes they separated, each one wiping his eyes.

“Frank, you haven’t changed a bit,” Alex said when he had recovered himself slightly. “I swear that’s the same cap you were wearing when you took me to Leeds to join up.”

“Eh, lad,” Frank said. “Tha’s grown up gradely.”

“Come and meet the family,” Alex said, clearing his throat.

He introduced Bridget, and Frank looked at her admiringly. “Tha’s a reet pretty lass,” he said admiringly.

Alex introduced the children, and Frank was delighted to meet his young namesake, and obviously flattered that although Alex had forgotten a lot of things, he still had some recollection of Frank.

They all sat back down again, while Elsie put the kettle on again.

“What’s for dinner, love?” asked Mo, cutting the cake.

“Just the usual, meat pie and all the trimmings,” Elsie replied.

“Aw, fantastic,” said Alex. “I can remember your pies, Elsie. You’re in for a treat,” he said to the rest of the family.

“Are we waiting for Suzie and Robin?” Mo asked.

“No, we don’t know what time they’ll be back,” Elsie said. “I’ll just plate them up some dinner, and keep it warm for them in the range. They can have it when they get in.”

“Is that the girl you wanted me to talk to?” asked Arthur curiously.

“Yes, that’s right,” Elsie confirmed. “I think you might be able to throw some light on her background.”

“I still think that’s a long shot,” said Alex. “I mean, what can Arthur possibly know about Suzie? He hasn’t been here for years.”

“True,” admitted Elsie, “but he was here in 1937. Suzie was born in 1938, almost nine months after his visit. Not that I’m implying anything there,” she added hastily.

Arthur laughed. “Believe me, I’d be flattered,” he said.

Elsie smiled at him. “Anyway, you knew Annabelle Molyneux and the family, and you can give her some background information.”

“I’m OK with that,” Arthur replied easily.

There was the sound of a car in the farmyard. Elsie looked up, surprised. “That must be them,” she said. “They’re earlier than I expected.”

“Must have been a quicker delivery than they thought,” Frank commented.

They heard a car door slam, and then footsteps across the yard. There was a slight tension in the kitchen and then the door opened, and two people came in.

Robin came in first, and blinked. "I gather your guests have arrived," he said to Elsie and Frank with a grin.

Elsie smiled back, and Alex could see that he was tall, good looking, with a quick and ready smile. Alex, however, was more interested in the young woman who came in behind him. Suzie was smaller than expected, neat, and quite staggeringly beautiful. For some reason he hadn't expected her to be beautiful. She came in past Robin, and stood looking at everyone. She looked from one to the other, and then saw Alex. She smiled at him, and Alex felt his heart lurch.

"Alex?" she asked. Alex nodded. She came across the room to him, and stopped in front of him. She put her head on one side, and looked up at him.

"You look better than your photograph," she said finally. Everyone laughed. Suzie smiled and Alex could see why she had captivated Robin.

"Come and meet the rest of us," he said, taking her hand and leading her over to Bridget. Bridget smiled, and they touched cheeks. Bridget introduced the children, and then turned to her father.

"And this is my father in law," Alex finished off, introducing Arthur.

Arthur stepped forward, and took her hand. He smiled at her, and she smiled back, looking at him with her head on one side.

"Well, if I had any doubts before," he said slowly, "I think they've been blown away by meeting you. I remember Annabelle Molyneux, and if you're not her daughter I'm a Frenchman."

Suzie smiled at him again, then stepped forward and kissed his cheek.

"I think I've been waiting to meet you for a long time," she said. "Why don't you sit down and tell me all about it?"

PART SIX — SUZIE

Chapter 33

“Good God!” Robin exclaimed.

Helen and I looked over sharply at Robin. “What’s the matter?” I asked.

“I know that name,” Robin explained, still looking at the birth certificate.

“Well go on then, what does it say?” Helen demanded.

“Your mother’s name is Annabelle Molyneux,” Robin read out. “So we weren’t too far wrong on that on.”

“And my father’s name?” I asked anxiously.

Robin frowned. “That’s the odd thing,” he said. “It’s got ‘father unknown’.”

“You mean she didn’t know who the father was?” Helen asked, puzzled.

“No, silly, it means she didn’t want anyone else to know who he was,” I told her.

“I wonder why she didn’t want anyone to know?” Helen commented.

“Maybe she was trying to protect him,” Robin said. “She might have been so much in love with him that she didn’t want to put his name on the birth certificate in case it made things difficult for him.”

“Or maybe he bullied her into doing it that way,” said Helen, darkly.

“I suppose anything’s possible,” shrugged Robin. “Unless we can track down your mother and ask her we’ll never know.”

“Suzie’s mother, or Mrs. Hennessy?” asked Helen.

“Either,” said Robin. “Mrs. Hennessy might know who the father is, but your mother will definitely know. I wonder what happened to her.”

“Can you ask George?” I asked.

“No, I think George got all the information he could when I spoke to him before. I can try, but I don’t think he’ll be able to tell us anything else.”

“So where do we go from here?” Helen asked.

Robin shrugged. “I really don’t know,” he confessed. “I thought once we’d found the birth certificate we’d know everything we needed to.”

“Well, at least we got something,” I said.

Robin put his arm round me and hugged me. “At least we know you’re a member of the Molyneux family,” he said. “That might bring Mother round.”

“Why would that make a difference?” I asked, puzzled.

“Like I told you, Mother is the biggest snob going, and the Molyneux family is way up there in her lexicon. She thinks they’re wonderful.”

“But if I’m the cause of the big scandal she was talking about, surely it won’t make any difference. Any besides, I’m illegitimate—she won’t like that one bit.”

Robin laughed. “You could be their nanny and she’d think you were better than any other nanny,” he said. “Believe me, most of the nobility and gentry in this country are descended from the by blows of royalty. Being illegitimate isn’t a bar to anything, my love.”

“I thought you couldn’t inherit a title if you were illegitimate?” Helen put in.

“It depends,” replied Robin. “But that’s hardly anything we need to consider, is it?”

“Oh great, so now I’m a bastard,” I said gloomily.

“Don’t be so ridiculous,” snapped Helen. Robin laughed.

“What’s so funny?” I asked, a bit grumpily, I must admit.

“You are, my love,” he said lifting my chin with his finger and kissing me softly on the lips.

“Why?”

“Calling yourself a bastard. You might not be, you know.”

“How could I not be?”

“Didn’t it ever to you that Annabelle could have married your father?”

“Eh?” I was startled.

“I see that idea never occurred to you.”

“No, never. Why would it be ‘father unknown’ on my birth certificate if they were married?”

“Because she didn’t want anyone to know,” said Helen excitedly.

“Precisely,” agreed Robin.

“George told us she disappeared,” I reminded them. “Do you thing that’s where she went, to be with her husband?”

“It’s possible,” Robin admitted. “I would presume if that is the case she knew he was someone her family would never accept, and that’s why she left.”

“And what of Mrs. Hennessy?” Helen put in. “I wonder what became of her?”

“It’s entirely possible she left to go with Annabelle,” said Robin.

“But why would she leave me in Yorkshire?” I asked. “Surely, if I were Annabelle’s child she’d have taken me with her, and sent Alex to Yorkshire on his own.”

“Now there you have me,” Robin confessed. “I can’t imagine why she wouldn’t take you with her, unless there was a problem we can’t think of.”

“It does seem a strange thing to do,” mused Helen. “I mean, she goes dashing off, leaving Alex with Mrs. Hepton, and then comes back with a baby. Her husband knew about it because

he put you in his will, so that wouldn't be a problem, and then she packs you and Alex off up to Yorkshire and disappears. Weird."

"Weird is right," I agreed.

"Well, I don't suppose we'll ever know all the answers," Robin said. "So I suggest we just get on with our lives, and put those mysteries to one side."

"Easy enough for you to say," I said grumpily.

"I know it's going to be difficult love," he replied sympathetically. "But at least we know where you come from, and who your mother was."

"You keep saying that," I said.

"I know," he said with a smile. "It's only because I can't think of anything else to say."

"Well, if that's all we can do today, I'm going to leave you two to it," said Helen decisively, getting off the bed. "I've got a date tonight, and I need to get ready."

"A date? Who with?" I asked her. Helen smiled archly.

"With Jonathan, from downstairs," she told me.

"But he's got a girlfriend," Robin said.

"Not any more," Helen replied smugly. "He told me they'd split up a couple of weeks ago."

Robin frowned. "I seem to remember she hasn't been around for a while," he admitted.

"Well, enjoy yourself," I told her.

"I will," she promised, with a wicked little grin.

"And be careful ... you know what I mean," I said meaningfully.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to get caught," she replied. "I've been back to the clinic, and I'm all set."

"Well make sure you use Jonathan's room," said Robin. "I've just washed the sheets."

"Who's just washed the sheets?" Helen asked.

"You know what I mean," he said. "Now get out of here, you hussy."

She laughed, and gave me a wink as she went out. Robin put his arms round me, and nuzzled my neck.

“Alone at last,” he said, in his best over-egged theatrical style. I laughed.

“Oh sir, surely you’re not going to take advantage of me,” I fluttered in a high falsetto voice. “I’m not that sort of girl.”

“Any girl is that sort of girl,” he replied. “And yes, I am going to take advantage of you ... shameless advantage. Starting right now.”

I loved his play-acting. He could always break me out of a somber mood with his antics, and his sense of humor could always make me smile. He was also sensitive to my moods and he could tell that right now I needed the sense of security that came through his loving. He suited actions to words, and started to kiss me gently on the side of my neck. He gently pushed me back on the bed, and his hand slid under my top, gently stroking my skin. I put one hand behind his head, and caressed the nape of his neck. It was one of his most sensitive areas. He gently pulled my top up over my breasts. He bent his head a little further, and started to move his mouth over my bra, leaving hot patches on my skin. He slipped his hand around my back and unfastened my bra one-handed. This was a technique he had needed to practice, but as they say, practice makes perfect, and he could now do it perfectly.

Having undone the clasp, he moved his hand around, under my bra, until his hand cupped my breast. He pushed the bra out of his way, and took my nipple gently in his mouth. I arched my back, to press more into his mouth. He moved onto the other breast, and treated that one the same. He started to move his tongue in circles around the nipple, gradually getting bigger, until he reached the area between them. He moved down my body, kissing as he went, until he reached the waistband of my skirt. He sat up.

“We have a problem here,” he murmured.

“What’s that?” I asked languidly.

“You’re wearing far too many clothes,” he replied. “How can I possibly take proper advantage of you if you’re still wearing all this,” and he flicked my skirt with his finger.

“I suppose I should take it off then,” I suggested innocently.

“That’s a good idea,” he agreed enthusiastically. He stood up, and extended a hand. I took it, and he pulled me up and off the bed. After I was standing up, he pulled me into his arms, and we kissed again. His hands were wandering all over my body, caressing my breasts, pulling my skirt up, and insinuating his fingers into my panties.

“You’d better hold on a minute,” I said.

“What for,” he asked, busy with kissing my neck.

“I need to go to the bathroom and get ready for you,” I told him. “I don’t want to do what I told Helen not to.”

He lifted his head, and nodded. “But don’t you dare take off anything else while you’re in there,” he warned me. “I want to do that myself,” he said. “Undressing you is one of my chief pleasures in life, and you’re not going to deprive me of it.”

“Pervert.”

“Yep, that’s me,” he agreed with a grin. “Now get yourself into that bathroom and get ready.” And he turned me round, pushed me towards the door and slapped my bottom gently to send me on my way.

I hurried to the bathroom, eager to continue where we had left off. I was aroused, and wanted Robin. I reflected that I was becoming quite shameless, and grinned. I was enjoying becoming shameless, I thought, and had something in mind for Robin when I got back into the bedroom. I opened the bathroom door, and got a shock. Helen was in the bath, and Jonathan was there with her, giving her a massage. He heard the door open, and jumped up.

“Oh shit,” I heard him exclaim.

I couldn’t help it, I laughed. Although not entirely dressed, I was at least decent. I stammered an apology, but Helen just waved one hand languidly.

“Don’t worry, we should have locked the door,” she said calmly. “Did you need to use the loo?”

“Er, yes, among other things,” I said, hoping she would pick up on the ‘other things’ bit.

“No problem. Jonathan can wait outside until you’ve finished.” She gestured, and Jonathan left. He was blushing bright red, and was trying to hide the fact he had an enormous erection behind his hands. I opened the door for him, and he sidled out.

“Sorry about that,” I apologized to Helen again.

“Don’t worry,” she repeated. “I take it you need to fit something before going back to lover boy.”

“Yes,” admitted. “I don’t want to get caught.”

“Very sensible,” she congratulated. me. “You’d better hurry up, before you go off the boil.”

“No chance of that,” I grinned at her. “Robin has a certain way about him.”

“Well in that case, hurry up before I go off the boil,” she replied. I laughed.

“It’s all very well for you,” she said crossly, “but it took me ages to persuade Jonathan to come up here.”

I got myself sorted out, blew her a kiss, and left the bathroom. Jonathan was nowhere in sight, but I leant over the banister, and saw him on the landing below.

“All clear now,” I called. “And remember to lock the door this time.”

He blushed bright red again, but did come up the stairs. As I went into the bedroom, I heard the bathroom door open, and Helen’s voice saying “Ah, there you are. Now, what were we doing before we were interrupted.” Then the door closed, and I heard the key turn in the lock. I was giggling when I got into the bedroom, and Robin looked up.

“What’s so funny?” he asked. I told him what had happened, and he started to laugh. “How unfortunate. Poor Helen.”

“Don’t worry about Helen,” I said, moving towards him. “She was enjoying herself immensely. She was asking where they’d got to as the door closed.”

“A very good question,” he murmured, taking me in his arms again. “Where were we?”

“As I remember it,” I said, “I was just about to get undressed.”

“No,” he corrected me, “I was just about to take your clothes off.”

“Well, you’d better get on with it then,” I told him, “before, in Helen’s words, I go off the boil.”

“Well, I never like to keep a lady waiting,” he said huskily, and moved forwards. His lips found mine, and we started to kiss.

We made love slowly, taking time to pleasure each other. I had learnt to give as much pleasure as I received, and our love making was more mutually satisfying than ever. Robin had been a good teacher, and I had learnt well.

Later, we lay in each other’s arms. I was feel relaxed and totally satisfied, and on the verge of sleep. Robin gave me a little shake.

“What?” I asked.

“Are we going to eat tonight, my love?”

“I don’t know. Are you hungry?”

He ran his hand up my thigh. “Always.” he leered.

“You know what I mean,” I laughed.

“I’m peckish,” he admitted. “I could probably do with a little something.”

“We’d better go downstairs then.” I stretched, and got up off the bed. I couldn’t be bothered getting dressed, so put on my dressing gown and slippers. Robin had also bought himself a dressing gown and he slipped his on rather than getting dressed. We went downstairs to the kitchen to check what we had that was edible. With all the rushing about we’d been doing we hadn’t managed to get to the shops and stock up, so the pickings were rather slim.

“You can have a cheese omelet if you like.”

“I think I’d rather have scrambled eggs,” was the response.

“Ugh. In that case, you can cook them yourself.”

“OK, I don’t mind.” Robin was very good at cooking scrambled eggs, but it was one thing I really didn’t like. He got the eggs out and started to beat them.

“So what do you think we should do next?” I asked him idly.

“About what, love?” he replied.

“About finding out who I am.”

“I don’t know what to suggest. It was brilliant that we found your birth certificate, but I’m stumped about what to do about either finding your mother, or finding out who your father was.”

“I haven’t got any ideas either. I guess we’re pretty stumped.”

Robin finished scrambling his eggs, and came and sat down next to me. “Well, you never know, something else might turn up.”

I didn’t say anything, but thought that this was merely wishful thinking. I didn’t realize at the time how right he was going to be. After he’d finished his meal we went into the living room to watch the television. There were a couple of other people in there, and we sat and chatted for a bit. I was still feeling a bit let down, a sense of deflation. I had expected so much when Helen had managed to find my birth certificate, and although some of that expectation had been fulfilled we still didn’t have all the answers. I suspect I was a bit distracted that evening, because when we went back upstairs to bed, Robin expressed surprise that I had accepted an invitation to go to a party the following weekend. I had to admit I hadn’t been paying attention, but a party sounded like a good idea anyway. I reminded Robin that it would be Helen’s last night, and it would be a good send off for her. He agreed, but seemed dubious about where the party was being held. In the event, we didn’t go anyway.

Helen wasn’t back when we finally settled down for the night. We still hadn’t seen her when we left for college. I was a little concerned, but Robin reminded me that Helen was quite capable of

looking after herself and I was worrying unnecessarily. I thought he was probably right, but still had this niggling feeling at the back of my mind that something wasn't quite right. When we got back that night, Jonathan was in the kitchen by himself. When I asked after Helen, he said he hadn't seen her all day.

"But you were out with her last night," I said.

"I know, but we had an argument while we were out, and we came home separately."

"Where did you leave her?" I was concerned ... this wasn't right.

"I left her in the pub," he replied, looking defensive.

"You just walked out and left her?" I said incredulously.

"Oh come on, if anyone can look after herself, that one can," he replied.

"That's not the point," I told him. "You took her out, you should have brought her back."

"I don't see it's my concern if she tells me to get lost," he said sulkily.

"Oh for heaven's sake," I stormed at him. I left the kitchen, and went up to Robin's room. I knocked on the door, and heard a very feeble 'come in'. I opened the door and went in. Helen was lying on the bed, face down. As I approached the bed she turned over, and I gasped in horror.

"Helen, what happened?" I asked her.

"I got beaten up, what does it look like," she replied.

"Oh my god, we've got to get you to the hospital," I told her.

"Don't be silly, I'll be all right," she replied.

"Oh no, I'm not taking that for an answer," I told her. "Wait here until I go and get dressed, and then I'm taking you to the hospital." I dashed upstairs and quickly threw on some clothes, and then went back down to Robin's room. I made Helen get up, and half way through getting her dressed Robin came in.

"Jonathan tells me you've had an argument," he began, and then saw Helen's face. "Dear God, who did this to you?"

"We've got to get her to hospital," I told him.

“Too right,” he agreed. “I’ll go call a cab and then get dressed.”

“Tell him to take me to Queen Alexandra’s—it’s a military hospital,” Helen told him. She seemed to have accepted that she was going and was sure of where she needed to go. Robin disappeared, promising to be as quick as he could.

“Have you got your handbag?” I asked her.

“No, I lost it.”

“Have you told the police?”

I was still busy getting her ready to go out. I had her coat ready and held it for her to put on. Robin came back and said a taxi was on its way. We got her on her feet and started to take her downstairs. She was feeling very dizzy still, and I was glad Robin was there to help. As we took her downstairs we passed Jonathan. Very much to my surprise, he didn’t seem at all surprised at her condition, and didn’t make any effort to speak to her. For her part, Helen just turned her head and looked at him until we were past. It was at this point I began to have my suspicions about what had happened. I glanced over at Robin, and saw that he had noticed the exchange—or rather, lack of it—as well. His lips were folded tightly, and I think if we hadn’t had Helen to sort out he would have stopped and said something.

We got outside just as the taxi turned up. We helped Helen into the car and we both accompanied her to Queen Alexandra’s. When we got there Helen was immediately admitted, and we were told we could go. I wanted to stay but was told politely but firmly that they would deal with her. I left the house phone number and they promised to contact us to let us know how she was getting on.

I didn’t want to leave her but Robin took my arm and took me outside. Once there we made for the nearest tube station and started making our way home. We didn’t chat much on the way, we both had our suspicions about Jonathan’s part in this, but it was as if we didn’t want to have them made real by discussing them. However when we passed a phone box on the way home, Robin

stopped off and called the police. He told them what had happened, where Helen was, and the odd response of Jonathan to her injuries. They promised to go and interview Helen in the morning, and said they would follow up any leads she gave them.

Needless to say I was extremely upset and worried, and when we got back to our room I found it all too much and burst into tears. Robin comforted me and held me as I sobbed on his chest. After a while I calmed down and dried my face.

“Do you think it was Jonathan?” I asked him.

“Looks like it,” he replied.

“I can’t believe he’d do that sort of thing.” Robin said nothing, and when I glanced at his face, I saw he was frowning. “What is it?” I asked.

“I heard something when I first moved in,” he said slowly. “I never paid any attention to it—you know I don’t like gossip—but it looks as if it might have been true.”

“What did you hear?”

“Just after I moved in I heard a couple of the lads talking in the kitchen about Jonathan. It sounded like they were saying he’d beaten up his girlfriend and stolen all her money, because she didn’t want to go out with him anymore.”

“Didn’t the police do anything?” I asked.

“She wouldn’t press charges,” he shrugged, “and they couldn’t do anything about it. But with Helen being in the Wrens I imagine she won’t have any choice. I think attacking a member of the forces is a very serious offence.”

“Poor Helen,” I said. “She was just looking forward to having a good night out, and now this.”

“Come on, let’s get to bed,” Robin suggested. “I’m bushed and I think you’re worn out as well.”

We got ready for bed and Robin just cuddled me to sleep, knowing how upset I was. Helen was one of my oldest friends, and to see her in that state had really upset me. The following morning we set for college as usual. I had remembered to get the phone number for the hospital and at lunch time I rang them to

see how Helen was. They told me I could visit in the evening if I wished, between six and eight o'clock. I asked how she was doing, and they said that she was doing very nicely, and they would be discharging her in a couple of days. I thought that sounded a bit fast, but when I told Robin he wasn't in the least bit surprised.

"I've seen facial injuries before," he said. "I once fell off my horse when out hunting and hit a tree branch full face. It felt, and looked, a lot worse than it was. George came back to see what had happened and he put my broken nose back into place. That hurt worse than anything."

"George set your broken nose?" I said incredulously.

"Oh, it's a common accident when you hunt," he replied. "It's one of the first bits of first aid you learn on the hunting field."

"No wonder you wanted to be a vet," I told him.

"How do you work that out?" he demanded.

"Well, animals don't complain when you treat them," I joked, "but I can just imagine what some of your human patients must have said."

"Cheeky," he replied. "Anyway, I was pretty sure that Helen would be sent home in a couple of days. Most of what you see is bruising and swelling, and once that's gone down there won't be much else wrong."

"I'll take your word for it."

The afternoon passed in the usual fashion and we decided to make a detour round via the hospital before going home. We hopped on the tube and were soon there. We enquired after Helen, and were directed to her ward. She was just about the only one in there and her face brightened considerably when we came in.

"Helen, how are you?"

"Oh, not too bad," she replied. She did look a little better, and the plaster across her nose was really quite fetching, which I took care to tell her. She immediately stuck her tongue out at me.

"You're definitely feeling better," I told her. She turned to Robin.

“Did you tell the police?” she asked.

Robin nodded. “Do you mind?” he asked. “I thought someone should tell them.”

“Well, I was a bit annoyed at first, but then I thought ‘what the hell’. They came to see me this morning, and mentioned someone had reported it.”

“Was it Jonathan?” I asked, and she nodded.

“The bastard,” I exclaimed.

“Want to tell us what happened?” asked Robin, as he perched on the edge of the bed. Helen nodded again.

“Well, you know most of it,” she began. “He asked me for a date, and I thought ‘why not?’ He’s always been OK with me before, so I didn’t think anything of it. As you saw we were getting on well for a bit.” I grinned at her, and she had the grace to blush.

“Once we got out to the pub and he started drinking, he changed. He became abusive and started calling me names. I didn’t like that, so I told him to get lost. He started shouting at me, telling me I was a stupid tart and a prick teaser. The landlord heard and came over and threw him out of the pub. He was still telling me he was going to get me, but I thought he’d push off after a while. The landlord told me to stay in the pub for a while to give him chance to cool off and get clear, and that seemed like very good advice. I sat at the bar and chatted to the landlord for about an hour, and then thought it would be safe to go. I left and started walking back here. I’d only gone just past the first corner when Jonathan suddenly appeared. He’d obviously been drinking elsewhere because he was quite drunk by this time. He grabbed my bag, telling me I owed him for the night out, took the money and threw my bag away. Then he grabbed me. I told him to get off me and took a swing at him. Unfortunately he ducked and I was off balance. He got hold of me with one hand, and started hitting me with the other. He got a couple of good hits in,” here she pointed to her nose, and one eye, “but then I pulled the fainting trick on him and just went limp. He couldn’t

hold me and hit me, so he dropped me on the floor, kicked me a couple of times, and then ran off. I waited until he'd gone, then somehow made my way back to the house. I crawled up the stairs to Robin's room. I was going to come to ours, but just couldn't make it any further. I thought I'd just lie down for a bit, but I must have passed out. Next thing I knew, you were there."

"I hope you told the police all this," Robin said when she'd finished.

"Didn't have much choice," she replied. "I was ordered to tell them everything, and so I had to."

"Guess military discipline is good for some things, then," Robin said with a smile.

We stayed there for about forty minutes and then Helen's evening meal arrived and we had to leave her to it. I promised to call in again as soon as I could but Helen told me not to be an idiot, I had studying to do, and she was in the best place. Robin agreed, but said we would come and see her before she went back to Portsmouth.

We set off back to the house, and arrived there about half an hour later. As we went through into the kitchen we were greeted with the information that the police had been, and Jonathan had been arrested and taken away.

Chapter 34

Helen was discharged from hospital on the Saturday, and went back to Portsmouth to report to sick bay. On Sunday she was back having been given a week's sick leave. We hadn't heard anything of Jonathan since he had been taken away, although rumors were rife. Helen had expected people to be a bit hostile as she had been the cause of Jonathan's departure, but was actually overwhelmed by the support she received. Even Jonathan's ex-girlfriend came round to sympathize, telling her that she had broken off the relationship after six months because of Jonathan's tendency towards violence. Helen was quite relieved in a way, because it demonstrated that it wasn't her fault—Jonathan was like that, and that's all there was to it.

After Helen had gone back to Portsmouth after her sick leave, things settled down and returned to normal. I was still coming to terms with the facts of my birth and gradually came to believe what Robin said, that it really didn't matter. There was still a niggling little doubt, but as time went on it became nothing more than a minor annoyance. I think Robin was pleased with my acceptance of the situation. He was always completely sympathetic, but he really didn't think it made any difference. He had loved me before he knew who I was, and he told me that even if it turned out I was related to royalty, it wouldn't make any difference. We used to joke about it, making up even more

ludicrous stories about what had happened to my mother. It may have been silly, but it was a way of coping with it.

Our relationship went from strength to strength, and I could no longer imagine life without Robin, and he confessed that he couldn't imagine life without me, either. I spoke regularly to Elsie and Frank, and Mo and the children, and Robin still spoke to his brother and sisters. We used to meet up about once a month with George, Jessica and Henrietta when they came up to London to shop, and we still got on famously. Jessica reported that their mother still wouldn't allow them to speak Robin's name, and if she had to mention him, she invariably called him 'your brother'. I asked Robin if he was bothered by the ongoing estrangement, and he said it hadn't affected him at all—he had never really got on with his mother ever since he had decided to earn his own living.

Christmas came and went and we spent it with Elsie and the family at the farm, seeing more practice with Huw Edwards. We were becoming known around the area now and people kept telling us that they were looking forward to us qualifying and moving up there. I was worried that this might upset Huw, but he took it as it was meant and said that personally he was looking forward to being able to retire. Christmas was fairly peaceful but we had a call out on Christmas day to an early lambing. It was snowing and absolutely freezing cold. Robin caught a bad cold as a result of spending three hours in a draughty barn and spent the next three days in bed. I told Elsie I'd look after him, but she apparently still didn't trust either of us to behave, and she took all his meals up. To be honest, I don't think Robin was actually up to much misbehaving.

We came back after Christmas to find one of our course mates talking about leaving and not carrying on with becoming a vet. When questioned we heard a horror story of how he'd been virtually kept prisoner by his mentor whilst seeing practice over Christmas. He had been dragged out of bed to go and do actual work instead of merely observing, and he was so traumatized he

didn't know if he actually wanted to carry on being a vet. We persuaded him to give it another try, and helped him find another mentor for the Easter break. Naturally we went up to the farm again, and had a wonderful two weeks. Yorkshire in the spring takes some beating, and although an unseasonal snow fall cut the farm off for three days, it soon melted and spring arrived.

Elsie seemed to be looking a little tired, and she said it was just lambing which had been difficult that year, but I was worried and bullied her into going to see the doctor. He did some tests and declared she was just a little anemic and run down. He gave her some iron tablets and she soon picked up. I was relieved—I didn't know what I'd do if anything happened to her.

We returned to the house on the Saturday before college was due to start again, and took up where we'd left off. We were going to be busy revising for the end of year exams and expected to be studying every night. About a week after we got back I was called downstairs one night by Tom, who told me I had a phone call. I went down, and it was Elsie.

"Hello Elsie. Is everything all right?"

"Yes, everything's fine," she replied, but I sensed something strange in her voice.

"Well something's up, you don't normally ring during the week. And you sound a bit ... odd."

"Sharp enough to cut yourself, you are," she retorted.

"But I'm right, aren't I?"

She sighed. "Yes, love, you're right, something has happened."

"So what's the problem?"

"Do you remember I told you I felt Alex was still alive, and that he might turn up again one day?"

"Yes, I remember." Then the penny dropped. "You don't mean ..."

"Yes I do. I've had a letter from him."

"My god, it must be, what, fifteen years since he went?"

"About that, yes."

“So where’s he been hiding all this time?”

“He’s had amnesia, caused by what he suffered during the war. He didn’t know who he was, or where he was from. He’s been in America making his fortune apparently.”

“So how did he get his memory back?”

Elsie gave a little laugh. “Would you believe he nearly died in a skiing accident? Apparently that second trauma brought his memories back.”

“My god,” I repeated slowly. “And now he wants to come back and see us, I suppose.”

“That’s right. You don’t seem very excited,” she commented.

“Well, I hardly remember him, Elsie. I mean, I was what, three or four when I last saw him.”

“I suppose it wouldn’t mean so much to you, would it?”

“Sorry, Elsie, I didn’t mean to rain on your parade.”

“That’s all right love,” she replied. “I just wanted to make sure you would be coming up as usual in June, after your exams.”

“Yes, if that’s still all right. Will you have enough room for everyone?”

“Oh heavens yes,” she laughed. “We’ve got all those spare rooms in the other wing of the house, don’t forget. It’ll take a bit of work to get them ready, but I’ll manage.”

“When’s he coming over?”

“They’re coming over at the end of July. They’ll spend a week in London and then come up here for about three weeks.”

“Well don’t do all the work before I get up there. I can give you a hand to get the rooms ready. I don’t want you doing all that work by yourself.”

“Thanks, love, that would be a big help if you could.”

“Of course I could. Don’t be silly.”

We chatted for a few minutes longer, and then hung up. I went upstairs to tell Robin what had happened, and he seemed most intrigued.

We had, of course, told Elsie and everyone what we’d found on my birth certificate, and she was impressed with what we’d

managed to find out. She felt like Robin did, that it was no use worrying over what couldn't be sorted, and I should settle for what I'd got. I think her attitude helped me reach acceptance even more than Robin's—after all, I had known her for a lot longer.

Second year exams were a lot tougher than the first year ones. Apart from the fact that there were more subjects, we had to know them in more depth. I didn't exactly struggle but the work involved in making sure I got a good pass meant that I had very little time to worry about anything else. I just hoped that the next years' exams would not get proportionally harder. I mentioned this to one of the third year students one lunchtime and he laughed and told me not to worry. He said that if I could get through the second year, I could get through anything.

Once exams were over, we could relax and think about getting ready for Yorkshire. By now we had taken to leaving certain things up at the farm, knowing they would be quite safe there. Accordingly we had bought two sets of overalls, two sets of boots, stuff like that. It meant that we had much less stuff to take with us when we travelled up.

A week before we were due to go up Robin dropped a bombshell. He told me that his mother wanted to see him, and he had been summoned to the family residence for an audience (his words, not mine.) He said he had debated whether to go or not but then curiosity had won out, and he felt he ought to go and see what she wanted. That meant I had two choices. I could travel up on my own, or wait until Robin could go and then travel up with him as originally planned. I decided on the latter course. Apart from anything else, it was easier if Robin was there to help with the cases. I rang Elsie and told her that we'd be a week later than expected, and then rang Huw Edwards and told him. He wasn't overly impressed, but agreed that we could come up a week later. I knew him well enough by now to see through his grumpy exterior, and I wasn't put off by his manner.

Robin duly left to see his mother and I was left in the house by myself. Helen, who was fully recovered from her

ordeal of earlier in the year, had rung and said she was taking late leave again so I couldn't even spend any time with her. I mooched about the house, only waiting for Robin's regular evening phone calls. Infuriatingly he refused to tell me what his mother had wanted him for, but he promised to fill me in when he came to pick me up. The five days he was away seemed to drag interminably, but finally he rang to say he was on his way and would see me that afternoon. I waited impatiently for him to arrive and found myself anxiously listening for the sound of a taxi drawing up outside the house. I finally heard the sound of a car and hurried down stairs and opened the front door. Imagine my surprise when I saw Robin getting out of the driving seat of a car! I knew Mo had been giving him lessons as well as me, but he had never mentioned anything about getting a car.

"Where did you get that?" I asked in astonishment.

Robin, his face split by the widest grin, took my hand and led me up to the car.

"Isn't she a beauty?" he asked.

"Yes, but where did you get it?"

"I bought it. Yesterday in fact. Do you like it?"

"Of course I like it. But you never mentioned you were going to get a car."

"That's because I never intended to."

"So why this?"

"It's George's old one," he explained. "He's bought himself a new one, though god knows how he afforded it, and he asked if I'd like this one. Naturally I said 'yes', and here she is!"

"It's fantastic."

"It'll certainly make getting to the farm easier now. And we won't be stuck there on weekends either. Much more possibilities for fun now."

The look in his face gave me no problems in interpreting what he meant by 'fun'. And I had to admit, I would enjoy that as much as he did.

“We’ll have to make sure there’s plenty of rugs in the back,” I said demurely. “For sitting on, of course.”

“Oh, of course,” he agreed, with a twinkle in his eye. “Come on, let’s have a cuppa, I’m parched.”

With one last look at the car, I let him lead me inside. “Are you going to tell me what your mother wanted you for?” I asked as we got to the kitchen. I started to fill the kettle, as he plonked himself down at the table.

“I might,” he said teasingly.

“You’d better,” I warned him, “otherwise you’ll have fun explaining the black eye I’m going to give you.”

“Bully,” he responded with a grin. He waited until I’d made the tea, and sat down at the table. He hitched himself along the bench, and put his arm around me. “I’ve really missed you,” he said, kissing me on the cheek.

“I’ve missed you too, love,” I told him, kissing him back. “But come on, what did your mother say?”

He settled himself back, pushed his feet out and held me against him. I settled back too, and nestled against his shoulder.

“Well,” he started off, “as you know I wasn’t exactly keen on going down in the first place, but decided it wouldn’t hurt. Anyway, I arrived on the Monday afternoon and George picked me up from the station. He was as mystified as I was as to why she’d summoned me, considering what she’d said previously, but he thanked me for coming and said he appreciated the sacrifice I was making in giving up a week’s holiday with you to come. Holiday,” he snorted. “He should try doing what we do in the holidays, and see if he likes it! Still,” he went on, “we arrived at the house, and I went up to my old room. Hadn’t changed a bit, you know.”

He took a drink of tea, and then continued. “I was told I’d see mother at dinner, so I mooched around the place for bit after I got there until it was time to get changed for dinner. I don’t know what I was expecting but when I arrived in the sitting room just before dinner, mother was there. You can imagine my

surprise when she came over and gave me a kiss on the cheek, all gracious lady of the manor. She even smiled at me. Well, I didn't know what to make of this, so I just gave her a peck on the cheek. George, Jessica and Henrietta had arrived and we all had pre-dinner drinks, all very gracious and polite. We had dinner and the same thing continued. To say I was confused would put it mildly. The ladies retired after dinner and George and I shared a glass of port. George was as mystified as I was but we had to go along with whatever mother was up to. We joined the ladies again, had another couple of drinks and then coffee, and then mother retired to bed, still without saying anything." He paused again, to have another drink of tea.

"Any more tea, love?" he asked. "This mug seems to have a hole in it. It's empty."

Giving him a look that spoke volumes, I got up and brewed more tea. When it was ready, he took a couple of sips. "Ah, that's better," he said. He seemed content to sit in silence.

"Well go on," I said exasperatedly. "What happened the next morning?"

"Hmm? What? Oh," he replied. "Yes, the next morning. We met again for breakfast, except for mother who has never eaten breakfast with us. Just as I was leaving the table the footman told me that she had asked—asked, mind you, not commanded—that I visit her in her rooms. I was intrigued as you might imagine. I finished my breakfast and went on up."

He paused again. "And?" I prompted.

"I was just getting to that bit," he complained. "I went in and there she was, all done up in a frilly dressing gown. She asked me to sit down, all pleasant, and asked how I was doing at college. I told her I was doing pretty well, and then she smiled archly and said she hoped you weren't distracting me from my studies." I choked on my tea, and he patted me on the back until I'd got myself sorted out.

"Yes, I know how you feel," he told me. "I felt pretty much the same. Anyway, I told her that no, you weren't a distract-

tion, we had agreed to study separately, and that we were both determined to qualify. Then she asked if we still intended to marry when we had qualified. I told her yes, we did still intend to marry, expecting another explosion. And then, if you please, she said she wished us both well, and hoped we'd invite her to the wedding."

"After all she said!" I exclaimed indignantly. "That's pretty rich."

"I know, I felt the same way. She obviously realized that she needed to explain her self. She said she'd acted hastily before, and hadn't had a chance to consider things properly. Now that she'd calmed down, she realized all the advantages our marriage would bring to the family and she was no longer opposed to us getting wed."

I was staring at him, open-mouthed. "She said what?"

"She said she didn't mind us getting married anymore," he repeated.

"But why? I don't buy all this baloney about reconsidering, and thinking things over."

"Well, no, neither did I," he confessed. "However, I did find out the reason for this amazing change of attitude. After we'd chatted about a few things, she dropped into the conversation that she'd heard you were Annabelle Molyneux's daughter."

"Oh," I gasped, halfway between outrage and laughter. "She's changed her mind because I'm someone's bastard? That takes the biscuit."

Robin frowned. "I thought I told you not to refer to yourself like that," he said severely. "And yes, that is why she changed her mind. You're the daughter of one of the leading families in her circle, and that now makes you an eligible match. Of course, there is one other thing." Once again he paused for a drink of tea.

"Well, what?" I demanded.

"Sorry?" he replied. I elbowed him in the ribs.

"What other thing?"

“Oh, that.” He gave me a sideways glance, and I knew he was winding me up. I picked up the bread board which was on the table, and threatened him with it.

“OK, I give in. The other thing,” he continued, “is that as Annabelle Molyneux’s only surviving child ...”

“As far as we know,” I put in.

“As far as we know,” he acknowledged, “you’re the heiress to the Molyneux fortune. And that makes you very eligible.” He leant forward and put his finger under my chin. “Close your mouth, love, you look like a fish with it hanging open like that.”

“Did you say heiress?” I croaked.

“Yes, I did say that,” he confirmed.

“But they don’t even know I exist,” I said, dumbfounded.

“They do now,” he said.

“But how?”

“Because my dear mother, who heard it all from Jessica, has told them that I’m engaged to be married to their grand-daughter.”

“Oh help,” I said weakly. “That means they’re going to want to meet me.”

“Probably, yes,” he agreed. I looked at him suspiciously.

“What else aren’t you telling me?” I asked.

“Well, by a great coincidence, they just happen to have moved up to Yorkshire,” he said airily. “I’m sure we can arrange to have a day off to go see them.”

“But suppose I don’t want to?” I said, feeling panic-stricken.

“Then you don’t have to,” he said calmly, taking hold of my hands, which I was twisting together on the table. “But think of it this way, my love. They lost their daughter twenty something years ago, and they never even knew they had a grand-daughter until a couple of weeks ago. Can you imagine how they feel? I’m not going to force you to do anything but I do think that you should at least meet them. If you don’t want to see them again, you don’t have to. But you’ve always said you wanted to know who you were, and where you came from, and this would give you the chance to find out some more of that.”

“I suppose I should see them,” I finally said, reluctantly. Robin gently kissed me on the top of my head.

“That’s my girl,” he said.

“I’ll have to tell Elsie,” I said. I couldn’t help thinking they’d be like Robin’s mother, and not want to know me.

“Don’t worry, they won’t be like my mother,” said Robin, giving me the impression he could read my mind.

“How can you be sure?” I demanded. “They might not like me.”

“That’s possible,” he admitted, “but like I said before, once you’ve met them once you don’t necessarily have to have anything to do with them again if you don’t want to. You never know, they might be brilliant.”

“OK, I’ll go visit them over the summer. But you’ve got to come with me,” I added hastily. No way was I going on my own.

“No, that’s OK, I’ll come with you.”

I relaxed a little, feeling that if I had his support then I could go through with the ordeal; and I did feel it was an ordeal, meeting the grandparents I never knew I had. What would they expect of me? Would I have to take the role of their lost daughter? Would they expect me to give up my studies to take up their sort of life, like Clarissa, Jessica and Henrietta did? I resolved there and then that I was not going to give my life up to follow some sort of socialite butterfly existence, even if that meant that I wouldn’t have anything to do with them. I was my own person and I wasn’t going to give that up, no matter what. Robin had been watching me closely whilst these thoughts crossed my mind, and he knew me so well he was practically able to read my mind.

“Made your mind up already then?” he asked, the glimmer of a smile on his face.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, that you’ve obviously decided that no matter what happens, you’re not going to give up your life.”

I turned round to look at him. “How do you do that?” I asked in exasperation. “Are you reading my mind?”

“No silly, of course not. You forget I know you very well and I can read your expressions as easily as a book.”

“Too easily. How am I supposed to be able to hide anything from you if you can read what I’m thinking?”

He laughed, took my hand, and kissed it. “And why would you need to hide anything from me, my love?”

“You never know,” I replied archly. “Every girl needs a few secrets—even from the love of her life.”

He took my cup from me, and stood up. “Come on then,” replied the love of my life. “We’ve got some packing to do, and then we can set off for Yorkshire.”

“Aren’t we setting off tomorrow?” I asked in surprise.

“Well that was the original plan because we were going on the train. But now we’ve got the car, we can set off now and be there in time for breakfast or if you’d rather, we can find somewhere to stop overnight and get there a bit later on in the morning, but be able to stay awake.”

“Well,” I said slowly, moving a bit closer and looking up at him, “seeing as you’ve been away for nearly a week, and you must be tired from all that travelling, I think we ought to stay here tonight, and set off in the morning.”

“Little witch,” he said, laughing, and pulled me to him. “I take it you’ve missed me then?”

“I might have done,” I replied. “Why don’t you come upstairs, and you can decide for yourself.”

He pulled me too him, and held me hard against his body. He kissed me deeply, and I felt his manhood hard against my lower belly.

“Hmmm,” I said when we broke apart. “Seems like I’m not the only one who’s been missing someone.”

“Shall we go and find out then?” he asked, a wicked grin on his face.

“Why don’t we?” I replied, and we went upstairs.

The next morning, with the packing all finished, we set off for Yorkshire. We had a great trip, stopping for lunch on the way at a lovely little pub Robin found by the simple expedient of driving off the main road into one of the little villages on the way. We set off again after about an hour and made good progress during the afternoon. By three o'clock we were passing familiar landmarks, and by half past three we were turning into the lane that led to the farm. We pulled into the farm yard, and Robin parked up next to where Frank usually parked his battered old Ford. Elsie came to the door, a look of surprise on her face. We walked across the yard to her.

"What's all this then?" she exclaimed. "We weren't expecting you until tomorrow."

I gave her a hug. "Robin got the car as a sort of present, and came back a day earlier than expected from Kent, so we thought we might as well come up today instead of tomorrow."

"Well, that's lovely," she said, smiling warmly at both of us. "Bring your bags and come on in, we've got plenty to talk about."

I helped Robin in with the bags, and then we sat down with Elsie and a cup of tea at the kitchen table.

"So, what's new?" I asked. "When do Alex and co. arrive?"

"At the end of July," Elsie replied, passing us a plate of home made scones thickly spread with her home made butter and jam. "I've got something to tell you about that, as well."

"Oh?" I asked. "What's that then?"

"Alex is bringing someone with him."

"Well yes, he's bringing Bridget and the children."

"Apart from them. He's bringing his father in law, Bridget's dad."

"I'm sure that's very nice for him, but what's that got to do with me?"

"He knew your mother." Elsie dropped this bombshell quite calmly. "More tea, dear?"

"He knew my mother?" I repeated incredulously.

"I know, quite a coincidence isn't it?"

“That’s one way of putting it,” I said acidly.

“Now don’t take on, dear,” she went on, still in that infuriatingly calm voice. “At least you’ll have some warning now you know. It’ll give you a couple of weeks to get used to the idea.”

“My mother’s had her finger in the pie as well,” Robin broke the silence that ensued.

“Your mother?” Elsie said in surprise.

“Yes. Unfortunately my sister Jessica dropped us in it again. However this time my mother was quite impressed when she found out Suzie was Annabelle Molyneux’s daughter, and she’s withdrawn all her previous opposition to our engagement and wedding. She even wants to come to the wedding.”

“Well, I’ll go to the foot of our stairs,” said Elsie, totally flabbergasted. “I’d never have believed it.”

“No, me neither,” Robin agreed. “And she’s gone even further.”

“What’s she done now?” asked Elsie with resignation.

“She’s told Suzie’s grandparents that they’ve got a granddaughter, and now they want Suzie to visit them.”

“Good heavens,” exclaimed Elsie. “Where do they live?”

“In Scarborough, luckily enough,” Robin told her. “We can take a day one weekend and go and see them.”

Elsie looked at me. “Are you ready for this?” she asked. “It seems as if things are moving fast all of a sudden.”

“Well, I’m not totally sure about any of this, to be honest,” I confessed. “But Robin says he’ll come with me, so at least I’ll have some moral support.”

“Hmph,” replied Elsie. “I’m not sure I would use the word ‘moral’ to describe his support, my girl.” I blushed, but Robin had a look of total innocence on his face.

“Why Elsie,” he protested, “I don’t know what you mean!”

She gave him a severe look, but I could see the smile glimmering behind it. “Don’t you think you can soft soap me, young man,” she said.

“Of course not Elsie,” he said meekly. He held his plate up. “Can I have another scone please?”

Chapter 35

We settled down to our usual summer routine, working with Huw Edwards during the week and occasional weekends and helping out on the farm. On top of this I was also helping Elsie get rooms ready for Alex and his family.

At the back of my mind, though, was the impending visit to my grand parents. Robin had been brilliant in this respect, and had made all the arrangements. I found myself totally unable to speak to either one of them and had asked Robin to do so on my behalf. Elsie wasn't sure whether to approve of my behavior or not; she was torn between a desire for me to find my family, and a worry that she would lose me completely. She needn't have worried. I had no intention of letting my grandparents take over my life, or of letting them tell me what to do. The upshot of this was that when the day of our meeting finally arrived I was in a slightly truculent mood. Robin was aware of how I felt, but I think Elsie put my quietness down to being nervous. She was right, of course; I was literally quaking in my shoes as the time for the meeting arrived.

Robin drove us up to Scarborough, and spent some time finding the address. I was feeling more and more nervous the closer we got to their address. I had pains in my stomach and I was feeling physically sick; I was cold; and my mouth was dry. Robin found the street and drove up it. The houses were very impressive, all well set back from the road with long drives. He drove slowly up the road, checking for the name of the house.

“Not quite where you’d expect to find the last remnants of one of our noble houses, is it?” he joked, looking at the houses. “Not quite the country estate.”

I shook my head, too nervous to speak. He looked over at me, and then put one hand over mine.

“It’ll be fine, sweetheart,” he said reassuringly. “They sounded really nice on the phone, and really keen to meet you.”

“I’m sure they are,” I replied somewhat tartly. He looked over at me, but didn’t say anything else.

“Ah, here we are,” he said in satisfaction a few moments later. “This is it.”

My heart was pounding so hard I was surprised he couldn’t hear it. I gulped in a dry mouth, and wished myself a thousand miles away.

“Come on love,” Robin said gently. “Time to be brave.” He smiled at me, and winked. “Chin up.” We got out of the car, and I looked up at the house.

This was a large Victorian mansion, surely far too large for an elderly couple to live in by themselves. The only word I could really use to describe it was ugly. It didn’t sit neatly in its plot of land, it sprawled. There was no harmony in its frontage, no balance. The climbing vines which clung all across the front didn’t hide this ugliness, they somehow enhanced it, drawing attention to the various disparate elements which made up the overall elevation of the building. A wooden porch jutted from the front over the door, which was large with stained glass panels to either side. There were large green bushes in pots, one on either side of the door.

“This has to be a joke,” I muttered as we walked up the steps.

“What has?” asked Robin.

“This,” I gestured at the door. “It’s just so damned Victorian—as if the place hasn’t changed in the last hundred years.”

“It probably hasn’t,” he replied, and rang the bell. I could hear a faint echo in the distance. After a wait of what seemed like hours

but was in reality only a couple of minutes, the door creaked open. Oh all right, it didn't creak, but it should have. It really should. Inside the door was a genuine, honest to god butler.

"Good afternoon Sir, good afternoon Miss," he said.

"Afternoon," replied Robin. "This is Miss Linthwaite, and I'm Mr. Carstairs. I believe we are expected."

The butler bowed slightly. "Indeed you are, Sir and Miss," he replied. "Please come this way."

He stepped back slightly, and gestured for us to enter the hallway. This was immense with a huge staircase to one side, and a black and white tiled floor. Large pieces of Victorian furniture stood at intervals around the walls, and there was a genuine aspidistra in a blue bowl on top of one of them. I was suddenly overcome by an insane desire to giggle and had to cover it up with a cough. The butler looked at me, but said nothing,

"This way please," he said, and lead us at a stately pace towards one of the many doors which lead from the hallway. He knocked and entered.

"Miss Linthwaite and Mr. Carstairs," he announced, and moved aside to let us go through.

I took a deep breath, grabbed my courage with both hands, and walked through the door.

The first surprise was that the room was really lovely. It was light and airy with its high Victorian ceiling, and three large windows; two to the front and one to the side. It was painted in light pastel shades which emphasized the height of the room, with a beautiful dark blue carpet on the floor. The furniture was not modern by any means, but wasn't heavy Victorian either. I had no idea which period it did come from, but it looked as if it had been made for the room. There was a fire in the grate despite it being summer, and there were several large leather armchairs placed around it. I next glanced at the people, and there were rather more than I was expecting.

It was apparent that the whole of the Molyneux clan had been summoned to meet me. Instead of just my grandparents

there were two further females of indeterminate age, and another gentleman. They were all either sitting or standing by the fire, and they were all staring at me. I almost panicked and turned around but Robin was behind me, and he put his hands on my shoulders and gave me a little push forwards. Having moved me out of the way slightly, he came to stand beside me.

“Good afternoon everyone,” he said with a smile.

“Good afternoon, my dears,” said the woman I assumed to be my grandmother. “Please do excuse our rudeness, but we were taken by surprise.”

“But surely you were expecting us?” Robin asked, surprised in turn.

“Yes of course we were,” she replied, “but what we weren’t expecting was that Suzie here would bear such a strong resemblance to our dear Annabelle.”

One of the men came forward. “It really is quite striking,” he confirmed. “If we had any doubts about who you were, my dear, they have certainly been dispelled now. There’s no doubt you are definitely Annabelle’s daughter.”

Please,” said my grandmother, “come and sit by the fire, and let’s get to know each other.”

I submitted to the gentle pressure of Robin’s hand on my back, and walked forward towards the fire place. Suddenly a voice broke the silence.

“Dreadful dress sense. She’ll have to be taken in hand.” Startled nearly out of my wits, I turned round to see who had spoken. It had to be one of the other two females in the room, but they were both staring at me with no clue as to who had spoken.

“Please, ignore my sister,” said my grandmother, taking me by the hand, and indicating I should sit in one of the chairs. “She has no idea that she speaks aloud.” I sat down, slightly bemused by all this. Robin came and perched on the arm of my chair.

“Now my dear, please, let me introduce everyone. I am, as you’ve probably guessed, your grandmamma, Sibyl Molyneux. This is your grandpappa, William Molyneux.”

He came over, and took my hand. "Delighted to meet you at last, my dear," he said, sounding for all the world as if he would burst into tears any second. I looked at him, and saw that he did indeed have tears in his eyes.

"And these are my sisters, Agatha and Abigail," said my grandmother, indicating the other two females in turn. They stared at me, but made no attempt to either come closer or to greet me.

"And this is Geoffrey, George's cousin," she said, pointing out the last gentleman in the room. He also shook my hand before sitting down next to my grandfather.

"And now, let me look at you," said grandmother, taking my hand and patting it warmly. "This has all been such a shock to us, you know. We never knew what Annabelle had done with the baby, and now here you are."

"You knew she was pregnant then?" I asked.

"We found out far too late to do anything about it," she replied. "We only found out when she didn't come back after going on that last visit. We thought it strange that she should wish to go for such a long period of time, but then she always was a little on the wild side. She was never conformable, Annabelle."

"So how did you find out? Who told you?"

"We got a letter from Annabelle's old nanny," was the response. "She said she felt we ought to know about Annabelle's condition and that she had given the child up for adoption, but she never told us where the child was or what had become of Annabelle. There was no return address on the letter and we couldn't make out the postmark, so we never even knew where the letter had been posted from. It was dreadful. I couldn't bear to think my daughter would prefer to have her baby amongst strangers rather than at home with her family, but that was Annabelle all over."

"So you would have allowed her to keep the baby then?" I asked. I didn't feel as if we were speaking about me, but rather about a totally unrelated child.

She dodged the question rather neatly. “We would certainly have supported her in her hour of need,” she replied. “There was absolutely no reason for her to run away like that. We wouldn’t have been pleased with the situation, but she was our daughter after all and we would have done our best for her. And now you must tell us what you’ve been doing with yourself. Please, start at the beginning, and tell us everything.”

I noticed that she hadn’t really answered the question, and the overtones of ‘we would have done our best for her’ seemed a little ominous. I remembered one of my school friends telling me about a cousin of hers in Ireland, who had got pregnant and ended up in the local Magdalene where she had been treated like a slave until she’d had the baby, which had immediately been given up for adoption. The idea that this is what they’d have done to my mother made me regard my grandparents in a more unfavorable light. Just then, however, the butler and the maid brought in a trolley loaded with sandwiches, cakes, scones, and the usual tea things.

“We thought you might be a bit peckish after your journey,” grandmother explained, “so we asked Cook to do a proper tea today.”

The tea was all laid out on a large tray table, and grandmother poured tea for me. Once this was all sorted out, and I had been invited to help myself to whatever else I wanted, I was urged to begin my story.

I began by filling in what I knew about life in Coventry, and the reason why I had ended up in Yorkshire at the Linthwaite’s Farm. I told them all about my early life there; and about going to school, and what my friends and I used to get up to. They interrupted with questions fairly frequently, seeming to have an endless capacity for detail. Although at first I found this off-putting, I soon found myself giving them more detail than I had planned to, merely to prevent the questions.

I explained about helping Huw Edwards on the farm as a child, and my decision to become a vet. I told them all about

Helen, and staying with her family until the tragedy that overcame them. I mentioned how I met Robin and when we had become engaged, and how we planned to marry once we had both qualified. I went on to tell them about Alex's reappearance, and about his father in law. At this point, grandfather became very excited.

"Did you say Arthur McCluskey?" he asked.

"Yes, that's right, he's Alex's father in law," I explained.

"Good heavens, I always wondered what happened to him. We were hoping to be in business together at one time, you know. Partners. He came over in, let me see, 1937, or 1938. Just before Annabelle's affair, in fact. He was in the house when she left. I wonder why he's coming over?"

"Apparently he wants to meet me," I said, rather embarrassed. "He told Alex he knew my mother, and wanted to come and see me."

"And who could blame him," said grandfather, beaming at me. "You're well worth seeing, my dear. Robin's a lucky man, a very lucky man." I blushed, and took a drink of tea to hide my face.

"Now don't be ashamed of compliments, my dear," said grandmother, patting my hand. "A girl as beautiful as you must get used to them, you know." Behind me, I could hear Robin sniggering quietly. I longed to be close enough to him to elbow him in the ribs, and promised myself I'd punish him later.

"Did Arthur say anything else about his visit?" asked my grandfather.

"Only that he might know who my father is," I replied. There was a sudden electric silence.

"But ... don't you know?" asked grandmother.

"No, there's nothing on my birth certificate."

"But how extraordinary of Annabelle not to put a name down."

"I don't know about extraordinary, Sybil," grandfather put in forcefully. "It makes it damned difficult to find out who he was."

“Language dear,” she chided him gently, and he muttered an apology. She turned to me. “We always assumed that you would know who your father was,” she explained. “We thought Annabelle would put it on the birth certificate.”

I shook my head. “No, it just says ‘father unknown’,” I replied.

“How dreadful for you,” she said softly. “It must have made you feel very upset.”

“Yes, it was upsetting,” I admitted. “I didn’t like thinking I was someone’s illegitimate child.”

“Well, it shouldn’t worry you any further,” grandmother said firmly. “As far as we’re concerned, you’re Annabelle’s child and that’s all that matters.”

“Thank you,” I replied softly, feeling tears at the back of my eyes. “Thank you so much for saying that.”

“She’ll have to be presented,” came the voice I’d heard earlier. I turned around to regard the two sisters, my great aunts, who were still sitting exactly where they had been.

“I beg your pardon?” I said politely.

“She’ll have to be presented.” This time I saw it was Agatha who had spoken.

“Nonsense,” said grandmother robustly. “I’m sure she’s not in the least bit interested in that outdated nonsense, and she’s got far more important things to get on with. Haven’t you dear,” she said, turning back to me.

“I don’t even know what she means,” I confessed. “Presented to who?”

“The Queen, it should be,” she said, “but of course, these days it’s not what you’d call a presentation at all. Not like when we were younger. Quite outdated and old fashioned. I would recommend that you ignore all that and get on with your own life. Being a vet sounds much more exciting.”

I started to relax a little. Grandmother and Grandfather seemed to be genuinely friendly people, if a little on the formal side ... but then we had only just met. I was deeply touched that

they had accepted me despite my irregular birth, and that they had raised no objections to anything I'd told them so far, even though I wouldn't have been bothered if they had.

"Please continue with your story my dear," grandmother prompted me.

"There isn't much left to tell," I replied. However, I carried on from where I had left off, and soon brought them all up to date with the details of Alex's imminent arrival. Grandfather looked at me.

"You tell Arthur McCluskey that he's welcome to come over and see us anytime," he said. "I really liked the cut of his jib when we were in London together, and I dare say he won't mind staying a couple of days while we catch up on old times. I might even have a business proposition that would interest him, you never know."

I promised I would tell Mr. McCluskey he would be welcome.

"And I'd like to speak to him as well," said grandmother. "If he does think he knows the identify of your father, I'm sure we'll want him to share that information with us as well as with yourself. It would mean so much to us, you see."

I reiterated that I would try and bring him over once they had settled in.

"You're a good girl," she said, patting my hand. "You must bring your Elsie over to see us one day, we'd love to meet her after she brought you up."

"Thank you," I replied, "I'm sure she'd love that."

The rest of the visit passed quickly, with grandmother and grandfather asking me more questions about my life, and with me explaining what Robin and I hoped to do after we were living up here. I explained all about Huw Edwards taking us on, and how we finally hoped to become his partners and then to buy him out.

"Well, if you need the money to buy a partnership, you come to me for it, Suzie," grandfather said at one point.

“Oh, I’m sure Elsie, Mo and Frank will be able to afford to buy that for me,” I told him.

“I’m quite sure they could,” was the response, “but I want to do something for my grand-daughter, and this is something that you’d like and will probably need in the future. Please give me the chance to help you.”

I looked across at him, and could see the scarcely hidden pleading in his eyes. This was something I could do for him.

“Of course I’ll ask you, grandfather,” I assured him, and was rewarded by the look of relief in his face.

“Make sure you do,” was all he said, but I could see it meant a lot to him. I caught sight of the clock over the mantel piece and said to Robin “We’ll have to go, we’ll be late back for dinner.” I stood up to go, Robin behind me. Grandmother got up as well, and gave me a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“God bless you child,” she said, “and thank you for coming to see us. Please come again whenever you like, we’d love to see you again. After all, you are our grandchild and we want to keep in touch now we know who, and where, you are.”

I kissed her cheek back, and realized she smelt faintly of lavender. Grandfather also came and hugged me, once again kissing me on the cheek.

“Come again soon, Suzie,” he said gently.

I nodded. “I will,” I replied.

The bell by the fireplace was rung, the butler arrived, and we were ushered out in state. This time I was bid goodbye by the butler as ‘Miss Suzie’, and realized that I had been accepted by the whole household, not just my grandparents. We got in the car and drove off down the drive. As we turned onto the road, I puffed my cheeks out and said “Thank heavens that’s over.”

Robin looked over at me. “I thought they were very nice,” he remarked.

“Yes, they were, and I really liked them, but heavens above, talk about formal and stuffy,” I replied. “Don’t forget, I’m not used to all that. I nearly died when that butler opened the door.”

Robin smiled. "I know what you mean," he agreed. "But don't let that put you off visiting them again."

"I won't, but how I wish it could be in more relaxed circumstances."

"I imagine it must be a bit off putting to someone who's not used to it."

"That's one way of putting it," I replied. "I feel as if I want to kick over the traces and do something outrageous, just to remind myself I don't have to be that way."

"Ah, well then, if that's what you want to do, I know just the place," Robin told me. "And it's on the way home, so no problem there."

"And just what did you have in mind?" I asked him, feeling my pulses beginning to race a little.

"I think you have a pretty good idea," he responded slyly.

"I might have, but you'll have to let me know exactly what you're thinking of," I teased him.

Robin took me at my word, and began to describe, in a very detailed manner, exactly what he had in mind. By the time we found his 'special place' and got the blankets out of the boot of the car, I needed no further encouragement to join him in what he had planned.

I found making love in the open air was incredibly sexy, and the small frisson that came from the thought that someone might just see what we were doing added a further spice to the proceedings. We lingered there for over an hour, until a slight cooling of the air reminded us that Elsie would be preparing our meal and we needed to get back.

"Feeling more relaxed now?" asked Robin as he handed me back into the car.

"Much better, thank you," I replied.

"Good. I'd hate to think all my efforts were wasted."

We drove back to the farm through the lovely summer evening, arriving just in time for dinner. Elsie couldn't wait to hear all about the visit.

“How did it go?” was her first question once we had sat down at the table.

I told her all about the visit, about how kind my grandparents had been but how I felt a little bit stifled by all the formality, and how I didn’t feel I’d ever fit in with that sort of life. I also mentioned my reservations about what they would have done if my mother hadn’t run away, and said how glad I was that I’d been sent up to the farm. As I spoke, I saw a sort of tension leave Elsie, and realized that she had been expecting me to say I wanted to live with them. I leant over and took her hand.

“Don’t worry, Elsie,” I told her sincerely. “I know I’m a pest and all, bringing young men into the fold and not behaving myself, but I’m not going to throw all you’ve done back in your face by waltzing off to join a family I don’t know just because of who they are. You’re more of a mother to me than anyone else I’ve ever known, and I love you too much to do that to you. So even though you’ve been hinting you want the place to yourselves, I’m afraid you’re stuck with me and Robin until further notice.” I smiled at her, and she smiled back at me, then gathered me up and gave me a gentle hug.

“I was worried,” she admitted, “especially seeing what sort of people they are. I should have known you better and trusted you.”

“Yes, you should,” I told her severely, and then laughed at her startled expression. After a second or two she joined in, and that released the last little bit of tension in the atmosphere. I soon had her in stitches with a description of Agatha and her odd statements, and even Robin joined in with his observations. I did mention that I’d promised to go back again, and Elsie nodded.

“Yes, you should go back,” she agreed. “After all, they’re your grandparents and it’s only natural they’ll want to see you.” She was even in agreement with grandfather over who should fund my possible future partnership with Huw.

“That’s only proper,” she said. “He’s your kin and he should help to pay your way into the partnership.”

The rest of the evening was spent describing the visit again to Mo and to Frank when they came in, and discussing matters around and about the farm. The next day, Sunday, I spent all day helping Elsie scrub and polish the spare rooms for the next lot of guests to arrive. She had opened the spare rooms on the opposite side of the house to where we slept, saying it would be quieter on that side as they were away from the kitchen downstairs, and the farmyard outside.

“Being city folk they’ll not be used to the noise of a farm,” she reasoned. “Mind you, they probably won’t be used to the quiet, either, but I reckon they’ll settle better to the quiet than to the noise at five o’clock in the morning.”

I agreed, and we spent several happy hours chatting away while we polished, dusted, vacuumed and freshened the four rooms—one for Alex and Bridget, one each for the boys, and one for Mr. McCluskey. I told Elsie he’d been invited over to stay with my grand parents, and she said she thought it a very good idea.

There were just over two weeks until Alex’s planned arrival date and we were all getting very excited, especially Elsie. I could tell Frank was also looking forward to it, but in his usual laconic way. In the two days before they were due Elsie carried out a frenzy of baking, making all sorts of cakes and scones, and even going so far as to make some strawberry jam. Finally the day of their arrival dawned, and Elsie was quite nearly beside herself.

Robin and I were collected by Huw Edwards for a difficult calving which he said would be good practice for us, and were whisked away just after lunch with no idea when we would be back. I was actually quite relieved at this, as it meant all the emotional stuff would be out of the way before we returned. It wasn’t that I wasn’t looking forward to seeing Alex again, but I had been so young when he left I really couldn’t remember him, and so felt a lot less of the excitement felt by Elsie.

The calving went a lot more smoothly than we expected, and after the obligatory cup of tea in the farmhouse Huw drove

us over to the farm and dropped us off. He refused the offer of another cup of tea saying he didn't want to intrude on a family reunion. As he drove away we could hear the babble of voices from the kitchen, carrying across the yard in the clear summer air. I looked at Robin, and he looked at me. I shrugged.

"Come on then, let's get it over with."

We walked hand in hand across the yard. When we got to the kitchen door I disengaged my hand from Robin's and pushed him in front of me. He went in and I heard him joke with Elsie about seeing the guests had arrived. I followed him in and stopped just inside the door, blinking at the kitchen full of people. I spotted Alex straight away. I looked at him, and he looked back at me, a look of surprise on his face.

"Alex?" I asked. He nodded.

I walked across to him, and looked up at him. He was quite good looking but not a patch on Robin to my eyes. I could see why women would find him attractive though. He had a boyish air about him that complimented his good looks. I was desperately thinking of something to say.

"You look better than your photograph," was the only comment I could think of, and was surprised when everyone laughed.

"Come and meet the rest of us," he said, taking my hand and leading me over to Bridget.

"Hello Bridget, it's lovely to meet you," I said, holding out my hand.

Bridget smiled, and said "Hey, no need to be so formal; after all, we're nearly sisters aren't we?" and she leant forward so that we touched cheeks.

"Let me introduced the children," she said, and brought them forward. "This is Arthur," she said, indicating the older one, "and this is Frankie."

"Pleased to meet you, boys," I said.

"How do you do?" replied Arthur. Frankie just smiled. I turned to the other man who was standing a little to one side.

“This is my father in law,” Alex finished off, introducing Arthur.

Arthur stepped forward, and took my hand. He smiled at me and I found myself smiling back.

“Well, if I had any doubts before,” he said slowly, “I think they’ve been blown away by meeting you. I remember Annabelle Molyneux and if you’re not her daughter, I’m a Frenchman.”

I gave him a little smile and then, not quite knowing why I did so, I gently kissed his cheek.

“I think I’ve been waiting to meet you for a long time,” I said “Why don’t you sit down and tell me all about it?”

Chapter 36

“That’ll have to wait,” Elsie said firmly. “Dinner’s ready, and if we don’t sit down and eat soon it’ll be spoilt, and I’m not going to let that happen. So let’s get this kitchen organized, and eat.

“Come on Bridget, let me show you and the boys your rooms,” I said, picking up one of the suitcases.

“That’s a good idea, Suzie,” Elsie approved. “If these gentlemen will give me a hand to shift some furniture, we should be ready for a meal by the time you get back.”

The men indicated that they would be willing to help with the furniture removal, so I indicated to Bridget that we should make our way upstairs. She picked up another case and called to the boys. We went up the stairs and turned left at the top, into the usually unused part of the house. To ensure that the rooms there didn’t feel damp, or smell musty, we had had the windows open and had put large bunches of fragrant pot pourri in bowls in each room. Elsie didn’t normally hold with such things as pot pourri, but under the circumstances she felt it was worth it. The end result certainly was—the rooms felt light and airy and smelt fresh. We had cleaned and polished every scrap of furniture and wood and cleaned all the carpets and curtains. All the bed linen and covers had, of course, been thoroughly washed and ironed and they looked lovely. When I showed Bridget into the room she and Alex would be sharing, I heard her gasp with pleasure.

“Oh, this is lovely,” she said, quite sincerely. “And look at the view from that window.” She put her case down, and walked over to look out.

The view was certainly impressive. This side of the house looked out over untouched moorland, which today was looking fresh and green with a delicate bloom of wild flowers. The sky was that particular shade of blue which I had only ever seen in Yorkshire, with light wispy clouds chasing each other over the hills. The light was going as the sun went down, but it was still more or less broad daylight and the light had that peculiar clarity you only seem to get over the Yorkshire moors. Bridget stopped by the open window and breathed deeply of the fresh air.

“I’ve never breathed air like that before,” she said. “It’s so fresh and clean. It’s lovely.”

“I’m glad you enjoy the fresh air,” I told her. “Mind you, it can get pretty bleak around here in the winter.”

“Yes, I suppose it could.” She turned away from the window, and looked around the rest of the room. I could see her taking in the details of the furniture.

“My lord,” she said. “Is all this original?”

“I think so,” I replied. “I know most of it has been in Elsie and Frank’s family for several generations.”

“It’s amazing. I’ve never seen anything like this before. It’s lovely.”

“It’s the devil to dust and polish,” I laughed.

Bridget laughed as well. “I’d like the chance to find out,” she said. “I’m going to be hunting through the antique shops while we’re here, and I’m hoping to ship some pieces back to the States for our house in Philadelphia.”

“I hope you find what you’re looking for,” I told her. “You’d probably better start off in either Scarborough or York, I think that’s where most of the good antique shops are.”

“Hey, thanks for the tip. I’ll tell Alex.”

“Alex should be telling you,” I joked.

Bridget laughed. “Yeah, you’re right, he should be telling me! After all, he grew up here didn’t he!”

“Come on, I’ll show you where the boys are sleeping, and then your father, and the bathrooms.”

I took her to the boys’ rooms, and she thought they were lovely. I showed her her father’s room, and she loved that as well. I then showed her the bathrooms. I’m sure she found these a disappointment, especially as they would have to share, but she hid it well and said everything that was proper. I left her to unpack and freshen up before dinner, and went back downstairs.

Down in the kitchen, Elsie had got Alex and Robin to shift the kitchen table further up the room, and had also had them bring the dining room table in, placing it so that it made a ‘T’ shape which gave everyone room to sit down.

I gave Elsie a hand by laying the table, and then helping her with the vegetables. By the time Bridget and the boys came back downstairs, dinner was being served up. We all sat down and enjoyed the meal. Afterwards the boys were so tired from the drive, the meal and all the general excitement, they almost fell asleep in their chairs. Alex and Bridget took them up to bed while the rest of us, except for Frank and Arthur, tidied up and put everything away.

We all gathered around the fire once everything had been done. It was a bit of a tight squeeze with all of us there, but we managed to fit everyone in. Robin and I shared one of the large armchairs Frank brought in from somewhere. I hadn’t ever seen them before, but I decided not to ask where they’d come from. Alex and Bridget shared another one; while Frank, Elsie, Mo and Arthur had one each. Elsie served coffee and tended the fire, and then settled herself down.

“All right,” she said quietly, “who’s going to start?”

“Start what?” asked Alex, who was obviously drowsing in his chair. I have to admit he did look extremely comfortable, with his arm around Bridget’s waist as she was perched half on his lap.

Elsie gave him a slightly disgusted look. "Start the tales," she said. "Especially the one about who Suzie's father might be."

"Oh, that," he replied.

"Yes, that."

"Well," said Arthur, shifting himself in his chair, "I for one would appreciate hearing everyone else's story tonight. I feel I should tell mine last as the missing piece of the jigsaw, at least where Suzie's concerned."

"Well in that case," Elsie agreed, "why don't we all catch up with Alex's story. I know you've told us a lot," she said to him, seeing him about to reply, "but Robin would probably like to hear the full story, and I know I certainly would. So wake yourself up, lad, and let's hear the tale."

I looked around, and saw Frank nodding in agreement. "Aye lad," he said in his quiet voice. "Let's hear the full tale. Happen it might make me feel less guilty."

"Guilty?" exclaimed Alex. "Why would you feel guilty?"

"Because it were me as got thee into t'Navy early. If I hadn't done that, you'd not have suffered. I've allus felt it were my fault, because I'd lied at the recruiting office."

"True," agreed Alex, "but then if you hadn't, I'd never have met Bridget or her father, and then we'd never find out the last clue to Suzie's family."

"Good thought, lad, I'd not looked at it that way. That helps, it certainly does. So now, tell us your story, lad, and let's hear what you've been doing for the last few years."

Frank settled back in his chair, and everyone looked expectantly at Alex. He blushed slightly at being the focus of several pairs of interested eyes, but began his tale.

While Alex spoke, I sat and watched the play of the firelight on people's faces. That's not to say I didn't find his tale interesting, but I found I could let my mind wander occasionally. I was half sitting on Robin's lap and he had one arm round my waist, pretty much as Bridget was sitting with Alex. At one point all I could think of was that if Alex was doing to Bridget what Robin

was doing to me with his other hand, the springs in their mattress were going to get a good work out tonight.

Alex's tale drew to its conclusion, and there was a small stir of movement. Frank was looking at Alex, and I swear I could see tears in his eyes.

"Eh, lad, I never knew you'd been through so much," he said huskily.

"Don't worry about it," Alex replied. "Like I said, everything's turned out for the best, and I've got lots of rewards from it. Like this one," he said, giving Bridget a hug.

"I know, but still ..." Frank continued. Elsie jumped up.

"Right then," she said, dispelling the mood that Frank's words had inspired. "Who wants another cup of tea?"

Various people replied to this, so for the next few minutes Elsie was busy with tea pot and kettle. I got up from Robin's lap, and wandered over to see if she needed a hand. Elsie was coping, but when I saw Frank about to get up I realized he was going to do 'his rounds' for the evening.

"Don't bother getting up Frank," I called over. "We'll go round and see to everything. I could do with stretching my legs, and getting some fresh air."

Robin enthusiastically endorsed this idea, getting up himself and coming over. Elsie shot us both a suspicious look but decided not to say anything, probably because of all the guests around. I opened the door, and we slipped out into the warm night. It was still almost daylight and there was certainly enough light to see by.

"What a beautiful night," I breathed as we walked across the yard hand in hand.

"It certainly is," Robin responded.

"And what do you think you're playing at?" I demanded.

"What do you mean, love?" he replied innocently.

"While we were sitting in the chair. Stroking me like that. You know what sort of effect that has on me. It's not fair."

"Sorry sweetheart," he said, not sounding very sorry at all. "But I just can't resist you when you're so close."

“I know, but it’s still not fair. Especially when we can’t do anything about it later.”

“Well, not in the house.” He leered suggestively at me. “But there’s always out here.”

“But we’ve got to do the rounds,” I responded, although I felt my breath catch in my throat at his suggestion.

“And so we will, my love, don’t worry. Just a bit faster than Frank, which will leave us a bit of spare time.”

I giggled and he grabbed my hand and turned our sedate walk into a fast trot. We checked the calving house, the play barn, the dogs, made sure all the gates were closed, and corralled a spare hen or two which had escaped Elsie earlier. Then we revisited the play barn, and checked out the hay loft. Ten minutes later, we arrived back at the kitchen door, a little breathless, but perfectly respectable. I had Robin check my over for loose straw, and I did the same for him before we went in. We composed our selves, and then I opened the door. Everyone was still drinking their tea, so we went to the table and helped ourselves. Robin reported to Frank, pointing out enough details so that it was obvious we had done them. I saw Elsie relax slightly and then smile over at us. She looked at me, and then winked and patted her hair. I followed her movement, and found a piece of straw which Robin had overlooked. I casually pulled it out, and disposed of it. She smiled over at me, and then gestured to the chair.

“Is everyone ready for the next round?” she asked. There were several murmurs of assent, but Arthur held his hand up.

“I don’t know about anyone else,” he said, “but with all the travelling today, I’m absolutely bushed, and my bed is calling me loud and clear. I would appreciate leaving any more catching up until another day.”

I looked over at Alex and Bridget, and they were nodding in agreement. However as I’d seen Bridget whispering to Alex, and him replying, I would have put money on it that sleep was the last thing on their minds.

Frank stretched, and said "Well, I have to admit it would be grand to hear more, but I'm fairly tired meself, so if you folks want to go upstairs that's fine by me. I'll not be far behind you."

I felt a bit disappointed but Robin and I did have a bit of studying to do to cover our holiday essays, so having an early night wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Arthur stood up and made his way to the door. He opened it, and then turned back.

"One other thing which I think we ought to consider," he said to the room at large. "I know what I have to say concerns Suzie a great deal, but there are other people who need to be considered here." I had an inkling of what he was going to say, and a couple of seconds later I was proved right.

"Suzie's grandparents should also hear my tale; indeed, they might be able to shed more light on what I have to say. I think they should be present too."

I looked at Elsie, and she was nodding. She looked at Mo, and he nodded. Then she looked at Frank, and got a sharp nod in return. Finally she looked over at me and Robin.

"Well Suzie, what do you think? Should we invite them over to hear what Mr. McCluskey has to say?"

"Please, call me Arthur," he murmured quietly.

"All right, thank you. Should we have them over to hear Arthur's tale?"

Everyone turned to look at me, and I could feel myself blushing hotly. I considered the question for a few minutes. Finally I looked across at Elsie.

"I think it would be only right," I agreed. "After all, they have as much right to know as anyone here. Probably more," I added.

"Good," Elsie said decidedly. "I'll give them a call in the morning and see if they want to come over. I suppose I'll have to get the best china out."

I looked at her sharply and was relieved to see that she was smiling. I smiled back.

"I only want my grandparents here," I told her. "The rest of them can hear it from them when they get back."

“I think that’s reasonable,” Elsie replied. “After all, they might not want the others to hear it. I’ll tell them in the morning.”

“Right then, that’s all settled,” Arthur said. “I’m glad I got that off my chest. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“We’ll be going up too,” Alex added.

A chorus of ‘good nights’ echoed around the kitchen, and with the three guests gone the room suddenly looked a lot bigger.

“Great,” said Robin, moving over to the fire. “I get an arm-chair to myself. You weigh a ton sweetheart, you’ll have to go on a diet.”

I picked up a cushion from one of the other chairs, and threw it at him. “Cheeky beggar,” I said, as it hit the back of his head. He picked it up and made to throw it back.

“That’s enough of that,” Elsie’s voice came like the crack of a whip. “You’re not children. If you want to throw things you can go out into the barn and do it.”

Robin looked guiltily at her, and put the cushion into his chair and then sat on it. I looked over at Elsie and she gave me a wink and a quick smile. I gave her a quick smile back and then went and sat in a chair opposite Robin.

“There, that told you,” I told him smugly. He grumbled for a bit and then stuck his tongue out at me.

“Spoiled rotten you are,” he grumbled. “You started it.”

I smiled smugly back at him. Elsie, Mo and Frank came and joined us, and we sat for a few minutes in silence.

“Did you two check the gate to the top field?” Elsie suddenly asked.

“Er, yes, I think so,” Robin replied.

“But are you sure?” she persisted. “We don’t want the animals getting out and traipsing all over the countryside.”

“Well, if it would make you feel better we can go and check it again.”

“I think you should. And there’s still a couple of chickens out. Suzie, you’d best go with him and make sure they’re put away.”

I looked over at her and she looked back at me solemnly for an instant, and then the corner of her mouth twitched.

“Well, if you think we should,” I began.

“I do,” she replied. “Off you go, and do the rest of the job.”

We needed no further urging, and jumped up.

“Don’t go running over them fields,” came Frank’s voice as we opened the kitchen door. “I don’t want either you laid up with a broken ankle, or something worse.”

We promised to be careful, and went out into the yard.

“Does Frank know what we get up to?” Robin asked as we went through the gate and into the fields.

“I’ve no idea. I’ve never been able to read him like I have Elsie. He’s very good at keeping a straight face, and he never lets on to anything.”

“I’ve got a sneaking suspicion that he knows a lot more than he lets on,” Robin commented.

“You could be right. Come on, let’s go and check that gate.”

He held my hand and brought me to a stop. “You know darned well there’s nothing the matter with the gate,” he said, pulling me closer. “That was just one of Elsie’s little ways of giving us some time together.”

“Yes I know,” I replied. “But I will find it easier when we go back if I can say, hand on heart, that we checked the gate. You know how much I blush. It’ll be a dead give away.”

“As usual, my sweet, you are so right,” he agreed. “And of course, it’s further away from the farm house, and therefore more private than the play barn.”

“It is,” I responded. “And I hope you have some more of your supplies in your pocket after earlier.”

“Sweetheart,” he said, actually managing to sound hurt. “Of course I have. I was in the boy scouts, you know.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” I asked as we walked up the field hand in hand.

“You mean to tell me that you don’t know their motto?” he said in mock astonishment.

“Why should I?” I replied a bit defensively. “I’ve never been in the scouts, or known anyone that was. So what is it?”

“‘Be prepared’”, he quoted at me. “I take it quite literally.”

“Yes, good motto for a vet.”

“You’re so right.” He laughed, and pulled me up the field until we were almost running. We reached the top gate and found it was securely fastened as we had expected. Although there was no road running directly alongside this field, the one next to it did exit onto the road just along from the farm lane, and had a massive hole in the dry stone wall caused by an inexperienced driver getting the bend wrong, and crashing into it. The insurance companies were still wrangling over payment and as a result the wall still had a hole in it, which was quite large enough for a cow to get through, never mind a sheep. Frank hadn’t realized there was a problem when he turned the sheep out into the field a few weeks back until he’d received an irate phone call from the neighboring farmer asking why Frank’s sheep were running wild all over the place. Frank had borrowed Mo and a couple of dogs, and the two of them had had a great afternoon rounding up all the sheep and moving them into a different field. So, not only had Frank temporarily lost the use of one of his best grazing fields, he also had to install a locking gate into the field to stop the livestock getting into it. He hadn’t originally kept the gate locked, but on two occasions ramblers from outside the local area had walked across the field and left the gate open, necessitating more time spent rounding up livestock. As a result, the gate was now chained shut, and padlocked.

I stood at the gate, turning my back on it, and looking out at the view. The gloaming was well advanced now, with just the hills outlined against the ever-darkening sky, and with a glow coming from behind them. I breathed deeply of the scented air, and sighed with happiness.

“What a wonderful view,” I murmured.

“It certainly is,” replied Robin. I glanced at him, and saw that he was looking at me.

“I meant out there,” I said severely.

“I know you did,” he responded. “But I prefer this view.”

His look gave me the old familiar shiver, and started the butterflies cavorting in my stomach again. Returning his look I quite deliberately undid my shirt, and then reached around behind and undid my bra, pulling the straps down under my shirt, and removing it completely.

“What about this view then?” I asked provocatively, looking at him from under my eyelids. To give him an even better view, I put my arms behind me and leant on the gate.

“Now that’s what I call a view,” he whispered huskily, and came towards me. He bent his head, and started kissing my breasts, sucking on my nipples alternately. I closed my eyes, and gave into the sensations he was creating.

* * * * *

Some time later, we walked decorously across the yard, once again holding hands. I had checked my blouse carefully to make sure it was buttoned correctly, and I was sure everything was back in place.

We went into the kitchen, to find that Frank had retired to bed, and Elsie and Mo were sitting one each side of the fireplace.

“Took your time, didn’t you?” Elsie said, concentrating on her knitting.

“Well, it is quite a long walk,” I replied. “It’s all uphill.”

Mo laughed, but Elsie said nothing else. I went over to the fire. “I think I’ll be off to bed now,” I told her. I bent to kiss her cheek. “Good night.”

“Good night love,” she replied. I wished Mo a ‘good night’ as well, and went upstairs. Robin stayed in the kitchen for a while longer as Mo had just got the whiskey out, and offered Robin a drink.

Halfway up the stairs, I realized that my predictions about Alex and Bridget were being fulfilled; I could hear the rhythmic

sounds and soft cries that were coming from their room, and thanked heaven that Robin and I had managed some time alone tonight. Feeling as aroused as Robin had got me and not being able to do anything about it would have been sheer torture whilst listening to the sounds of other people's love making. I crossed the landing into my room, and went over to the window. I stood looking out for a while, feeling relaxed and at peace but not terribly tired. I reflected I was obviously getting used to the life of a vet, as only last year I would have been fast asleep by this time with all the work we were doing with Huw.

Finally, as the moon rose over the landscape casting white light and black shadows with equal ease, I turned from the window, undressed and went to bed. Sleep eluded me for a while, but within half an hour or so I drifted off into a deep, restful sleep.

When I woke in the morning I was grateful it was Sunday and I didn't have to get up and get ready to go out with Huw. I might be getting used to the workload, but getting up early had never been a favorite with me. Through my bedroom window I could hear the calls of the children, both Alex's two and Elsie's three, and smiled that they were getting on so well. I heard Alex's voice and Bridget's drifting up the stairs from the kitchen, and Elsie's slightly deeper tones mingling in, presumably as she offered them breakfast. Looking at the angle of the sun, I assumed Frank would be out with the animals as usual, and would be back for breakfast shortly. I heard footsteps in the passage outside the door, and then a light tapping.

"Are you up?" came Robin's voice through the panels.

"Not yet," I responded.

"Want any help?" he asked. I could hear the grin in his voice, and smiled in response.

"No. I can manage, thank you."

"Spoil sport."

"Go away, I'll get up in a minute."

"All right love, I'll see you downstairs."

"Yes, won't be long."

I heard footsteps across the landing, and then receding downstairs. The kitchen door opened and closed, briefly letting in a louder burst of noise. I stretched, feeling remarkably happy and contented, and then got out of bed.

By the time I entered the kitchen Frank had been and gone, Mo was also out and about, and only Robin and Elsie were still sitting at the kitchen table. I made my good mornings and wandered over to the range, where Elsie had set some bacon and sausages frying for me. I cooked the rest of my breakfast, and then sat down with them at the table.

“I’ve been thinking about what we said last night,” Elsie announced, “and I think Arthur hit the nail right on the head, we should invite your grandparents.”

“I thought we agreed that yesterday?”

“We did, but I just wanted to make sure that that’s what you want. After all, you’re the key player in this.”

“I think he was right as well. We should invite them.”

“Good,” she said, getting up and moving over to the sink. “I’ll give them a ring just before lunch, and arrange a time for them to come and visit.”

“How are they going to get here?” I asked. “I don’t know if they can drive, or even if they have a car.”

“I’ll go and pick them up,” Robin instantly responded. “It’s not that long a drive to Scarborough.”

“Sure you don’t mind?”

“Positive. Now eat your breakfast, and let’s show Alex and family some of the sights of Yorkshire.”

“There won’t be much open on a Sunday,” Elsie warned.

“I know, but we can go to Halifax and see the Piece Hall and the gibbet. That’ll entertain the kids, at least. Then I thought we’d take them over and show them Heptonstall. Bridget will just love all those lovely cobbled streets. After that, who knows!”

“Sounds like a nice trip out,” Elsie commented. “Make sure you’re all back here just after half past two, for Sunday lunch.”

“We will,” he promised, and ushered me out of the door.

Out in the yard Alex and Bridget were showing the children around the farm, helped (or hindered) by Elsie's three. Mo was exercising a couple of his dogs in preparation for an upcoming trial, and after a few moments Alex wandered over to the gate to watch him working. Robin and I went over to where Bridget was standing, watching with appalled fascination as Elsie's three children demonstrated 'straw jumping' in the play barn, and obviously wondering whether Elsie was a delinquent mother, whether all Yorkshire folk were completely mad, and whether she could possibly stop her children joining in.

"Don't worry," I told her. "It's not as dangerous as it looks. I used to do that myself when I was their age."

"Really?" she said, turning to regard me with fascination. "Did you never hurt yourself?"

"No, not once. It's great fun. You should try it." I couldn't help bursting out laughing at the expression on her face. "Have you asked Alex about it?"

She shook her head.

"We've got a trip planned out for you for today," Robin said cheerfully. "We thought we'd take you out and about and show you some of the sights."

"That sounds good," she replied. "When do we go?"

"Want to get the kids out of the barn?" Robin asked with a smile. She smiled back, although a little tentatively, and nodded.

"It's quite safe, but I can understand that it looks dangerous. When do you want to set off?"

"Can you give us five minutes?" she asked.

"Yep, no problem. We'll wait out here for you."

Bridget called the children and they all disappeared into the farm house. Robin and I wandered over to join Alex leaning on the gate.

"We're taking you out and about this morning," Robin announced. "Bridget's just gone to get ready. We'll be leaving in about five minutes."

“Sounds good,” Alex said, turning round to lean on the gate. “Where are we going?”

Robin explained the itinerary, and Alex said it sounded fine. Bridget and the children appeared from the farm house and we all headed over to Alex’s car, which was a lot bigger than ours, and climbed in. I sat in the back with Bridget and the children, and Robin went in the front with Alex.

“OK folks, here we go!” Robin exclaimed, as Alex reversed the car across the yard. “Let’s go hit Halifax!”

Chapter 37

The day out was very successful; as predicted, Bridget loved all the sights we showed her. She declared Heptonstall the ‘cutest little place she ever saw’, and was equally complimentary about the Piece Hall in Halifax. Alex demonstrated that he had remembered everything from when he was a boy, and showed her his old school and some of the places he had haunted when he was a school boy.

Sunday lunch was also a great success, with Elsie’s cooking receiving rapturous acclaim, especially from Arthur, who said he hadn’t eaten anything like it since he was over here last. Everyone was so stuffed after the meal that they were content to laze around the farm. Alex and Bridget dug out some old chairs and took them outside to sit in the sunshine, in the garden to the side of the house. Young Arthur and Frankie finally got their courage up (egged on by Elsie’s three) and spent the later part of the afternoon straw jumping in the play barn. Bridget had been on eggshells the first few times they jumped, standing in the barn doorway and almost trying to catch them as they fell through the air. After that, though, she calmed down a little and rejoined Alex sitting in the sunshine.

Robin and I spent some of the afternoon with Alex and Bridget just chatting and comparing notes about anything and everything. Bridget and I found we had quite a lot in common, especially where clothes were concerned, and we promised our-

selves a trip to Leeds to have a look round the shops one afternoon. Alex and Robin, after an initial period which reminded me of nothing so much as two dogs circling each other, not quite ready to fight, but not yet ready to make peace either, settled down into what could only be described as a firm friendship. Alex, being quite a bit older than Robin, had a slightly more serious outlook, but Robin had a more realistic sense of things than either his upbringing or his apparent youth would have lead Alex to suspect. Each made a start in respecting the other, and they quickly developed a sincere liking.

The following week dragged by. Elsie kept her promise and contacted my grand parents who accepted her invitation to come over for the afternoon on the following Sunday. I was both looking forward to this and dreading it. Recalling the faded glamour of their house I wasn't at all sure how they'd fit in to the farm's way of doing things, and dreaded that they'd hold their noses up at it. Elsie told me not to be a ninny, and assured me that everything would be fine. I was slightly reassured, but certainly wasn't totally comfortable with the visit. Robin also told me not to worry, and pointed out that if they really wanted to find out who my father was they would just have to put up with it. Surprisingly, I found this way of looking at things more reassuring than Elsie's, probably because it just suited my mood.

I was still very uncertain about my grandparents. I had been so nervous the first time I met them I hadn't really taken much notice of anything except the size of the house. On our subsequent visits, of which there had been two, things hadn't been much better. I still felt like a fish out of water being greeted by the butler and ushered with great pomp into the drawing room. I was much more used to the more relaxed, slightly rough and tumble atmosphere of the farm, and my casual life with Robin and the other students in London. The thought of having to spend any great length of time with them left me feeling as if I might be stifled. I had made it quite clear that I wasn't going to give up my life as either a student or, hopefully, a vet later on, and I gath-

ered that they were slightly disappointed with my decision, but had decided to accept it, albeit reluctantly. I'm sure they were disappointed with my way of life, my way of dressing, and the fact I was determined to earn my own living. The only thing I felt had their complete approval was my engagement to Robin. As the heir to a title and a large estate he appeared to fulfill all their requirements for a grandson in law. The fact that they knew his family by repute if nothing else also helped.

On the Friday night Alex suggested we all went to the cinema. There was a small local cinema in Elland, and they were showing a film Alex had missed when it came out in America. Bridget and I thought the idea was wonderful; Elsie volunteered to baby sit and Arthur said he'd help, so we had an early tea and off we went. It was a lovely evening; after the film we all went to the pub, where we tried the local brew. Bridget tried a half pint, and enjoyed it so much she had another, after which she became a little tipsy. Alex, also unused to real ale after the American beers, had a couple of pints and also got a bit unsteady. Robin, who had volunteered to drive, was only drinking orange juice and I had my usual vodka, lime and soda water. We were certainly a merry crew driving back to the farm, and found everyone had gone to bed when we got in. Robin decided to raid the beer barrel in the scullery as he hadn't had anything to drink earlier, and persuaded Alex and Bridget to join him. We sat up until nearly midnight, and then staggered off to bed. We weren't drunk by any means, but none of us was entirely sober either.

Elsie merely raised her eyebrows at Alex and Bridget the next morning; they were both slightly hung over, and Alex vowed never to touch real ale again. Robin was fine, as was I, and we enjoyed the sight of our guests' suffering, although we did offer plenty of advice and sympathy when it was requested. Elsie's breakfast soon brought them round; a good cooked meal, and several cups of tea worked wonders. Alex announced he was taking Bridget and the boys to Scarborough for the day, so Elsie and I scrambled together a packed lunch

for them to eat on the beach. Bridget, who hadn't brought a bathing costume with her, asked if she could borrow one of mine. We were nearly the same size, although I was maybe just a little taller. Towels were packed, the packed lunch put in the picnic hamper, and they set off a little after ten o'clock. Arthur had declined going with them, as Mo had invited him to come to a sheep dog trial with him and Arthur, fascinated by the whole thing, had accepted with alacrity. They left shortly after Alex and Bridget, so by half past ten there were just me, Elsie, and Robin left in the kitchen.

After all the rush and bustle of people going, it was lovely to have some peace and quiet in the kitchen. I made us all another cup of tea, and we sat by the range drinking it. Elsie in particular seemed to relish having some quiet time.

"I'll do lunch, shall I?" I volunteered. Elsie looked across at me.

"Would you love?" she asked. "That would be so nice. The boys are out with their friends today, so it's just us three, Frank and little Suzie."

"No problem. I'll just finish this and then get started."

"Bless you," replied Elsie. Robin got up.

"I'll go and get the eggs from the barn," he said. "I could do with some fresh air."

Elsie nodded, and he went out. Just as I finished my tea, Elsie looked over at me.

"Are you two still happy together?" she asked.

"Yes, of course," I responded. "Why do you ask?"

"No reason," she replied. "I just like to know that everything's all right, that's all."

I got up and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. "Everything's fine, Elsie."

"That's all right then. Now, shall I bake a cake for tea?"

"Why don't you let me?" I asked.

"Because I want a cake people will eat," she retorted quickly, with a smile. I laughed.

“OK, so I’m not very good with cakes. But even you can’t deny I make great pastry.”

“True,” she replied. “I certainly can’t match your pastry, love. What are you doing for lunch?”

I sketched out the menu I’d thought up, and she approved it. I got the vegetables out of the larder and started preparing them, sitting at the kitchen table whilst Elsie worked her usual miracle with a Victoria sponge. Robin came in with the eggs and off-loaded them into the larder. He then volunteered to go and get some more potatoes and things from the kitchen garden, and disappeared again. Elsie and I chatted about various things, and the subject of my grandparents’ visit the following day came up. I’d never really spoken to Elsie about how I felt, but now I found myself opening up about my feelings towards them, and my interpretation of their attitudes towards me. Elsie listened quietly, occasionally putting in the odd question here and there. I finally ended up admitting that I wasn’t sure I wanted them to come to the farm, in case they turned their gentrified noses up at it. Elsie didn’t say anything for a while once I’d finished, just continued with making some more bread. Then she looked up at me.

“Well, you can’t change how you feel about them, love. And let’s face it, it’s not as if you’ve been brought up with them, or by them for that matter. You are who you are because you’ve been brought up here, with a good set of values, and because of how you live your life and who you live it with. They’re going to have to accept that, or else they’re going to have to accept losing you, perhaps for good, and I really don’t think they’ll want to do that. You’ll have to make some compromises too, but I don’t think you’ll have to adopt a life style you’re not interested in. I think you’ll find that as time goes by, they’ll accept you for who you are. It’s obvious they want to be a part of your life, and if your life is going to be lived here in this house for a few years yet, and then in your own place when you’re married, then they’re just going to have to accept that as well. You can’t live in Scarborough, you’d have to give up all you’ve worked for here,

and you're obviously not going to do that. So my advice is don't rush things, don't get worked up about something until it happens, and take each day with them as it comes."

I looked over at her, feeling a great release as she spoke. I walked over, and put my arms around her, and held her tightly. She returned my hug, flour and all. We were still hugging when Robin came back in with the pail full of vegetables.

"Anything wrong?" he asked.

"Nope, nothing at all," I replied, releasing Elsie and standing back. "Just having a chat about stuff, that's all."

"Ah," he said. "One of those female type things men aren't supposed to know about, is it?"

"No, clever clogs," I retorted. "I've been talking to Elsie about my grandparents, that's all."

"Good," he responded promptly. "About time you did that. If anyone can get your head straight about them it's Elsie."

"Thank you for the approval," Elsie said. "I'm glad you have such confidence in my abilities!"

"Any time, Elsie love, any time," he said outrageously, going up to her and slipping an arm around her waist, and giving her a peck on the cheek. "Best woman I know, you are."

"Get on with you," she retorted, giving him a light slap. "Carrying on like that. Right charmer, you are."

I laughed at the pair of them, enjoying their banter. Robin had managed to charm his way into Elsie's heart in about fifteen minutes flat when she'd met him in London, and she allowed him far more license than anyone else on the farm—Mo included. Robin, of course, took outrageous advantage of this to wheedle most things out of her, except permission for him to sleep with me, of course. That aside, she usually gave in to his demands and laughed at him while she did so. I didn't blame her—Robin had managed to charm me in a lot less than fifteen minutes when I'd first met him. It had just taken him longer to show me that he wanted to be more than a friend. Sometimes I'm a slow learner.

“So, what’s for lunch? I’ve been working hard, you know.”

This remark brought down the combined ire of myself and Elsie, with him being told in no uncertain terms that fetching the eggs and digging a few vegetables hardly constituted a day’s work. He finally managed to make peace with the pair of us by making a cup of tea. We accepted his peace offering and we all sat down at the table, covered as it was by half prepared vegetables and rising bread, and enjoyed a short break. Half way through, Frank came in and joined us, and we all enjoyed a good chat. When Frank went back out Robin went with him, offering his services with mending the wall in the top field. Frank had finally got tired of waiting for the insurance people to get themselves sorted out, and had decided to repair the wall himself. Robin was keen to learn the art of dry stone walling, and Frank was only too happy to have some company whilst he worked, and someone to teach.

I finished preparing lunch and Elsie finished kneading her bread, and put it by the range to rise. We sat comfortably together for a while and then everyone arrived for lunch. This was quite a noisy affair, given that there were only five of us. Frank and Robin discussed the techniques for the wall they were rebuilding; and Elsie, Suzie and I talked about various female things of great importance, such as Suzie’s new party dress, what color it should be, and whether she could have her ears pierced. Once these important items had been decided (pale blue, and ‘no’), talk turned to the visit the following day.

Frank was his usual calm self, regarding the visit as something which needed to happen and it was best to get it over with. Suzie really didn’t care one way or the other—she was going to a party at a friend’s house, and Elsie had arranged for her to go and stay all day, so that no one would have to drive her to and from in the middle of the visit. Robin and Elsie were well aware of my feelings, but neither saw fit to comment. Frank went back out after lunch and Robin went out with him. Frank had commented that he was coming along fine as a wall builder, and said

he could make himself useful again. Suzie vanished back into her bedroom, and amused herself by playing her music. However, due to Elsie's putting her foot down firmly when she first got the radio and gramophone for her birthday, the volume was kept down and we couldn't hear anything from her room.

I moped about the kitchen until Elsie got tired of me and sent me out with a flask for Frank and Robin. I picked up the flask, wrapped some scones in a large handkerchief, and set off for the top field. It was a lovely walk, and Frank and Robin were grateful for the refreshments, and the break. I stayed up there with them for the rest of the afternoon, fetching and carrying stones for them and holding various tools as directed. I found the manual work curiously satisfying, and thoroughly enjoyed my time with them. This was probably helped by the fact that Robin had taken his shirt off in the heat of the afternoon, and I could admire the stretch and glide of his muscles under his smooth skin. Frank also stripped off, and I compared his wiry, tight frame to Robin's smoother, less defined musculature.

Late in the afternoon we packed up, the wall finished, and walked back down the hill to the farm. We could see from the cars parked in the yard that everyone was back, and as we got nearer we could see the children once again playing in the play barn.

"Happen Alex will have to build himself a barn when he gets home," Frank commented as we got nearer.

"Well, it would certainly keep them busy and out of the way," Robin agreed.

"Poor Bridget," I said, "she'd never have a moment's peace if they could do that at home. She's only allowing them to do it here because you and Elsie have told her it's safe."

Frank laughed. "That never even occurred to either of us. We just wanted all you kids out of the house and out from underfoot. Telling you to play in the barn killed two birds with one stone. I knew from personal experience how much straw was needed to give you a soft landing, so there we were."

Robin gave a short laugh. "You must have been braver than I was—I still wouldn't do that today."

"Coward," I told him.

"Yep," he agreed, "I'm a red blooded coward, and I want to keep all the red blood on the inside, where it can't be seen."

We all laughed, and as Frank went to the barn to put his tools away Robin and I went into the house. The kitchen was bedlam. Mo and Arthur were standing by the range discussing the trials, with many hand gestures. Elsie was getting the dinner ready, helped by Bridget. Alex was listening to Arthur and Mo, and putting in the occasional word. Suzie had come back downstairs and seemed to be alternately helping and arguing with her mother. Bridget was putting in the occasional word which Suzie was listening to, and then either shaking her head, or gesturing with her hands. I gave Robin a push towards the men, and went over myself to where Elsie and Bridget were putting the finishing touches to the meal. It looked as if everything was proceeding well. Elsie caught sight of me, and gave me a quick frown.

"Just look at the state of you," she exclaimed. "Get yourself upstairs and clean up before you sit down for dinner. Where have you put the flask?" The look of guilt on my face must have spoken volumes.

"Oh, you haven't left it up the fields have you?" she asked in dismay. "Well, no hope for it now, but you'll have to go back up after dinner and fetch it back."

"Sorry Elsie," I muttered.

"Well, least said, soonest mended," she said briskly. "Go and get washed up, and then come back down. We should be ready by then."

I wandered off upstairs, aware that Robin was watching me as I went. I got upstairs, took one look in my mirror, and realized why Elsie had been so dismayed. I had smudges of mud and moss all over my face, with my hair all over the place where I had run my hands through it. I quickly undressed, put on my dressing gown, and went down the landing to the bathroom. I

went in and shut the door behind me. Just as I was turning round, I nearly dropped dead with fright as a hand went over my mouth. Next second I relaxed as Robin's voice whispered in my ear.

"Don't yell! It's only me."

"What are you doing?" I whispered quietly, but urgently.

"I thought I'd pop up and surprise you," he said grinning and looking smug.

"Surprise me? I nearly died, you idiot!"

"No matter, I'm here now."

"I can see that. What are you doing?"

"Well, I thought I'd start off with this," he said, turning round and setting the bath taps running. He turned back to me. "Right, that should create enough noise to cover any sounds we might make."

"What sort of sounds? What are you doing?" This last came out in a squeak, as he pulled the tie of my dressing gown, causing it to fall open.

"Sshhh, keep the noise down," he whispered, putting his arms round me and pulling me close.

"But I'm all dirty," I protested, even as his hands began their practiced exploration of my body.

"Don't worry, I'll give you a good scrub in the bath," he replied, in between kissing my jaw. I gasped as his hands found my sensitive areas, and his fingers slipped inside.

"No, you won't," I told him, pushing him away, and re-tying my belt. "We're not going to do anything in here, no matter what you've got planned."

"Spoilsport," he complained.

"Maybe I am," I replied, "but I gave my promise to Elsie, and I'm not going to break that no matter what you do."

"What about that time we were here on our own," he reminded me. "What about your promise then?"

"That was different," I protested. "We were on our own for a start, not with a house full of people downstairs." He sighed regretfully, and let me go.

“Oh all right,” he said, making his way to the door. “I’ll go and have my bath in the other bathroom.”

“Oh, I see, Elsie sent you up as well. I wondered why you just happened to be up here. Now go on with you and leave me to have my bath in peace.”

He made a face at me, and slipped out of the door. I locked it behind him and carried on with my bath. Washed, dressed and feeling wonderful, if a little frustrated, I rejoined the party in the kitchen. Apart from Robin, I was the last one to be seated at the table.

“Where’s Robin?” I asked as I sat down.

“He went up for a bath,” replied Elsie. “He was a mucky as you were.”

“Oh,” I replied. Elsie glanced at me, but didn’t say anything else. A few minutes later Robin appeared, looking freshly scrubbed, and sat down at the table.

The meal was lively, with conversations happening all around, and sometimes across, the table, with everyone talking about the day’s events. We had just finished the meal and were clearing the table when the telephone rang. I went over to answer it.

It was Helen. She was on leave, and was bored staying in our house on her own, and wondered if she could come and stay for a few days.

“Elsie,” I called over, “it’s Helen. Have we got room for one more?”

“Of course we have,” she replied, ever hospitable. “When’s she coming up?”

I held a brief conversation with Helen.

“She’ll set off now, travel overnight, and arrive tomorrow if that’s OK.”

“Will she need picking up? Don’t forget we’ve got your grandparents coming over as well.”

I told Helen that would be fine and asked about picking her up from the station. She said not to bother she’d get a taxi. We chat-

ted for a couple more minutes and then hung up, as the taxi was at the house to take her to King's Cross. I walked over to where Elsie was just starting the washing up, and gave her a hug.

"Thanks for that, I know it'll make more work for you."

"Well, I couldn't say no to Helen, could I? She's part of the family, really. Especially since her mum died. Anyway, it'll make work for you to start with, she'll have to sleep on the spare bed in your room. You'd better get up and make it up for her." She gave me a smile. "It'll be just like old times, having the two of you up there. There's clean sheets in the linen press, and blankets in the cupboard on the landing. You know where to find everything."

I gave her a quick squeeze and went up to my room. It took me only minutes to make the bed up, and to put some of my things away, making the room look tidier. I was thrilled that she was coming up—it would mean that everyone who had been involved in my story would be present tomorrow, to hear Arthur's last missing piece of the jigsaw. I finished tidying up and went back down to the kitchen.

When I got there Alex, Bridget and the children (including Elsie's) were sitting by the range. Elsie, Mo, Arthur, Frank and Robin were sitting round the kitchen table. I pulled out a chair and sat down.

"All sorted out then?" Elsie asked, and I nodded.

"Is she sure about getting a taxi from Halifax," asked Robin.

"Oh yes, she said not to worry about it. She's just been paid, and says she's not short of a bob or two. Which reminds me," I said, turning to Elsie. "She was saying something about paying for her board while she's here. She's going to talk to you about it tomorrow when she gets here."

"She'll get her ears boxed then," replied Elsie straightaway. I smiled.

"I thought you'd say that, but I'll let you sort her out tomorrow."

The chat became general after that, and we had a very enjoyable evening just sitting and relaxing. I went to bed in good

time and fell asleep almost immediately. The next morning I awoke reasonably early, early enough to help Elsie with the breakfasts, anyway. However, the feeling of butterflies in my tummy started as soon as I began to eat and got stronger as time went on. Robin departed to collect my grandparents as soon as he'd finished his breakfast.

He gave me a quick hug, and a peck on the cheek, saying "Don't worry, love, it's going to be fine," before he left.

Helen arrived about three quarters of an hour later, stepping out in to the yard looking like a fashion model—which I told her as soon as we'd finished hugging each other. She laughed.

"Well, if you've got the money, you might as well enjoy it," she replied. We went in, and she was introduced to everyone. Bridget in particular seemed to be impressed, especially when she found out Helen was financially independent even without having to work. Alex was pleased she had joined the Wrens, and they spent some time swapping Navy stories. There was a big argument with Elsie as I had expected, with Helen insisting on paying for her board, and Elsie equally firm that she wouldn't. They finally settled it that Helen wouldn't pay, although she muttered to me that she was jolly well going to get Elsie a present for letting her come, whether she liked it or not!

Helen's arrival proved a welcome distraction to my main worry for the day, as did telling her all about my meetings with my grandparents. She was fascinated by my descriptions of them and the rest of the family, and went into gales of laughter when I described Agatha and Abigail's comments about me.

Eventually we heard Robin's car coming back into the yard and the moment I had been dreading arrived. I went out to meet them (after some urging from Elsie), and came up to them just as Robin was helping grandmother out of the car. We hugged, and she smiled.

"What a beautiful place this is," she remarked, looking round. "I can quite understand why you wouldn't want to come and live in Scarborough after having been brought up here."

I beamed at her, and took her arm to help her across the yard. Behind us Robin was escorting grandfather, who was looking around him with interest. We went into the kitchen, and Arthur was there. He greeted my grandmother like an old friend, and then shook hands warmly with grandfather.

“William, great to see you again,” he boomed, “you don’t look a day older.”

“And you haven’t changed a bit,” grandfather replied. “You still try and flannel everyone in sight.”

I introduced everyone and then got them sat down by the range. Elsie had put the kettle on and I made the tea. I passed the cups around.

“Sorry it’s a bit rough and ready,” I apologized to grandmother, as I gave her a cup.

“Oh, stuff and nonsense child,” she replied. “You can get so tired of everything being done properly. It’s lovely here, and everything’s very homely and comfortable. I’m really enjoying myself being out of the house.”

I felt the last of my butterflies fly away as she spoke, and started to relax.

“And now, Arthur, if you don’t mind, we’d like to hear the last piece of the story. I gather you might have a new light to shed on what happened all those years ago, and who Annabelle might have been mixed up with.”

Arthur came over from the table and sat opposite grandfather.

“Yes, that’s right William,” he confirmed. “It was years ago, but I think I might have the final piece of the jigsaw. Let me get myself comfortable, and we’ll get cracking.”

Chapter 38

Arthur pulled out his pipe, and started to fill it with tobacco.

“I first noticed something was going on with Annabelle during my visit in 1937,” he began. “If you remember William, I had come over for a quick visit to discuss whether we could both profit from investing in the war economy. We were staying at your place in the country.”

“Yes, I remember,” grandfather replied. “There was quite a crowd that week as I recall.”

“There was,” Arthur confirmed. “In fact, you found it difficult to find somewhere to squeeze me in, although you managed. Anyway, during that week I got to know Annabelle quite well. She was a taking little thing and seemed glad to have someone to talk to. No disrespect to you,” he said to my grandparents, “but sometimes children find it easier to talk to a relative stranger than they do their own family.”

Bridget nodded. “Yes, that’s true,” she put in. “I love my Pop, but there were things I didn’t want to talk to him about. Still are, for that matter. I used to talk to other people about all sorts of things.”

“So, there we were,” continued Arthur, “getting on famously and chatting about just about anything. I was real sorry when I had to leave to go back to the States.”

Arthur paused, and lit his pipe. Once he had it going to his satisfaction, he resumed his story.

“I came back within a couple of months. Our business wouldn’t wait, and I didn’t want any overhearing any of what we were discussing. I had concerns about someone in my office passing information outside, and this was too critical for that to happen. This time we met at your house in London.

“Annabelle was there as well, getting ready for her season, or some such. Not being part of your social scene, I really didn’t grasp what that was all about. However, she was still the sweet young thing I’d gotten fond of before, and we picked up our relationship again as if there’d never been a break. She was in fine fettle, looking forward to all the balls and other nonsense, and she looked lovelier than ever. Much as young Suzie looks now, as a matter of fact.”

Everyone glanced at me, and I could feel the tell-tale blush creeping up my face. Fortunately, before I was put too far out of countenance, Arthur continued.

“My stay this time was quite a long one, as you’ll recall. We were having business discussions at all hours of the day, and sometimes the night. My concerns over my private secretary were revealed as being well-founded and he had to be sacked, and I needed a replacement. In and amongst all this, there was Annabelle. Although you didn’t seem to notice, doubtless being busy and all, I noticed that as the season went on she appeared less happy about what she was doing. I asked her what the problem was, and she just said that she thought she was in love with someone but that you wouldn’t approve, and would ‘take steps’ to split them up without any regard for her feelings. I asked her who she meant, and she finally confessed that it was Henry Fortescue.”

“Fortescue? That rip,” exclaimed grandfather. “I should think I would have taken steps. The man was a total cad, and a libertine to boot. There’s no way I would have allowed him anywhere near Annabelle—or any girl of her age.”

“Well, I have to say that after I met him I was of the same opinion. If he’d come sniffing round my Bridget, I’d have sent

him packing as well. But there's no one so foolish as a young girl who thinks she's in love, and Annabelle wouldn't hear a word said against him." Arthur's voice was keeping people spellbound. He was obviously an excellent teller of tales, and knew how to pace himself. While he was talking we all hung on his every word and no one interrupted.

"In the end you prevailed, and Fortescue was sent packing. Annabelle was distraught and thought the world had come to an end. She turned to me for comfort, and I did what I could in between everything else. She regarded me as a shoulder to cry on, nothing more, and I felt very paternal towards her. Having said that, though, it's a damned good job I was married or else I might have been tempted to take things further. But I was in love with my wife, and that came very firmly between the two of us. I think Annabelle was happy with my role, regarding me as a sort of uncle.

"Anyway, she moped her way through the rest of the season. She told me that she'd been talking to you, Sibyl, and told you she was just feeling the strain of the season. She continued going out to parties and such like, and meeting all the 'eligible' young men she should have been interested in. However it was clear to me that she was still pining after Fortescue, and that he had managed to charm her quite a lot more than anyone suspected."

"I did wonder if the affair had gone further than I thought," said grandmother reflectively. "But we were never close, she would never confide in me, and I accepted what she said because it was easier than provoking one of her tantrums. I suppose I should have been paying more attention to her, but I was just relieved that she seemed to have accepted our ban on seeing him, and left it at that. Poor Annabelle."

"Don't blame yourself, Sibyl," Arthur continued. "I know, from personal experience, how difficult it is to bring up a teenage girl. They can pull the wool over your eyes faster than a sheep shearer, and lie very convincingly."

Bridget tossed her head. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean," she told her father primly.

He laughed. "Oh, I think you do," he said. "Anyway," he continued, "that was the situation when I was called back to the States, and I didn't return for some months. Obviously I kept in touch with you William, but my wife was ill and I didn't give Annabelle much, if any, thought over the intervening months. By the time Elizabeth was well and I could leave her, it was early 1938. I came over to see you, and we were once again staying in London.

"Annabelle seemed to me to be more distracted than ever. She had lost weight and looked constantly tired. My first thought was that she was ill, but having talked to Sibyl I was reassured that she was just worn out by the season, and would recover once she returned to your family home. I didn't get much chance to speak to her because she put me at a distance, and kept me there very effectively. She seemed to have lost her desire to confide in me, and I didn't want to intrude. However, I did keep an eye on her and I was worried about her."

"Yes, I remember that discussion," said grandmother. "You did seem to be quite worried about her, and I remember feeling resentful that you were implying I wasn't being a good mother. I really should have listened."

"Well, like I said, teenage girls can be difficult," Arthur continued. "Anyway, not long after that discussion, you and William left to return to the country. I still had business to conclude in London, so I moved into Claridge's for the remainder of my stay. Annabelle went with you, and I thought that would be it.

"However, after I returned from discussions with my broker and bank manager one night, I found Annabelle waiting outside my room. She was very upset, almost distraught, and insisted on coming in. Once inside she threw herself in my arms and sobbed as though her heart was breaking. I did what I could to calm her down, and managed to get her reasonably coherent. She was still crying, but at least she wasn't hysterical. I rang down and ordered some food, thinking that would be the best thing, and while I waited for it to arrive I told her to go into the bathroom and sort herself

out. She went, which relieved me greatly—the last thing I wanted was the hotel staff starting rumors that I had a young woman in my room, and what sort of state she was in. Fortunately as she recovered herself, Annabelle realized the same thing and stayed out of the way until room service had left.

“Once she came back out, she admitted she hadn’t had anything to eat that day, and she was ravenous. She started in on the food, and before long had cleared everything I’d ordered. Once she’d eaten, and drunk a glass of wine, I asked her what the problem was.

“She sat there looking at me and then, surprisingly calmly, announced that she was pregnant. You could have knocked me down with a feather. In fact, I did sit down quite quickly. I asked her if she was sure, and she nodded. Next I asked if you knew, Sibyl, but she shook her head, and said she’d die if you found out. I took that with a pinch of salt—young girls are always talking about dying—and asked if you knew, William. She was even more emphatic that you shouldn’t find out, talking about horse whipping for the father, and incarceration for her. So then I asked her what she wanted me to do about it.

“She told me that she only wanted somewhere to sleep that night, and the use of my telephone so that she could ‘make arrangements’. I asked if she was talking about having an abortion but she assured me that was the last thing on her mind, and she was having the baby adopted.

“I was incredulous, asking her how on earth she thought she could pull the wool over everyone’s eyes about her having a baby. She told me that she’d told you two that she was staying with friends, and told the friends she was staying with someone else. In the meantime, someone she could trust absolutely had promised to find her somewhere to live, and would take care of the baby when it was born. After it was born she planned to tell everyone she was going on a holiday, and then just not go back.

“To say I was knocked flat by this would be an understatement. It was then that I recovered sufficiently to ask about who

the father was. As soon as I mentioned that, she started to cry again. She didn't get hysterical but she obviously couldn't talk about him. I told her that I wouldn't help her unless she told me. She shouted at me, accusing me of being as bad as her parents, and what difference did it make whether I knew or not. I told her it would make not a scrap of difference to me, but it might make all the difference to him. She laughed at this, a little wildly, and told me that he already knew and had told her he wouldn't marry her under any circumstances.

"I was pretty taken aback at this, and asked why on earth he wouldn't do the decent thing. She laughed again, and said that doing the decent thing was the last thing he would ever do, and then called him some names I didn't think she would have known, let alone used in company. So I asked her once again who the father was, and that's when she told me it was Henry Fortescue.

"I'd had my suspicions, but my heart sank when I heard his name. I knew then why he wouldn't marry her. I'd been concerned enough about Annabelle to hire a private detective to check into Henry Fortescue, and the report from the agency was in my brief case. I'd only picked it up that morning. It didn't make pretty reading. Although from a very good family, Fortescue had a dreadful reputation and was deeply in debt. He was known to be dishonest, and to cap it all, he was married. He had married some poor girl he had got pregnant when in his early twenties, and kept her hidden away on his estates—well, what was left of them. By the time I got my report, the estate he'd inherited had been gambled away or sold to pay debts, and amounted to nothing more than a farmhouse and a few dozen acres of land. His wife and child lived there, but she wasn't acknowledged as his wife; she worked in the kitchens, as a kitchen maid, and his son was being trained as a stable boy."

This information drew several shocked exclamations, from all those gathered around the fire, or the table. My grandfather and grandmother were looking shocked, and my grandmother

had gone as white as a sheet. I was also amazed—it appeared I had a genuine, honest to goodness half brother out there somewhere. I wondered if it would be possible to track him down. I was also less than pleased with who my father was. He seemed to me to be a complete scoundrel, and a total bastard. The more I thought about him, the more despicable he seemed.

“Oh Annabelle,” grandmother said, and started to cry soundlessly, the tears falling down her cheeks and leaving marks in her make up. Grandfather reached across and took her hand. He also looked shocked and angry.

“So, there was poor Annabelle, pregnant, and feeling that there was no one who would help her except this mysterious person who was going to take the baby.”

“That would have been my mother,” Alex put in. “I remember her having a conversation with the neighbor about it. Mrs. Hepton told her she was mad for taking the baby. It wasn’t until later I realized what she was talking about, but it all fits.”

Arthur nodded. “And Suzie here is obviously that baby. To continue then. I managed to calm Annabelle down again, but before she would tell me anything else she made me promise I would never tell anyone about any of this. Obviously I said that you should be told, but she was adamant that she didn’t want anyone to know about this. Eventually she wore me down and I made the promise, but only on condition that she allowed me to help her financially as well. She argued about that for quite some time, telling me that she had no intention of ‘sponging’ off me, but I told her that I wouldn’t help her in one way unless I could help her in the other. She eventually gave in, and agreed that I could open a bank account for her and make a monthly payment into it. I arranged to collect her in the morning, and go with her to a bank to open an account. On those conditions, I promised to keep quiet about the whole affair.

“Once she had my promise she calmed down again, and asked if she could stay the night. I had one eye on the proprieties, which may have seemed strange given the situation, so

I told her to stay in the hotel and I went off to my club for the night. When I came back the next morning, she went with me to the bank where we opened the account. I had some further business to transact in the City and told her to go back to the hotel and wait for me there. Unfortunately, by the time I got back she had already gone. She'd left a note thanking me for my help, and telling me she was sure everything would be all right. She also said that she wouldn't be telling me where she was going, or where she was going to leave the baby, as she thought that, despite my promise to her, I might feel tempted to tell you. And that was the last time I ever saw Annabelle." Arthur's voice stopped, and a silence descended on the room.

"But why didn't you tell us all this when you found out she'd disappeared?" my grandfather asked him.

"Because by that time I was back in the States if you remember," Arthur reminded him. "I had all hell on. Elizabeth was sick, my business was going haywire, and I had no time to think about anything else. I never heard anything further from you about Annabelle and I assumed, wrongly as it turned out, that she'd reconciled herself to you and it had all been sorted out. It wasn't until Alex here got his memory back that things started to unravel, and I remembered what had happened with Annabelle."

"Yes, things were a little hectic at that time," grandfather agreed.

"So what happened from your end?" Arthur asked.

"Oh don't, it was dreadful," said grandmother, covering her eyes. "It was a terrible time."

Seeing that she was obviously unable to talk about it, grandfather took her hand in one of his, and continued.

"Well, we obviously knew nothing about all this," he began. "The first we knew that there was anything wrong was when Annabelle didn't come back from her visit to her friends. She'd told us she'd been invited to stay with a family we scarcely knew, but she'd made so many new friends during the season it didn't seem all that odd to us. We thought we'd got rid of Fortescue and

that it would be safe to let her go, as well as doing her good to get some rest. So we agreed she could go, and come back at the end of the summer.

“Next thing we knew was we got a phone call from these people, the Blythes, telling us that Annabelle had gone off somewhere else and what did we want them to do with her things? Obviously we were completely astounded at the call, and explained that we had no idea she’d made other arrangements. We asked where she’d gone and they said they didn’t know for sure, but they thought she’d gone to Leicestershire. I was extremely cross that they’d let her go, but after I’d thought about it for a while I realized it wasn’t their fault; they’d believed Annabelle when she told them that we knew all about it, and it had been arranged for months. It might very well have been arranged for months, but we didn’t have the slightest clue what she was up to. Anyway, they sent her stuff back to us and that was the last we heard. We made discreet enquiries but we didn’t want to set tongues wagging. Peter accused us of not caring about Annabelle, and took matters into his own hands. He searched high and low for her for about six months, but nothing came up. He had some ideas about where she might have gone, but these came to nothing. For some reason he thought she might have gone to Devon—she had always loved our holidays there—but although he went down there and searched for her, he never found her. He left home shortly after he came back from Devon and we lost touch with him as well.”

“So Annabelle upset many people by disappearing,” Robin said reflectively.

“She most certainly did,” agreed my grandfather. “She tore the whole family apart because she fell for the charms of a complete scoundrel.” An uncomfortable silence fell, until Bridget broke it.

“So who was the friend who was going to help her?” Bridget asked.

“Like I said, that must have been my mother,” Alex replied. “She must have arranged somewhere for Annabelle to live in the

later stages of her pregnancy, and then she went and fetched the baby, Suzie, and brought her up as her own.”

“Yes, I know that,” said Bridget impatiently, “but who was she? I mean, how did Annabelle know her, and know she could trust her. You don’t leave your baby with just anyone.”

“Actually, that’s a fair point,” Arthur conceded. “Do you know who she was, Sibyl?”

“I’ve been puzzling over that for a while,” grandmother replied. “I can only think it was the young Hennessy girl who was Annabelle’s nurse, and then her personal maid when Annabelle got old enough not to need a nurse. She wasn’t much older than Annabelle in years, but she certainly had her head screwed on the right way. I can’t think of anyone better suited to help you out in a crisis.”

“So where is she now?” Arthur asked, looking at Alex. Alex shrugged.

“Can’t help you there,” he replied. “She packed me and Suzie off up here, and then by all accounts she disappeared. All I can think of is that she went to look after Annabelle somewhere.”

“Another mystery,” Arthur said, shaking his head.

The mood in the room was somber; Arthur had confirmed who my father was, but it didn’t appear he was anything to be very proud of. I had learnt I had a half brother, but had no idea where to look for him; and my mother, and Alex’s mother, were both still missing. Typically, it was Helen who broke the mood. She had been sitting towards the back of the kitchen, probably feeling it wasn’t her place to intrude on this family-orientated meeting, but now she jumped up.

“Come on guys,” she said, making several of us jump. “I mean, look at you all. Yes, it’s not a happy tale, but it was all a long time ago. And at least you now know who Suzie actually is.”

“Very true,” said Arthur, taking his cue from her to lighten the mood. “And we can always clear up the rest of the mysteries another time.”

“Well, speaking personally,” I said, getting up from my chair, “I’ve had enough mysteries to last me a lifetime. I’ve found out

that I'm the result of a libertine taking advantage of my mother, and that I've a half-brother I never knew existed. I still don't know where my mother is, or whether she's still alive, or whether she'll ever want to see me, even if I can find her."

I stopped, on the verge of tears. Everyone was looking at me, my grandparents with sympathy in their eyes. However it was Elsie, wonderful, reliable Elsie, who came over to me and gave me a hug.

"Now don't you take on so, lass," she said gently. "I know it's been a bit of an ordeal for you, and it's left you with more questions to answer, but at least you know a little bit more. And even if your father was a bit of a rogue at least you know who he was. And no one who knows you, or loves you, will let it make a blind bit of difference to how they think of you."

Murmurs of support came from all areas of the room, and I relaxed in her familiar embrace.

"That's better," she said. "Now, you get sat down again, and I'll make us all a nice cup of tea. You can have some home-made scones to go with it, and then we'd better see about getting your grandma and grandpa home—they look worn out." She gave me a little pat, and then pushed me gently in the direction of my chair. I sat down in it, and gave a shaky smile. I looked over at my grandparents, and saw that they were indeed looking tired.

"I'm sorry," I said to them. "I forgot she was your daughter as well as my mother. This has to have worse for you than me."

"Now don't you be silly," said my grandmother robustly. "I won't deny it was a shock to finally hear about Annabelle, but we've had longer to come to terms with this than you have. At least we have some idea of what happened now, and that's always worth while. As Elsie said, we'll have some tea and then if your lovely young man can take us home, that will be a lovely end to what has turned out to be quite a day."

"Only too pleased to help," Robin instantly responded, drawing a smile from nearly everyone present.

Elsie bustled about making tea and making sure everyone had enough, and then Robin went to help grandmother out of her chair.

“For heaven’s sake young man,” she told him, “I’m not ancient you know! I’m quite capable of getting out of my seat.”

“I’m sure you are,” he responded promptly, “but I was always taught to be respectful to my elders, and so I try to be.”

“Respectful my left foot,” she retorted. “Cheeky is what you are, young Robin, and don’t think I don’t know it.” She turned to me with a smile. “You’re going to have your hands full with this one, Suzie my dear. Now, be a good girl and give me a kiss, and we’ll be on our way home.”

I kissed her cheek, and gave her a gentle hug. She looked surprised, but then returned it. I kissed grandfather, and gave him the same, which he also returned.

“Come and see us again soon,” grandmother urged me. I nodded, feeling guilty that I didn’t really want to. Robin ushered them out of the kitchen, and I watched them go across the yard to his car.

“Well, that was exciting,” remarked Helen. “I say Suzie, you’ve got lots of skeletons in your closet. I wonder what else will crawl out and surprise us.”

Helen’s total lack of reverence broke the mood completely, and everyone laughed and relaxed.

“And now, of course, you’ve got your next quest,” Helen continued.

“What do you mean, next quest?” I asked her with some asperity. “Don’t you think I’ve done enough for now? What do you think should be next?”

“Well, you can take your pick,” she said, munching on one of Elsie’s scones. “You can go looking for your mother; you can help Alex find his mother; or you can go looking for your half-brother.”

“And what should I do next week?”

“Oh, I’m sure we’ll think of something to fill in some time,” she laughed. I had to laugh with her, she was so irrepressible.

Frank stood up. "I think I can help with one of those," he said casually. Everyone turned to look at him.

"What do you mean?" Elsie asked from where she was standing by the kitchen table. "Which one?"

"Suzie's half brother," he replied.

"You mean you know him?" I asked, totally astounded.

"I wouldn't go that far," he replied, "but I certainly know of him. And his mother."

"But how?" Elsie demanded.

"It's like this," he responded. "Do you remember a few years back I wanted to improve the beef herd?" Elsie nodded. "Well, I was told of a youngish lad over near Harrogate who had a good reputation for producing beef breeding bulls—full pedigree, accredited herd and all that—and who didn't charge the earth for his cattle. So I drove over there one afternoon, and went to see him."

"I remember," Elsie said slowly. "You were impressed by his herd, but didn't actually buy anything. Do you mean to tell me that you think this lad is Suzie's half brother?"

Frank nodded. "What makes you think he'd be stuck out here?" she continued.

"Weren't you listening, woman?" he asked. "Arthur told us this Fortescue chap ended up with a farm and a few dozen acres. I'm not sure if he said where it was," he broke off, looking over at Arthur, who shook his head, "but this youngster was about the right age. He lived with his mother, and he told me that he came to the farm through his father. And he was called Fortescue. Now if that doesn't fit, tell me what does."

"You're daft," Elsie snapped at him. "Just because he was called Fortescue it doesn't mean he was the right one. There might be dozens of them around the place."

"Ah, daft I might be," Frank replied, "but stupid I'm not. I liked this young fella, but you know me I never buy from anyone I'm not sure about. So I stopped in the local pub for a pint on the way back, and got chatting to the bar maid. You can learn a lot from bar maids," he added reflectively. Elsie snorted.

“Anyway, this bar maid knew I wasn’t local and asked me where I’d been, just friendly like. So I told her I’d been up to Fortescue’s farm to look at some cattle. Well, that set her off. Never known anything like a woman for gossip,” he added slyly, looking over at Elsie. This time she refrained from rising to the bait.

“So next thing I know, I’ve got chapter and verse on how badly his mother had been treated, and how he’d been brought up as a servant on the farm when he was actually the owner’s son, and how his father had come to live there years before, and that he’d been a drunkard. Seems like he went home from the pub one night and attacked his housekeeper in a fit of drunken rage, and then went out into the fields and shot himself. Everyone thought this was a good ending, but then it turned out his housekeeper was in fact his wife. He’d left no will, so she ended up with the farm, and she and her lad have lived there ever since, and made a right go of the place.” He turned and looked at Elsie. “Now tell me it don’t fit,” he said finally.

Elsie was silenced. Arthur cleared his throat.

“Actually it would fit,” he commented. “Although Frank’s right, and I didn’t say where the farm was, it was in North Yorkshire. So it looks like we’ve found another member of your family, young Suzie.”

“How many more are there going to be?” I asked in exasperation. “I’ve got relatives crawling out of the woodwork now.”

“And here you were all these years thinking you were an orphan. Turns out you’ve got more relatives than I have,” remarked Helen.

“I suppose I’ll have to go and see him next,” I grumbled.

“I don’t see why you have to,” replied Elsie. “After all, his mother probably won’t be too please to see you. It’ll just prove what a complete bastard her husband was.”

I felt better immediately. “That’s a good point,” I agreed. “I don’t want to go round upsetting people.”

“So, what about the other two quests?” Helen demanded. “Are you going to do anything about those?”

“No, I’m not,” I retorted. “I don’t think I want to know about a mother who would abandon her own child and never try to get in touch. Anyway, who’s to say she’d want to see me—she might have married and had another family by now. I can’t see that she’d welcome me coming crashing back into her life. You never know how she’d react to that.”

“Now that is a very sensible outlook,” Elsie said. “That’s a very mature way of looking at things. And now if you’ll all go and sit elsewhere, I think it’s time I did something about getting some supper ready. Go on, off you go, I’ve got work to do.”

Chapter 39

The summer passed, as summers will. Alex, Bridget, Arthur and the children left after their holiday was up, but promised to come back the next year. Frank, Elsie and Mo continued in their usual routine, only occasionally being interrupted by small family crises. Robin and I continued to see practice, and Huw continued to grumble about how long it was taking for us to qualify, and we also found plenty of time to ourselves. After hearing Arthur's tale of my mother, I was even more determined not to 'get into trouble' and so we were extra careful. Helen stayed for the rest of her leave and thoroughly enjoyed herself. Elsie continued teaching her how to cook, and professed herself pleased with her pupil's efforts. In general then, life continued very much as it should have done for the rest of the summer.

There was one incident which was definitely out of the ordinary. Despite Elsie's statement that there was no need for me to visit Mr. Fortescue, who could be my half-brother (in fact, probably was after Frank's tale), I still had the nagging feeling of a loose end that needed tidying up. I took Elsie's advice and refrained from visiting but one afternoon, after a hard day out with Huw attending a calving, Robin and I returned to the farm to find a strange car in the yard. Exchanging glances we went into the farmhouse to see a stranger sitting at the table drinking tea and enjoying a plateful of Elsie's home-made biscuits.

“Ah, there you are,” said Elsie calmly as we came in. “Get yourselves sat down and I’ll get you some tea. By the way, Suzie, this is Mr. Fortescue.”

Talk about being knocked down with a feather. I paused in the act of sitting down and stared until Robin nudged me, whereupon I sank into my chair.

“How do you do?” he asked, holding his hand out.

“Fine, thank you,” I responded, shaking his hand.

“I believe we might be related,” he continued quite calmly, looking at me over the rim of his tea cup.

“Yes, so I believe,” I replied. Elsie passed me a cup of tea and I took an unwary gulp.

“Careful, it’s hot,” he said as I spluttered and coughed, Robin assiduously patting me on the back. I finally subsided, and saw he was regarding me with an amused look on his face.

“I’m Tim Fortescue,” he said by way of introduction.

“But what are you doing here?” I demanded.

“You’d be surprised how things get around in the farming community,” he replied, with a definite twinkle in his eye.

“Frank. It was Frank, wasn’t it?” I asked.

“Yes, it was your Cousin Frank,” he admitted.

“What did he tell you?”

“Well, actually he told me nothing. But he told the bar maid at the Bull and Bush plenty—enough for me to come down here to try and find you.”

“I knew it,” Elsie stated from by the fire. “He had to go and see if he was right.”

Tim grinned. “Don’t blame him,” he said, “I’m glad he did. It’s nice to know I’ve got another sister, and one who’s so close at hand.”

“Only during the holidays,” I told him. “I’m down in London the rest of the time.”

“What do you do down there?”

“I’m studying to be a vet.”

“Great! It’s nice to have one in the family.” He smiled at me, and I couldn’t resist smiling back.

“Oh, this is Robin, by the way. He’s my fiancé. We’ll be getting married as soon as we’ve qualified.”

Tim reached out his hand again, and Robin shook it.

“Lucky man,” he said. “She’s a little beauty.”

“Don’t tell her that,” Robin replied. “You’ve no idea how much you’ll make her blush. Look, there she goes.”

I looked at him furiously, even as I felt the tell-tale red creeping up my face. Robin started to laugh at me, and then Tim joined in. Even Elsie had a little chuckle, and finally I had to admit defeat and laugh as well.

“So, how did you figure out where I lived?” I asked him eventually.

“It wasn’t difficult,” he replied easily. “Frank was quite explicit in what he told Nora the bar maid, and he gave enough details for me to figure out where you were.”

“So do you think it’s possible that we’re related?” I queried.

“Oh, yes, I think you’re definitely my sister. Everything fits, and it’s certainly like my father. You’ll have to come and meet the rest of us sometime.”

“The rest of us?” I exclaimed.

“Well, you didn’t think you were the only one, did you?” Tim replied, a slightly bitter note in his voice. “Our father was nothing if not prolific. There’s at least six of us that we know of, and very possibly more.”

“Six!”

“At least,” he confirmed gravely.

“Prolific isn’t the word,” Robin put in. “Arthur said he was a libertine, but I think he was a bit short of the mark.”

“The only consolation I’ve got,” Tim continued, “is that I’m the eldest and the only legitimate child, so I got the farm.”

“Your poor mother,” said Elsie from over by the fire. “It sounds like he led her a hell of a life.”

“The day he put a shotgun in his mouth and pulled the trigger was the happiest day of her life,” Tim agreed. “Since then she’s been a different woman. She doesn’t even mind all my

brothers and sisters coming over to visit—she makes everyone welcome. And she'd be happy if you'd come over and join us one time. The next family get together is at Christmas, if you'd care to come over. Robin too," he added.

"Well, if you're sure," I said diffidently.

"Of course I am," he replied with a warm smile. "The more the merrier."

"Well, thank you, in that case we'd love to."

"Wonderful, I'll tell mum to expect you. You can stay overnight as well if you like."

Robin and I managed not to look at each other. "Great, we'll look forward to that."

Tim got up, and we got up with him. He was very tall, taller even than Robin, and quite good-looking with his brown hair, and brown eyes. He held out his hand and we shook it in turn.

"Well, I'll be off," he said. "And don't forget, come over at Christmas. I'll let you know the exact date nearer the time. Frank can give you directions. Thanks for the tea, Mrs. Fletcher," he said to Elsie.

"You're welcome, Tim," she replied.

"OK then, see you later," and with that, he was gone. I sat down at the table.

"Well, there's a turn up for the books," commented Elsie, as she brought another pot of tea over to the table. "And fancy there being six more of you. Quite a family you've got there."

"Yes, you could say that." I still couldn't believe it. Tim seemed like a genuinely nice guy, despite all he'd been through.

"Can't say you don't have a family now," Robin teased. "You've got more brothers and sisters than I have."

"But how could he?" I burst out. "How could he just go on seducing people and having child after child without knowing them or caring for them?"

"Some people are like that," Elsie replied. "You do get them occasionally—and it is occasionally, thankfully. They just take

what they want and don't care for the consequences, especially not for those whose lives they ruin."

"I'm glad I don't know anyone like that," I said hotly. "I think that's dreadful."

"You can count me in on that," Robin agreed. He looked over at Elsie, and hesitated before adding "I know you don't approve of the fact that Suzie and I are sleeping together," he said, "but I think you know I would never treat her the way her father treated her mother. You know I love her, and I'm determined to marry her come what may."

Elsie smiled at him, then reached out and patted his hand. "You can bet your bottom dollar I know that," she told him. "If I wasn't sure of it, I wouldn't have given you any help at all. But just you mind you carry on being careful," she added, "I don't want to hear that you've got to get married at some point."

"Don't you worry," I told her. "I've no intention of ending up like my mother."

Tim's visit was the talking point for the rest of the week, including his invitation to go over at Christmas.

Robin and I packed up and returned to London, and college, in September and life carried on pretty much as usual. The third year was no more difficult than the second had been, and we both coped extremely well with the work. Tim kept his promise and gave Elsie the date for the Christmas get together and we returned his call, telling him we'd both be there. Helen had also been invited for Christmas leave, although she would have to travel up separately as our holiday dates didn't coincide.

The family party, as Tim insisted on calling it, was actually a lot of fun. We were a diverse group, all different ages. I wasn't quite the youngest; there was one other boy, Richard, who was younger than me by about three months. For me it just reinforced what a total reprobate my father was, because it was obviously he'd been sleeping with both our mothers at the same time. Richard's outcome had been happier than mine, however, as he had been raised by his mother with her family's support.

Everyone had a different tale to tell, although mine was by far the most in demand; no one else's mother had disappeared off the face of the earth in the same way. Tim's mother was a lovely woman who made us all welcome, and provided us with fantastic food all weekend. Of course, the best bit for me and Robin was that we could share a room. No one blinked an eye at this, and we made the most of it.

* * * * *

And so life continued on its well charted course. Robin and I studied hard, and graduated after seven long years. My grandfather bought me a partnership in Huw's practice, as he had promised, and George put forward the money for Robin. And finally the day arrived that we moved out of the London house for good, packing all our stuff into Robin's car or arranging to have it collected and moved up in a lorry a couple of days later. Helen had promised to oversee this part of the process for us, and was as good as her word.

We moved up to the farm initially, putting most of our stuff in store in the barn until we could find a house. We started our careers as vets, and finally set a date for the wedding. This was to be a big do. Not only were Robin's family all coming (including his mother, with whom he had patched things up eventually), but also all of mine—all my brothers and sisters. We'd found a few more along the way, and eventually there were a round dozen Fortescue offspring. Alex, Bridget, Arthur and the children were all coming. Young Suzie was going to be one of my bride's maids, with Helen being my maid of honor. Elsie was there, naturally, and had also insisted on doing all the food for the reception which was to be held at the farm.

Elsie had actually thrown open the dining room which had never been opened in my memory, and declared we could have the meal in there. Frank was going to give me away. I had had several discussions over this with my grandparents, and although

grandfather was disappointed he could understand my reasons for asking Frank. Frank had been the closest thing to a father I'd ever known, and I felt it only right that our relationship should be acknowledged in this way. I had talked it over with grandmother as well, and she understood my reasons and she helped explain it to grandfather.

Robin had asked his brother George to be best man, and he was tickled pink. He was going to bring the rest of his family up a few days before and I was dreading meeting Robin's mother, despite the fact that they'd apparently made up their differences. However I need not have worried. My grandmother took Robin's mother on as her special responsibility, and managed to keep her happy. I think she would have definitely preferred a big society wedding, but Robin made it quite clear to her that this was my day, and she wasn't going to spoil it. The only thing she did insist on was that Henrietta should also be a bridesmaid, and I was only too happy to accommodate her. So I ended up with two bridesmaids and one maid of honor.

When you added my family; the Fortescues; Robin's family; all the friends and neighbors which we had invited, including special people like Huw Edwards, there were quite a crowd of us. In fact, it was very nearly standing room only in the local church.

We had several wedding rehearsals after the banns were called, and the vicar was definitely disapproving of Robin's attitude towards the serious business of getting married. However after I had spoken severely to him Robin managed to restrain himself, and the vicar relaxed. He was a lovely man and I was quite annoyed with Robin for winding him up, however unintentional it was. But everything got smoothed over and we eventually got everything sorted out. The days between the last time the banns were called and the day of the wedding seemed to drag, and also to speed past in a blur.

I had had my dress made by one of the local dressmakers who had asked me what I wanted, and then made some suggestions as to how it might work better if I followed her advice.

Like most brides I had a definite idea of what I wanted, and I was prepared to argue about it. However, with a lot of tact and some of Elsie's diplomacy, the dress was designed, altered, made, and fitted, and it was a triumph. I hadn't gone for white, which made my skin look sallow, but had instead settled for a very delicate, clear yellow, with an over lay of tulle in white. The effect was fantastic and I loved every inch of it. Robin, of course, had no idea what I would be wearing. He told me that wasn't fair, as I knew what he'd be wearing.

The next thing to be sorted out was the meal at the reception. It was apparent from quite early on that the dining room—in fact, the whole house—would not be big enough to seat everyone who had to be invited. After much heart-searching and wandering around outside, it was decided that the meal would have to be held outdoors in the play barn. This then involved a great deal of sweating and swearing on the part of our men folk as they struggled to clear out all the accumulated junk, and then clean the place out. It took nearly two weeks of solid work to get the place looking something like a reception area. The finishing touches were provided by a couple of coats of white-wash and the attentions of the local florist, who used her talents to create swags of blossoms and large arrangements which hid the most obvious features. We begged and borrowed tables and chairs from everyone we knew, and finally had a lay out which would seat everyone. Then we had to decide on the menu. As it was going to be a sit down meal and we would be serving from the farm kitchen across the yard, it needed to be something that wouldn't be too upset by being carried backwards and forwards. Elsie had spoken to the landlord of the local pub who had just started doing food, and he had offered to do the whole thing for us. for a very reasonable price. Elsie had accepted his offer and had left the whole thing in his hands. I think she felt a bit torn, but as she was going to be a guest at the wedding it really wouldn't have done to have her presiding in the kitchen as well, so she yielded her objections (and her kitchen) with

good grace, and having agreed a menu was only too happy to leave it to someone else.

Finally the great day arrived. I was up early to get bathed and to have my hair done. The wedding was at eleven o'clock, and Elsie reckoned it would take me about three hours to get ready. I had laughed at this idea but she insisted I get up early, and as it turned out she was right. I had my breakfast whilst one of Elsie's friends did my hair, and then it was the turn of Helen to do my make up. I finally got my dress on at about ten thirty and then, satisfied that everything was in place, Elsie left with the others, leaving me and Helen upstairs to wait for Frank. Young Suzie and Henrietta would meet us at the church. I was as nervous as a cat on a hot tin roof as I paced backwards and forwards, waiting for Frank to honk his horn to let me know he was ready for me downstairs. Robin had been banished from the house the night before, and had gone to stay with George in a hotel in Halifax.

Eventually I heard Frank's horn, and Helen and I went down to meet him. His face as he looked at me was softened by emotion.

"By heck, lass, you look gorgeous," he said as I came towards him. "Come along then," he said, taking my arm, and leading me out to the car. Helen helped me with my dress as we settled into the back of the car, and set off.

The trip to the church was uneventful and we arrived just the right number of minutes late. I got sorted out with my dress and then Helen, Suzie and Henrietta took their places, and Frank gave the signal to the organist. As the music swelled in the church Frank escorted me down the aisle, to the usual gasps and whispers, and finally stood me next to Robin, who was looking completely and utterly overwhelmingly gorgeous in his morning suit. Robin turned to me and smiled, and as he took in the dress his look turned to one of appreciation. As I took my place next to him he mouthed "I love you" to me, and I felt myself blush under my veil. Of course, Robin couldn't see me clearly but he knew I was blushing, because he knew me so well. As we turned to face the vicar he took my hand and squeezed it and I squeezed it back.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today, in the sight of God and the face of this congregation ...” The service started, and I looked at Robin. He was gazing back at me adoringly and lifted my hand to his lips to kiss it before we took our vows.

“Do you promise to love her, and keep her ...” We made our vows, and I have never meant anything so much in my life. I heard Robin’s voice repeating his vow, and also heard the little catch in it as he spoke my name.

“I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride.” Finally it was done. We were married. Robin gently lifted my veil and kissed me on the lips. He looked at me with a shining tenderness in his gaze, and I returned his look. We turned round and started to walk back up the aisle as the music from the organ swelled around us.

Behind us, everyone followed on in procession as we passed, and we went out into the daylight. We had the usual business of photographs, and then it was back to the farm for the reception. I had a surprise then, because Robin had arranged for a horse and open carriage for the journey. It was perfect and just finished everything off nicely.

“You romantic thing,” I told Robin, as he handed me into the carriage.

“Only the best for Mrs. Carstaires,” he replied.

Back at the farm things were in full swing in the kitchen. The landlord had done us proud and produced a sumptuous meal, which was served very professionally by an apparent army of young boys and girls.

“Where did all these guys come from?” I whispered to Elsie, as the meal progressed.

“He has a large family,” she whispered back.

“He must do, there seems to be about twenty of them.”

Elsie laughed. “No, not that many. He has four younger brothers and sisters, and his older sisters have about six between them.”

“I thought he looked a bit young to have that many kids.”

The meal was superb, and everyone commented favorably on the idea of having the meal in the barn. Fortunately the weather co-operated fully all day, and it was literally sunshine all the way. The reception came to its conclusion with the speeches. George had everyone in stitches, Mo had nearly everyone in tears. My grandfather made a speech, and Frank made a very eloquent speech which had everyone amazed. As I overheard one of the guests saying, I'd never heard him put so many words together at one time before in my life.

With the formalities finally over it was time for us to set off on our honeymoon. Robin had steadfastly refused to tell me where we were going, which had left me in a bit of a quandary about what to pack. When I asked him what I should take to wear, he replied "Just a smile, my love, just a smile," which while romantic, didn't exactly help me know what to pack. In the end I took a little bit of everything, just in case. As I said to Elsie, if he got a hernia carrying my case into the hotel it would serve him right for not telling me what I should take.

I went upstairs with Helen to get changed and came down in my 'going away' suit. Robin had also changed and was wearing more familiar clothes but still looked smart and, to my eyes, gorgeous. His heather blue jumper really set off his eyes. We drove off with the usual trail of old boots, tin cans and assorted junk tied to the back of the car, and a large 'just married' poster on the back. As soon as we were out of sight, Robin removed all that and put it on the back seat.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Of course," I replied.

"Then let's go." He put the car in gear, and off we drove.

We didn't actually go that far. Robin drove us to a house which I'd seen and admired several times over the last few months, and which I had secretly wanted to live in. I'd told Elsie all about it, and had been heartbroken when it was rumored the house had been sold. Now I found out who had bought it, as Robin drove through the gate and up the drive.

“Where are you going?” I asked him.

“I thought you’d like to have a look around this place; you’ve admired it often enough over the last few months.”

“But the owners ... won’t they object?”

“Why don’t we go and find out?” he said with a grin.

“But we can’t just go in,” I protested.

“Oh, I think it will be all right,” he said. He grabbed my hand. “Come on love.”

“But where are you taking me?”

“I’m taking you home,” he replied.

“Home?” I repeated stupidly.

“Yes, home. Our home. This home.”

I was dumbstruck. “But how ... When ...” I stammered. He laughed.

“As to how, Elsie told me you liked the house. As to when, I bought it a few weeks ago. I’ve had an army of people in here getting it ready for us.”

“Oh Robin,” I said, feeling tears start in my eyes. “Thank you.”

“Come on,” he said, taking my hand. “Come inside and let’s see if you like it.”

He took me by the hand and led me up the path. He rummaged in his pockets and produced a business-like bunch of keys. After a few seconds of fumbling he found the right key, and opened the door. As I went to walk in, he pulled me back.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” he asked. When I just looked at him, he bent down and picked me up. “Groom’s privilege,” he said, as he carried me over the threshold. “Here you are Mrs. Carstairs,” he said grandly, “your future home, and the home of our future children.”

“Children?” I asked him. “How many do you think we’re going to have?”

“Well, there are five bedrooms upstairs,” he said wickedly. “If we keep one as a spare room for when Helen comes to stay and one for us, that leaves three. Reckon we could do three?” He

pulled me towards him as he spoke, and his eyes were speaking volumes as he did so.

“We might have to practice quite a lot,” I told him seriously.

“Well then, we’d better get started right away,” he said, bending down to kiss me. I felt his arms go round me, and I put mine round his neck as I kissed him back.

“Hadn’t we better explore the house first,” I asked him.

“Don’t worry, I know exactly where we’re going. Now come on upstairs, and let’s get started on this family.”

“Oh Robin,” I breathed, “you say the loveliest things,” and kissed him.

THE END

