

A black and white portrait of a woman with dark, wavy hair and bangs. She is wearing a white, high-collared, ruffled blouse and a large, ornate, oval-shaped earring with a gold-colored finish and a central stone. The background is dark and textured. The name 'KAREN MASON' is printed in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters at the top. The phrase 'Never Forget' is written in a black, cursive script at the bottom.

**KAREN MASON**

*Never Forget*

NEVER FORGET

**Published by Karen Mason at Obooko**

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This book is dedicated to those who didn't make it to New York.

Prologue  
The North Atlantic

15<sup>th</sup> April 1912

In the distance someone was singing '*I'll Take You Home Again Kathleen*' and for a moment Alice wondered if she was in Heaven and the sweet voice was her mother's. She turned her head and through her misty eyes could just make out a woman draped in a soggy-looking mink coat, holding onto a little girl with auburn ringlets, who remained unresponsive as the woman sang to her. Alice wasn't quite sure where she was, just that she was so cold and needed to sleep. Voices seemed to swim around her – the woman singing, other women chattering. She realised she was lying upon something soft, like a lap, but she couldn't be sure what it actually was.

'Are you sure it's not a boy?' a snooty voice asked. 'It looks like a boy dressed as a girl.'

'She's a girl,' insisted another warmer, yet more commanding voice. 'Look at her pretty little features.'

Alice forced her eyes open and staring into her face was a man with white hair and kind, friendly features. He smiled on seeing she was still alive, but he quickly disappeared again. Alice needed to sleep and she couldn't fight it. If she could just sleep for a while longer then she would wake up and find out what had happened.

Half a mile away, in a boat largely occupied with wealthy old women clutching onto their minks and fancy leather bags, Nesta Villiers sat staring across the ice fields, wondering if anyone was ever going to come and rescue them. The baby in her arms was growing restless, and as she wrapped her coat around him and snuggled him against her, she could feel him shivering. She looked up and noticed one of the old women sitting opposite her, giving her an indulgent smile - her crinkly eyes twinkling as if some long distant memory had come to life, and warmed her in these horrific times.

'They're tougher than you think,' she said. 'They can withstand most things.'

'But it's so cold,' Nesta shivered. 'He'll want feeding soon and I've no milk.'

The elderly woman frowned in puzzlement and Nesta thought quickly.

‘I had trouble producing milk,’ she said, embarrassed at saying such a thing in a boat filled with strangers who could hear every word in this deathly silence.

‘Well I’m sure the rescue boat will be here soon and they’ll have plenty of milk for your baby,’ the woman replied.

Nesta smiled and pulled the baby a little closer to her. She kept her head down and tried not to look in the water. She wondered if anyone else had noticed that about ten feet from the boat, clinging onto a piece of ice, was a body. It was clearly a woman, her long red hair floating in the water, the flecks of ice in it making her look prematurely old. The straps of her white life jacket floated around her, and showed that she hadn’t had time to fasten it properly. Nesta knew if she looked around some more, she would be confronted with other bodies, and it felt obscene, given she had a newborn in her arms. No matter what she had encountered in her past, nothing compared to the hell she had just witnessed, and the only hope that could come out of all this was that she could give this poor, orphaned child a decent future.

## Chapter One

June 1911

‘Get off the bleedin’ stage!’

The audience didn’t even have the decency to shout their commands out. Instead their dissatisfaction was hissed in low voices whilst they supped their beer and smoked their cigarettes. Being bottom of the bill meant Alice didn’t even have the luxury of darkened lights, and instead could see everyone clearly. It was a hot June night and the men who’d come here were uncomfortable and impatient to see The Howard Sisters. The thought of scantily clad girls hiding their modesty with nothing more than big ostrich feathers was far more appealing than a skinny girl parading around, dressed as a lady and singing about Billy the Burglar.

‘Send ‘er ‘ome!’ came another cry and this one was accompanied by half a pork pie being thrown at Alice’s chest. Still she smiled and carried on twirling her parasol, walking up and down the stage, singing of the lady who was awoken and ravaged by a randy burglar. She glanced down at the orchestra pit, and Raymond, the conductor gave her a hopeless shrug. Everyone here at The Royale Theatre on Greek Street knew the acts performing tonight would be treated with the same disdain up until The Howard Sisters came on.

Finally the song ended, and Alice’s sigh of relief could be heard throughout the whole auditorium.

‘Thank you everyone!’ she called, not letting that beaming smile leave her face, even though the boos were getting louder and louder.

Stanley Shields, the compère ran onto the stage.

‘Won’t you put your hands together for the lovely Lady Davinia?’ he urged the audience; but when he saw them bristling, he whispered to Alice from the corner of his mouth.

‘Get off the fucking stage!’

Alice did as she was told and ran down through the bowels of the poky theatre to the dressing rooms. A couple of docker types were surreptitiously hanging around outside The Howard Sisters’ dressing room, and Alice had to avoid slipping in a pile of shit that had been left by one of The Great Dragondo’s performing monkeys. She burst into the smallest but most packed dressing room and slammed the door behind her, glad to be away from the lion’s den outside.

None of The Bellamy Girls paid her any attention. They were all too busy in their various states of undress to react to Alice and her histrionics. Poor Hettie was on next and was trying to

squeeze her heavily pregnant frame into a virginal white wedding dress. Her act was with the comedian Jack Harris, where they pretended to be newlyweds, and if people could see she was eight months gone it would spoil the illusion. Alice rushed over and helped Lotty, the dresser, as she pulled hard onto Hettie's corset, hoping she could make her just look fat rather than pregnant.

'I'm effin' sweating buckets 'ere!' Hettie cursed. 'ow am I gonna pass meself off as a glowing bride?'

'Oh stop moanin'' Albie shouted from the back of the room. 'And you wanna start getting' changed as well Alice. Lotty's paid to dress all you girls, not just Madam Hettie.'

Scared of upsetting Albie, Alice left Hettie and found a spare dressing table. She quickly removed her Lady Davinia outfit and changed into the costume she was to wear when backing The Howard Sisters. Their saucy dance was based on some sort of sea theme, and The Bellamy Girls had to wear swimming costumes. Albie, their manager sat on a packing case, her fat stomach pushing her big, ugly veiny breasts up into her chin. She was counting some money and drinking porter, not bothering to wipe her lips as it dribbled out and down.

'You'll need to put that back on after the show' she said to Alice without even looking at her. 'You've got a booking tonight.'

'Oh do I have to?' Alice groaned, slipping out of her silk gown. 'I'm knackered.'

The withering look Albie threw her was enough to strike fear into Alice, and she relented, stripping off her petticoats and corset, and slipping into the close fitting swimming costume, that would do nothing to flatter her skinny frame. Before she'd even finished putting it on, Albie threw a dirty silk handkerchief at her.

'You might want to shove that down your top,' she snapped. 'The fellas don't want to look at a bloody boy.'

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Nesta lay in bed fuming. The servants were being so loud, cleaning up after the party, that she felt she could hear every clank of cutlery as it was being put away. The laughter of the two young maids she'd employed to cover for Eileen and Amy, her usual maids - who were on leave - was going right through her. Her head was pounding and she wanted to sleep, but it was such a stifling night, she had no choice but to have the windows open; and the noise of horses clattering around Belgrave Square, taking people home from their evenings out, was unbearable.

The door opened and Roland walked in. His face was ruddy and his bow tie was askew. No doubt the card game had erupted into some sort of fight – it usually did with Roland. He couldn't stand losing, and would challenge the victor to a re-match, until it got to the point where tempers were raised and they settled it with fists.

'Could you please tell those girls to be quiet?' Nesta sighed. 'I'm so tired and they're keeping me awake.'

'It's not my place to reprimand the staff,' Roland snapped, sinking down onto the bed. 'Anyway, Ann and Agatha are young and fresh. They've never served at a society party before. It's exciting for them.'

Nesta didn't reply but her stomach turned a little, mentally picturing her thirty-five year old husband lusting after the young maids who were barely fourteen. He'd done it before and had so nearly got caught; she'd hoped he wouldn't risk it again.

Still fully dressed, Roland lay back and looked at his wife, noticing the slight tremble in her hands, which were lying loosely across her stomach. Her frigidity aroused him somewhat, and after an evening of watching the little maids bobbing about, flushed with excitement and bending over to sweep up spilt food, he felt rather in the mood.

'I suppose you've got one of your headaches?' he said, idly running his finger along her arm.

'Yes,' Nesta replied, moving her arm away.

'You know, maybe I should go downstairs and ask Ann and Agatha if they'd like a little private party.'

'Don't be disgusting,' Nesta hissed. 'They're children.'

Roland rolled on top of her and Nesta felt sick as drops of whisky fell from his moustache down onto her face. He looked so grotesque from this angle and she wondered what had happened to that handsome man who'd swept her off her feet ten years ago. She felt his hands wandering down her body, his rough fingers scratching her legs as he pushed her nightdress up.

'Well then,' he said angrily. 'If you don't want me to go downstairs and take what I want from those young girls, you'd better do your wifely duty.'

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Only a certain type of girl had been requested for this party at the Guards Club in Piccadilly. Albie said little about the clients, but apparently they wanted girls who could pass as



ladies, and so she had chosen the slimmest and prettiest girls from the troupe. She saw Alice, Sadie, Fanny, Bertha and Nora into a Hackney cab that would take them the short journey, and Alice sat squashed against the window, watching London go by, thinking how excited she'd been the first time she'd ever travelled in one of these motorised taxis. Back then they seemed like some sort of wonder of the modern world, and she'd made up her mind that one day she'd be rich enough to afford a car of her own. Now she just saw them as just a quicker way of taking her to her doom. At least a horse and carriage was slow.

'Last time I went to the Guards Club, the Prince of Wales was there,' Fanny said, taking her powder compact out of her bag and dabbing her button nose. 'He was 'ome from school and some cousins had taken him there.'

No one responded to Fanny. She was only fourteen, the youngest of the Bellamy Girls, and still excited about 'dancing' at parties for rich young men. For the others, this was just another way of making money. They'd even given up hope of meeting that one man who'd turn their fortunes around and ask them to marry him. The men were never interested in that. They just liked groping pretty girls and having them sit on their laps while they talked business and boasted about how much money they made.

They soon reached The Guards Club, and the girls were whisked into the fancy building next to Fortnum and Mason's by Mr Dickens, the manager. As they walked up the stairs, Alice looked at the paintings of the noble soldiers and sailors who'd been members of this club over the years and thought it sad that it had become little more than a drinking den for men with more money than sense and a family name to trade on.

The girls were taken straight into The Wellington Room - a private room that was hired out for parties. Indeed, the first time Alice went to The Guards Club, this was where she'd come. The party had been for a minor duke and Sadie had got drunk and took off all her clothes while the men jeered her on. It was obvious that things had already got out of hand tonight. Young men sat around swigging from champagne bottles, and one had been smashed against the wood panelling, its fizzy contents sliding down the wall onto the carpet. The air was thick with smoke, and the smell of spilt alcohol and sweat was nauseating. There was a roar when the men spotted the girls, and it was time to turn on the act. Simultaneously, the five girls plastered smiles onto their faces and joined the throng.

'Here they are!' said one of the men, standing up unsteadily and opening his arms. 'Come here you darlings.'

Alice really wasn't in the mood for this. Tonight had been bad from start to finish. The act had gone down like a lead balloon and now she had to endure being made to feel like a piece of meat. Mauled by these burly strangers and pretending to enjoy it. As usual, the other girls were picked before her - squealing and laughing as they were groped. Alice looked down at her chest

and wondered if she should have kept the handkerchief tucked in her dress to give her more feminine curves. Her 'Lady Davinia' outfit certainly made her look classy, but there was nothing alluring about the burnt gold dress and the white, ruffled shirt.

'Are you lost?' a voice said from behind, making her jump. She turned around to find a young man standing there in his shirt sleeves, one of his braces drooping down off his shoulder. Alice gave a little gasp on seeing him. He was so handsome with his blonde hair and neat little moustache, it surprised her to find someone here so appealing.

'I beg your pardon?' she asked.

'Are you lost? You came in with the other girls but you hardly look the same. I was wondering if you were someone's sister.'

'Oh no,' Alice blushed, making an effort to match his cut-glass accent. 'I'm with the other girls.'

They both threw a cursory glance at the others, who were being pulled onto laps, giggling and swigging at the bottles of champagne that were being passed to them.

'Perhaps you'd like to join me?' the young man said with a wry smile. 'You have to forgive my friends. Thomas, the rakish looking gentleman currently fondling your redheaded companion, is getting married next Saturday and he's celebrating.'

Alice groaned inwardly. Stag nights usually descended into chaos and were when young men behaved the most badly.

'Robert Fairfax,' the young man suddenly announced, thrusting a hand at her.

'Alice Du Pont,' she replied, shaking his hand and using her stage name.

'Let's find a quiet corner Alice,' he said, picking up a bottle of champagne from the bar and popping his cigar into his mouth. 'It'd be nice to have some civilised company.'

Alice followed Robert out onto the balcony, trying hard not to gaze at his muscular body through his flimsy shirt. He was tall and broad, and seemed far more sober and self-possessed than his friends. Alice wondered what he would want from this evening. If he wanted more than just a friendly chat and a cuddle, then she would have to stop him. Anything more and he would have to negotiate with Albie. She wanted to save Alice for someone special - someone who'd pay a lot of money for her virginity.

There was a wrought iron table and two chairs on the balcony, and Robert sat down upon one of them while Alice tottered over to the railings and looked out over London. From here she could see Eros and Nelson's Column, and in the far distance Big Ben. She looked over the edge,

and on the pavement fine ladies and gentlemen were making their way into the taxis that would take them home from the theatre and the grand restaurants lining Piccadilly.

‘Come and sit with me Alice,’ Robert commanded, and she turned and smiled at him, feeling a little guilty for ignoring him.

‘I’m sorry,’ she replied, joining him at the table. ‘I just find London so beautiful at night.’

He swigged at the champagne and passed it to her. Taking his lead, Alice too drank from the bottle, and tried not to recoil when the flat, rather warm liquid hit the back of her throat.

‘Are you from London?’ he asked.

‘Hampshire,’ she replied, keeping up the pretence of her persona. Robert seemed to want to speak to a posh girl, not a ruffian from Battersea. ‘I’ve only been living in London for a few months.’

‘Really?’ he smiled. ‘You’ve come to London, a poor innocent country girl and have been corrupted into entertaining young men at private parties?’

‘Yes. I have to make a living.’

‘Give me your hand.’

‘What?’

‘Give me your hand.’

Puzzled, Alice lay her hand across the table and gasped when Robert started unbuttoning her white glove and rolled it off, leaving her exposed. She felt strangely naked and embarrassed as he picked up her fingers and examined them.

‘You have common hands,’ he declared. ‘These aren’t the hands of a lady. Tell me the truth about yourself Alice. If indeed your name really is Alice.’

‘Yes it is Alice,’ she snapped, snatching her hand away and putting her glove back on. ‘It’s Alice Higgins if you must know.’

‘And you’re from Hampshire?’

‘I’m from Battersea,’ she replied in her normal accent. ‘Do you want me to go back inside?’

‘Don’t be silly,’ he smiled, his blue eyes twinkling mischievously. ‘You’re exactly what I wanted. If you must know the truth, I’ve been chucked over by my fiancé and I felt in need of

the company of a good old fashioned London girl. Although I must say, you could easily pass as a lady.' He laughed wanly. 'As long as no-one sees those hands of course.'

'My Aunt Bella always reckoned I had something of the lady about me. I was always good at doing accents. Bella'd take me round Battersea Park to get me out of dad's hair and I'd make her laugh, taking the Mickey out of all the posh women we'd see.'

'So are you an actress?' Robert asked, offering her a puff of his cigar. 'Percy organised the entertainment for tonight, and he did mention you girls were performers.'

'Yes, we're The Bellamy Girls. We've got a residency at The Royale, we provide the chorus. But I've also got me own act - Lady Davinia. I pretend to be a lady but I sing bawdy songs.'

'Sounds intriguing,' he said, laughing as Alice choked on the acrid cigar smoke.

From inside there was the sound of a bottle breaking, followed by raucous laughter. Alice looked at Robert and passed him his cigar.

'Don't you want to go back inside with your friends?' she asked.

'No,' he smiled, reaching out and grasping her hand. 'I like talking to you. Jennifer ending our engagement has left me bereft. I'm in need of some friendly banter.'

'Well all I do is chat,' Alice said primly. 'Some of the girls provide all sorts. But I just chat, and I can dance if you like.'

Robert leaned forward, grasping her hand a little tighter, fixing her with those penetrating blue eyes.

'You intrigue me,' he whispered. 'It's almost as if you don't want to be here.'

'Of course I do,' she replied. 'I like it out here with you. You've got to excuse me Robert, I had a rotten time on stage tonight. The audience just don't seem to like Lady Davinia. I don't understand it, they loved me when I was Little Tommy.'

'Who's Little Tommy?' Robert asked.

'It was my first stage act when I was ten. I performed with a singer called Herbert Cavendish, playing his little son. We'd do songs together, and the crowd loved us. But I grew up and even though I still could pass for a boy, I got too tall and wasn't sweet enough, so Herbert dropped me and Albie took me on. It was her who suggested I become Lady Davinia.'

‘And I'm sure it's a very charming act. You've just had the misfortune of performing to unappreciative and ignorant audiences. I'll come and watch you one night and I promise to give you the biggest cheer you've ever had.’

‘You're just being kind.’

‘I'm not. I love the theatre. And it sounds as though you're quite the seasoned pro.’

‘It was nine years ago this month Aunt Bella persuaded Herbert to take me on. Seems like a lifetime ago.’

‘So where is this Aunt Bella now?’

‘She died when I was fourteen. I had to move into digs then. I couldn't go back home - my dad hates me. After mum died, he couldn't cope with all us kids, and was glad when Bella took me off his hands when I was five.’

‘I know what it's like to be cast from one's family,’ Robert sighed. ‘You have my every sympathy.’

Before he could elaborate, the balcony door opened and one of his friends stepped out - a short, barrel-chested young man who swayed as he tried to remain upright.

‘Come on old chap,’ he slurred. ‘We're going to the Raffles Club. Apparently Binky Hope has got these whores from Ceylon in there, thought we'd check 'em out. Those lot in there are just common tarts.’ He looked at Alice and squinted in puzzlement ‘Who are you?’

‘This is Alice, Percy,’ Robert said. ‘We were just having a lovely chat.’ He took Alice's hand once more and brought it to his lips. ‘It has been a delight Alice,’ he said. ‘I will make sure a taxi is called to take you and your friends home. And I meant what I said, I will come and watch you. I bet you're quite the performer.’

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Nesta waited until Roland was fast asleep, flat on his back and snoring loudly, before she got out of bed. Her lower body smarted from his assault, and it hurt to walk. She wrapped her silk robe around herself and stepped out onto the balcony. The night was balmy but there was a feeling of dampness in the air, as if rain was on its way. It had been a swelteringly hot June and a storm was needed.

She looked out over Belgrave Square, to the houses on the other side, and wondered how outraged one of her neighbours would be if they were to look out of their window and saw Lady Nesta Villiers standing, scantily dressed, in the middle of the night. She thought back to the beginning of her marriage. Once it had dawned on her that she and Roland were incompatible, she would come and stand on this balcony and look down at the pavement, watching as her long, blonde hair swung down towards the ground. She'd imagine she was Rapunzel, and at any moment a handsome prince would come along and rescue her. Of course no-one ever came and she remained trapped in her fortress. She still longed for escape – anywhere would do, but she now knew there were no fairy tale princes out there to set her free.

It started to grow cold and Nesta came back into the bedroom, taking care not to awaken Roland as she closed the French doors. The last thing she wanted was for him to start mauling her again. She wondered if she could risk sneaking into one of the spare bedrooms to get some sleep. No doubt the servants would whisper about it, but she knew they talked about her anyway so it made little difference.

Taking a chance, she stepped out into the hallway, quietly shutting the door behind her. She went to head for the next bedroom, but when she heard a cough come from the games room on the floor below, she realised someone was still in there. She guessed it was her brother, James, and feeling in need of a little company, she went down to the next level; crossing the chequered floor and pausing before opening the door. What if it wasn't James? It would cause a terrible scandal if the lady of the house entered this gentleman's enclave dressed in just her night attire, and there was someone else's husband in there. Nesta decided to knock, but when James called '*who is it?*', she knew it was safe to enter.

The games room was where the men went to at the end of any party; usually to play cards, billiards or just to talk business away from their wives. It stank of cigar smoke, and Nesta could barely see James through the haze. He was at Roland's globe shaped drinks cabinet, and was pouring himself a glass of whisky. He beckoned the bottle towards Nesta.

'A nightcap?' he asked.

'Please,' she replied, sitting upon one of the rather battered sofas. She felt a slight thrill in being here, and it reminded of her childhood, back when they lived in Durville House before their father died. Whenever their mother wasn't around, Nesta would take the opportunity to climb into the tree house and join James and his friends while they plotted their expeditions around the surrounding woods. If Roland knew she was in here, he would go mad.

James returned with their drinks and sat beside his sister. Without him saying a word, Nesta could see he'd lost at cards tonight. James hated to lose, and it would always cause his jaw to stiffen and a look of despondency would make his blue eyes become hard. He ran his hand through his wavy dark hair and swigged his drink down in one go.

‘How much did you lose?’ Nesta smiled indulgently.

‘A few guineas, it doesn’t matter,’ he snapped. ‘I’m just annoyed at that damned fool of a husband of yours.’

‘What did he do?’

‘It doesn’t matter. Go back to bed Nesta. This isn’t a room for a woman to be in.’

‘Why? Might I die of the smell of cigar smoke?’ she laughed. ‘Or woe betide, I may breathe in the scent of sweat!’

‘It’s nice to see you smile,’ he said, reaching out and stroking her face. ‘You used to laugh so much when we were children.’

‘Yes, well, Durville wasn’t exactly the gilded cage this place is,’ Nesta sighed, looking around at the ornately decorated room. She doubted if Roland had ever bothered to read any of the collection of first editions that had belonged to his grandfather, Sir Oswald; and the thick velvet curtains that had been brought over from Wallington, his mother’s ancestral home in Surrey, were now stained with the various liquids that had been spilt on them over the years. All signs of how little Roland valued what he’d inherited.

‘Why don’t you go and see Mother?’ James suggested. ‘She’s always writing to me and telling me how much she worries about you.’

‘And leave Roland alone here to his own devices? I don’t think so. If Mama worries so much, she can come over here and see me.’

‘Betsey hates sailing as well you know. I think a trip to New York would do you the world of good.’

‘Why are you trying to get rid of me James?’ Nesta asked, sipping the bitter tasting whisky.

‘I’m not. It’s just that I’m off to Italy soon, and Roland will be going to Paris. I don’t like the thought of you rattling round this old house on your own.’

‘I’ll be fine. I might join a charitable committee or something. Winifred Jacob is organising a jumble sale in aid of the church poor fund in a couple of weeks, I might chip in and help.’

‘I see. Well, if you do stick around, just keep away from any gossip you may hear.’

‘Such as?’

‘I’ve said too much.’

He got up and went over to the drinks cabinet, pouring himself another glass of scotch. Nesta never remembered her brother drinking as much before the death of Lucia, his wife two years ago. He'd been such a happy little boy – always laughing and full of mischief. Now he seemed as trapped in his own misery as she was.

'What's Roland up to?' she asked.

James returned to sit beside her, but this time he couldn't look her in the eye, and instead swirled the amber liquid around the crystal glass, as if searching for some sort of answer in it.

'He was boasting about how he's going to be living with Dolly Ballantyne in Paris,' he said quietly.

'Dolly Ballantyne?' Nesta uttered. This woman was a mythical creature – the most sought over widow in the whole of Europe. Her husband, the American industrialist Elwood Ballantyne had left her half a million pounds in his will, and she wasn't even thirty. 'What do you mean he's going to be living with Dolly Ballantyne?'

'She has a house in Paris and has invited Roland to live there while he's overseeing the building of Le Parisienne. You know what Roly's like, he's a dreamer. Dolly's probably just invited him to dinner and he's built it up into something else entirely.'

'No, I don't think so,' Nesta replied quietly, feeling her throat constrict, and that familiar terror start to creep into her bones. 'Dolly's just the sort of woman Roland would covet.'

'Yes, but he's already got a wife,' James laughed nervously. 'I told you old girl, don't take it too seriously. I'm just feeling morose because I lost out to that oaf Emmet Young. Roland was just being a fool and boasting to the other men. Half of them are in love with Dolly Ballantyne and Roland was just trying to outdo them. Don't give it another thought Nessie.'

'You're right,' she smiled. 'Even Roland wouldn't be that callous. Well, I suppose I'd better go back to bed. Don't stay up on your own too long.'

She stood up and bent down, kissing James on the top of his head before leaving the room. She climbed the stairs wearily, still wondering if she should go into a spare room. She dare not. Roland had another woman in his sights - a beautiful woman who was desired by most of the men in Society. Roland was a competitive man and even if he was just fantasising about living with Dolly Ballantyne in Paris, he would no doubt make it his mission to become acquainted with her whilst he was overseeing the building of his latest hotel.

He was still asleep as she re-entered the room, and before getting into bed, Nesta sat at her dressing table and spritzed herself with Eau de Roses to mask the smell of cigar smoke. She looked at herself in the mirror, thinking how ironic it was that she was once as desired as Dolly Ballantyne. With her golden hair, cornflower blue eyes and those haughty cheekbones, she had



stood out amongst the other Debs in her year. And being the daughter of Betsey Tanner, the famous American socialite, she'd seemed like an exotic bird to capture. When Roland Villiers had been the one to win her heart, the other young men had been green with envy. Now those same men pitied him. They may have settled for the plainer Debs in her circle - the ones that now were sliding into middle-age and sagging around the middle. But those same girls had provided them with heirs. Strapping young men who would carry on the family name. Nesta had remained as beautiful as she was at nineteen, but she was of no use to Roland. After three miscarriages, the doctor had as good as declared her barren, and she knew it was only a matter of time before her husband found someone who could provide him with children. The question was - what was to become of her when he did?

## Chapter Two

It was amazing what a drop of rain could do to an audience. The self same people who'd heckled Alice a couple of evenings before, had tonight cheered her on, and at the end of her Lady Davinia routine, someone had even thrown a rose onto the stage. She knew it was little to do with her act, more that they were glad to be out of the rain and were appreciative of any entertainment offered to them. With a cheery bow, she ran off stage and before she could reach the dressing room, she was stopped by Bertie the stage manager, who grasped her by the shoulders and smiled excitedly.

'You've got a visitor Alice,' he said. 'A young man.'

'A young man? Who is he?'

'Says his name is Robert Fairfax.'

'R-Robert,' she uttered. She'd convinced herself that he'd forgotten her after the other night. 'What does he want?'

'You! He's out in the lobby.'

'I'm supposed to be getting changed, ready for The Howards. Can you tell Albie I'm stuck on the lav and I'll be out in a minute?'

'Course I will Al,' Bertie winked. 'You go and speak to 'im. He's a proper gentleman.'

Alice ran through the bowels of the theatre, past the acts rehearsing, and up into the lobby. Robert was leaning against the cloakroom door, looking dandy in his top hat and tails - nothing about his appearance giving away the fact it was pissing down with rain outside.

'Good evening Miss Du Pont,' he smiled, and Alice swooned a little before panicking and feeling suddenly self-conscious. What on earth did she look like under these stark lights, caked in greasepaint?

'What are you doing here?' she asked, daring to step a little closer to him.

'I had a meeting in High Holborn. I thought I'd take a stroll down here and see if you cared to accompany me to Tivoli's after your performance.'

'Tivoli's!' Alice gasped. 'You can get us in there?'

'My dear I can get us in wherever I like. Have you finished for the night?'

'No, I'm dancing with The Howard Sisters at the end of the show. Say you'll stay and watch Robert, please.'

He absent-mindedly patted his jacket pocket.

‘I haven't a ticket...’

Alice ran over to the box office and tapped on the window, awakening Sid, the attendant, who'd fallen asleep whilst reading *The Daily Sketch*.

‘Sid! Sid!’ she called out.

‘What is it?’ the elderly man grumbled, pushing his glasses up his nose.

‘Let my friend in,’ she pleaded. ‘He wants to see the second act.’

‘No skin off my nose,’ Sid grouched. ‘We ain't full.’

Alice showed Robert into the auditorium and felt a little embarrassed that the theatre was small and shabby, and not like the grand places he was probably used to. She found him a seat close to the front and told him she would meet him by stage door at the end of the night; and as they parted he gave her a little kiss on the cheek.

Running back to the dressing room, Alice's head spun with excitement and nerves. Tivoli's was the grandest restaurant on Shaftesbury Avenue. All the famous actors and actresses of the day went there after their performances, and it was the sort of place chorus girls like Alice could only dream of being invited to. She wondered what she could wear. Her Lady Davinia outfit wasn't elegant enough, and the dress she'd come from home in was just a basic day dress. She panicked, convinced she couldn't go.

Bursting into the dressing room, she was met with another shock when she found Evie Howard, the youngest and most beautiful of The Howard Sisters, standing in there, an audience of enthralled Bellamy Girls watching on as in a haze of chiffon and marabou feathers, she was trying to teach some steps to Susan, Albie's favourite girl.

‘What's going on?’ Alice asked.

‘Where you been?’ Albie barked as she pushed her way through the girls. ‘Get changed.’

Evie Howard turned to see whom Albie was addressing, and raised an eyebrow in curiosity. Alice withered under her gaze. Evie was so beautiful and classy with her unusually short dark hair, high cheekbones and smouldering dark eyes. It was hard to believe she took her clothes off for a living.

‘Who's this?’ she asked, not taking her eyes off Alice. It made her feel so belittled. She'd danced behind this young woman every night for three weeks, and yet she didn't even know her name.

‘Alice Du Pont,’ Albie practically spat. ‘She’s one of my dancers. Sorry she interrupted you Miss Howard.’

Evie walked towards Alice and looked her up and down. Like Alice, she was tall, and it felt weird to be at eye-level with another woman, when usually she was so much taller than everyone.

‘Do you know the mermaid routine Alice?’ Evie asked in her clipped, posh voice.

‘Yes,’ Alice replied breathlessly. ‘I’ve danced behind you as a sea nymph many a time.’

‘I’m sure you have,’ Evie laughed. ‘My sister Agnes has fallen and we think broken her ankle. I need someone to take her place. Could you show me what you can do Alice?’

Alice looked past Evie at Albie, who stood with her arm around Susan, who was now on the verge of tears. Albie was looking at Alice as though she wanted to kill her, and normally this would put her off; but she was feeling strangely defiant tonight. A handsome, wealthy young man was taking her to Tivoli’s, and in her mind, that now made her a proper performer. Ignoring the jealous looks being thrown at her, she began to dance, emulating what she’d seen Agnes Howard do night after night. Most of it just consisted of basic ballet moves, but luckily Aunt Bella had given Alice ballet lessons when she was a small girl. She whirled around the tiny dressing room, arms outstretched, remaining poised; imagining she was wearing the flimsy chiffon outfit the girls wore. Evie watched her every move and clapped eagerly when she stopped.

‘Wonderful!’ she gasped. ‘Wonderful! We’ll take her Mrs Smith.’

‘I thought you was ‘avin my Susan,’ Albie pouted.

‘No, *you* thought I was having Susan,’ Evie laughed. ‘I asked you for someone who could pass as my sister. She’s too short, too fat and has red hair. Alice is perfect. Speak to Mr Mitford, he’ll sort out all her terms with you.’

Before Albie could say a word, Evie grasped Alice’s hand and pulled her out of the room and along the corridor to The Howard Sisters’ room - that hallowed place Alice had only ever dreamt of entering. Before they went in, Evie stopped her and laid her hands upon her shoulders, smiling excitedly.

‘You do want to do this don’t you Alice?’ she gasped.

‘Yeah, course I do.’

‘Come on then.’

The Howard Sisters' dressing room was twice the size of the one all eight Bellamy Girls were supposed to squeeze into. It smelt of the finest perfume and beautiful outfits hung from every surface. At the far end of the room, at a mirror with lights all around it sat Esme Howard. She was wearing her stage costume, a diaphanous piece of gauze with a silver skirt made to look like a mermaid's tail. The dresser was affixing her head-dress – a tiara with silvery feathers attached. In the other corner, Agnes Howard was sitting having her ankle tended to by Moses Carruthers, the theatre manager. He looked in his element, perching on a stool with the slim, naked leg of a Howard Sister resting upon his lap. He snarled when he saw Evie come in, accompanied by Alice.

'What's she doing here?' he asked, not hiding the contempt in his voice.

'Alice is taking Agnes' place tonight,' Evie said, manoeuvring Alice to the spare dressing table and sitting her down.

'She's unreliable that girl,' Carruther's spat. 'Always wandering off in a world of her own.'

'Well she's the only one out of that rabble next door who can pass as one of us,' Evie replied. 'And she dances beautifully.'

She sat beside Alice and looked at her, smiling warmly.

'Can you do your own make up? Rosie will help you into your outfit. You and Aggie are about the same size, so it should be fine.'

'I'd rather just the two of you go on than a Bellamy guttersnipe,' Agnes groused from the other side of the room.

'But look at her,' Evie fizzed. 'You wouldn't think she was a guttersnipe, she's quite the beauty. Anyway, I'm going to take her to Gardeners afterwards and find out all about her.'

'Oh I can't Miss Howard,' Alice said quickly. 'My gentleman friend is taking me to Tivoli's.'

'Tivoli's. Oh my goodness. See Aggie, she *is* the proper young lady.'

'Well, I say he's taking me to Tivoli's,' Alice sighed. 'But I haven't anything to wear. I don't think I can go.'

'I'll lend you something,' Evie smiled. 'I've never been to Tivoli's, and I'd love to hear all about it. So, in exchange for me lending you a dress, you can repay me by telling me all the gossip.'

The next hour went by in a whirl for Alice. She had to hastily wash the cheap greasepaint off, and powder her face with the same luminous make-up the other girls wore. She winced as Evie applied pomade to her hair and slicked it back, fixing it in a ballerina's bun on top of her head. As she looked at herself in the mirror, Alice didn't recognise the girl staring back. The light powder highlighted her sharp cheekbones, and without the thick waxy lipstick she wore for her Lady Davinia act, her pout seemed bigger. Her large, dark eyes were the same as Evie's and indeed they could pass as sisters. She then stripped naked, and Rosie, the young dresser, helped her into Agnes's costume. The top was see-through, and Alice felt embarrassed that Robert would be able to see her small breasts. But this was the chance of a lifetime and she couldn't let bashfulness hold her back.

Soon she was on stage and performing to *The Aquarium* by Prokofiev. The other Bellamy girls all danced around behind them, dressed as nymphs, while Alice, Evie and Esme tantalised the audience with their ballet moves. Alice had a solo spot towards the end and the audience gasped as she span around the stage, and for a moment she felt like the beautiful ballerina she'd dreamt of becoming as a little girl. After a standing ovation, the girls ran off stage and Alice hesitated, not sure if she should return to the Bellamy Girls' dressing room or join The Howard Sisters in theirs. The choice was taken from her as Evie grasped her hand and pulled her into their room.

'You were amazing!' she gasped. 'Where did you learn to dance like that?'

'My aunt taught me. She was on the stage too. She learnt to dance in Paris and everything.'

'How fascinating.'

The door opened once more and Esme came in, a sulky expression on her face.

'I just spoke to Carruthers. They've taken Aggie to a doctor on Harley Street. He can pay for it as well. If he hadn't left that ruddy bucket lying around, she'd have never fallen over it.' She stopped and looked at Alice, placing a hand on her narrow, bony hip and frowning. 'Why is she still here?'

'Why don't we keep Alice on, Essie?' Evie suggested. 'Aggie's going to be out of action for a few weeks. It would save auditioning other girls.'

'We'll have to speak to Spencer,' Esme said, sinking down on the fancy Queen Anne chair in the corner of the room. She reached for her cigarette case and lit one up. 'He might not want her. She's a bit boyish.'

'I think she's quite the thing,' Evie smiled proudly. 'Don't you think we could be twins?'

'Yes, if one twin had been sent to live in the gutter.'

Alice let Esme's insults wash over her. She'd had the best night of her life, and nothing was going to spoil it now.

'Why don't you take your make up off while I look for a dress for you?' Evie suggested. 'You've got to look spectacular if you're going to Tivoli's.'

Alice went over to the sink in the corner of the room and washed her face with the brittle water that came from the rather rusty tap. Rosie helped her take her hair from its bun, and as it tumbled over her shoulders, Alice felt the greatest sense of relief. There was a knock on the door and before anyone could say '*come in*', Spencer Mitford, the girls' manager entered. He was a dandy looking man who always wore a bowler hat, and waistcoats with garish brocade sewn onto them. His moustache covered a large part of his face and when he took his hat off, it looked quite comical to see he was bald.

'Good evening girls,' he said in his broad, cockney accent. 'And good evening Miss Du Pont.'

'Hello,' she uttered, feeling somehow self-conscious at him seeing her without make up, her hair hanging free, just covering her breasts.

'Wasn't she wonderful Spencer?' Evie called out from behind the ornately decorated screen, as she looked for an outfit for Alice. 'Can we keep her?'

'Well, I'll have to discuss terms with Mrs Smith,' he said. He came towards Alice, and the way he licked his lips in appreciation disconcerted her. 'Of course as a *temporary* member, you won't be on the same wages as Evie and Esme. Do you live with the other Bellamy Girls my dear?'

'A couple of them - Fanny and Bertha. The other girls lodge with Albie in Old Compton Street. We live at Mrs Hopkirk's in Vauxhall.'

'Well that's good, 'cos I know how jealous young girls can be; and it might get a bit difficult with you living with them *and* being the star attraction here at the theatre. What does Mrs Smith currently pay you?'

'Eight shillings a week.'

'And I suppose you earn a little extra by attending – ahem – parties?'

'How did you know about that?'

'Everybody knows old Albie rents her girls out to entertain young gents. Well, there can't be any of that while you're a Howard Sister. So let's say I'll pay you a pound a week and we'll leave it at that.'

‘Thank you,’ Alice gasped. She had never earned so much money in her life. And there would be no more parties with lecherous men. It truly was a grand day.

‘Right you are,’ Spencer said, tipping his hat once more. ‘I’ll go and speak to the old dragon.’

He left the room and Esme looked up at Alice, flicking her cigarette ash on the floor.

‘Are you a tart?’ she snarled.

‘No,’ Alice blushed. ‘I never do nothing with the fellas. I just sing and dance a bit. They like to look at pretty girls while they’re talking business.’

‘Good, because we might take our clothes off for a living, but it’s in the name of art. We can’t have some little scrubber bringing us down.’

Evie emerged from the screen, holding onto the most beautiful dress Alice had ever seen. It was black beaded, with sleeves made of lace, and a pale green sash that went around the waist. It looked as though it would have cost a fortune.

‘This was a gift from a good friend of mine when we were performing in Brighton,’ Evie explained. ‘Would you like to wear it tonight?’

‘Oh could I?’ gasped Alice, daring to reach out and finger the silk skirt. ‘I’ll look after it. I promise.’

‘I know you will,’ Evie smiled. ‘And you’re going to be the talk of Tivoli’s.’

Alice knew she would hardly be the talk of Tivoli’s - not when it was always populated by such famous people. But with Evie’s beautiful dress, and Robert on her arm, she felt as though she could hold her head high. She had never dined anywhere like it before. The room was domed and made of glass, and scattered around were birds in fancy cages, and it sounded as though they were singing along to the string quartet that played in the corner. Ladies who were festooned in sparkling diamond necklaces, and elaborate hats with feathers of every colour, laughed gaily while their gentlemen companions smoked cigarettes and moved from table to table chatting with their acquaintances. Alice nearly passed out when she heard raucous laughter coming from the far end of the room and saw it was Marie Lloyd - surrounded by an entourage of admirers. Robert laughed and led her to their table, which was quite close to the string quartet, and unfortunately behind a pillar so she could not see her idol.

Robert ordered a bottle of champagne and lit a cigar, sitting back and gazing at Alice.

‘You truly look beautiful,’ he said. ‘That dress is simply divine.’



‘It isn’t mine I’m afraid,’ she blushed. ‘Evie Howard lent it to me.’

‘And what a lucky girl you are to have been given a starring role tonight. That’s why we must have champagne to celebrate your good fortune.’

‘All I ever wanted to do was be a dancer,’ she sighed. ‘A proper dancer. I know the Howards’ act is a bit risqué, but they’ve danced in all sorts of places. They’ve even been to Paris. Imagine that Robert, dancing in Paris.’

‘Well, I’ve never danced in Paris, but I have been to the Moulin Rouge. It was quite an eye opening experience, I can tell you.’

‘You’ve been to Paris?’

‘I’ve been to many countries,’ he said, smiling at her naivety. ‘I was born in India and travelled greatly with my father. He used to trade in various commodities until he went into newspapers.’

‘Your father owns newspapers?’

‘Yes. He’s Lord Joseph Fairfax. He owns several newspapers here and on the Continent.’

‘And is that what you do? Do you work with him?’

‘Lord above no!’ he laughed. ‘My older brother Simeon does all that. I just squander his money, trying to set up businesses of my own. That’s how Papa sees it anyway.’

‘You must live in a very grand house.’

‘I have a modest apartment in Kensington. Father and I could never see eye to eye so he encouraged me to leave. I prefer it that way. I have a lovely housekeeper who cooks all my meals, and a divine little maid who makes sure my home is clean and tidy. That’s all I require. Anyway, I intend to make my own fortune and not have to rely on my father’s charity.’

‘What are you going to do?’

‘I’m going to emigrate to New York and invest in property. A friend of mine went out there in 1905 and he’s a millionaire already.’

‘A millionaire!’ she gasped.

‘Yes. You see there are thousands of people from all over the world going there to live and work, and they need housing. So, you buy up cheap properties, do them up to a certain standard, then rent them out.’

Alice felt a little disappointed. In her youthful naivety, she had daydreamt about having a grand romance with Robert. But he wasn't planning on sticking around. She indeed wondered why he had even bothered to take her out tonight.

The waiter came with the champagne and poured them each a glass. Alice was so excited at the thought of drinking Moët. She'd never had it before, and wondered if it would make her tipsy. The waiter then asked if they would like to order food and Robert instructed him to come back as they hadn't decided. As he left, Robert picked up the velvet covered menu and perused it. Alice didn't know if she should do the same; and when she looked down at the table, and the fancy cutlery, she panicked, wondering how she was going to use it.'

'I'm not very hungry,' Robert suddenly declared. 'Shall we just have something light? The Foie Gras here is out of this world.'

'Okay,' Alice smiled nervously. She didn't even know what Foie Gras was, so just went along with it. She drank her champagne a little too fast and the bubbles made her cough. She looked around to make sure none of the fancy ladies were looking at her and thinking her common. But they all seemed to be having such a good time, they didn't even notice.

'So, young Alice,' Robert said, taking her hand and bringing it to his lips. 'I know nothing about you, except that you're a remarkable dancer and actress, and that you come from Battersea...and of course that I find you utterly charming. What else is there to know?'

'I'm nineteen,' she said quietly, suddenly conscious of talking about herself and people hearing her accent. 'I was born in Battersea. My mum was from Limerick in Ireland and trained in Dublin to become an opera singer. She came to London to perform and met my dad. He'd just finished fighting in South Africa and Aunt Bella always reckoned that the shrapnel he'd got in his head must have sent him funny. He worked on the railway but he hardly ever gave any money to mum and our house was horrible. There was only two rooms and all of us had to squash into it. Mum's sister Bella used to come and visit and take me out. My brothers and sisters got jealous 'cos Bella made it obvious I was her favourite. She'd take me to the music hall, and because she was a singer and dancer, she knew everyone; so I'd meet all these famous people.' She lowered her voice. 'Well, not really famous like in here, but sort of famous. Bella taught me how to sing and dance, and when mum died, she let me move in with her. She only lived in little digs in Clapham, but it was a palace compared to our house.'

'Clapham's a lovely area. I used to have piano lessons there.'

'I stayed there until Aunt Bella died; then me and Herbert used to travel around the country living in digs. When I got too big, he sacked me, and the only job I could get was with The Bellamy Girls...until now.'

‘What an exciting life you’ve led,’ Robert smiled, and when he did, little creases would appear at the side of his eyes and something in Alice’s heart melted. Maybe it was the champagne; maybe it was the high she felt after the night she’d had; but she suddenly felt something powerful for him. He was a glimpse of what her life could be if she played her cards right and kept working hard.

‘I don’t want to end up like my mum,’ she said. ‘Throwing all my talent away for some man who doesn’t appreciate me. I want the finer things in life. Does that sound horrible?’

‘No, it sounds like you’re a kindred spirit dear Alice,’ he replied, kissing her hand once more. ‘We’re both independent and ambitious, and determined to make our way. Maybe that was why we were destined to meet.’

‘I’ll never forget this night as long as I live,’ she swooned. ‘I don’t think I’ve ever been happier.’

‘It’s no more than you deserve. I knew you were special the moment you turned up at Percy’s party, and I would simply die if I didn’t have you in my life.’

Alice gave a little gasp of surprise and desire. No one had ever spoken to her in such a way - not even the drunken men who’d paid for her company in the past. Robert was a gentleman and in one evening, both he and Evie Howard had made Alice realise she could be a somebody. All she’d been waiting for was for the right person to spot her potential.

## Chapter Three

August 1911

Carlotta Booth's annual garden party was late this year. She normally held it at the end of June but the Coronation had somewhat scuppered her plans. Carlotta was notoriously vain and in need of constant praise; and after her having attended the hundreds of Coronation parties that had gone on around London, her little do seemed quite mediocre.

Nesta felt ill and had no desire to spend an afternoon in the company of her mother's oldest friend, however she knew she had no choice but to go. Carlotta's husband Winston was investing a large amount of money in Villiers Hotels, and Roland was keen to keep him sweet - even if this meant Nesta sweltering in the summer heat, trying to look radiant in her finery. Carlotta and Winston lived in a large house close to Albert Bridge, and even though she boasted a ninety foot garden with high walls, it was still evident they were in the middle of town; and all the smells of the river and city life seemed to choke Nesta, as she stood, attempting to look as though she was enjoying herself.

Roland was deep in conversation with Phyllida, Carlotta's beautiful eighteen year old niece. She was the Belle of the Ball - just over from Massachusetts and ready to enter Society, hoping to find herself a rich, English husband. Nesta felt embarrassed for Roland as he did his best to impress the young girl with his tall tales; making her laugh out of politeness when she'd much rather be chatting to one of the handsome, eligible young men who were hovering around, seething quietly whilst Roland stole their thunder.

A part of Nesta couldn't wait for her husband to go off to Paris the next week. It was just the nagging fear that he was going to spend all his time with Dolly Ballantyne that bothered her. Her blood ran cold at the thought of Roland divorcing her and marrying that woman. Nesta knew her life would be as good as over. She'd be a social outcast, and at thirty, would have little chance of marrying again. She'd become one of those women who rely on the charity of their father's trust fund, living in some poky mansion flat with just a housekeeper for company. She couldn't bear it and wished she knew of a way of holding onto Roland.

She was awoken from her thoughts by a tap on the shoulder. She turned around to find Carlotta standing there, her fat face partially hidden by her elaborate hat. Nesta could see she was smiling, and the tip of her nose was glowing red - probably from the copious amounts of sherry she liked to consume before any party.

'Do you think you could get your husband away from my niece honey?' she laughed in her warm Boston accent. 'I'm trying to find her a husband.'

‘I think you'd stand more of a chance of persuading him than me,’ Nesta sighed. ‘He never listens to a word I say.’

‘I remember when you were her age,’ Nesta mused, gazing over at Phyllida, who was now allowing Roland to remove something that had nestled in her black, curly hair. ‘He was just the same with you as he is with Philly. Men are so damn fickle.’

Desperate to talk to someone, Nesta took Carlotta's arm and led her away from the throng, out of earshot of the other guests.

‘Have you heard any rumours about him and Dolly Ballantyne?’ she asked.

‘I can't say I have,’ Carlotta replied. ‘What have you heard?’

‘Before he went to Italy, James told me Roland had been boasting about how he was going to live with Dolly in Paris. I've even offered to go with him, but he's refused. I'm worried Carlotta. He wants an heir and I'm getting older all the time.’

‘Have you seen a doctor?’ Carlotta frowned. ‘I know a very good man in Harley Street. He could examine you, see if you have any problems.’

‘Oh no,’ Nesta shivered. ‘I hate the thought of someone touching me intimately like that. I just wish there was some potion I could take that would make me pregnant.’

‘You want to do something old girl,’ Carlotta said. ‘I was just hearing about Lady Zena Watson, the other day. You heard of her?’

‘She's married to Sir Redmond Watson isn't she? I heard she's become a missionary in Africa or something.’

‘That's the official line,’ Carlotta laughed. ‘The truth is, Redmond put her into an asylum in Epsom so he can divorce her on the grounds of her unreasonable behaviour and marry his mistress. Apparently he's chasing after the Duke of Marlow's youngest daughter.’

‘You think Roland would do that to me?’ Nesta gasped. ‘Surely he wouldn't.....’

‘Like you said, he's desperate for an heir.’

Nesta felt light-headed and unsteady on her feet at the thought of her husband locking her away in some horrid mental asylum - telling people she'd gone to visit her mother; or, like Lady Watson, had supposedly become a missionary. To be cast aside was one thing. To be locked up was another.

‘Nesta dear you've gone as white as a sheet,’ Carlotta observed. ‘Do you want to go inside and sit down?’

‘Yes, could I?’ Nesta asked, gripping her head. ‘The heat has quite gotten to me.’

Carlotta led Nesta through the French doors into the reception room at the back of the house. She rang the bell, and while they waited for Walsh, the butler, to come, Carlotta told Nesta to sit upon the Chesterfield Sofa. The feel of the cold leather was a welcome sensation against her hot skin and she started to feel a little better. Walsh soon appeared, and Carlotta instructed him to bring some iced water for Lady Villiers. She then sat beside Nesta and reached out, feeling her forehead.

‘You’re running a temperature. Do you want me to get Baines to take you home?’

‘No!’ Nesta gasped. ‘Roland tires of me and my poor health as it is. I don’t want to anger him further by running out on him. I’ll be fine. It’s just so stiflingly hot today.’

‘Okay, well I’d better be getting back to my guests. If you need anything, just ring for someone. Do you promise?’

‘Yes I promise,’ Nesta smiled. ‘I just need to rest.’

Walsh brought a jug of water filled with ice and mint leaves, and poured Nesta a glass. She sipped it a little but found more comfort by pressing the glass against her forehead. A feeling of hope rose in her heart, and while she would never reveal her suspicions to anyone, she did recall feeling this way before. The unbearable tiredness, the fever, the persistent headache - in all three pregnancies, she’d had the same symptoms and she allowed herself to wonder if it had happened again. She tried to remember when she had her last period and she was sure it was a couple of months ago. How wonderful to think that when Roland returned from Paris, she might have a baby to present to him.

A shadow was cast into the room and she looked up to find it was Roland. He had finally torn himself away from Phyllida and was no doubt angry because Carlotta would have told him that Nesta wasn’t feeling very well.

‘Another headache?’ he asked sarcastically, as he walked into the room and sat beside her on the sofa.

‘Yes, you know I can’t take the heat Roland. I never wanted to come here in the first place.’

‘You never want to do anything Nesta,’ he snapped. ‘I may as well be a single man.’

His words made Nesta shiver with fear, and she gently ran her hand over her stomach, hopeful that it contained a precious baby.

‘I think you should go away while I’m in Paris,’ he said. ‘Have a proper rest.’

‘Where would I go?’ she asked.

‘I don’t know. Maybe we could find you a nice sanatorium in the country. Somewhere you can take it easy and get better.’

‘There’s nothing wrong with me. I just have a delicate disposition.’

‘Quite, quite, what was I thinking?’

‘I was actually thinking of helping Winifred Jacobs with her Poor Union. She’s teaching some women in Victoria to sew, so they can earn a living.’

‘You don’t want to go mixing with people like that,’ he scoffed. ‘I do worry about you Nesta. You never seem to be able to just enjoy life. You could do all sorts of things while I’m away. Take a trip. Go and stay with James in Italy.’

‘Let me come with you to Paris,’ she pleaded. ‘You’ll need someone to escort you to parties and functions. Let it be me.’

‘No, you’re too unreliable. I can’t promise to have drinks with the French Ambassador, telling him my beautiful wife will be accompanying me, only for you to get one of your headaches and drop out at the last minute.’

‘Whereas Dolly Ballantyne will always be willing and able,’ Nesta snapped, immediately regretting it.

‘What do you mean?’ Roland asked.

‘Nothing. I’ve just heard rumours.’

‘Well they’re true, in part. I will be staying at Mrs Ballantyne’s house while I’m in Paris. But there’s nothing in it. Not that anyone could blame me if there were.’

Nesta gripped his arm and watched as he looked at her in horror, shocked to see his normally passive wife showing some emotion.

‘Give me the chance to be a proper wife,’ she begged. ‘I won’t cry off from engagements in Paris. I’ll love it there, I know it.’

‘No,’ he replied, swatting her hand away. ‘It’s all been arranged. Like I said, I suggest that whilst I’m away, you take it as an opportunity to get some treatment for your disposition.’

He stood up and strode out of the room, and Nesta fought back the tears. Roland truly hated her, she could feel it. He regretted ever marrying her and she knew if he could find a reason to divorce her, he would. How she hoped and prayed she was pregnant. He would change

his mind about her when she produced him with a strapping son. He'd realise he'd done the right thing in marrying her.

The following day Nesta sent Judith, the housekeeper, along to Doctor Perkins' surgery in Eaton Square with a request that he visit her. Judith Farrell had worked for the Villiers family for thirty years, and was fiercely loyal to them. Nesta knew she would be the soul of discretion about her mistress needing a doctor. Even though Judith had known Roland since he was a small boy, she had taken to his wife, and she and Nesta got along well. Sometimes when she was in the kitchen alone, preparing the week's shopping list, Nesta would go down and join her and they would chat. Judith would tell her all about her son who had won a scholarship to Cambridge University, and was studying to become a barrister. She was also excited about the holiday to Bournemouth she and her husband John were taking in September; and Nesta promised to lend them finest luggage so they could travel in style.

Judith returned with Doctor Perkins, who always found the time to visit a rich client as soon as he was summoned. The housekeeper showed him into the small drawing room at the back of the house, and offered him tea, which he accepted. Like Judith, Perkins had known Roland as a child and Nesta knew he was terribly fond of him. She had no idea how much he could be trusted – especially if she wasn't pregnant and there was something else wrong with her. Roland could even use him in his attempt to get her put away. But she knew she had to take a chance. Perkins was an extravagant looking man, whose white, wispy hair stuck out from under his top hat. He always wore the fanciest silk waistcoats, and in the winter his coats would be lined with fur. He had become very rich and fat by seeing people with far too much money, especially women like Nesta whose husbands were convinced they suffered from a nervous disposition, and were willing to pay through the nose for some jollop to make their wives more lively.

'So what appears to be the problem?' he asked. 'Not your nerves again?'

'No, it's not my nerves. I think I may be pregnant.'

'Really? How late are you?'

'I think I last had a show in June. I'm also experiencing all the same symptoms as before. I'm dizzy and have a temperature, and I keep feeling nauseous and very tired.'

'Certainly sounds promising. Are your breasts tender?'

'A little. I haven't gained any weight yet, but I think I must only be about six weeks.'

'Have you had any other illnesses that might cause these problems?'



‘No. I get a lot of headaches, but that's always happened to me. This feels different.’

‘Well, I would say you more than likely are pregnant. Would you like me to examine you, or would you like to see how things go on?’

Nesta went to say no. The thought of Dr Perkins touching her intimately was horrific; but if she could find out for sure now, she would be able to tell Roland before he went to Paris - and just maybe the prospect of becoming a father would be enough to stop him running off with Dolly Ballantyne.

‘Yes, could you examine me please?’ she asked quietly. ‘Then I'll know for sure.’

They went up to the bedroom and Dr Perkins asked Nesta to strip naked. She felt so embarrassed at doing this. Roland was the only man to ever see her without clothes, and even then she liked all the lights to be out before he touched her. With cold, probing hands, Dr Perkins felt her breasts and listened to her heart. He then instructed her to lay down, while he gently pressed her stomach. When he started rubbing his hands together to warm them up, Nesta winced, knowing what was coming next. He told her to open her legs and she closed her eyes and tensed every muscle in her body. As he attempted to examine her intimately, it made her think of all the times Roland had taken what he wanted from her, with no concern for her welfare or comfort, and somehow this made her relax. She hated Roland touching her and only did it because she so longed for a baby. If she could endure this horrible humiliation with the doctor, then hopefully she would be told what she wanted to hear, and it would make it all worth it.

‘You are indeed pregnant my dear,’ Perkins said, withdrawing his fingers and going over to the washstand in the corner of the room and rinsing them. ‘I would estimate you are between four and six weeks gone.’

‘Really?’ Nesta gasped, sitting up, forgetting her modesty for a moment.

‘Yes,’ Perkins smiled. ‘I suggest you give Roland the good news tonight when he comes home.’

‘I will,’ she gasped. ‘Oh thank you Doctor Perkins, thank you so much.’

‘It's a pleasure my dear. I will send my clerk along with the bill later this afternoon.’

Nesta floated through the rest of the day. This was her fourth pregnancy and she was determined it would be the one that would work. Whatever it took to hang onto this baby, she would do it; even if it meant remaining in bed for the rest of her term. She knew Roland would stick around if she gave him an heir. A son would be perfect, and even a daughter would be

better than nothing. Men always doted on their little girls, and no doubt he would stay with her in the hope she'd get pregnant again and produce a son.

She sent Judith out to get some summer flowers to decorate the house with, and asked Mrs Turner, the cook, to produce something delicious for dinner - Nesta wanted everything to be perfect when she told Roland the good news. She then changed into the dress James had brought her from Paris last year in an attempt to cheer his sister up. It was a maroon, chiffon gown, with a scooped neck and thousands of beads sewn into the bodice. At the time, Nesta had thanked him for it, but she'd felt it far too risqué, as it left quite a lot of skin exposed and she liked to remain modest. But tonight she felt daring. She had finally achieved her goal and wanted to celebrate in style. Knowing she was pregnant made her feel womanly and sensual and it seemed right to dress the part.

Roland was due home at seven and Nesta ensured the table was laid, and everything was ready for his return. She waited in the drawing room, trying her hardest not to watch the clock, but felt more and more despondent as slowly time went on and it seemed that he wasn't coming home. At half past eight, Amy, the maid knocked and asked if Nesta was likely to be wanting dinner soon. Nesta felt embarrassed. The servants wanted to finish work for the day, and her dream of a romantic meal with her husband was holding them up. She asked Amy if they could wait until nine o'clock, as she was sure Sir Roland would be home soon.

Nine o'clock came and Nesta resigned herself that Roland was either working late, or had gone on to one of his clubs. She rang for Judith and asked her to tell the rest of the staff they could finish for the day, and if she could bring her a ham sandwich and a pot of tea. The house was filled with the smell of the beef that Mrs Turner had cooked; but Nesta couldn't face any of it. Her disappointment was choking, and it was only the knowledge that she had to eat to remain strong for her baby, that made her request a small meal.

She retired to her bed and lay upon it, still in her beautiful dress - trying hard not to cry; worried that one of the servants might come in and find her. It was at times like this she wished she could escape Roland and run away to New York and live with her mother. Not that Betsey would be particularly glad to have her divorced and disgraced daughter causing her embarrassment in polite New York society. But it would be so nice for Nesta to be her own woman and not spend her life jumping through hoops, trying to please Roland, when nothing ever worked.

He finally came home at half past eleven. By the heaviness of his footsteps and his hacking, rheumy cough, Nesta could tell he'd been drinking in some smoky club. She'd heard all the rumours about her husband - how he liked to frequent low dives, where cheap women flaunted their wares openly. At least, mercifully, if he'd spent the evening in the company of some whore, it meant he would leave her alone.

The door opened, casting light into the room, and he stumbled in, throwing himself down upon the bed and taking off his shoes. That horrid cough making the bed shake.

‘Why are you still dressed?’ he grouched, not even bothering to turn and look at her.

‘Because I wanted to make an effort for you,’ Nesta replied, sitting up and lighting the lamp on her bedside cabinet so he could see what he was doing whilst getting undressed. ‘I asked Mrs Turner to cook us a special meal - beef Wellington, your favourite. It's cold now. Mrs Turner's probably taken it home to give to her husband.’

‘Well if she has, she can damn well have the money for it docked from her wages.’

He stood up, and with an unsteady sway, began to unfasten his bow tie. Instinct made Nesta want to get up and help him, but her disappointment stopped her from moving.

‘What's the special occasion anyway?’ he asked. ‘Not your birthday is it?’

‘No. I found out today that I'm having another baby.’

Roland stopped what he was doing and looked at her, squinting, trying to focus.

‘What?’ he asked.

‘I'm pregnant. Dr Perkins confirmed it today.’

Roland staggered over to the bed and sat beside her. Nesta searched her husband's face for some indication that he was happy; but instead he looked almost annoyed.

‘How far gone are you?’

‘About six weeks.’

‘Well try and hold onto this one. Perhaps you should stay in bed.’

‘I intend to rest as much as I possibly can,’ Nesta said. ‘I won't lift a finger.’

‘The hotel's not due to be finished until May, so it'll be born before then won't it?’

‘Yes, it should be due in March or April.’

‘I see.’ He rubbed his hand across his face. ‘I'm exhausted. I think I'll sleep in the spare room, let you get some rest.’

Chapter Four  
November 1911

It was the biggest night of Alice's life and everything was going wrong for her. The Howard Sisters were performing at The Palladium – the shiny new theatre in the heart of town, as part of a revue of the West End's most popular acts; and she felt sick and dizzy and couldn't fit into her outfit. Agnes' ankle was still mending and so Spencer Mitford had asked Alice to stay on until after Christmas. He then had an idea about making them a four piece act, and keeping Alice on permanently. The thought of this excited her. Being a Howard Sister had changed her life dramatically. She'd moved into nicer lodgings in Fulham, so she could be nearer to Robert; and because the Howards were considered so beautiful and glamorous, designers clamoured to offer them clothes: and she now had a wardrobe full of the most beautiful gowns. Unfortunately, many of them were starting to feel a bit snug, and it terrified Alice to face up to why this was happening.

She found a cleaning cupboard and hid in there, sitting in her robe, clutching the outfit she could barely get into. In their most daring routine yet, the three girls would be wearing men's suits, with nothing underneath, so as they moved, the audience would get a tantalising glimpse of their breasts. Vesta Tilley had even given them advice on how to wear men's clothes with confidence and Alice had been so excited about doing something that she knew would cause a stir. But the trousers wouldn't do up, and her once flat breasts were now quite full and heavy, which meant the audience would get more than a glimpse of them as she moved. Now she sat amongst the mops and tins of disinfectant, clutching the woollen trouser suit and crying.

There was a knock on the door.

'Are you in there Alice?'

It was Evie. Alice didn't want to speak to her, but at the same time she felt so despondent; and Evie usually had a solution for everything.

'Yes,' she sniffed.

The door opened and Evie stood there, already in her costume. Looking stunning in the close fitting black suit with the silk trim on the lapels, her dark hair slicked back, thick kohl on her eyes, making them look even more seductive. As normal, she was sucking hard on a cigarette in a long, black holder.

'What are you doing hiding in there?' she asked.

'I can't get the trousers on,' Alice cried. 'The buttons won't all do up.'

‘Stand up, let me look at you.’

Reluctantly, Alice stood up and stepped out of the cupboard. Evie popped her cigarette into her mouth and gripped Alice by the shoulders, examining her.

‘How far gone are you?’ she asked.

‘About four months I think,’ Alice blushed. This was the first time she’d ever spoken of her pregnancy and to do so made her feel even more dizzy.

‘Oh dear,’ was all Evie said.

‘I’ve tried to hide it, but all of a sudden I’ve started to get fat. Look at me.’

‘Wait there,’ was all Evie said and she walked off, disappearing round a corner and no doubt heading back to the dressing rooms. Alice stood shivering, not sure what was going on. Would Evie sack her and replace her with someone else? There were scores of girls queuing up to become a Howard Sister, and she knew she could be replaced just like that. After all, they were known for their sylph like figures, and overnight she’d turned into a whale.

Alice sat back down on the bucket she’d been resting on and closed the door again, preferring to sit in the dark. She couldn’t believe her bad luck. She’d kept Robert waiting as long as she possibly could, but he’d managed to seduce her one evening after he’d taken her to the theatre. Alice hadn’t paid a thought about getting pregnant, convinced that because she hadn’t been doing it for very long, somehow it wouldn’t happen to her. But it had. She could even feel the baby moving, like a little butterfly in her stomach. She thought about the girls she’d acted with in the past who’d found themselves in the family way and had gone to see women in horrible houses in grotty areas who’d done all sorts of unmentionables to get rid of the baby. Most of the girls came back too traumatised to talk, and a couple of them had died. Alice knew she couldn’t put herself through that. She would have to make other plans, but she didn’t know what.

There was another knock on the door and Alice opened it. This time Evie stood beside Spencer, who actually looked amused at what he was seeing.

‘Well well well, what have we here?’ he smiled.

‘Stand up Alice,’ Evie said.

Alice did as she was told, trying to hunch herself over to appear smaller. But that was hard at five foot ten.

‘Put the trousers on,’ Spencer said.

Without argument, Alice turned her back and under her robe, wriggled into the trousers. The bottom three buttons would do up, but the rest wouldn't budge over her rounded tummy. She turned around and showed this to Spencer.

'And you should see the jacket. It barely covers my chest.'

'Wait there,' Spencer said and he walked off. Alice looked at Evie and smiled apologetically.

'I'm sorry Evie,' she said.

'Why weren't you more careful? You should have asked me, I know all sorts of tricks to stop you getting pregnant.'

'I just thought Robert would take care of things. I don't know what I'm going to do Evie.'

'Will he marry you?'

'I don't know. He's hardly got any money. He only gets by because he knows lots of people who give him things and lend him cash. I think his father would go spare if he knew he'd got a girl pregnant out of wedlock. Especially a cheap dancer.'

'You're not a cheap dancer,' Evie pouted, giving her a comradely shove on the shoulder. 'You're one of The Howard Sisters. We're the talk of the town don't you know?'

'I won't be for much longer. I'll soon be the same size as you and Esme put together.'

'Nonsense. Our mother danced until she was eight months pregnant with Aggie. She just used to pull her corset extra tight. You'll stay a Howard Sister for as long as we need you.'

'If Robert won't marry me, I'll have to give the baby away won't I?'

'Possibly,' Evie sighed. 'But Spencer knows lots of people. He'd probably be able to find a really nice family for it to go to.'

Alice remained quiet, but the thought of her baby being passed onto strangers filled her with the most devastating sadness. She didn't even know it, hadn't seen it yet, but she somehow felt attached to it.

There was the sound of footsteps and Spencer joined this strange little tableau once more. He was holding a jacket and a belt, which he thrust at Alice.

'The belt will hold the trousers up,' he said. 'And this is my jacket, wear that.'

‘What would we do without you Spencer,’ Evie gushed, hugging him and kissing him upon the cheek. She then looked at Alice and held out her hand. ‘Come on silly, come back to the dressing room and get changed in comfort.’

The performance went as best as expected. Fortunately Spencer’s thick leather belt held Alice’s stomach in, and because he was quite a slight man, his jacket wasn’t too big for her, but did cover her breasts. Vesta Tilley had taught them how to dance with gentlemen’s canes and Alice was glad of this because it acted as a distraction from her ample frame. The men in the audience were far more refined than the ones they usually got at The Royale, but she could still hear their gasps when the girls turned in a certain way and a glimpse of breast could be seen. Luckily there were no tuts of disapproval from the ladies, as they saw The Howard Sisters as somehow tasteful and artistic.

The after-show was being held at The Savoy, but Alice was so tired, all she wanted to do was go home to her lodgings and put her feet up. As she was taking her make-up off, there was a knock on the door, and when Spencer answered it, Robert came in. His face was flushed and there was a slight stagger to his gait, which meant he was drunk.

‘Couldn’t you wait until we’d finished getting changed?’ Esme tutted as she went behind a screen to put her dress on.

‘Nothing I haven’t seen before old girl,’ Robert laughed. ‘Besides, I’m here to accompany Alice to the Savoy.’

‘I’m tired Robert,’ she said. ‘I don’t mind going home.’

‘Nonsense,’ he scoffed. ‘Half of show-business is going to be there. We need to mingle. So, get your glad rags on. We’re going to party.’

JB Freeman, the impresario who had arranged this evening’s show, had hired the grand ballroom of the Savoy to hold the party in. Robert had been right when he said half of show-business was going to be there. Alice spotted so many famous faces, her head spun. There was a small orchestra playing upbeat music, and the sound of laughter echoed around the room. Evie and Esme were immediately snapped up by Edward and Caspar Burrows, the twin brothers who produced a lot of West End shows, and Alice smiled as she watched as her friends being whirled around by the handsome young men. She felt a little short-changed being stuck with Robert. He was drunk and now flitting from table to table, trying to wheedle his way into conversations with whoever he thought was influential.

Alice took a glass of champagne and found a seat at an empty table in the corner of the room. She felt like such a misery – this was a lovely party and another time she would have been enjoying herself. But she had so much weighing upon her mind. Despite Evie assuring her that she could stay on as a Howard Sister, she'd felt so tired and cumbersome whilst dancing tonight. What would she do when she was far gone? Her only hope was that Robert would marry her. He told her he loved her often enough, and Alice was sure she loved him. She was perfectly aware he wasn't the knight in shining armour she'd first thought him to be. There were times when he'd gambled all his money away and had to tap off her just to be able to buy food and pay the housekeeper. But he was so charming that she would forgive him for his shortcomings and hope one day he would straighten himself out and get a job; or at least try to make amends with his father. Sometimes Alice would allow herself to fantasise about marrying Robert. He'd go to work for his father, and they'd be rich and live in luxury. While she enjoyed being a Howard Sister, her dreams of stardom were fading somewhat and she just longed to get married and be a mother. But typically, Alice's ambitions prevented her accepting the prospect of marrying an ordinary man - she wanted the good life she'd always felt she deserved.

Looking up, her heart sank on seeing that Robert was now whirling Elena, one of the Russian acrobats who had performed tonight, around the room. The rather plain, diminutive girl smiled with glee at dancing with such a tall, handsome, well-mannered English man. Alice knew first-hand how Robert could turn on the charm. If he hadn't, she wouldn't be in this predicament in the first place.

She jumped out of her skin when someone slumped down beside her, and looked round to find it was Spencer. He smiled at her and reached out, grasping her hand.

'Will he marry you?' he asked, looking over at Robert, who had now switched from Elena the Russian, to the far older Lydia Gormley, the operatic singer.

'I hope so,' Alice sighed. 'Otherwise I'm stuck.'

'Well we'll never see you without a job,' Spencer said. 'Once you're too far gone to dance, you can always help out as a dresser.'

'Do you mean that?' she gasped, tears pricking her eyes. Everything had been looking so hopeless; and while she knew it would be frustrating to be reduced to working in the background, dressing the girls. It would be better than being left destitute.

'Course I do,' he replied. 'Then when the baby's born, we can find a nice home for it. I know quite a few people who'd pay a pretty price for a bonny baby.'

'Pay for it?' Alice frowned.

'Yes. You don't want to give it away do you? It could set you up for life.'



Alice absent-mindedly ran her hand over her tiny bump and shuddered. The thought of selling her child was horrendous. It wasn't a pet dog, or a pair of shoes or something. It was a baby made from the love she and Robert shared.

'Why don't we have a dance?' Spencer offered. 'You look as though you need cheering up.'

'I'm knackered,' she sighed. 'I didn't want to come here in the first place, but Robert likes to meet people.'

As if speaking of the Devil, Robert pulled himself away from Lydia Gormley and headed over to Alice's table. His face was flushed from exertion and his tie was slightly askew. He was such a cad and he looked the part. She wasn't sure if she could ever truly trust him, but she wanted to marry him, just so she could keep her baby.

'Come and dance,' he said to her, holding out his hand. He looked at Spencer. 'She hasn't promised herself to you has she?'

'No,' Spencer laughed. 'I was just trying to persuade her to dance, but she says she's tired.'

'Come on old girl,' Robert said, pulling her up. 'You're probably the best dancer here. Show them what you're made of.'

Unable to refuse Robert, Alice smiled sadly at Spencer and followed him onto the dance-floor. Thankfully the orchestra was now playing a waltz and they could dance slowly. Robert held her tightly as he moved her around the room, and as Alice looked up into his face, she wondered what their baby would look like. No doubt it would be tall - they both were. But would it favour his fair, Nordic colouring, or would it have her dark, Irish ruddiness? If it hadn't been such bad timing, it would be quite exciting.

'Sorry I missed the show tonight,' he said. 'How did it go?'

'You didn't see it? Why not?' she snapped.

'I had a meeting with a pal of mine. He's come up with a very exciting prospect that I want to run past you.'

'You could have at least watched me. It was fine by the way, except that my costume didn't fit.' She lowered her voice. 'You may not have noticed, but I'm getting fatter.'

Robert looked down at her and furrowed his brow. She could see every emotion running through his face, until he realised what she was hinting at. He visibly paled and his dancing slowed to a virtual stop.

'What?' he uttered.

‘We need to talk,’ she replied. ‘That’s why I didn’t want to come here tonight.’

‘Okay, okay,’ he said. ‘Don’t worry, we’ll sort something out. I need to think. How far along is it?’

‘About four months I think.’

‘Right. Okay, well, I suppose we’ll be alright. I can’t talk about it right now. Let me see you into a cab home. Meet me for afternoon tea tomorrow at The Priory. I’ll be sober then and we can talk properly.’

Alice lay awake all night crying. Pauline, the girl who she shared a room with kept tutting and telling her to shut up; not asking what could possibly be wrong, and her coldness just made Alice feel more lonely and helpless. She kept picturing Robert’s face when she’d told him she was pregnant. There’d been no pleasure, no excitement at the prospect of becoming a father. She guessed that he wanted to meet her at The Priory tomorrow so he could chuck her. Then she’d have no choice but to become a dresser for the Howard Sisters and let Spencer sell her baby.

Alice was dreading meeting Robert the following day, convinced he was going to tell her he didn’t want to see her again. She was glad it was Sunday and there was no performance that evening, so she wouldn’t have to paint on a smile and pretend to be happy. She decided she wanted to look nice, in the hope of changing Robert’s mind, and so chose her favourite outfit. The two piece suit was from House of Heath and consisted of a lilac blouse, with pearl buttons and a lace panel down the front; the skirt had the same trim round the bottom. It seemed a shame that it was a rainy November day and it was likely to get muddy. The beige felt hat she’d bought the week before complimented her outfit and over the top she wore the large woollen coat with the funnel neck and rabbit fur cuffs that Evie had given her. Alice always felt like a lady when she wore it, and a part of her wanted to make Robert see what he was going to miss. If he would only swallow his pride, he could become part of his father’s company, and Alice could play the part of his wife without ever letting him down. Since joining the Howard Sisters, she’d socialised so much, she knew all about etiquette and fine dining, and could easily keep her posh accent up.

The Priory was a restaurant in Kings Road, about a mile and a half from Alice’s house. The rain had eased, so she decided to walk it, feeling the fresh air would clear her mind. As gentlemen passed her, they would tip their hat, thinking her a lady, and when she walked through the rougher parts of Fulham, she gathered her coat about her and hurried her step, forgetting that she had been born into such a slum. Had Aunt Bella not rescued her, she would have been one of the ragged children who ran behind finely dressed ladies, asking them for pennies. And instead of becoming a dancer, she would have probably ended up a prostitute or married to a violent man who saddled her with a large family.

She finally made it to the restaurant and was shocked to see Robert was already there - he was normally late for everything. The Priory was large and spacious and filled with well-to-do people who were taking a break after doing early Christmas shopping - the air filled with the sound of polite chatter and the clinking of cups and saucers. Alice made her way to Robert's table, close to the pianist -who was playing Chopin, and sat down.

'You look lovely,' Robert said, pouring her a cup of tea from the Royal Doulton pot. Alice noticed how the smell of Lapsang Souchong seemed to waft up her nose and make her feel slightly nauseous. Smells had become so much stronger to her in recent weeks; and at the moment, this place reeked of tea, cigar smoke and sickly French perfumes; and Alice had to put her handkerchief to her mouth for fear of gagging.

'Did you stay late at the party?' she asked.

'I left about one. A few of us went onto Dickie Raynsford's place for a card game. I won five pounds.'

'That's nice for you.'

Alice dared take a sip of the scalding hot tea, hoping it would settle her stomach. The last thing she needed right now was the baby reminding her of its presence.

'How are you feeling?' he asked. 'With everything?'

'A little sick, and tired, but that's about it.'

'We should have been more careful.'

'*You* should have been more careful. You said you knew what you were doing.'

'Yes, I know. I'm sorry Alice. But, I've been thinking, and it could all work out beautifully.'

'What do you mean?'

He looked around to make sure no one else was listening, and lowered his head.

'When is it due?' he asked quietly.

'Well I work out it'll be late March early April.'

'Well, how would you like to give birth in America?'

'America?'

‘Yes. Let me explain the whole story. My friend Ralph Trevelyan has made a fortune in New York, renting out rooms to immigrants. He knows of an old factory in Manhattan that could be turned into flats. Apparently these people are so desperate to stay in America they’ll pay anything in rent, and I could recoup the outlay for the flats in a year. I want us to go out to America and build those flats Alice. I want our future to be in New York.’

‘Do you mean that?’ Alice gasped. ‘You want us to stay together?’

‘Yes. I want us to get married as soon as we get there, then when our baby’s born we’ll be entitled to stay because it will be an American citizen.’

‘You want to marry me *after* we get to America?’

‘Yes. You see, there’s another part of the plan. I want you to pretend to be my sister.’

‘Your sister!’ Alice gasped loudly, and Robert shushed her. Laying his hand on her arm to quieten her.

‘Not so loud,’ he hissed. ‘Yes, I want you to pretend to be my sister.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘There’s a ring that gets passed down the female line of our family – the Moore diamond. My great-grandfather mined it South Africa a hundred years ago and had it made into a ring for his wife. When she died it went to my grandmother and when she died, it went to my mother. But my only sister *Alice* died when she was two, and there were no other girls for it to be handed down to when Mother died. It’s just sitting in a vault in Hatton Garden, doing nothing. I’m going to take it to America and sell it. But I want it to seem legal and above board, so I want you to pretend to be Alice.’ He laughed, reaching out and stroking her face. ‘You don’t know what a revelation it was for me when I found out your name. It’s all going to work out perfectly.’

‘So how do I pretend to be your sister?’

‘Well, I know a man – Tommy Dawkins, I met him in the clink...’

‘The clink!? You’ve been in prison?’

‘Just briefly, it was nothing. That’s beside the point. He’s a master forger. All he needs do is get a copy of Alice’s birth certificate from Somerset House and he can forge all the relevant papers. He can also forge a letter stating that the ring is yours and you’re entitled to sell it. We go to New York as brother and sister and sell the diamond. We marry, the baby is born and we settle there.’

Alice wasn't entirely happy about this plan. If she got found out, she would go to prison and what would happen to her baby then? She never knew Robert had been in prison either, and she felt a sudden unease, wondering what she was getting herself into with him.

'Don't look like that,' he smiled. 'There are hundreds of thousands of people turning up in New York every year looking for work. Once we've off-loaded the ring and got married, we can disappear and no one will ever find us. My father doesn't care if I live or die and he's not worried about the Moore diamond – it's nothing to do with the Fairfax's. With the money I get from it, I can buy us an upstate apartment, build my flats and be a millionaire within a couple of years. We'd have such a fine life Alice – the three of us. What do you say?'

'But isn't it stealing?' she whispered. 'What you want to do, isn't it stealing?'

'Not really no. I was born before Alice, so if I'd have been a girl, the ring would have gone to me anyway. It's just an accident of fate that I was a boy and wasn't entitled. What else is going to happen to the ring? It'll just sit there and one day get swallowed back into father's estate.'

'But if I'm going to have a birth certificate with Alice Fairfax on it, how can we marry? I'm sure even in America brothers and sisters aren't allowed to marry!'

'We'll also take your real birth certificate. Mere trivialities Alice, it doesn't matter. Now it'll take a few months to sort everything out, so I estimate we can sail late February, early March.'

'I'll be nearly nine months pregnant!' she cried.

'We'll hide it. We can just make out you're fat,' he laughed. 'I went to school with Algy Rutherford. His father is a senior manager at White Star Line, and he reckons he could get us two First Class tickets for the Adriatic. You'll travel in such luxury Alice, you won't even notice you're at sea - or pregnant.'

Alice wondered what choice she had. Go along with Robert's crazy scheme and risk going to prison? Or chuck him and end up an unmarried mother, dressing the Howard Sisters, and selling her baby. Maybe there was a chance they could get away with it. America was a big country and it was true, once the diamond was sold, they wouldn't be doing anything illegal. Robert was a bounder, but he did have ambition and would do all he could to ensure she had a good life.

'Okay,' she said reluctantly. 'But I won't go unless you have all the proper papers. I don't want to end up in prison.'

‘You won't dear Alice,’ he smiled. ‘This time next year you'll be one of the fine upstate New York ladies. You'll have a nanny for the baby, and will go to every party thrown for the social elite. No one will need know Alice Higgins ever existed.’

## Chapter Five

It was Nesta's thirtieth birthday, and she wanted to spend it like she'd spent most of her days these past few months - in bed, reading the newspapers and eating the boxes of chocolates she would send Judith out to buy her. No one apart from the housekeeper, Dr Perkins, and Roland, knew of her pregnancy. She hadn't even written to James in Italy and told him. She'd always broadcast news of her pregnancy in the past, and it would end so horribly. After the miscarriage, people would make vague excuses not to see her, or if she did visit, they'd ensure their children were kept in the garden with Nanny so as not to upset her. Nesta didn't want to risk any of that again, and so decided it best to keep quiet.

She'd had the foresight to let it be known in her circle that she had badly injured her knee and that was why she hadn't been seen. If anyone did call round, she'd blame her weight gain on the chocolates she was eating through boredom. But today she had no choice but to get out of bed. Lady Helen Waterman, one of her closest friends, had returned from India and had written to Nesta to say she was coming to see her on her birthday. Nesta knew it would be hard to keep such a big secret from her friend, but it wouldn't exactly difficult to disguise. Despite being five months pregnant, the bump in her belly was negligible - the only weight she'd put on was in her face and breasts. She'd never been as far gone as five months before and didn't know if this was normal - it was hardly something ladies in polite society discussed. The baby never seemed to move, and she hated the thought of calling Doctor Perkins in, just for him to poke her about. She could only put her faith in God and hope for the best.

She rose and had a leisurely bath in the en-suite bathroom Roland had had fitted the year before. It felt so nice not to have to rely on maids to run baths or empty chamber pots any more. Nesta valued her privacy and now she could keep that part of herself hidden away. She changed into a thick woollen two piece. The temperature had certainly dropped, and she was freezing cold. She asked Simpkins to light all the fires and make sure the windows were closed. When she went down to the breakfast room and attempted to eat her usual grapefruit, she found every mouthful made her feel sick - like the food was getting stuck in her throat. She felt light-headed too, and yet she was glad of it all. These horrid symptoms were an indication that she was still pregnant. Sometimes, when nothing happened, she'd begin to wonder if Dr Perkins had got the diagnosis wrong!

Amy, the maid, knocked on the door and came in, trying to manage a huge pile of parcels and letters. Nesta laughed and got up, rushing over to her.

'Let me help you,' she said.

'These are all for you ma'am,' Amy said in her chirpy, cockney accent.

'I am popular,' Nesta smiled. 'Thank you Amy, could you clear away the breakfast things now?'

Nesta returned to the table and sorted through her many packages. They seemed to come from all over the world. The largest had an Italian shipping label on it, and she guessed it was from James. The box with 'fragile' written all over it, had a label from New York on and she

realised this was from her mother. The other one was the most surprising. It came in a candy stripe box, with the name of a French furrier on it. Nesta opened it up to find it was a mink cape, all lush and new. Tucked within the tissue paper was a letter to her, and it was from Roland, written in his handwriting, not his secretary's;

*My darling Nesta*

*I have miraculously remembered your birthday. How are you? And how is Roland Jr? I'm so sorry I'm not going to be able to make it home for Christmas, but things are simply manic here. I am sending you this to keep you (and our baby) warm. Think of me when you wear it my darling, and I'll see you when I can.*

*Roly*

This letter filled Nesta with bittersweet feelings. Roland had not spoken to her with such affection since before they married, and the cape was beautiful. But she wondered if he'd actually chosen it. He usually got his secretary to buy all his presents for him, and Nesta wondered if he'd got her to choose this one as well - or even worse, Dolly Ballantyne. Maybe they'd had a laugh at her expense knowing they were together in gay Paris, while she was stuck in England, pregnant and alone.

Nesta told herself to stop having such cruel thoughts. Maybe the prospect of becoming a father had made Roland appreciate her. Perhaps he really was working over Christmas to build a future for them. Not that he really needed to – with both his parents dead, and no siblings, the Villiers's fortune was all his. The hotel business was just something for him to do. But Nesta was grateful, Roland had provided James with a job when Lucia died, and he'd neglected his import company, leaving it to fall to wrack and ruin. The Tanner fortune wasn't vast, and besides, James needed something to occupy his mind and drive away the demons grief had aroused.

She cheered herself up by opening James' present and found it was a deep blue felt hat with a peacock feather attached, along with a beautiful silk scarf with a peacock print. His note said he would be home for Christmas, and this made Nesta happy. She didn't like the thought of imposing herself upon friends for the festive season. At least she and James could spend it here together.

Her mother's present was a beautiful Faberge picture frame in blue enamel, with a gilt edge. Her letter was a revelation, announcing her engagement to William P Hasburg the Third. Apparently he owned several department stores throughout America, and they were marrying on Saturday April twentieth, next year. As a Christmas present, she wanted to buy Nesta a ticket for the Titanic's maiden voyage on the tenth of April. Betsey was uncharacteristically excited about the huge ship that had been built and thought it would be wonderful for her daughter to sail on it, and then spend a couple of weeks in New York. But Nesta knew she couldn't go. The baby was due late March, so there was no way she could make a Transatlantic voyage - no matter how



luxurious the Titanic was. She had no choice but to write to her mother and tell her the truth. No doubt Betsey would insist Nesta came across later in the year, as she would be desperate to see her first grandchild.

Helen arrived at dead on one o'clock. Nesta had known her all her life. Her father, the Earl of Buckinghamshire was best friends with David, her own father, and the two little girls had been put together and had got on well. The rather dowdy Helen had always been jealous of Nesta's beauty, and yet she had done far better for herself in marrying Sir Humphrey Waterman. His family owned a large tea plantation in India, and Helen lived a wonderful life out there. She had two sons who were at Uppingham, and she had come home to spend Christmas with them at her family home in Marlow. But first of all she wanted to visit her poor, childless friend.

Simpkins showed her into the drawing room, where Nesta was waiting. Helen had that gaunt look people got after a long sea voyage, but other than that she looked quite splendid. Her skin had a slight tan to it and the Indian sun had created golden highlights in her mousy hair.

'I've bought you lots of gifts,' she declared, kissing Nesta upon the cheek. 'But I've left them downstairs for the servants to bring up later.'

'You needn't have,' Nesta said. 'But thank you, do sit down.'

Helen sat on the chaise lounge on the other side of the room, while Nesta sat on the tapestry sofa, closest to the fire - she just couldn't get warm today.

'I must say I'm surprised to see you walking around Nesta,' Helen said. 'I had drinks with the Wilmslows last night and Kate was saying how you'd broken your knee.'

Nesta blushed, unsure of how to reply. She was grateful for the interruption of Simpkins bringing in the tea and a selection of cakes. She made a big deal of pouring the drinks and asking Helen which cake she wanted. She didn't know what to say. Did she dare tell her the truth? Helen was her oldest friend and she wanted to think she could trust her, but she knew what these women were like when they got together and gossiped.

'How did you injure your knee?' Helen asked, sipping her tea.

'I er, I...well, the truth is, I wanted a break from the social scene for a while, so I made the excuse that I'd hurt myself.'

'So there's nothing wrong with you?'

'Not really, no.'

'I did wonder if you were pregnant again and using your knee as an excuse.'

Nesta blushed furiously at Helen's flippant remark and winced at her guessing correctly. How did she respond now? She did so long to talk to someone about it.

'I am,' she replied quietly. 'But you must promise not to tell a soul Helen. The three times before I've told people and it's ended badly. I'd rather keep this to myself. My mother doesn't even know.'

'Betsey doesn't know!' Helen gasped. 'She'll go crazy when she finds out.'

'I'm going to write to her tomorrow. Besides she'll be too preoccupied organising her wedding to some American called William P Hasburg the Third. It'll suit her just fine if I come over later in the year with her grandchild.'

‘Does Roland know? He must be thrilled.’

‘You know Roland, he’s being cautious. I’ve disappointed him so many times before.’

‘When’s it due?’

‘Early spring. Roland won’t be back from Paris by then, but by the time he does return in May I’ll have recovered and the baby will be quite bonny.’

‘I thought you looked fuller in the face,’ Helen smiled in that smug way women who had children always did. ‘How wonderful.’

‘I implore you not to say a word to anyone Helen. This is the longest I’ve carried a child and I don’t want to put some sort of curse on it. Only Mrs Farrell, Roland and my doctor knows, and I intend to keep it that way. I’m taking it easy and not going out. I sometimes stay in bed for whole days. I’ll do anything to hang onto this baby.’

‘I don’t blame you. It’s only a matter of time before Roland starts looking elsewhere. A man in his position needs an heir.’

‘I know,’ Nesta replied through gritted teeth. ‘But I don’t even care if it’s a girl. You know how fathers dote on their daughters. Besides, if I can do it once, I can do it again.’

‘That’s the spirit. Well, I was going to ask you if you would like to go for a walk around St James’ Park this afternoon, but I suppose the answer is no.’

‘Isn’t it rather cold?’

‘Yes, but the weather’s wonderful Nesta. When you’ve been stuck in India, with its two seasons or so it seems, you miss England with its weird and wonderful mixture of the four seasons in one day. It’s a little chilly, but the sky’s clear and I’d just like to breathe fresh air and see English plants!’

‘Well I don’t suppose it would do any harm,’ Nesta replied. ‘I do feel a bit like a caged bird here. Let’s have our tea and we can venture out.’

Nesta enjoyed the walk to St James’ Park. It felt like such a long time since she’d been a member of the human race and it was nice to mix with people once again. She held onto Helen’s arm, and they walked slowly, taking in the sights. When Nesta saw the nannies and mothers with their babies, she didn’t feel quite so bad - knowing that soon that would be her. Roland would press for her to have a nanny, but she wanted to play a role in her child’s life too – she’d waited so long for it after all. Betsey had been a wonderful, warm mother and Nesta wanted to be the same way with her child. She remembered Lady Sybil, Roland’s mother, and how she never embraced her children, just shook hands with them. At the wedding she’d found Betsey loud and objectionable, and made no bones about displaying how worried she was that her only son was marrying the daughter of an outlandish American who thought nothing of hugging and kissing James and Nesta; and cried when her daughter had exchanged her vows.

By the time they got back to the house it was getting dark and Helen said she had to leave. She was having dinner with the Hamiltons in Grosvenor Square that evening and had to go back to her hotel to change. She promised Nesta that she would stop by before she headed back to

India, and that she wouldn't breathe a word about the pregnancy to a soul – even if she did think it was incredibly exciting.

Nesta was quite exhausted, and went up to her bedroom to retire for the rest of the day. She saw that the servants had put the gifts Helen had brought in there, but she was too tired to examine them and decided she would do it tomorrow.

She went to sleep, thinking what a nice day she'd had. In fact, her life had been so much better since Roland had been in Paris. She wished there was some way she could live like it forever – just her and her baby, the servants, and no man to tell her what to do. She knew it was an outrageous thought - a woman needed a man to take care of her. Look at her mother, she was even marrying again at her age! It would be impossible to look after a baby alone, no woman did it out of choice, but Nesta knew, deep down she'd love to give it a try.

She slept soundly that night and when she next opened her eyes, it was daybreak. Nesta even slept better without Roland in the bed beside her, fidgeting and snoring and trying to grope her under the covers. As she moved, she felt something wet against her legs and bottom, and for a moment thought she had wet herself in her deep sleep. Throwing back the covers, she was horrified to find the bed and her nightdress covered with the deepest red blood. She then became aware of the cramp in her lower stomach and realised what had happened. She froze with horror. It had happened again. God had punished her once more and made her lose her baby. Roland would never forgive her now, and he was bound to have her locked away so he could divorce her.

Unsure what to do, Nesta sat up a little, shivering from shock, rubbing her arms trying to keep warm. She knew she needed help, but somehow, by telling someone, it would make it real. But the bed was such a mess and it needed to be cleaned and changed. Wracked with confusion and disappointment, she started to cry and reached out for the bell beside her bed, ringing it loudly for a servant to come and help. She blamed herself for this - she should never have gone for that walk with Helen yesterday - the exertion had made her miscarry. She wept for her dead baby. She'd had so many plans for it. If it had been a boy she was going to call him David, after her father; or a little girl was going to be Elizabeth, after her mother. But now it was dead, and part of her heart had died with it.

The door opened and Judith came in, her face paling when she saw what she was presented with.

'Oh my goodness,' she gasped. 'Oh my goodness, I must go and get Doctor Perkins!'

'No!' Nesta cried. 'No, I don't want to see the doctor.'

'But you're bleeding to death.'

'I'm not. I've just lost the baby. Shut the door Judith.'

The housekeeper did as she was told and then rushed over to the bed, kneeling beside it, and feeling Nesta's forehead.

'You're running a temperature. You must let me go and get Doctor Perkins.'

‘No, I don't want anyone knowing about this. I'm going to have a bath and get clean. Please can you strip the bed and throw the sheets and blankets away? I'll help you turn the mattress over when I come out.’

‘But what if something's gone wrong with you? You're five months pregnant, where's the baby?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘My sister miscarried at five months and she gave birth to a tiny baby.’

With a gasp of horror, Nesta shot off the bed, expecting to find a foetus laying there, but there was nothing. Just blood.

‘But the baby wasn't big anyway. I didn't show and I never felt it move.’

‘Oh dear,’ Judith sighed. ‘I think it must have died inside you some time ago. It happened to me before I had my Peter. I was pregnant and nothing happened for months. By the time I was six months gone I was the same size as I'd been beforehand. Then, like you I lost a lot of blood, but no baby. The doctor reckoned I'd either not been pregnant in the first place, or else the baby had died ages ago. I'm so sorry Lady Villiers.’

‘It can't be helped,’ Nesta said, swallowing her tears. ‘But please, like I said, don't breathe a word to anyone. I'll tell Roland in my own time. I just need to get used to the idea.’

‘Of course you do,’ Judith smiled, daring to pat her mistress's hand. ‘You have a bath. I'll strip the bed and turn the mattress and make you a nice cup of sweet tea.’

Nesta remained in the bath until it was cold, letting her tears run down into the water. She wondered if there was still some laudanum in James's room. When Lucia died, he'd found it so hard to sleep, that the doctor had prescribed it to him to help him rest. Nesta had seen how only a few drops of the tincture had knocked her brother out, and guessed if she took the whole bottle, it would finish her off completely. No one would miss her if she was dead. Her mother had William, and Roland would be free to marry Dolly Ballantyne, who would give him as many children as he liked. But she thought of James. Her brother had been a broken man since the death of his wife, and this house had become his home when he wasn't travelling on business. Would he really want to come back to the place where his sister had taken her own life?

Judith helped her out of the bath and into a nightdress. Nesta hugged the housekeeper when she returned to her bedroom and saw the bed all freshly made up and turned. No one would have suspected the horrors that had been seen on it that morning.

‘Now you get into bed and I'll bring you up some tea,’ Judith said. ‘Are you still bleeding?’

‘No.’

‘Okay, well just rest. Are you sure you don't want me to send a telegram to Sir Roland and tell him to come home?’

‘No, I just want to be by myself,’ Nesta whispered. ‘Thank you so much Judith.’

The next three days went by in a blur for Nesta. She slept little and her temperature kept going up and down. At times she would contemplate suicide, but as always, the thought of James

- and even what the news would do to her mother, was enough to stop her. She would then decide to write to Roland and tell him the truth, but would hesitate. If she told him now, he would see it as an excuse to concoct some plan to bring about divorce proceedings, claiming her to be an unfit wife or mentally unbalanced or something. He wasn't due home until the beginning of May, which gave her nearly six months to try and think of some way of hanging onto him. She'd heard there were people out there who sold babies to couples who couldn't have children. Nesta knew she could find it in her to love the offspring of a poor girl; but she didn't know if Roland would feel the same way. He was so vain she could guarantee he would only be happy with a replica of himself.

She thought about buying one of these babies and passing it off as her own; and for a day or so, she had her heart set on this. But as time went on, and she felt more and more lonely, she realised that she longed to see her mother. She thought of Betsey's letter, and her offer to buy her a ticket for the Titanic so she could come out to New York for the wedding. If Nesta went to America in April and stayed for a few weeks, by the time she came back, Roland would be home and she could face the music. But at least she would have spent some time in the comfort of her mother, and might feel a little stronger and able to cope.

On the fourth morning, when Judith brought up the breakfast tray, she smiled on seeing Nesta sitting up in bed, looking a little cheerier.

'You look brighter,' she said, laying the tray across Nesta's lap. 'Are you feeling better?'

'Yes,' Nesta smiled. 'Could you please fetch me my writing pad and a pen? I want you to send my mother a telegram.'

## Chapter Six

### April 1912

Alice couldn't sleep. The baby was kicking her, Robert was snoring, and the bed in this hotel was hard and lumpy. Determined to keep his money for gambling with only the very richest men on-board the Titanic, Robert had paid for this very basic hotel in Southampton for them to stay in before sailing the next day. Alice also couldn't rest because she was filled with a sense of dread that she couldn't explain. Nothing had gone right so far. They were supposed to have sailed to New York two months ago on the Adriatic, but Robert's acquaintance hadn't got the papers ready in time; and when his friend Algy Rutherford offered to swap their two First Class Adriatic tickets for two second class Titanic tickets, Robert had jumped at the chance. It was in his nature to show off; and to be a passenger on the maiden voyage of biggest ship in the world was too much for him to resist - even though his girlfriend was due to give birth any day now.

Everyone had been so excited about them going to New York and sailing on the Titanic. Evie and Spencer had even organised a little party on Alice's last night with the Howards back in February. By then it had become impossible for Alice to hide her pregnancy and so had 'retired'; and Spencer generously gave her a twenty pounds pay off, just to keep her going until they got settled in America. Alice had smiled sweetly and went along with it, but no one knew the truth about their trip. They just thought Robert was whisking her off to get married and start a new life with their baby. They didn't know that she was going to have to pretend to be his sister - padding her clothes out so she looked fat all over, so no one would suspect she was pregnant. Alice liked to act, but now was not the time for it. She felt wretched and just wanted to rest. She'd never been on a boat before and even though the Titanic was unsinkable, she still had visions of it rocking about and making her feel sick.

Morning came and Robert got out of bed full of the joys of spring. He opened the curtains and stood on tip toe, declaring he could see the funnels of the ship from where he was.

'Come on Al, come and see,' he urged.

'I don't want to,' Alice grumbled. 'I'm scared.'

'What are you scared of?' he asked, sitting back down on the bed. 'We're going to be sailing in the finest luxury for six days, then we'll be in New York. We can book into a decent hotel, sell the diamond and start a new life.'

'And I'll have a baby at some point.'

'I bet they've got fantastic hospitals in New York. We'll be able to afford to book you in somewhere clean and efficient.'

Sometimes Alice wondered how much of Robert's plans were real and how much were in his head. He meant well, but he was a dreamer. He seemed to think she'd be able to pop the baby out and then get on with their merry adventure. She'd known enough women give birth back home in Battersea, and they were often confined to bed for weeks afterwards because they were

so weak. If she was left like that, how would she be able to help Robert make his way in America?

‘Now come on you silly goose. She sails in five hours; we've got to get going.’

Alice carried her bad feeling onto the beautiful and majestic ship. Everyone around her, even the ragged Third Class passengers were buzzing with excitement. They were going to America to start a new life, and travelling on this marvellous feat of engineering to get there. Algy had told Robert that the Third Class accommodation was probably better than most of these poor immigrants had ever experienced. The Second Class cabin Alice and Robert had was certainly more luxurious than the horrible hotel they'd spent the night in. There were sumptuous oak twin beds, a small settee, a desk, a wardrobe, and a wash stand. They would only have to share the toilet with the cabin next door as there were several along the corridor, but despite all this, Alice just wanted to lay down and sleep. She was so tired and nervous, she wanted to sleep the journey away. The Moore diamond ring was digging into her wedding finger (Robert thought she would look more authentic if she wore it), and she was hot and sweaty, wrapped up in three jackets and a coat - just to make her look fatter. She stripped them all off and lay on the bed, feeling it's soft mattress, and breathing in the smell of newness.

Robert stood at the porthole, looking out at the ship being loaded.

‘You should see some of these people Alice,’ he said. ‘Rich beyond belief.’

‘If you'd have just been nicer to your father, you could have been rich beyond belief.’

Robert sat on the bed and lit a cigarette.

‘Father disowned me when I was twenty-one. I used a large sum of his money to invest in a company that was importing automobiles. I did it without his permission and when the company folded and I was left owing hundreds of pounds, instead of bailing me out, he let me go to prison. The courts saw it that I could afford to pay off my debts and I was refusing to do it, so I was locked up.’

‘Why didn't you tell me this before?’ Alice cried. ‘You always made it seem your father might one day take you back.’

‘I wanted to impress you. I live on a small trust fund given to me by my Uncle Joshua on my mother's side. It's because I'm still in with him I managed to talk my way into getting that ring. The Fairfax's have washed their hands of me. I'll never be accepted into the family again.’

‘Does your uncle know you're here?’

‘No. I haven't told anyone. Now, why don't you have a nap for an hour or so, then come out on deck and we can wave to the well-wishers? There's hundreds of them out there.’

‘Maybe,’ Alice grumbled, falling asleep. She was so tired she could barely keep her eyes open.

She never did go out on deck. She fell into such a deep sleep Robert thought it best not to disturb her and instead went out on his own. He bumped into an acquaintance called Oliver Carrington. Oliver invited him to dine with him and his wife that evening in the First Class

dining room, and Robert came back to the cabin full of himself, telling Alice all about his good fortune, and how the ship had nearly collided with another boat as it was moving out of port.

'I told you I had a bad feeling about this ship,' Alice said, trying hard to stay awake, feeling nervous because she had the strangest dragging sensation in her lower stomach.

'It was a minor mishap. You must come out tomorrow Alice, it's quite beautiful. Or when we stop at Cherbourg tonight, and it's not moving. The fresh air will do you the world of good. We're pioneers Al. No one's ever sailed in this ship before. You don't want to spend the whole time in bed!'

Robert had no idea just how horrible she felt. The dragging feeling had turned into painful twinges, and she was sure the baby was coming. She didn't want to spoil his fun and so remained quiet, running her hand under her tummy and silently asking her baby to hang on for another week - just until they reached New York. She remembered Mrs Johnson who lived on Queenstown Road. Her mother helped deliver her baby, not long before she died, and Alice remembered her sending her back and forth to get hot cloths. Afterwards her mother explained that Mrs Johnson was old to be having her first baby, and had been in labour for a week. Alice hoped she would be the same. At just twenty, she certainly wasn't old, but apparently first babies took an age to come and she prayed as hard as she could that hers was no different.

Alice was slightly reassured that the ship wasn't rocking all over the place. In fact, she was hardly aware they were moving at all. Occasionally there would be the sound of a seagull over head, but mostly all she could hear were distant voices. People up on deck, enjoying themselves. People in the corridor outside, going out to dine. She felt so lonely and scared. There had been so much talk of this boat being unsinkable that it made her weary. Her mother had been a Catholic and even though she hadn't passed her faith down to her children, she had still talked of God and his punishments, and there seemed something sinful about building a boat that would be able to beat any trial the Lord sent. What if God punished them by sinking it? Alice couldn't swim. How would she survive out in that vast sea?

Gradually, her maudlin thoughts were swept away by the pain that was ripping through her lower body. She knew instinctively that her baby wasn't going to wait a week to be born in New York - he wanted to come now. She went into a panic, wondering what she was going to do. She didn't know where Robert was; she had no idea if there was even a doctor on board this ship. She was so delirious with pain, all she could do was crawl around the room - as being on all fours was the most comfortable position she could find.

When Robert returned, he found her kneeling against the bed, backside in the air, puffing and panting.

'No!' he cried, kneeling down beside her. 'Please don't say it's what I think it is.'

'It hurts Robert,' she cried. 'It hurts so much. I want to get off this ship. Is it still in France?'

'No, we've set sail for Ireland now - it won't stop until tomorrow.'

'See if there's a doctor on board!' she yelled. 'I need a doctor.'

'Yes, yes of course. Just wait there.'



He ran out of the room and at the same time, Alice felt wetness run down her legs. She looked down and saw a pool of water on the floor and realised this must be the waters breaking. She knew this was an indication that there was no going back now, and the baby was well and truly on its way. The urge to push was overwhelming, and with a yell, she pushed for all her might. She tried to climb up on the bed, but it was too much of a strain, so she remained on all fours and when the urge to push came again, she did so, crying because she didn't know if she was doing things right.

A while later Robert returned, accompanied by an elderly gentleman in his evening suit. Alice felt embarrassed at this man seeing her in such a compromising position, but if he could help, that was all that mattered.

'Alice, this is Doctor Nordstrom,' Robert announced. 'He's going to help you.'

'Oh my goodness,' the kind faced doctor smiled, rushing over to Alice and putting his hands around her waist. 'Let's get you on the bed.'

Alice heaved herself up and allowed Dr Nostrom to lay her on the bed.

'Where is the father?' he asked in his strong accent.

'What?!' Alice cried.

'Is Daddy on the boat?'

'Alice's husband is in New York,' Robert said hastily. 'She was rather hoping the baby would hold on until she got there.'

Doctor Nostrom laughed and shook his head.

'No. I'm afraid this little one is going to be born on the biggest ship in the world.' He looked at Robert. 'This is no place for a brother,' he said. 'Go back to your party. By the time you return, you will have a new niece or nephew.'

Robert didn't need telling twice. He shot out of the room and left Alice alone with Doctor Nostrom. He told her to try and relax and breathe deeply; before washing his hands in the wash stand and fetching some spare towels from the bottom of the wardrobe. He then gently raised Alice's buttocks and put the towels underneath her.

'We don't want Mr Ismay charging you for ruining his blankets,' he laughed. His easy manner made Alice feel better, and for the first time in days she felt as though maybe things would turn out okay. He stayed with her, gently encouraging her and telling her when to push; and when someone knocked on the door to ask what all the noise was, he went to reassure them that everything was fine.

At one minute past midnight on Thursday the eleventh of April, Alice gave birth to a baby boy. When Doctor Nordstrom lifted him up and passed him to her, she cried with joy. It was dark, she was exhausted and ached all over, but for a moment it felt as though the sun had come bursting through the porthole and the world had become perfect. The baby was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. Doctor Nordstrom left her and went back to his cabin to find some nail scissors to cut the cord; and Alice was happy for some time alone with her son. His cries were like that of a little bird, and he waved his tiny arms about angrily, kicking his legs against her. It was hard to comprehend that this perfect human being with ten tiny and fingers

and ten tiny toes was all hers and had come out of her body. She decided she would call him Robert, after his father; but he would be known as Bobby. It was such a sweet name.

‘Hello Bobby Fairfax,’ she whispered, kissing him upon the forehead. ‘I’m your mummy. What a thing you’ll be able to tell the other children when you get older. That you were born on the Titanic!’

By the time Robert returned at three o’clock in the morning, Doctor Nordstrom had left and Alice was dozing. Doctor Nordstrom had made a makeshift cot for Bobby out of the bottom drawer in the wardrobe and lined it with spare blankets from his own cabin. He laid it on the floor beside Alice’s bed, and she’d fallen asleep, leaning over the edge, gazing down at her son.

She awoke when Robert came in and he rushed over to her, sitting on the bed, and looking down at Bobby.

‘What is it?’ he asked.

‘A boy,’ she replied. ‘A beautiful boy. I’ve named him Robert – after you. But I’m going to call him Bobby.’

‘That’s a lovely thing to do, thank you. And guess what, I won twenty pounds tonight in a poker game.’

‘I’ll have that,’ Alice said sleepily. ‘We’ve got a son to support now.’

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By the Sunday afternoon Alice was feeling much better, and finally ventured out of her cabin. Robert had managed to get Bobby some clothes by talking his way into the Third Class decks and buying some little woollen trousers and a jumper from an Irish girl who was travelling with her four children – the youngest one, just two months old. She also sold him some nappies, which Alice had to cut down to fit Bobby. The suit was too big, but at least it would keep him warm, along with the blankets she had him wrapped in. She put on Robert’s big overcoat and her boots and went out on deck to look at the sea. They could have been anywhere in the world. There was no sign of land; all around was flat sea and little else. The sky was clear and the air chilly, but there was something so peaceful about holding her baby and looking down into the water, watching the tiny fish swimming alongside it, as if having a race. A few people who were going for an afternoon stroll stopped by to look at the baby and said how bonny he was.

Having Bobby made Alice feel different. Suddenly she didn’t care if Robert was a bounder and a cad – she didn’t even know where he’d disappeared to right at that moment. Her son was everything to her and she would do whatever she could to give him a good life. It was exciting to think they were going to America. Bobby would speak with a strange accent and wouldn’t know what England was like. She guessed he would look like Robert when he got older; his hair had a coppery golden tone to it and his eyes were blue like his father’s. He was going to be a handsome devil; and even if it meant she went out scrubbing floors or had to go back to entertaining sleazy gentlemen, she would do whatever it took to give him everything he wanted.

That evening Robert fetched her some supper from the dining room, which she ate in the cabin. He then told her that he was going to a card game with some gentlemen he'd met, and gave her some fancy French magazines he'd stolen from the library to look at. Alice read for a while, fed Bobby, then lay him down in his 'cot' to sleep while she too had a doze. The fresh air she'd taken in that day had knocked her out and she needed to rest and dream of the new life that awaited her in a matter of days.

The loud banging on the door awoke Alice with a start; and for a moment she thought she was imagining it when she heard a steward shout out for people to leave the cabins. She got out of bed and stumbled sleepily over to the door, and when she opened it, she was shocked to see a stream of people wearing white, boxy lifejackets over their coats, walking along the corridor, puzzled looks on their faces. A steward in a starched white jacket was dithering around, trying to get people organised.

'What's going on?' Alice asked.

'There's been a minor accident madam,' he replied. 'Don't panic. There's a lifejacket in the wardrobe, I need you to put it on and come up to the boat deck.'

'What sort of accident?'

'I'm not sure. Now please, madam, just do as I say. Put a coat on as well, because you'll be up there a while.'

'What about my baby?'

'Bring your baby too.'

Alice went back into the cabin and peered out of the porthole to try and see what was going on. All she could see was the black night sky, but she could hear many voices, talking rapidly all at the same time. She slipped on her boots and put on the big, second hand woollen coat Robert had bought her to wear atop the other clothes, so she looked fat. When she saw how loose it was on her, she realised how much weight she'd lost in the three days since having Bobby. Apart from her engorged breasts, the rest of her body was back to its stringy former self. She found the lifejacket in the wardrobe and put it over her head, not sure if she should fasten the ties at the side. She then wrapped Bobby up in all his blankets and left the cabin, still not quite sure what awaited her.

She followed the crowds up to the boat deck, and looked around for Robert, wondering where he was. Knowing Robert, he was too busy playing cards to worry about some sort of accident. As she walked up the many stairs, she heard two women behind her talking in shrill, gossipy tones.

‘I think we’ve hit something,’ one said. ‘I was just getting into bed and I felt a strange shudder.’

‘What could we possibly hit?’ the other one asked. ‘We’re in the middle of the Atlantic.’

‘Ice. My brother-in-law sailed around these parts a couple of years ago and his boat narrowly escaped hitting an iceberg.’

‘An iceberg wouldn’t damage the Titanic,’ the other one scoffed. ‘Why, I wouldn’t be surprised if this isn’t just some sort of exercise.’

Alice didn’t say anything, but did find the prospect of them doing a safety drill at gone midnight a rather absurd notion. She tried hard not to think about the bad feelings she’d experienced about this trip, and put it down to her just being in a funny state because she’d been going into labour. If the ship was sinking, she was sure everyone would be panicking far more than this.

They reached the boat deck and the collection of women gasped in shock at what they saw. The ship had come to a standstill. The boat deck was swarming with women, children and crew, who were clambering up ladders, unfastening ropes and lowering down lifeboats. Alice’s heart began to race and she clutched Bobby even tighter to her. A voice was shouting through a megaphone for all women and children to come forward, and Alice found herself being pushed along in the crowd. There were few men up here, and the ones that were looked as though they were from First Class; some of them were even refusing to wear their lifejackets and had them draped over their arms. Alice didn’t know who to talk to or what to ask, and felt light-headed.

She noticed a woman standing on the outer edge of a group of people waiting for the lifeboat to be lowered, and tapped her on the shoulder. The woman turned around and Alice could see without even talking to her, that she was from First Class. She wore a mink cape and a fancy fur hat, strands of blonde hair peeking out from underneath. She was very beautiful and didn’t look at all flustered by what was going on around her.

‘What’s happening miss?’ Alice asked, and she realised in her panic, her voice had reverted to ‘Alice Higgins’. Still, that was the least of her worries now.

‘I’m not quite sure,’ the woman replied in a cut-glass accent. ‘I think there’s been some sort of collision and we’ve got to get into the lifeboats whilst they sort it out.’

‘It’s freezing up here ain’t it? I might just go back inside.’

‘No, you mustn’t,’ the woman insisted, laying her hand on Alice’s arm. ‘They really were quite insistent.’

‘But I need to find my chap. I don’t know where he is.’

‘They’re putting women and children in first, then the men. He’ll be okay.’ She peered into Bobby’s blanket and smiled. ‘He’s oblivious to it all,’ she laughed.

‘Good job too,’ Alice replied. ‘Lucky he can’t sense how scared his mum is.’

‘How old is he?’

‘Three days. He was born on here.’

‘Really? What’s his name?’

‘Bobby.’

‘That’s a lovely name. And don’t you be scared...’

‘Alice.’

‘Don’t be scared Alice. Look at the size of this ship. Nothing could go wrong.’

The lifeboat was lowered and the stewards started helping women get into it. Alice noticed that all the women who were going in were First Class passengers. Fancily dressed, posh women in their furs and jewels, holding onto their leather bags. Calling back to men on the deck, shouting out requests for things for them to remember to bring with them when they came. Alice shuffled along behind the blonde woman, who looked round once more when Bobby started to whimper.

‘Oh dear,’ she said. ‘I think he’s starting to wake up.’

The woman was at the front of the deck, and the guard shouted that there was room for one more in the boat, and it was between her and Alice.

‘What about me and my baby?’ Alice called.

‘They’ll be another boat down shortly,’ the guard replied. ‘Now move along madam.’

‘Why don’t I take your baby?’ the woman said quickly. ‘I’ll bring him to you once we go back on board.’

Alice hesitated for a moment, hating the thought of someone taking her beloved son. But her protective instinct kicked in. If there was any chance that she was going to get left behind on this boat and drown, then she didn’t want Bobby dying. His life was most important.

‘Take him,’ she said, thrusting him into the woman’s arms. ‘Please look after him.’

‘Of course I will,’ the woman said. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Alice Higgins.’

‘I’m Nesta Villiers, if I don’t find you, find me.’

And with that, Alice stood and watched and cried, as Nesta climbed into the lifeboat, holding onto the rope with one hand and Bobby with the other. She sat down amongst the other women, and gave Alice a hopeful smile and a wave as the men shouted at each other and started lowering the boat. Alice ran to the side of the ship and watched as it descended down into the sea, to where the other boats were. She also saw that the ship seemed to be lower down than it had been earlier, and she realised that it was sinking. She began to panic, convinced she was going to die. She had to find Robert and make sure he got off the boat. If one of them died, the other had to live to look after Bobby.

Alice turned to run back into the ship but was pushed back by a steward who told her to wait for the next lifeboat. At the same time, someone let off a flare above. The noise made people panic and there was a sudden surge. Alice was knocked off her feet, and as she landed, the back of her head hit the railings and from then on everything went black.

## Chapter Seven

On a ship blighted with the spectre of death and the prospect of loss, the babe in Nesta's arms had become a beacon of hope. She'd come out on the deck of the Carpathia to get some peace and quiet away from the women in the cabin she'd moved into, who spent all their time fussing around her 'son'. She wasn't sure why she'd told them his name was David, or that he was hers. But what else could she say? That she'd practically snatched him from the arms of a Third Class passenger who she guessed would stand little chance of getting into a lifeboat? Or that she'd had every intention of handing him back once they were rescued? Both facts were true. That terrible night, which was just forty-eight hours ago, and yet seemed like a lifetime, Nesta had seen what was going on. How passengers like herself were being encouraged to get into the lifeboats, while even some of the Second Class passengers were held back. Somehow the little cockney sparrow from Steerage had made it onto the boat deck with her baby, and Nesta had shuddered at the thought of her and the child going down with the ship - that was why she'd taken him. But when she'd sat in that lifeboat, surrounded by an ice field and the distant sounds of people crying for help, she'd convinced herself Alice had died and this baby needed a mother; and so, when people asked his name, she said he was called David and that she'd given birth to him on the Titanic.

They would be reaching New York the next day and Nesta hoped the telegram she'd sent her mother, instructing her to send a driver to meet her, had arrived. Unlike most of the women on this boat, Nesta had no need to go to The White Star Line offices to find out the fate of her male companion. Nesta was alone apart from her new baby 'son'.

It was a chilly day and people preferred to stay indoors. Many of the women were inconsolable and spent their time huddled in the corner of the banqueting room that had been turned into a dormitory, crying and calling for their husbands and dead sons. That was why people loved to see David. He was proof that life went on, even though so many had died. The women still didn't know if there was going to be another ship following on with men they'd picked up from the boat, but many of them, especially the few Third Class women who'd managed to escape, had resigned themselves to widowhood.

Nesta sat on a bench, holding David to her, watching the sea, thinking how cruel it seemed that something so placid had swallowed up that mighty ship and hundreds of people on board it. Even now, at night, when she tried to sleep in that cabin she'd so kindly been given; when she closed her eyes, she could hear the sound of people screaming as the ship sank. It was a sound Nesta was sure she would never forget.

Someone sat beside her and she turned and saw it was a smartly dressed, elderly man; his white hair immaculate, his moustache neatly trimmed. For a moment she thought him to be one of the passengers who'd already been on the Carpathia when it so mercifully changed its route

and came to the Titanic's rescue. But she vaguely recognised him, remembering seeing him in the First Class dining room - he was the sort of distinguished, handsome older man a woman noticed.

He glanced down at the baby and smiled.

'Did he sleep through the whole thing?' he asked. He was American, his voice gruff but friendly.

'On and off,' she replied. 'He was so hungry by the time we got on here, thankfully there was plenty of milk for him.'

'Is he not yours then?'

'Oh yes. It's just that cow's milk agrees with him better.'

The man chuckled and blew into his hands to warm them up.

'Listen to us,' he said. 'We've just witnessed a catastrophe and we're talking about baby's milk!'

'Did you lose anyone?'

'No,' he said with a shake of the head. 'I was travelling alone. I've just spent six months in London, and I was heading home. What about you?'

'My mother is getting married in New York, I was going there.'

The elderly man furrowed his brow.

'With a baby in tow?'

'It's a long story,' she smiled enigmatically.

'Well, you'll have some things to tell him when he grows up.'

'Sometimes I think it was all a horrible dream. That I'll wake up on board and all those people will still be alive. I don't think I'll ever forget that sound. Those screams.'

'It's not much better on here. So many poor women weeping for their men. I think the young woman I'm caring for lost her baby.'

'H-Her baby?'

'Yes. I found her unconscious as I was getting into the lifeboat. I carried her on and kept her with me. She'll have to go straight to hospital as soon as we dock, her head is badly smashed.'



Thankfully, we were given a cabin and I've been caring for her, but she wakes up occasionally and asks for her baby, *where's her baby?* She had no baby with her.'

'How terrible,' Nesta replied, pulling David a little closer to her. 'Is she very young?'

'Yes. I've no idea if she was sailing with her husband. I found her boarding card in her pocket and it says she's a Lady Alice Fairfax, but whether there's a Lord Fairfax, I don't know. She isn't wearing a wedding ring, just a beautiful engagement ring. Who knows what her story is?'

Nesta breathed a sigh of relief. The guttersnipe who'd passed her the baby was no Lady. She then felt bad for being relieved that David's mother was probably dead.

'She may have a baby back in England, or even waiting for her in New York,' Nesta said. 'It might not be so sad.'

'Let's hope not,' the man replied, banging his hands upon his knees. 'Well, I'd better be getting back to her. I'm going to stay with her until I can find her family.'

'That's very kind of you.'

'I like to help people. Now you get that baby inside before he freezes, and I hope you both have a safe onwards journey when we get off of here.'

'And you,' she smiled. 'Although I doubt if any of us will ever be the same again.'

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The Carpathia arrived in New York on the 18<sup>th</sup> of April and Nesta couldn't wait to get off. So wrapped up had she and all the other survivors been in their bubble of misery and despair, they'd only been able to think of the people and possessions they'd lost. Somehow they'd convinced themselves no one would know of their fate and they'd be able to sail into New York un-noticed. Instead, the world had gone mad. Suddenly, the ship was surrounded by smaller boats, most of them manned by pressmen, shouting up at the people on deck, wanting their story. Thousands of people had gathered at Pier 54 to welcome the ship home. Some were family members desperate to find out what had happened to their loved ones; some were journalists, taking pictures and scouting for stories, and some were just there to see the spectacle - the world's richest people emerging from a ship; dishevelled and haunted by what they'd seen.

Nesta wanted nothing more than to be reunited with her mother, and get away from these women who'd cried constantly for three days. She'd struck up a sort of friendship with a young woman called Bridget Kelly, a Steerage passenger who'd lost her husband and all her possessions, and was facing an uncertain future in New York with two children aged five and

twenty months. They'd bonded as 'mothers', Nesta confessing she had no idea what to do with David, and Bridget helping her rip up towels to use as makeshift nappies, and winding him when he'd drunk his milk too quickly. Before they disembarked Nesta quite happily gave Bridget the diamond necklace she was wearing. It had been a present from Roland for her twenty-fifth birthday, and she hated it because when he'd given it to her, he'd thought he was entitled to repayment for such a generous gift by taking her when she didn't even want him to. He liked her to wear it - she guessed - because it reminded him of his power. Well, she now had the perfect excuse to say she'd lost it, and so gave it to Bridget to sell when she got to New York. The young Irish woman had cried and blessed Nesta and David, wishing them a long and happy life.

Nesta had every sympathy for women like Bridget who'd lost everything; but wanted to hit people like Gloria Chandler, who'd spent the entire journey clinging to her husband and weeping because their automobile and all her jewels had gone down with the ship. When Nesta discovered their man-servant had also perished and yet they hadn't give him a second thought, she'd had to walk away, shocked that even in such wretched times, selfishness remained inherent in some people.

The badly injured were taken off the ship first, and Nesta tried to look out for the man who'd rescued Alice Fairfax. She wanted to see the girl, just to make sure she wasn't David's mother. But in all the confusion it was impossible to see. When the time came for her to finally leave, she was astounded by the silence of the survivors. They shuffled along, wrapped in blankets and coats, the shock of what had happened finally hitting many of them - especially the ones who had no one here waiting for them. Soon the crowds fell silent too, watching on as these sorry refugees finally reached the destination they should have arrived at in that majestic new ship.

Soon the silence was broken as people spotted their loved ones and rushed forward to greet them. Nesta heard a yell of 'my darling!', and burst out crying when she saw Betsey pushing her way through the crowds, hanging onto her hat and trying to run as much as her robust frame would allow her. For some reason Nesta thought her mother would have just brought a driver. She didn't think for a moment she would come here herself.

'Mummy,' she cried like a little girl, rushing to her. 'Mummy you came.'

'As if I wouldn't,' Betsey said, wiping a tear away. 'I'm so sorry I put you on that ship Nesta. I could have killed you.' Her speech stopped when she looked down and saw that her daughter was holding a baby.

'What's that?' she asked.

'Your grandson, David' Nesta replied. 'I can't explain now Mama, can we just get away from here?'

Webb, Betsey's driver was waiting in the Packard to take them back to her house on Park Avenue, and David began to cry as soon as the car started up and rattled along through the New York Streets. Webb had to swerve several times to avoid people milling around in the road, still clambering to see the Titanic survivors.

Betsey looked at Webb, to make sure he wasn't listening, then looked at her daughter.

'You said in your letter...'

'I was wrong,' Nesta replied. 'I didn't even know I was still expecting.'

Nesta thanked God for her conversation with Bridget Kelly. In her open, working class way, she'd told Nesta how she hadn't even known she was expecting her youngest daughter, Mary, because she'd had periods all the way through. She'd then gone on to regale Nesta with a tale about a woman back home in Knock, who thought she'd miscarried, only to give birth to twins seven months later.

'Did you manage to get anything for him off that ship?'

'No. All we have is what we're in. My belongings went down with the Titanic.'

'Well we'll have to go out tomorrow and sort you out with some new things. And what about David, he must be filthy?'

'He is a little. I haven't had a chance to change his nappy since this morning. He'll be hungry too. I can't feed him. He needs milk.'

'My goodness. Well, it's nothing that can't be sorted.' Betsey leaned forward and tapped Webb on the shoulder. 'Webb, can you take us someplace that sells baby clothes? I've got a grandson to dress!'

Nesta was whisked back to her mother's mansion on Park Avenue, and Betsey took charge. She summoned Clarice, her housekeeper to take David and feed him and change him into the various items they'd bought in a little, exclusive baby-wear shop on Fifth Avenue. Nesta was taken up to one of the grand rooms on the top floor, and Betsey commanded her to have a bath and wash her hair. Nesta followed her mother's wishes, but didn't tell her that as she sat in the luxurious marble bath, surrounded by rose scented water, she felt terrified. Every time the water made a sound against the side of the bath, it reminded her of that eerie silence when exhaustion had engulfed the survivors in the lifeboats and all that could be heard was the sound of water lapping against the boat; or the occasional bump when a body hit it. She hated being alone, because that was when the memories came flooding back - that terrible sense of guilt because she'd lived while so many others had perished, including David's mother.

With a night-dress and housecoat donated by her mother, Nesta wrapped herself up and went into the small drawing room that was adjacent to the bedroom. She sat by the fire, but she just couldn't get warm. No matter how hard she tried, it was as though that ice had stuck to her skin and she just couldn't get it off.

Betsey joined her with some tea and sandwiches, but Nesta could barely eat. She wanted to see David. She wanted to make sure he was still here and that her mother hadn't somehow seen through her story and had surreptitiously contacted the White Star Line office to try and find his real mother.

'Where's David?' she asked, while Betsey poured her some more tea.

'He's fine. Clarice is looking after him and you can have him back tomorrow. I want you to have a good night's sleep after what you've been through. But first, I want to know the full story.'

'I don't want to talk about it,' Nesta sighed. 'It was the most horrible thing that's ever happened to me. Not knowing if I was going to live or die, listening to the cries of all those people...'

'No no, not the Titanic. I don't expect you to want to talk about that. David. I want to know about David. You wrote to me before Christmas telling me you'd had a miscarriage. Now you turn up with a baby. I don't understand.'

'I didn't even know I was still pregnant. I did think I had a miscarriage back in November, but apparently sometimes women can have a bleed, and still be pregnant. I put on a little weight and felt tired from time to time, but I just thought it was the after effects of what had happened. Then the first night I boarded the ship, I felt the most terrible pain and they called for the ship's doctor. I gave birth half an hour later. I was shocked, I can tell you.'

'My goodness, and does Roland know?'

'No. Roland doesn't even know I'm here. I just telegraphed him and said I was going away for a few weeks. He's far too interested in entertaining Dolly Ballantyne in Paris to worry about me. He doesn't even know about the miscarriage.'

'He doesn't know! What would have happened when no baby appeared?'

'I was going to tell him.' She sighed. 'Look mummy, I know Roland wants to divorce me. So I was going to come here for a few weeks, have a splendid time with you, then go home and face the music. But now I've had David, I don't know what's going to happen.'

'Well you must telegram him in Paris and let him know he's a father. And tomorrow I'm going to get Doctor Phillips in to examine you.'

‘There’s no need Mama. The ship’s doctor examined me and I’m fine.’

‘Why aren’t you producing any milk?’

‘I don’t know. There was a little at the beginning, then it dried up. Maybe it was the shock, or my age or something.’

‘If you insist. But we’ll still get Doctor Phillips in to look at David. I heard that you were in those lifeboats for hours, is that right?’

‘Yes. I think the accident happened around midnight and we were picked up by The Carpathia around four a.m.’

‘So that baby was out in the freezing cold for four hours! What would that have done to his little lungs? I insist he’s examined by a doctor. You don’t want to take a sick baby home to Roland do you?’

‘No, of course not. I want everything to be perfect when we go back to England. I want Roland to be the happiest man in the world.’

Chapter Eight  
New York City – Two Weeks Later

Alice heard voices and opened her eyes - just a flicker - before closing them again. For a few moments, a collection of images ran through her mind. She was on a stage somewhere, dancing, and she could hear people in the audience booing her. She didn't know where the stage was, or what she was dancing to, but she could so clearly hear the jeers coming from the crowd. Next she was dancing with a young man. She didn't know who he was, but he was tall and fair-haired and handsome and had such a kind smile when he looked at her; and when she thought of him, she felt warmth towards him. She then heard his voice, telling her he would see her later, and she was in a room, a small, dark room. Then her memory went blank.

She opened her eyes and everything was hazy. The room wasn't dark, but bright and white. She could barely focus and jumped out of her skin when a soft, warm female voice said;

'Well hello Alice. Welcome back to the world.'

Alice gasped when into focus came a dark-skinned woman wearing a nurse's hat. She smiled down at her and laid her hand upon her forehead.

'Where am I?' Alice asked, her voice croaky.

'Don't you worry about that honey,' the woman said, and Alice realised she had an accent she couldn't place. 'Just take it easy. Let me get you some water.'

The nurse went out of Alice's view and as her vision cleared, she saw she was in a room she didn't recognise. The bed she laid upon was sumptuous and warm, the blankets upon it heavy. Blinking, she looked over and saw the bright sunlight streaming in through tall windows on the other side of the room. Turning her head, she saw the nurse at a wash stand, pouring a glass of water from a china jug. The woman was chubby and her skin the colour of chocolate. She came back over to the bed and sat upon it, putting the glass to Alice's lips, using her other hand to tilt her head so she could drink. The water hurt Alice's dry, chafed throat and made her cough.

'Am I in hospital?' she asked.

'No, you're in the home of your guardian angel,' the nurse smiled, her white teeth gleaming. 'Mr Bloomberg saved your life.'

'Saved my life?'

The kind faced nurse frowned and reached out, grasping Alice's hand.

‘Don’t you remember anything honey?’

‘No.’ It was true. Alice’s mind was blank. She didn’t know where she was, or how she’d ended up here. She suddenly became aware of a heavy sensation on her head and put her hand up to discover it was wrapped in bandages.

‘What happened to me?’ she cried. ‘What’s wrong with my head?’

‘In good time,’ the nurse said. ‘You need to rest. I’ll come and see you in a while. Have some more water.’

She gently poured more water into Alice’s mouth and then put the glass back down on the fancy wooden bedside cabinet. She left the room, and shut the door behind her. Alice sat up slightly, wincing because every bone in her body seemed to ache. She looked at her arms and saw how bony they were. It looked as though she’d been starved. Even more alarmingly, she still had no idea who she was. When the nurse had called her Alice, it had resonated, as though it meant something. But she didn’t know what her surname was, or where she’d come from or how old she was.

Tentatively, she swung her legs round and sat on the edge of the bed, looking down and seeing that her feet were as bony as her wrists. Beside the bed was a large, oak wardrobe with a mirror on the front, and as she caught her reflection, she gasped. A young, thin-faced girl stared back at her. Her head was wrapped in a white bandage, but underneath it, long, dark brown hair hung down. Her skin was sallow, which made her large dark eyes look even more striking, her nose was small and her mouth was wide and her lips full and pouting. She was quite pretty, but it was like looking at the face of a stranger.

She lay back down and wracked her brain for memories - anything that would tell her who she was. All she could recall was dancing on the stage, and then the handsome young man. What was his name? Who was he? The helplessness of it all made her cry; feeling so stupid because she was lost in her own mind. She closed her eyes and tried to concentrate on the flashbacks. Who was the young man? Was this in his house? Was he Mr Bloomberg? And how had he saved her life?

There was a knock on the door, and it opened before she could speak. Into the room came an elderly man with neatly brushed white hair, wearing smart clothes. He had a kind face, and when he smiled at Alice, it made her feel reassured. Was he her father? Was he the elusive Mr Bloomberg? She had no idea.

‘How are you feeling Alice?’ he asked, sitting on the bed beside her. ‘It is Alice isn’t it?’

‘I think so,’ she whispered.

'I'll call my physician in later to take a look at your head. Hopefully those bandages will be able to come off soon.'

'Where am I? What happened to me?'

'You're in New York City,' he smiled. 'You've had a nasty bump to your head and you had to have an operation to mend your skull. Then you got pneumonia and it was touch and go, but you pulled through and now the doctors reckon you'll make a full recovery and will be able to go home.'

'I don't know where home is,' she uttered. 'I can't even remember who I am.'

'You're Lady Alice Fairfax,' he replied. 'Does that sound familiar?'

Lady Alice Fairfax. It certainly had a ring to it; and the young man she remembered dancing with was clearly a gentleman.

'I don't know,' she answered. 'How do you know my name?'

'I found a boarding pass in your pocket. Do you remember being on the Titanic?'

'The Titanic?'

'Obviously not. Well, you were on a ship called The Titanic. Why you were on it I do not know, but it hit an iceberg and sank; and as I was getting into a lifeboat, I found you unconscious on the deck. I carried you into the lifeboat and I've stayed with you ever since.'

A memory came to Alice as he said this. Lying on her back, her eyes opening and seeing a black sky filled with stars above her. Voices were all around her and there was a sensation of being cold. That was all she could recall.

'Is something coming back to you?' the man asked.

'A little. I can remember lying down somewhere and opening my eyes and seeing stars above my head. It's cold. Very cold.'

'You kept coming to in the lifeboat,' he said. 'Maybe it's that. Do you know if you were travelling with someone?'

'I don't recall. I'm sorry....'

'Only whilst you were in the hospital, I took the liberty of going to The White Star Line office when they posted a list of the dead and missing, and I saw that one of the missing was identified as a Sir Robert Fairfax. He was a Second Class passenger, and I wondered if he was any relation of yours.'



Robert Fairfax. The name seemed so familiar to Alice. Instinct told her he was the young man in her memories - the handsome young man whirling her around a dancefloor

‘He’s my brother, I think,’ she answered, although she wasn’t sure why she’d said it. Something in her sub-conscious was telling her this was who he was. ‘I’m not sure.’

‘Okay,’ the man nodded. ‘Well, I think that’s enough questions for today. Do you think you could manage some food?’

‘A little maybe.’

‘Okay, well I’ll get Cook to make you some soup.’

‘Is this your home then?’ she asked.

‘Yes honey,’ he laughed. ‘My name’s Richard Bloomberg. Not that that would mean anything to you.’

‘Thank you,’ Alice answered, feeling strangely tearful. ‘I’m sorry to be a burden.’

‘Don’t be silly. Enough people died on that ship, I didn’t want you to be another one of them.’

Not much else came back to Alice for the rest of that day. Most of her memories were of being in the lifeboat. She could see glimpses of faces looking down at her, voices discussing her and asking if she was a boy. The Titanic meant nothing to her. She did recall a feeling of excitement about sailing on a ship called The Adriatic. Although she didn’t know if this was something she’d done, or was meant to do.

She remained in bed, and a maid brought her some hot broth that she ate remarkably easily - given that no food had passed her lips in two weeks. But with a full stomach, she soon became sleepy and drifted off. Her dreams were more vivid than her waking thoughts. She kept hearing a baby crying, a tiny shrill cry like a newborn. She even woke up at one point and got out of bed, searching around the room for this baby she could hear so clearly. She stuck her head out of the door, wondering if Richard Bloomberg had an infant in the house, but all she was greeted with was a dark, silent house. She went back to bed and fell asleep again, this time dreaming of a street. It was a dirty, narrow street with cobbles on the road, and washing hanging from one house to another. Alice could see herself walking down this road, her feet cold and bare and everything seeming so big, like she was seeing it from a child’s perspective. She then went into one of the houses, and the next thing she could feel was a large hand hitting her around the head. This made her awaken once more and automatically put her hand up to her bandages.

The next morning, Alice woke up feeling more tired than she had when she went to sleep. A maid, who introduced herself as Daisy, brought her a boiled egg, some buttered bread and a cup of coffee, for breakfast. Alice found the coffee most strange to her palette, and realised she

must have always drank tea. It was a revelation about herself that she didn't know and it made her smile. She picked at her food while Daisy fluttered around the room, dusting surfaces, humming as she went. Alice estimated that the girl was about the same age as herself, although she wasn't quite sure how old she was, but she guessed she was about twenty. Daisy was a tiny, skinny girl who seemed to move very quickly, as if doing the chores were laborious to her and she just wanted to get it over with.

'You won't get better if you don't eat,' she said to Alice without even looking at her. Her accent was funny. Not as refined as Richard's, or as sing-song as the nurse who'd seen her yesterday.

'It's hard to eat,' Alice replied, her voice still croaky. 'How long have I been here?'

'Three days,' Daisy replied. 'You were in St Vincent's before then.'

'St Vincent's?'

'The hospital.'

Daisy put down her dusters and came over to Alice's bed, an excitable expression on her pinched little face.

'What was it like on the Titanic?' she asked. 'Is it true that it was like a grand palace?'

'I don't remember anything about it. People keep saying the word Titanic to me, but it means nothing. I have a vague memory of going to sail on a ship called The Adriatic.'

'Well I would guess that you were supposed to sail on the Adriatic, but you swapped tickets. I read about that. Some people had First Class tickets for the Adriatic and swapped them for Second Class tickets on The Titanic. I read in the New York Times about some guy in England who had the chance to do that, but refused because he was sure The Titanic was going to sink. Gee, that guy must be some kind of mystic.'

The way Daisy spoke made Alice laugh, and when she did, the maid looked at her with an expression of disgust.

'What are you laughing at?' she asked.

'You. I like the way you talk.'

'Oh. And I like the way you talk,' Daisy smiled. 'You have a lovely accent. I love English accents. Mr Bloomberg once brought a friend over from England. He had the most beautiful voice, and he was so polite. I swear, I almost fell in love with him.'

'Where are you from?' Alice asked.

'Hoboken New Jersey,' she replied proudly. 'I came here to make it on Broadway, but I ended up being a maid.'

'Are you an actress?'

'I act, sing and dance. I'm a triple threat.'

This saying resonated with Alice. She'd heard it before, but she didn't know where.

'So what does Mr Bloomberg do?' she asked. 'Is he a doctor?'

'Kind of. He's what they call a philanthropist. His father was a really rich guy, owned one of the biggest food companies in the world. Gee, I remember eating tins of Bloomberg hot dogs when I was a kid. But Mr Bloomberg wanted to do something good, so he didn't work for the

family company and he trained as a doctor instead. But when his pop died and he took over Bloomberg's, he stopped being a doctor and he started using his money to do good. Like opening hospitals and things in really poor areas. That was why he was in England, he was setting up a hospital for the poor in some area - London I guess.'

'Is he married?'

'No. No kids either. We always find it kind of weird, how a nice guy like that hasn't been snapped up. Plus he's richer than Midas.'

She was interrupted by the door opening, and the nurse from the day before entered the room, carrying a leather medical bag. She frowned on seeing Daisy chatting to Alice and slammed the bag down on a chair.

'Daisy what do you think you're doing?!' she cried. 'Lady Fairfax needs to rest, not be bothered by you.'

'It's okay,' Alice said. 'I like the conversation.'

'There's no need to be polite. Go on, go back downstairs Daisy.'

Daisy picked up her dusters and scurried off. Alice felt quite sorry for her. She was the first person who'd spoken normally to her since she'd woken up. The nurse took Daisy's place on the bed and reached out, feeling her forehead.

'Um, your temperature feels a little lower today. How are you feeling in yourself?'

'A bit stronger. I really need to go to the lavatory. Where is it?'

'Right there,' the nurse said, pointing to a door next to the bed. 'You go and I'll strip your bed, and then perhaps we could go downstairs. It's time you got on your feet a little bit.'

After relieving herself in the grandest bathroom Alice had ever seen, she came back out; and while the nurse stripped the bed, she slipped into the thick woollen dressing gown that was hanging behind the door. It felt warm and snug and comforting, but so heavy that it made her unsteady on her feet. She flopped down onto the chair that was nearby, breathless.

'It's to be expected that you'd be weak,' the nurse sighed. 'With all that you've been through.'

'What's your name?' Alice asked.

'Marion Desalles,' the nurse replied.

'Where are you from Marion?'

'New Orleans. But I've been living in New York for so long, I've forgotten what it's like.'

'Do you work for Mr Bloomberg?'

'Yes, I work in his clinic in the Upper West Side. He brought me here especially to look after you.'

'I don't know why he's been so kind to me. I'm not anything to him.'

'That's Mr Bloomberg all over,' Marion smiled. 'Always helping others. And there's nothing more he'd like than to see you on your feet. So come on, let's go downstairs.'

Marion left the bedding for the maids to collect, and, taking Alice's hand, helped her out of the room and down several flights of carpeted stairs to the bottom floor. She led her into a

beautiful room that was filled with the most exquisite furniture - a crystal chandelier hanging down from the ceiling; the sofas and chairs sumptuous and covered in tapestry cushions and exotic looking silks. A huge bay window let in the sunshine, and Alice could hear the sound of voices and automobiles outside. Marion helped her down into one of the chairs and asked if she would like some tea. Alice said she would and Marion went off to the kitchen. On the coffee table in front of Alice's chair was a copy of *The New York Times*, and on picking it up and looking at it, she saw the headline was '*Titanic Survivors Damn Inquiry Finding*'. The article was about how no one was being held accountable for the sinking of The Titanic; and as she read it, she felt quite shocked to think she'd survived such a terrible disaster. They estimated over a thousand people had perished - including it seemed, her travelling companion. Alice felt quite fortunate that she hadn't been conscious to witness it; as the accounts given by the survivors who'd watched it sink were quite horrific.

Page after page of the newspaper was dedicated to The Titanic, and Alice realised just how big a thing it was. The ship was supposed to be unsinkable and yet it had sunk in just a few hours after hitting an iceberg in the North Atlantic. Most of the people who had died had been Third Class passengers, trapped in the ship, unable to get out. As Alice read this, something came to her; a memory of walking up stairs, surrounded by people. She was holding something in her arms, but she couldn't recall what it was, and yet she could feel its weight so clearly. She put the paper down when Marion returned with the tea, and sat beside her, pouring her out a cup.

'Anything coming back to you honey?' she asked.

'I remember walking up some steps, surrounded by people. They're all wearing white things on their upper bodies.'

'That'll be the lifejackets. It sounds as though things are slowly coming back to you.' She paused. 'Alice honey, do you remember having a baby?'

'A baby!' she gasped. 'I haven't got a baby.'

'When you were taken into St Vincent's, the doctors examined you and said it was clear you'd given birth recently. Do you have any memory of a baby?'

'No, I don't. Although I dreamt of a baby crying the other night.'

'Okay,' the nurse nodded, and the nervous look on her face made Alice panic.

'What are you thinking?' she asked.

'Both Mr Bloomberg and I both think that part of the reason you've lost your memory is because you lost your baby on the boat. The shock has made you blank things out.'

'But surely I'd remember having a baby.' She looked at her left hand. 'I haven't got a wedding ring.'

'You were wearing a ring when they found you. Mr Bloomberg has put it in a case for safekeeping. It's a beautiful diamond ring. Maybe you were engaged to someone.'

'Well I wouldn't have a baby would I?' Alice snapped.

'No I suppose not. Maybe the doctors got it wrong.'

'I expect they did. I'd certainly recall having a child.'

That evening Richard came home and was delighted to see Alice up and about. He asked if she was well enough to have dinner with him, and she accepted. He helped her into the grand dining room at the back of the house, and gave her a cushion to make the rather hard dining chair seem more comfortable. To Alice's consternation, she realised she was rather sore down below - as if something had happened to her, and she wondered if it was true that she'd had a baby. She shuddered with horror to think it might have drowned on that ship. Even though she didn't even know anything about it, the thought of a child dying was highly unpleasant.

They dined on a delicious rich fish pie; although Alice could barely eat much of it as her throat was still so sore. Richard told her all about his trip to London, where he'd been setting up a charity hospital in Bethnal Green - one of the poorest areas there. As he described the ragged children with their distended stomachs and shoeless feet, that same memory came back to Alice. The one of walking on cobbles and getting hit by an unseen man. She wondered what the memory was. Had she ever lived somewhere like Bethnal Green? It was highly unlikely given that she was a Lady.

'I did some checking today Alice,' Richard said once the maid had taken away the dinner things and brought in the coffee. 'I'm trying to find your parents, but no one has enquired about either you or your brother. It's strange, I'd have thought someone would have known their son and daughter were travelling on the Titanic and would have contacted White Star Line. And judging by that ring you were wearing, I presume you have a fiancé somewhere.'

'Could I see the ring?' Alice asked. 'I don't remember owning any ring.'

'Sure,' he nodded. 'Just wait there.'

He left the room and Alice experienced the strangest of sensations. She felt something digging into her left palm and when she looked down, there was nothing there. She had a memory of something cutting into it, like a ring that was twisting itself round and digging in. But along with that, she had a bad feeling about it, like it was something she shouldn't have. Richard re-entered the room and sat before her, passing the ring across the table to her. Alice looked at the large, square cut clear diamond on its gold band and slipped it onto her wedding finger. Suddenly, like fog clearing, it all started to come back to her. Wearing this ring; keeping her hands in her pockets to hide it because it was stolen. Feeling swaddled up in loads of coats as she and...Robert...got onto the ship. Robert wasn't her brother. He was her lover, and he wanted her to smuggle it into New York. Her name wasn't Alice Fairfax, it was something else, but she couldn't remember. Anything before getting onto the ship was hazy. But she recalled getting onto the Titanic. There were lots of people milling around and throwing tape and waving flags. In her mind, she looked down and saw her stomach. It was fat. With a cry, she suddenly remembered giving birth. There *was* a baby. She was in a room with a strange man and she was giving birth to a baby.

'Is it coming back to you?' Richard asked softly.

'I-I think so,' she uttered.

She could see the baby's face, so sweet and innocent; looking up at her as she fed him. Bobby. His name was Bobby.

‘My baby!’ she cried. ‘Where’s my baby?’

‘There was no baby with you. But the doctors did think you’d given birth.’

‘I did!’ she shrieked. ‘I gave birth on the Titanic! It was a boy. I called him Bobby. Where is he? Where’s my baby?’

‘You didn’t have a baby when I found you. We think you may have left him in your cabin. After all, we were all told not to panic and that we’d be able to come back onto the ship.’

‘No, when I remember walking up the stairs, I’ve something in my arms. It must have been my baby. But what happened to him? I can’t remember anything after walking up those stairs.’

‘Try to remember my dear. Was your brother with you? Did you give the baby to him?’

Robert. She remembered being alone with Bobby when the call came to abandon ship. Robert was off playing cards or dining with someone.

‘He wasn’t with me, he was having dinner or gambling or something. Me and Bobby were alone.’

‘What about your fiancé? Was he sailing with you?’

Alice had to think quickly. If Richard knew the truth - that she wasn’t some posh English Lady, and the ring she was wearing was stolen, he might well call the police and she’d be shipped back to England and would go to prison. Then she’d have no chance of getting Bobby back – presuming he was still alive.

‘My fiancé chucked me,’ she said solemnly, using acting skills that were fast coming back to her. ‘He threw me over for another girl at Christmas. Robert and I are orphans and we only had each other, so he decided we would come to America to start a new life, and bring the baby up together. It’s coming back to me now. We were supposed to sail on The Adriatic, but Robert got the chance for us to go on the Titanic, so he swapped our tickets.’

‘Even though you’d be heavily pregnant?’

‘My brother was a dreamer,’ Alice smiled, a thousand images of Robert and his crazy schemes coming into her head. ‘The baby wasn’t due until the end of April so he thought we’d be safe.’

‘I see. So did you and your brother have no family back in England?’

She shook her head and hoped and prayed Robert’s father didn’t have a sudden attack of conscience and talk to the papers about his dead son.

‘They both died some time ago. Everything we owned was on the ship, so I have nothing but this ring. But I just want my baby back.’

‘We can only hope that if someone took him just so they could get into a lifeboat, they see the error of their ways and come forward.’

‘I feel so tired and drained now,’ Alice said. ‘There’s so much to take in. Would you mind if I went to bed?’

‘Of course not my dear. You need all the rest you can get, so we can get that memory of yours working.’

Alice went back up to the safety of her bedroom, and before getting into bed, went to the window and looked out onto Park Avenue. It was dark out there, but it was still busy— like

Regent Street or Oxford Street or Piccadilly Circus. Craning her neck, she looked down the Avenue and saw buildings as tall as Big Ben, all lit up spectacularly. She could so clearly remember being with Robert before they left - him making plans for their life in New York, and her not feeling any excitement - even though most young girls dreamed of going to America. Now she was here, and she still didn't feel anything. Her baby was out there somewhere, and that's all she could think of. She couldn't even grieve for Robert. He'd been a bounder and had now left her in a situation where she couldn't tell anyone the truth. Because if people found out they'd stolen the ring she'd end up in prison; and for that she hated him, even though he was dead.

She got into bed and pulled the covers around her. She tightly closed her eyes and wished she could remember what happened after she'd mounted those stairs. Everything was a blank from then on; just glimpses of being in the lifeboat, and then waking up here. She knew if she stood any chance of getting her baby back, she would have to keep up the pretence of being Lady Alice Fairfax for as long as she possibly could. And as soon as she was back on her feet, she was going to sell that ring. She couldn't rely on Richard's generosity forever, and she'd have to make her own way. She guessed her son was in New York, which meant she would have to stay here for as long as it took to get him back.

Chapter Nine  
May 1912

Nesta was having so much fun, and she couldn't remember when that last happened. It was Penny Waldron's birthday party, and instead of a stuffy, English-type do, with a string quartet and polite dancing, Penny had hired a ragtime pianist to entertain the guests at The Grand Hotel. The air was filled with laughter, and right now Nesta was dancing with Grant, Penny's husband. He was a very dashing looking man, with thick, dark hair and a pencil thin moustache. He was from Louisiana and spoke with a deep, romantic sounding accent. Nesta loved the way he called her ma'am.

'So you and Penny have known each other for a long time?' he asked as he spun her round.

'Yes,' she replied. 'When my father died Mother came back to New York to live, and I came with her for a while. We lived with Penny and her mother for six months. Penny and I went to the same academy for young ladies.'

'It's quite the coup for her having the Titanic survivor here. You must have people asking you questions about it all the time?'

'I do, but then when I tell them I gave birth on the ship, they become more interested in that.'

'Ha! Ha!' he laughed. 'Your son is always going to be known as The Titanic Baby!'

'I just wish the doctor who delivered him hadn't been killed. He did so much to help me.'

'Well, wherever he is, I'm sure he'll just be glad to look down and see your little boy happy and healthy.'

Grant was cornered by another wealthy, older woman, and when the music changed, he went to dance with her. Nesta made her way off the dance-floor, and headed over to her mother, who was sitting enjoying a mint julep and watching William, her new husband, dancing with Henrietta - Penny's pretty, sixteen year old niece. Nesta found the lascivious look on her step-father's fat, wobbly face a little disconcerting, but Betsey didn't seem to see any harm in it. To her it was just an elderly man teaching a young girl how to dance.

'Are you having fun my darling?' Betsey asked, leaning over and grasping Nesta's hand.

'Yes, this is great fun. I love it here in New York.'



‘Then why don’t you stay? Roland’s always travelling the world, opening his hotels. You could come and stay with me and William, and Roland could come over and see you and David when he had free time.’

Nesta was certainly tempted by this offer. Maybe it was because her mother was American, but she always felt more at home in New York than she did in London. She preferred the fun atmosphere, and while society was polite, they didn’t have that same rigidity as the British. And she always felt so alone in England - at least here she would have Betsey.

‘I’d have to talk to Roland about it,’ she said. ‘I can’t make a decision like that on my own, and there’s David to think of now.’

‘Well after all that time in Paris, maybe Roland should come out here for a while and see his son. It would be nice if we could bring James over as well. Reunite the family. It’s been so lovely having you and my grandson here, I’d hate it if you went home.’

The party looked like being a late one, but Nesta wanted to get home to David. She knew he was safe with Sarah, the nursemaid Betsey had employed to care for him; but Nesta missed him when she wasn’t near him. She may not have carried him for nine months, or given birth to him, but she loved him like he was her own. She’d watched him grow over the past month. Felt relief when he’d lost his scrawniness and the jaundice had cleared, and he’d turned into a bonny baby. She guessed his father must have been blond because his hair was golden. Luckily people just assumed he took after her.

She was driven home in her mother’s Packard, and went up to the room next door to hers that Betsey and William had transformed into a nursery. They had bought out Macy’s baby department, filling the room with the finest furniture - a beautiful oak cot; a wardrobe filled with baby clothes, and a mobile with jewel-encrusted fairies on, to hang above his crib. David was awake, waving his little arms about and gurgling happily while Sarah, the African-American nurse-maid sat in the corner, head on her hand, dozing. Nesta went over to her and tapped her on the shoulder.

‘I’m home now Sarah,’ she said softly.

The young woman grumbled and opened her eyes.

‘Oh Mrs Nesta, I’m so sorry I was asleep,’ she yawned. ‘David’s fine.’

‘I know,’ Nesta smiled. ‘It’s very late. Why don’t you go to bed? I want to sit with him awhile.’

‘Okay,’ Sarah said, levering herself off the chair. ‘Well, he’s been fed and changed, he shouldn’t give you no trouble.’

‘Thank you Sarah. I’ll see you tomorrow.’

The maid left the room and Nesta took her place. She looked over at David in his cot and decided she would take him for a walk around Central Park the next day. It would do him some good to get fresh air into his lungs, and she liked it when they met other mothers. For the first time ever Nesta had something to talk with them about. Thankfully, because David had been born on the Titanic, she could sketch over details like his birth weight or the time he’d been born. After all, if one gave birth on board a ship - after thinking they had miscarried - they could be permitted a little confusion.

Nesta felt more relaxed about having David now. Without letting her mother know, she had hired a private investigator to check if there had been an Alice Higgins on board the Titanic and if so, had she survived; but he’d found nothing. There had been no Alice Higgins in any of the classes, and none of the victims or the survivors fitted the right age group - except Lady Alice Fairfax, who was described as twenty years old and from England. Nesta remembered clearly her conversation with the handsome, elderly American gentleman who had been caring for Alice Fairfax; and while he said she'd been asking for her baby, it was probably a coincidence. The private investigator was convinced the girl who'd given her David was more than likely a Steerage passenger who was running away from the law and travelling under an assumed name. In her panic she'd probably given her real name, and the chances were she went down with the ship and no one knew about baby David.

Nesta thought about her mother's offer. How lovely would it be to move to New York? For David to grow up with all the freedom that an American upbringing would give. She got carried away with dreams of Harvard or Yale and maybe a career in law. She then checked herself and laughed. David was only a month old and she was already planning his life away.

Too tired to move, Nesta picked up the copy of *The New York Post* that was lying on the floor. It must have been Sarah's as she could never imagine her mother reading such a rag. As soon as Nesta saw the front cover, she almost dropped it again. There was a huge photograph of the man from the boat, accompanied by the headline '*Park Avenue Tycoon Offers \$1000 Reward For Lost Baby*'. Nesta opened the newspaper to find on page three another photograph of him and the headline read '*If You Took Baby Bobby from the Titanic Please Return Him*'

Nesta's mouth turned dry and her palms started to sweat. Dare she read it? Her worst nightmare was probably contained within this article, and it would be so easy to ignore it. But she knew she couldn't and read on.

*Billionaire tycoon Richard Bloomberg has offered a \$1000 reward to the person who snatched a newborn baby in order to get onto a lifeboat as the Titanic sank. Mr Bloomberg was sailing on the doomed ship after visiting London on charitable works.*

*Whilst getting into lifeboat number eleven, Mr Bloomberg found a young woman unconscious with her head badly smashed in. The young woman - Lady Alice Fairfax, an orphan from London, lost her brother Robert in the disaster and also gave birth to a son, which she named Bobby, on the first night of the voyage.*

*'Alice is positive she had Bobby with her when she left the Second Class cabin she was travelling in,' Mr Bloomberg explained. 'Unfortunately she cannot remember anything after that, but her memory is improving all the time and we're hoping more will come back to her. I am asking, from the bottom of my heart, if you are the person that took Bobby, please bring him back. We will not go to the police, and I am indeed offering a reward of one thousand dollars for his return. Alice has lost everything in the disaster and is making a life for herself in New York. But she won't be able to truly settle until she has her baby with her.'*

The article was followed by details of how people could contact the newspaper - who would then pass their details onto Mr Bloomberg. Nesta was shaking violently. It was too much of a coincidence. The girl had passed her a baby called Bobby, and she was called Alice. Why she gave the surname Higgins, Nesta didn't know, but it had to be her.

In a blind panic, Nesta tore up the newspaper and threw it into the fire. She was convinced anyone who read it would put two and two together and realise she was the person who took Bobby. And to think, his mother was currently living on the same street! It was only a matter of time before they ran into each other, no matter how big Park Avenue was.

Nesta ran into her bedroom and fetched the blankets off the bed and took them into the nursery, making a bed on the floor so she could sleep beside David's cot. She was terrified that someone was going to break in to snatch her baby, so she wanted to be there to fight them off.

She barely slept, convinced the police were going to arrive at any minute. She thought about what it said in the article - that Alice was making a life for herself in New York; which meant Nesta had no choice but to move back to England. As much as she liked the thought of staying with her mother, David meant everything to her and she needed to get him away.

After finally giving in and having a couple of hours sleep, Nesta was awoken by David screaming. The room was light and the morning sounds of Park Avenue could be heard clearly. She took him from his cot and felt his nappy was wet. She changed him, putting him into one of the many outfits Betsey had bought him. She was then joined by Sarah, who offered to do his morning feed.

'Yes, yes,' Nesta replied, flustered. 'Feed him. But he's not to go out today. I don't want him breathing any germs.'

Nesta washed and dressed and went downstairs. Consuela, the maid, offered her breakfast but she refused, instead going into Betsey's study, where Jacqueline, her mother's secretary was at work. Jacqueline always started at seven thirty a.m. and would organise Betsey's day to day diary. She was a very bookish woman who reminded Nesta of a shrew. She never wore bright colours, and her spectacles were always perched at the end of her nose so she could look down on the world.

'Can I help you Mrs Villiers?' she asked, not looking up from her desk.

'Yes,' Nesta replied, trying to find a surface to lean against in this cluttered room filled with artefacts collected from Betsey's travels around the world. 'I need you to get me on a boat back to London as soon as possible. I'll take first sailing there is.'

Jacqueline turned to look at her, peering down her nose at her.

'You do realise I'm supposed to look after Mrs Hasburg?'

'Yes, I appreciate that, but my husband is returning from Paris soon and he'll want to see our son. Please, it's a matter of urgency.'

'I'll see what I can do,' Jacqueline said snootily. 'I can't promise anything.'

Nesta left the study and made her way into the breakfast room, where Betsey was sitting reading the *New York Times*. Nesta hoped there was nothing in there about Richard Bloomberg and Alice Fairfax. Betsey was a shrewd old bird and might put two and two together.

'Where's William?' Nesta asked, sitting close to her mother and picking up a piece of toast.

'Would you believe he's gone for a walk round Central Park? He says it's good for his health. I however feel as though there's a subway train rattling round my brain. It was good sense of yours to leave that party early.'

'Mother I'm going to be leaving for England as soon as I can,' Nesta cut in.

Betsey stopped what she was doing and looked at her daughter.

'What?'

'I've asked Jacqueline to find me a place on a boat back to England. I feel so cut off from everything here, and you and William need some time alone.'

'Don't be silly,' Betsey laughed. 'We're old. We don't want to be jumping into bed every ten minutes!'

'Even so. My place is at my husband's side, and he is based in London. He hasn't even seen David.'

‘But you’re so happy here dear,’ Betsey frowned. ‘Why, London is only a few days away. Roland can come and visit.’

‘No. I am going home. Thank you for looking after me and David.’

‘You make it sound like a job. I’m your mother.’

Nesta hated the sound of the sob in Betsey’s voice, and felt guilty for leaving her so suddenly.

‘Perhaps you and William would like to take a vacation in London in the summer. I’d love it if you’d come and stay with us.’

‘So would I dear,’ Betsey smiled. ‘But I’m not good on boats, and besides, I’ll have to see what William’s doing. Like you said, a woman’s place is at her husband’s side.’

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The RMS Adriatic docked in Liverpool on the 19<sup>th</sup> of May, and Nesta was glad to be back on terra ferma. The voyage across the Atlantic had been hell. Every time the ship had hit slightly choppy water, or the lights had flickered because there was a dip in power, Nesta had gripped David to her and panicked, convinced they had hit something and it was going to sink. She spotted other Titanic survivors without even speaking to them, because they all had that same haunted look in their eyes.

Stepping off the mighty ship, the cold Liverpool air bit into her arms and she tucked David’s blankets tighter around him. She wheeled off his pram, while the porters carried her brand new cases, containing all the fancy clothes her mother had bought her and David while they were in New York. She was then approached by a smartly dressed young man in a cap and long coat.

‘Lady Villiers?’ he said.

‘Yes,’ she replied, scared he was some sort of detective hired by Richard Bloomberg to hunt her down.

‘My name’s Duncan, I’m here to drive you home.’

‘Home!’ she exclaimed. ‘Back to London!’

‘Yes,’ he smiled. ‘Follow me.’

He led her through the crowds to the road surrounding the Pier - where a shiny new automobile stood. Nesta had no idea what make it was, but it was very grand looking; with seats in the back and in the front, and a roof to protect them from the rain.

‘Whose car is that?’ Nesta gasped.

‘Your husband, Sir Roland,’ Duncan replied. ‘If you’d like to get into the front seat, I’ll put your things onto the back seat.’

So they set off, with Nesta’s cases and David’s pram piled up on the back seat, while Nesta sat beside Duncan, holding onto David. It took seven hours, with a couple of stops at petrol stations to fill up, and an inn so Nesta could feed and change David. But at nine o’clock that evening they finally arrived back at Belgrave Square. Nesta felt relieved to be home. She didn’t know what faced her, but she guessed Roland was in a good mood with her - he wouldn’t have sent a driver all the way up to Liverpool to collect her if he wasn’t. When she’d left this house in April, she’d done so under a cloud of shame and fear. Since then she’d cheated death, acquired a baby and had a fun time in New York. Her mother had helped her buy a wardrobe full of stunning clothes, so she looked attractive once more, and she knew her new-found vitality showed on her face. As long as Alice Fairfax remained in New York and didn’t remember the name of the woman who took her baby, everything was going to be fine.

She got out of the car, her legs aching after sitting for so long, and held onto David, who was fast asleep; while Duncan fetched her things from the car.

‘This is your new home little man,’ she whispered as she walked up the steps to the front door. ‘I hope you’ll be happy here, and you’ll be with me forever.’

Before she reached the top step, the door opened, and Roland stood there, arms outstretched, an uncharacteristic huge smile on his face.

‘Welcome home!’ he beamed. ‘Welcome home. Both of you.’

Nesta stepped up to him and he kissed her upon the cheek, then looked down at the baby.

‘I can’t believe it,’ he uttered. ‘Here he is. Come on in.’

They entered the house, while Simpkins the Butler came out to help Duncan with the bags and the pram. Roland led Nesta into the drawing room, and she received a nice surprise to find James sitting there. He got up and kissed her upon the cheek.

‘Why did you keep it so quiet Sis? The baby *and* travelling on the Titanic?’

‘It’s a long story,’ she said. It was only then that she noticed the young woman in a smart nurse’s uniform, standing by the window, her hands behind her back, as if she was standing to attention.

‘Darling, this is Faye,’ Roland announced. ‘She’s going to be helping you look after David.’

Nesta was speechless. She hadn’t expected Roland to go to all this trouble. She thought it would be up to her to find a nanny.

‘Pleased to meet you Lady Villiers,’ the young girl said in clipped tones.

‘And you Faye,’ Nesta uttered.

Roland stepped forward and held out his hands.

‘May I?’ he asked.

Nesta realised he wanted to hold the baby and she passed David to him. The look of joy on Roland’s face when he held his ‘son’ for the first time, was one she would never forget. They had both waited so long for a child, and this baby meant so much. Any guilt she felt about taking David away from his real mother disappeared. A young single woman on her own couldn’t give him the sort of life she and Roland could. They would be so happy together.

‘He’s beautiful,’ Roland said, and Nesta could swear there was a tear in his eye. ‘Simply beautiful’

‘I bet he’s tired after his journey,’ Faye said. ‘Would you like me to take him up to his nursery ma’am?’

‘He has a nursery?’ Nesta gasped.

‘Yes,’ Roland laughed. ‘I ordered it to be done by the time you both came home. It might smell of paint a bit, but I’m sure David won’t notice.’

‘Okay,’ she said, touched by his kindness. He hadn’t been like this towards her since before they married. He passed David to the nanny, and kissed his forehead, wishing him goodnight. Faye then took him out of the room, and Roland told Nesta to sit down and she did so, next to James.

‘Do you want something to drink?’ Roland asked. ‘I can call for one of the maids.’

‘No, I just want to go to bed,’ Nesta replied. ‘I’m shattered.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me you were having a baby?’ James blurted out. ‘I couldn’t believe it when I suddenly got a telegram from Roland saying you were in New York; you’d survived The Titanic and you’d had a baby.’

‘Yes,’ Roland said, sitting on the other side of Nesta and taking her hands. ‘Why on earth did you sail out on the Titanic when you knew you were about to give birth?’

‘Okay, I’ll come clean,’ she said, looking at both men. ‘I didn’t tell you James, because all the times before I’ve told everyone I was pregnant, it’s gone wrong. So I decided to keep it quiet this time. But...in November last year, I thought I’d lost the baby.’

‘You never said!’ Roland gasped.

‘I felt such a failure, I just wanted to get away. So I took mummy up on her offer to go to New York to go to her wedding. I had no idea I was still pregnant, but the day I boarded, I felt quite poorly and had to stay in my cabin; and by the end of the day, I was giving birth to David. The ship’s doctor told me that apparently it does happen. Some women think they’ve miscarried, then they go on to deliver perfectly healthy babies.’

‘It’s a miracle,’ Roland said. ‘I can’t believe I’ve finally got a son.’

‘What was it like sis?’ James asked gravely. ‘Surviving the Titanic.’

‘It was horrible,’ she replied. ‘I’ll never forget the screams of those poor souls trapped on the boat. Do you know most of the Third Class passengers couldn’t get out? They were trapped on board. Most of those who died only did so because they couldn’t afford a First Class ticket.’

‘That’s just the way of the world darling,’ Roland said. ‘It’s hard, I know. But they have to save those who are going to contribute the most. Horrific about Astor, he was a fine man.’

‘And so were those men in Steerage. They were going there to *build* America and make it into a powerful nation.’

Roland looked over Nesta’s head at James and frowned.

‘I feared this would happen. She’s traumatised by the accident. I’ll get Doctor Raynsford in to see her.’

‘I don’t need a psychiatrist!’ she protested. ‘There’s nothing wrong with me. I’m just tired.’

‘Of course you are,’ Roland smiled, taking her hand and squeezing it. ‘I think you need a bath and bed, and then tomorrow we can get on with the rest of our lives. First of all, we need to get to Eton to put David’s name down. Then we’ll have to start arranging the christening.’

He growled and brought Nesta’s hand up to his mouth and kissed it.

‘I’m so excited,’ he said. ‘This is the best thing that’s ever happened to me.’

Nesta was glad to escape to the bathroom, away from Roland and his over affectations. She still felt nervous in water, but somehow, being back in England made it better. She felt a sense of pride that she had actually done something to make Roland proud of her; and the more she



revelled in this feeling, the more she started to believe David was hers. Alice was young, she could have plenty more babies. And with Richard Bloomberg looking after her, she was bound to meet a nice man who could keep her and provide her with a family. Things were different for Nesta; she was never likely to have a child of her own, and David was her only hope. And she did love him so. As much as she would if she'd given birth to him herself.

She got out of the bath and dressed in her nightgown. When she stepped into the bedroom, she got a shock to find Judith making the bed.

'I thought you'd have finished for the day,' Nesta said.

'Sir Roland called me up to make sure everything was okay,' the housekeeper replied. She stopped what she was doing and walked towards Nesta. She suddenly felt nervous. Judith had seen exactly what had happened that day. There was no way a baby could survive that.

'Welcome home,' Judith said. 'It must have been terrible on the Titanic.'

'It was,' Nesta replied. 'As soon as I'm back on my feet I'm going to start fundraising for those poor women who've been left destitute from it.'

'But you've the miracle of little David to make things better. I was shocked when Sir Roland sent me a telegram saying you'd had a baby and to start making arrangements for a nursery. I thought after that day....'

'Well apparently it happens quite often,' Nesta snapped. 'Women think they've miscarried and they're actually still pregnant. Anyway Judith, I'm quite tired, I'd like to go to bed.'

'Of course madam,' Judith said with a bitter tone to her voice. 'You'd better get your rest. Babies are tiring.'

## Chapter Ten

April 1913

The whole Bloomberg household was swept up in Daisy's excitement. She was attending an open audition for a new show called *The Honeymoon*, that was going to be opening at The Starlight Theatre on Broadway and she spent every spare moment rehearsing. With Alice's encouragement, she would sing as she did her chores and could be heard all over the house. Alice had taken Daisy under her wing in the time she'd been living with Richard, and even though she was now the lady of the house, and Daisy just a maid, they had struck up a sort of friendship.

Richard had done wonderful things for Alice, like introducing her to his circle of friends, taking her to the opera, the ballet and the races. But all his acquaintances were his own age, and nice as they were, they expected her to behave like Lady Fairfax at all times. With Daisy, she could be more like Alice Higgins - a fun-loving twenty-one year old who liked to visit the shops on Fifth Avenue, and dream about marrying a handsome, rich young man. Except of course, Daisy couldn't afford the clothes she saw in Saks or Macy's, but Alice could. A jeweller off Times Square - impressed at doing business with Lady Alice Fairfax, had given her \$1500 for the ring. It was a phenomenal amount of money, but the jeweller was an expert and could tell the diamond was one of only a few mined from a certain region of South Africa in the early 19th century. He claimed it was extremely valuable and was more than happy to take it. Alice was suddenly a wealthy young woman in her own right and was glad she no longer had to rely on Richard to buy her things. She had even offered him rent for her room, but he'd refused, saying her company was payment enough. She couldn't remember being more happy - the only thing that would make it perfect would be to have Bobby back. Today was his first birthday and she was so glad she had the distraction of Daisy's audition to stop her from hiding in her room all day and crying.

She and Richard were taking breakfast in his beautiful conservatory. Sitting amongst the exotic plants he'd had shipped in from all over the world. Looking out at the huge finely landscaped gardens, it was hard to believe they were in the middle of the planet's busiest city.

'If I lose my maid today, I fully expect you to find me a suitable replacement,' Richard laughed, buttering a muffin. 'I wholeheartedly blame you for Daisy's aspirations.'

'Not guilty!' Alice exclaimed. 'She was singing and dancing long before I ever came here.'

'Maybe, but don't think I'm not aware you drop Madame Le Page a few dimes a week to teach Daisy to dance.'

‘Well, I thought seeing as I was having lessons, Daisy may as well join in too.’

‘Well I bet she's not up to your standard. She's the daughter of a bookkeeper from Hoboken. You're an English Lady. I expect your folks paid for you to have all sorts of lessons.’

‘Maybe,’ Alice sighed, although she could remember her childhood perfectly well - being beaten by her drunken father; living for Aunt Bella's visits when she'd take her to the theatre, and then home, where she'd teach her to dance like the people they'd seen on the stage. ‘I wish I could remember. But dancing makes me happy, and I've enjoyed taking Daisy under my wing. If she gets the part it'll all be worth it.’

Richard's driver took them to the theatre, and all the way there Daisy had to cling onto Alice, just to stop herself from shaking. Alice had lent Daisy her favourite coat - an almost identical copy of the one Evie Howard had given her; with the funnel neck and rabbit fur trim. She'd got it from Macys on the day she sold the ring and it was one of her most treasured possessions. Daisy was a few inches shorter than Alice, so it swamped her little frame; but with her best black velvet hat and the pink lipstick Alice had advised her to wear, she looked most presentable. Alice wasn't sure how lucky her friend was going to be at this open audition today - she'd gone to enough herself back home in England and they were like cattle markets; with the prettiest girls always chosen, and sometimes even catfights breaking out.

As soon as they pulled up outside the theatre and Daisy saw the long queue of girls trailing round the block, she started shaking her head and telling Alice that she wanted to go home.

‘That's not the attitude,’ Alice said. ‘You're as good as any of them.’

‘But look how pretty they are Alice,’ Daisy fretted. ‘I can't compete with them.’

‘Of course you can, now get out of the car.’

They were shot looks of envy as they emerged from Richard's car. Some of the girls lining up looked as though they were living on the streets while they waited for their dream to come true; and it brought back so many memories to Alice of living hand to mouth, staying in grotty digs and not knowing where the next meal was coming from. They went to the back of the queue and stood behind a chubby girl with ringlets, wearing a white dress that made her look even fatter. Next to her stood a sour-faced older woman in a cheap coat, who Alice took to be her mother. Alice wondered what the girl was auditioning for - the chorus or the role of Charley, the leading man's little sister who stows away on honeymoon with him. Alice hoped it was for the sister - she'd stand out a mile in the chorus.

The line was full of girls doing vocal warm-ups and practicing their dance moves. Alice knew she'd never get Daisy to be bold enough to dance in front of so many people, but she thought maybe she could get her to exercise her throat.

'Do you remember all the words?' she asked her pale-faced friend. *'You are the honeysuckle, I am the bee.'*

Daisy tried to sing the next line, but all that came out was a squeak. Alice looked down the line and noticed people were coming along pinning numbers on the girls and she guessed if someone could hear Daisy's lovely voice, it might stand her in good stead.

Once again Daisy started to stammer, so Alice had no choice but to sing along with her.

*'You are the honey honeysuckle, I am the bee. I'd like to sip the honey sweet from those red lips you see.'*

Daisy sang along, but Alice's sweet voice stood out; so much so that some of the girls in the queue shot her filthy looks. She then realised that the people putting the numbers on had reached them, and she was confronted by a bored looking girl holding a pile of papers with pins on, and a rather handsome young man with swept-back black hair and the most mischievous, big brown eyes.

'What a beautiful voice,' he said, his accent the more common 'New Yoik', rather than the refined tones of the likes of Richard. 'I hope you're auditioning.'

'It's my friend actually,' Alice said. 'Miss Daisy Morrison.'

'You're English!' he exclaimed, his smile dazzling and cheeky. A little bit of Alice's heart melted. 'Are you an actress?'

'I have done acting,' Alice smiled. 'Back in England.'

He gripped his chest and staggered.

'That accent is killing me,' he laughed.

'Which one of you broads is auditioning?' the bored looking girl sighed.

'I-I am,' Daisy said, raising her hand, and the girl set about pinning the number on her. Suddenly the young man grasped Alice's hand and pulled her out of the line. All the girls looked on as he led Alice away, across the road and lent against an automobile, putting his hands in his pockets and surveying her shocked expression with a smug smile.

'What's your name?' he asked.

'Alice,' she replied. 'I really should be getting back to my friend.'

‘Alice what? What you appeared in?’

‘Nothing. Not here. What is this?’

‘How rude of me,’ he said, taking his hand from his pocket and offering it to her. ‘Allen Horowitz. Or you probably know me as Al Kent.’

The name rang a bell, and Alice followed his eye line, to find he was looking at the as yet unlit poster for *The Honeymoon*, above the backstage door. It showed a picture of young lovers about to embrace, and underneath said ‘*by Al Kent*’.

‘You wrote it!’ she gasped. He looked no more than twenty five – far too young to have written a Broadway musical.

‘Yes,’ he laughed. ‘It’s all mine. It’s my first production.’ Those wandering dark eyes checked her over once more and Alice blushed, folding her arms across herself. ‘So,’ he said. ‘Do you act or not?’

‘I used to a little, back in England; but my memories are very vague.’

‘Vague? How old are you?’

‘Twenty-one, that’s not the point. I had an accident and lost some of my memory.’

‘I’m intrigued,’ he nodded. ‘I want you to audition.’

‘Audition! I’m here for Daisy.’

‘Your little friend’ll get chorus if she’s lucky. I want you to audition for the part of Daphne.’

‘Daphne? That’s the leading lady.’

‘Yes. She’s supposed to be English. Carole Munroe who’s playing her can’t do the accent; so much so Barney the producer wants me to re-write her as being from New England. That spoils the whole story. She’s an uptight English girl and when Maurice meets Lola, the American broad, he’s bowled over by her cos his wife’s so rigid.’

‘I’m not sure I could,’ Alice uttered. ‘People might think it crass. Your play’s set on a boat.’

‘And.....’

‘Some people are aware that I survived the sinking of the Titanic.’

‘You’re Alice Fairfax!’ he gasped. ‘The broad with the baby.’

‘Broad without the baby,’ Alice gulped, swallowing back a tear.

‘Yeah, I’m sorry. I read about you in the papers. All those crazy folks coming forward trying to sell their babies to you.’

‘Yes yes, and I don’t think it would be a good idea for me to appear in a musical set on a boat.’

‘You could change your name. Please Alice. Say you’ll audition. Come in with your little friend and stay behind. I’ll set it up with Barney that you have a private audition.’

He was so cute and cheeky, Alice couldn’t refuse him. And if she was honest with herself, she did miss being on stage. She probably wouldn’t get the part anyway, but it would be nice to try. And to spend some more time with Allen was a bonus.

‘Alright, alright,’ she sighed. ‘But I don’t want to tread on anyone’s toes.’

‘You leave that to me,’ he smiled. ‘I want you as my leading lady, and that’s what you’ll be.’

Alice couldn’t believe she’d agreed to audition, and by the time they got inside the rather small, snug theatre, she’d decided she wouldn’t go through with it. Allen was sitting in the front seat with another much older man with white hair, who was puffing hard on a cigar; and a woman with very bright red hair, clutching a note pad and writing something down while the chubby girl from the queue was trying to tap dance - her face going very red in the process. Daisy panicked and gripped Alice’s hands tightly.

‘I can’t go through with it Alice,’ she fretted. ‘I’m too scared.’

‘Nonsense,’ Alice scoffed. ‘Go on, knock them dead.’

Unfortunately for Daisy, her nerves got the better of her, and when it was her turn to audition, her throat clammed up; and while she did a very nice dance around the stage, she didn’t give them a chance to hear her sing. When she finished, Alice could see she was close to tears and rushed to the front of the auditorium to comfort her. As Daisy left the stage, the elderly man with the cigar left his seat and came over to them.

‘How you doin’?’ he asked Alice, completely bypassing Daisy.

‘Er, fine thank you,’ she replied. ‘What did you think of Daisy.’

‘Bad,’ he said. ‘She needs to learn some confidence. She can be understudy to the chorus.’

‘Can I really?!’ Daisy screeched.

‘Yes,’ he replied, finally looking at her. ‘When I say understudy to the chorus, I mean if one of my girls gets sick, and the next one down is sick, and the next one down to that is sick. I’ll call you.’

‘Oh thank you Mr Barcoli,’ Daisy twittered, doing a little dance. The man shot her a look of disdain and returned his attention once more to Alice, offering his hand.

‘Barney Barcoli,’ he smiled.

‘Alice Fairfax,’ she replied, shaking it. ‘You’re the producer I take it?’

‘Yes. Al was telling me you’re going to audition for the part of Daphne.’

‘Well, I don’t know....’

‘Come on, Alice,’ he said. ‘You’re an actress, I can tell by the way you hold yourself; and Al tells me you have the sweetest singing voice. Say you’ll audition for me tomorrow?’

‘Tomorrow?’

‘Yes, I want to give you the chance to get to know your lines.’ He looked over at the woman and snapped his fingers. She picked something up from the seat beside her and ran over to them, passing it to Alice. It was the script for *The Honeymoon*.

‘I want you to learn a speech from that,’ Barney said. ‘Any speech. And do you think you could do a song for me?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘Okay. Well I’ll see you tomorrow, one o’clock.’

She looked over at Allen and he gave her a cheeky wave. She waved back, clutched the script to her chest, took Daisy’s hand and walked out of the theatre. The queue had started to dwindle - lots of discarded number badges on the ground, looking like big pieces of confetti. The girls walked out onto Times Square, to where Richard’s driver was waiting to take them back to Park Avenue.

‘I’m sorry about that,’ Alice said. ‘It was supposed to be your big day.’

‘Hey, he didn’t write me off completely,’ Daisy smiled optimistically. ‘I’m second or third in line to the chorus. And you have kind of got more leading lady credentials than me.’

‘They only want me because I’m English.’

‘And you’ve got a lovely singing voice. It’s a shame you can’t remember if you were on the stage or not back in England.’

‘Well, we’ll soon find out tomorrow if I’ve got it in me to be an actress. I might end up falling flat on my face.’

Richard was out that night, so he didn’t get to know about Alice’s good fortune. She asked Cook to make her a light supper and retired to her bedroom to read through the script. The Honeymoon was a comedy about an American man who marries an uptight English girl: and on their honeymoon he falls in love with Lola, an exotic dancer on the cruise. Even though Alice had only met Allen briefly, she could tell he’d stamped his personality all over the play. It was irreverent and funny, and made her chuckle - even though she was alone. She wondered if she could do it. She’d done some acting in pantomime as a girl, and she could certainly sing and dance. But she wasn’t sure if she could hold it together for a whole play. She then reminded herself that she’d been acting the part of Lady Fairfax, who’d lost her memory, for the past year. She’d done it for so long, there were times she forgot she’d ever been Alice Higgins. There was no reason why she couldn’t keep it up for a two hour play.

The following morning at breakfast, Alice was determined to keep her news to herself, but it seemed Daisy had already opened her mouth to the other members of staff and word had got back to Richard. He seemed amused by it all and this was a relief to Alice – she thought he would disapprove somehow.

‘So what are you going to call yourself?’ Richard asked. ‘I think if you go by your real name, people will always just think of you as the Titanic Girl.’

Alice smiled to herself, thinking she could just call herself Alice Higgins. But it was not glamorous, and she preferred to think of Alice Higgins as being dead.

‘I’ve no idea,’ she pondered.

‘Well, I once had a friend and his sister was called Alicia,’ Richard said. ‘I think it’s such a pretty name and not far from your own.’

‘Yes, it is,’ she replied. ‘Alicia Fairfax. No I don’t want to be Fairfax any more. My goodness, there are so many surnames out there. I had a friend once who took the stage name Du Pont because her aunt knew they made dynamite, and she thought her niece was dynamite on stage and told her to call herself that.’ Alice suddenly felt very tearful, thinking about Aunt Bella, feeling sad that she now had no one in this world.

‘Well,’ Richard said tentatively. ‘It is only a suggestion, but if I had ever been lucky enough to have a daughter, I would have loved for her to have been just like you. So, I was



thinking, you could take my name. But I understand that Bloomberg sounds too Jewish, but how about Alicia Bloom?’

‘Yes!’ she gasped, clasping her hands together. ‘Yes, I love it. Alicia Bloom.’

She got up from her seat and rushed round to Richard, hugging him tightly around the neck and kissing his cheek.

‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘Thank you so much.’

He pulled away and took her hands, bringing them up to his lips and kissing them.

‘No, thank *you* Alice. Before you came into my life, I was just a lonely old man, rattling around this house. But you've given me a reason to wake up of a morning. I love you like a daughter, and I'll always look after you.’ He laughed. ‘No matter how big a Broadway star you become!’

‘I love you too,’ she replied, hugging him once more. It was true. Richard had been more of a father to her than her own ever had. She just wished she could tell him the truth about herself. It was like a barrier between them that stopped them getting truly close. She pulled away and sat back down, laughing.

‘Anyway, who's to say I'll be a big Broadway star?’ she chuckled. ‘I'll probably go to the this audition and dry up, just like Daisy did.’

Arriving at the theatre, Alice was a little disconcerted to feel her heart was fluttering. Not because she was nervous, but because she was excited about seeing Allen again. She hadn't felt this way about anyone since Robert, and she thought her experience with him had put her off men for good. But she kept thinking about that cheeky smile and the way he'd been so bold as to proposition her in the middle of the street - and it made him seem wildly exciting.

The theatre was so quiet today; compared to the previous day when it had been bustling, full of young girls trying to make it into the show. Barney was on stage, talking to the pianist, and Allen was in the front row, chatting to the woman with the notepad. When he spotted Alice, he got up and came over to her, holding out his arms.

‘Lady Fairfax,’ he gushed, with a hint of playful sarcasm in his voice. ‘How lovely to see you.’

‘Alice, please,’ she laughed. ‘And for the purposes of this audition I'm to be known as Alicia Bloom. It's my stage name.’

‘And it's almost as pretty as you,’ he said, taking her hand and kissing it. ‘Are you going to let me take you to lunch after this?’

‘I-I don't know,’ she uttered.

‘So that's a yes then,’ he answered. ‘If you're going to be my leading lady, I'll need to get to know you.’

‘I'm not necessarily going to be your leading lady,’ she giggled. ‘I haven't auditioned yet.’

‘A mere formality,’ he replied. ‘Something tells me you're going to be just fine.’

And Allen was right. Back on stage, Alice came alive and realised how much she had missed performing. She thought of when she'd met Robert and pinned all her hopes on making a life with him, and how she'd been willing to give up acting, and she felt a fool. This was where she belonged. It was in her blood. She performed the dramatic scene where Daphne finds out Maurice has been cheating on her, and confronts him. There was a line when she tells him all she's given up for him, and this made Alice think of Robert, then in turn Bobby, and she started to cry. But it fitted the scene and so she carried on. Afterwards, she sang *Everybody's Doing it Now* by Irving Berlin, and danced, showing the moves that had been polished at her lessons with Madam Le Page in Greenwich Village. She'd only gone because she'd missed dancing and wanted to regain her physical strength; but maybe deep down it was because she'd known one day she would return to the stage. Once she had finished, Barney, Allen and the woman (who she discovered was Rose Maloney, the choreographer) all stood up and clapped. Alice felt flushed by her success and gave a little bow.

‘Fantastic, fantastic,’ Barney said, getting out of his seat and walking to the front of the stage. ‘Amazing. Where did you train honey?’

‘I er, don't really have that many memories,’ Alice replied. ‘I don't know if Allen told you, but I'm a Titanic survivor. I had a blow to the head, then got pneumonia and a lot of my memories from England have been wiped out. Although I do remember taking ballet lessons as a child, and there are vague memories of appearing on stage.’

‘Well you're a natural,’ Barney said. ‘I want you to play Daphne.’

‘Really?’ she gasped. ‘But what about the girl who already has the part?’

‘She'll live. I want a proper English lady playing the part and I want you.’

‘I don't know what to say,’ she uttered. ‘Thank you. Thank you so much.’

Alice was overwhelmed that she was going to be appearing in a Broadway musical, and in her delirium, stumbled along behind Allen, out of the theatre and onto Broadway. She looked up at the posters for the shows, and all the famous names they displayed; and couldn't believe that

soon she would be up there with them. She had no idea where Allen was going to take her, and got a shock when he pulled her into a delicatessen called Abners. Alice had never been in such a place and when they walked in the door, she was startled by how cramped it was. Steam rose from behind the counter, as the thickly set owner made endless cups of coffee. A skinny waitress was weaving in and out of the closely packed tables, holding up plates of food; while working class people in drab clothes sat drinking and chatting. It was certainly a culture shock for Alice. It reminded her of the pie and mash shops back home in London. Not the highfalutin places Robert used to take her to in an attempt to impress her.

Allen found a table close to the counter, and Alice felt the steam rush up and hit her in the face - opening every pore in her skin. Allen looked at the waitress and threw her that dazzling smile.

‘Hey Julie, bring us a couple of coffees will ya?’ he shouted.

‘Yeah when I’m ready,’ the waitress called back and she went off on her way. Alice giggled at this exchange; and without telling Allen, thought of some of the scruffy cafes she’d eaten in back in England when she’d been on tour with Herbert Cavendish. People would shout at each other like this, except the accents would be Liverpudlian or Geordie. But the atmosphere was still the same.

‘What’s the matter?’ Allen laughed. ‘This no place for a Lady?’

‘No, I love it,’ she replied. ‘I just thought I’d go somewhere more swanky for my celebratory drinks.’

‘Hey, I ain’t made a dime yet. I’ll save the swanky places for when I’m a millionaire.’

‘And you’re sure you’re going to be a millionaire are you?’ Alice smiled teasingly.

‘You read the script, how could I not be? One day I’m gonna be as rich as Rockefeller and have my own theatre.’

‘Ambition,’ Alice nodded. ‘An admirable trait.’

‘You think so? But you’re a Lady, you ain’t ever had to be ambitious. You’ve had everything handed to you on a silver platter.’

‘I may have done, but I hardly remember any of it. Most of my childhood is a blur. I doubt if it’ll ever come back properly.’

‘What’s the deal with you and Richard Bloomberg? Has he adopted you?’

‘Sort of. He saved my life on the Titanic. Someone knocked me unconscious and if he hadn’t rescued me, I’d have drowned. Richard’s a lovely man. He should have married years ago

and had children - he'd have made a wonderful father. But it wasn't to be. I think he was lonely and I filled a void.'

'So you ain't got no family back in England?'

She shook her head.

'I know my parents are dead, and no one's come forward for me. I'm all on my own. But I don't want to think about England. I want to think about my new life here. I love New York. I never want to leave.'

'What about your baby? Do you think he's still here?'

'I don't know,' she replied quietly. 'We've done all we can to find him. When Richard put out the appeal, we got all sorts of crazies coming forward. People were actually willing to sell their own babies to us. Then there were the mystics who kindly told me that he was dead and they could contact his spirit. It made me ill, and in the end Richard called a halt to it. But what I like about America though is that people don't judge you. Back in England I'd be locked away in an asylum for being an unmarried mother. But no one seems to question it here. They're more excited at the fact I'm a Lady and that I survived the Titanic.'

'And that's how it should be,' Allen smiled. 'Ain't that why people come to America? To make a fresh start? My Pop came here because he stole the farmer next door's pigs.'

'Really?'

'Yep,' he laughed. 'He was living in Leipzig and his Pop's farm was losing money. So he stole the next door neighbour's pigs to sell. He got caught, but he escaped the authorities and made it all the way across Europe and got a boat to New York. That's where he met my mom. She'd left Russia because her new landlord hated Jews and were evicting them all. They came to New York and Pop got a job with a butcher and learned the trade. Now he's got the best kosher butchers in the Bronx.'

'And you didn't want to follow in his footsteps?'

'Hell no.' He stopped what he was saying and looked round at the waitress. 'Julie where are those coffees? And get me two rounds of pastrami on rye!'

'I'm coming,' Julie moaned and she disappeared into the back of the restaurant.

Allen turned his attentions back to Alice.

'This place is the pits. I tell you Alice, I can't wait for the day I can afford The Ritz in London.'

‘I’ve been there,’ Alice replied, thinking back to the time Robert took her there; dined her with a three course meal, then feigned a choking attack so loud, the management were embarrassed and let them leave without paying. ‘It isn’t all that.’

‘Well I’d like to find out for myself,’ he said.

‘How long have you been writing?’ Alice asked, spotting Julie heading towards them with two cups of coffee.

‘All my life. When I was a boy, Mrs Caplin, our landlady, had a piano and according to Mom and Pop, even when I was about three, I used to bash away at it and make up my own songs. Mom did home sewing to pay for me to have proper lessons. Then when I left school I got jobs playing piano in various theatres – usually Vaudeville. I learned my trade and started writing songs. I sold a few, and then I took the plunge and wrote *The Honeymoon* and touted it round until Barney decided to take a chance. And here I am.’

‘And here *I* am!’ Alice laughed. ‘You’re going to make me a star.’

‘No. *You’re* gonna make you a star. You have a lot of talent Alice and it’s gonna take you far.’

‘I hope you’re right. I have vague memories of performing in London, and being on stage and loving it, and I wanted to do it again. I even took dance lessons here in New York to build my strength up. I never thought I’d get the chance to perform again. And it’s all thanks to you.’

After Julie had brought their coffees and sandwiches, they chatted about their lives. Alice discovered that Allen was twenty-six and at the moment he lived in a Brownstone in Brooklyn that he shared with four other aspiring musicians and artists. He made his living by demonstrating pianos in a store on Fifth Avenue, and he wanted to make enough money to buy his parents a holiday home in the Hamptons. Alice couldn’t believe how easy it was to talk to him, and it felt as though she’d known him forever. He was not only good-looking, but he was hard working, honest, ambitious and didn’t object to her having a past.

They left the deli and Allen said he had to get back to the theatre. Alice felt sad about leaving him, even though she would be seeing him soon for rehearsals. They stood in the middle of Broadway, with all the hustle and bustle of New York life going on around them, and yet all Alice could focus on was Allen. In a short time he’d become so terribly important to her.

He reached out and took her hands, swinging them lightly, but gripping them hard so she couldn’t get away.

‘Look,’ he smiled. ‘I know that was a bit informal. I just wanted to get to know you. But how would you like to go somewhere high class with me tomorrow?’

‘And where’s that?’ she smiled.

‘The store where I work, Bernstein’s Pianos, is having this black tie event. There’ll be lots of musicians and songwriters attending. It’s a way for Mr B to sell more pianos. He’s done it before and folk seem to like it. As his chief salesman I’m allowed to bring a plus one, and I’d like that to be you.’

‘And I accept,’ Alice replied. ‘Although when you introduce me, can you call me Alicia Bloom? I’m trying to leave Alice Fairfax behind.’

He leaned forward and took her by surprise by kissing her on the lips, right there in public.

‘Honey,’ he smiled. ‘By this time next year, people will only know you as Alicia Bloom. You’re gonna be a superstar. Take your Uncle Allen’s word for it.’

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The ‘black tie’ event at Bernstein’s Pianos was still a little downmarket compared to the sort of parties Alice had attended with Richard over the past year. Mr Bernstein was rather slimy, and being a short man, he only came up as far as Alice’s breasts; but that didn’t worry him, as every time he spoke to her, he wouldn’t attempt to look at her face anyway. The other guests were Tin Pan Alley writers, and men from local hotels and restaurants, looking to place pianos in their joints to make them look more classy. The wives of the hoteliers were much older than Alice, and looked down their noses at her; even though she looked stunning in the midnight blue, silk gown that Richard had bought her for her twenty-first birthday. Allen just reckoned they were jealous of her and that was why they were being horrible. Alice rose above it all, just happy to be in Allen’s company. He was so funny and personable, and when he was persuaded to play the piano, he got everyone dancing to the Rag he played. Alice was disconcerted by the way he made her feel so happy, just by being in the same room; and when he looked at her, she just wanted to melt. The joy that Allen gave her helped to dispel the pain of not having Bobby, and all the horrible things that had happened to her as a child. She’d never dare to do it, but she even got the feeling if she told him the truth about herself, he wouldn’t judge her.

They left the party and walked arm in arm along Fifth Avenue. Alice noticed that as people passed, they glanced at them and smiled. They were a nice looking couple, and she liked the way they fitted together so well. Like Richard was the father she’d never had, Allen was the first man she’d ever encountered where everything felt right. Without them even knowing each other well, they were like peas in a pod and the comfort of this warmed her. What would make it perfect was if one day a woman knocked on the door of Richard’s house with a gorgeous one year old boy and told her it was Bobby. Then she’d feel complete.

‘What are you thinking about?’ Allen asked, squeezing her arm. ‘You did have a good time tonight didn’t you? I know those broads were off with you, but they were only jealous.’

‘No, I was just thinking that this is the first time I’ve been truly happy since I came to New York. Don’t get me wrong, I love living with Richard; but I’ve spent the last year in his shadow, following him about places.’ She laughed. ‘And I know he’s introduced me to certain young men in the hope of finding me a husband. But it’s only been in this last week or so that I’ve finally started to feel that this is my home. It’s where I want to build my life. I just wish I could have Bobby as well.’

‘You might still get him back,’ Allen said softly. ‘There could be some poor woman out there like you who’s lost her memory on the Titanic, and one day she’ll get it back and realise that the kid she’s got is not her own, and that you passed him to her.’

‘I like your optimism,’ Alice smiled. ‘And I haven’t lost my memory.’

‘What?’

‘I’ve got to tell someone Allen. The secret is killing me. My memory came back a few days after I regained consciousness. I can remember everything that happened in my life prior to the accident.’

‘So why haven’t you told anyone?’

‘I can’t. And I can’t tell you here, let’s go back to my place. Richard has gone to Connecticut to his cousin’s funeral. It’ll only be the staff at home.’

Before he could protest, or ask her to say more, she hailed a taxi and told the driver to take them to Park Avenue. Alice wondered what the hell she was doing. Allen was practically a stranger and yet she was going to tell him all about herself. They were silent for the short journey home, and Alice couldn’t wait to get back. All the servants were in their quarters for the night, so she took him into the kitchen in the basement. Somehow it seemed fitting to tell Allen everything about herself in this room. She was, after all, common, and not the Lady he thought her to be. She told him to sit down at the heavy wooden table that was covered in nicks where Cook had lost her temper and stabbed it from time to time; and she poured them both a glass of the red wine cook used to enhance the flavour of tomato sauces. It was bitter, cheap stuff; but right at that moment Alice didn’t feel herself worthy of drinking the fine French wines Richard liked to serve.

She sat opposite Allen and almost wanted to laugh at the baffled look on his face.

‘My name is Alice Higgins,’ she began. ‘I was born on the twelfth of January 1892 in Battersea, a rough part of London. My mother was from a middle-class Irish family, but she came to London to become a singer, and met my father and gave it up when she married him. He’d been a soldier when he was younger, but now he works on the railways. He hardly gave my mother any money and she had ten of us to feed - I was the youngest. We lived in a slum, and I was five when mum died. I stayed with dad for a while, but he was neglecting me so much that my Aunt Bella took me to live with her. She was an actress and a singer and she was the one who taught me to dance. She had a boyfriend called Herbert Cavendish, and his act was a father and son routine - with a girl always playing the boy. When I was ten, I took the stage name Alice Du Pont, and I became Little Tommy. Aunt Bella died when I was fourteen, and Herbert and I went on tour around the country. That’s where I learnt my craft.’

'I knew you were a professional,' Allen laughed. 'But why the Lady act?'

'Aunt Bella always reckoned I was more classy than my brothers and sisters. That I was the one who took after her and mum. So she taught me how to talk posh and hold myself like a lady. So when I got too old to play Little Tommy, I got a job with this woman called Albie Smith. She ran The Bellamy Girls. We were a bunch of pretty low-rent dancers and singers, and usually danced in the chorus behind bigger music hall acts. I developed my own character, Lady Davinia. She was supposed to be a posh woman who sang bawdy songs. Most of the time the crowds hated it, and I'd usually end up pelted with bread rolls! Albie also had a side-line in hiring out girls to dance at private parties for men with more money than sense. Some of the girls did the blokes favours too, but I was never like that. One night I went to a party, and this chap called Robert Fairfax was there. He seemed like a gentleman and he turned my head. I should never have let him take advantage of me, but he was such a sweet talker. Then I found out I was pregnant and he came up with the idea of going to America.'

'So you married him?'

'Oh no, it would have been better if I had done. It would have been legal then. No, Robert wanted me to pretend to be his sister because his father had disowned him and he wanted to steal the diamond ring that had been left to his younger sister Alice, who died as a baby. The plan was I travelled to America as his dead sister - Lady Alice Fairfax; we sell the ring then get married. But when the Titanic sank and I was knocked unconscious, everyone thought I really was Lady Alice Fairfax because I had my boarding card in my pocket. When I came round, I couldn't remember anything, and for a while did think I was her. Then when Richard showed me the ring, everything came back to me. But I couldn't tell him the truth because I'm a criminal. Richard's been so kind to me, I don't want to implicate him in it.'

'So do you still have the ring?'

'No, I sold it as soon as I could. But by then I'd spun this web of lies around me and it was too late to go back. So I'm now stuck being Lady Fairfax.'

Allen sat back and blew out his cheeks.

'Wow!' he said. 'That's quite a story.'

'I'll understand if you don't want to know me and want to drop me from the show. You can go to the police if you like.'

'See, as an upstanding American citizen I should go to the police. But the trouble is; from the moment I saw you teaching your little pal to sing outside The Starlight last week, I kinda fell for you. So that puts me in a tricky position.'

'Do you mean that?' she uttered. 'You've fallen for me?'

He laughed and reached across the table, grasping her hands.

'I think Alice Higgins is just as classy and talented as Lady Alice Fairfax. In fact, I think they're two and the same person.'

'But I stole a ring and ran away to New York.'

'No, your boyfriend stole the ring. You were an accomplice. Besides, my Pop stole pigs and ran away to New York.'



Put like that, Alice couldn't help but laugh. Allen ran his fingers over her knuckles, and pulled her hand towards him.

'Come here,' he whispered.

Alice did as she was told; getting up from her seat and walking round to him. Allen sat back and pulled her onto his lap, looking up at her with an uncharacteristically serious expression.

'I'm crazy about Alice,' he said softly. 'I don't care if she's an English lady or a kid from the gutter. You're beautiful and gracious and funny, and that ain't got nothing to do with no title.' He finally smiled. 'Now, let me do what I've been dying to do all evening.'

He pulled her head down towards him and kissed her. It felt like a lifetime since anyone had kissed Alice like this, and it was wonderful to be intimate with someone she felt so akin to. She ran her fingers through his hair, which he had slicked down with oil, so he looked smart tonight. He reached up and unclasped her hair, letting her dark brown locks tumble over her shoulders.

'You're beautiful,' he said. 'Simply beautiful.'

'Stay with me,' she whispered.

'What?' he frowned. 'Are you serious?'

'As long as you leave before the servants get up, no one will know.'

'Alice don't think I expect this of you...'

'I've been lonely for so long. I just want someone to hold me.'

Taking his hand, Alice sneaked Allen up into the house, and he did his best to muffle his gasps as he took in the opulence of Richard's home. Alice took it for granted now, but Allen was like a kid in a sweet shop as he walked past original paintings, real crystal chandeliers, and the various artefacts Richard had collected on his travels. Even on reaching Alice's bedroom he seemed a little lost, letting go of her hand and wandering around, open mouthed.

'This room is the size of my whole apartment,' he said.

'One day you'll be rich enough to afford a house exactly the same,' Alice said, sitting on the bed and reaching out for him. 'I know it. You'll be richer than Midas.'

He laughed and sat beside her.

'I like your faith in me,' he said.

They started kissing again and Allen gently pushed Alice down onto the bed. For a moment she asked herself what she was doing. What if she got pregnant again? She doubted if Richard would be so forgiving this time, and what about the play? She couldn't star in a musical if she was heavily pregnant. Dancing for twenty minutes with The Howard Sisters, when she was expecting Bobby was hard enough. Let alone two hours on stage.

Her worries were forgotten as Allen started to undo the tiny pearl buttons down the front of her dress, kissing her neck and shoulders. She felt so liberated, having told him everything. Secrets had caused a barrier between them, and now she could relax because he liked her for who she truly was.

'Talk to me,' he whispered into her ear.

‘What do you want me to say?’ she replied.

‘Anything. That accent drives me wild.’

‘You’re mad,’ she laughed.

He pulled away and looked down at her; that thick dark hair falling into his eyes, a sleepy but loving look on his face. Alice knew right then that she adored him.

‘I’m mad about you,’ he replied. ‘Have been from the moment I met ya.’

Alice was first to wake the next morning. Even from up in her room she could hear Cook banging around in the kitchen, preparing breakfast, and she knew soon all the staff would be up and about. If they found Allen here, they’d tell Richard and he’d take offence at her using his house to entertain men. She turned over and saw Allen fast asleep beside her, his arm thrown above his head, his chin darkened by the five o’clock shadow that had started to sprout. How lovely it was to wake up next to him; and Alice knew it was something she would like to do every morning. Even making love to him had been different than with Robert. Allen was gentle and loving, and the closeness that was between them made it seem like the most natural thing in the world. Robert could be rough, and often liked to do it after he’d been drinking, when all his morals seemed to go out the window and he revelled in degrading her. Allen had done nothing but make her feel like the most beautiful and precious woman in the world.

‘Allen,’ she whispered, nudging him. ‘Allen wake up.’

With a grumble, he opened his eyes and looked at her, smiling broadly.

‘Hello,’ he said. ‘How are you this morning?’

‘Fine,’ she replied. ‘The servants are starting to get up. You need to go.’

‘But they’re just servants,’ he frowned. ‘Ain’t they supposed to do what you tell them?’

‘They’re servants, not slaves,’ she laughed. ‘And they work for Richard, not me. If they catch me sneaking a strange man out, they’ll tell him and he’ll think I’m taking liberties.’

‘Geez,’ he sighed. ‘I’m glad to be a pauper.’ He laughed and sat up a little, propping himself up on his elbow. ‘Last night was great,’ he smiled. ‘You’re amazing.’

‘And so are you,’ she replied, leaning forward and kissing him on the nose. ‘But you’ve got to go.’

‘Okay okay. I’ll just wait for the day when you’re Mrs Horowitz and you’ll wake up next to me every day.’

‘Oh I’m going to be Mrs Horowitz am I?’ she laughed.

‘You will if I have my way,’ he replied, kissing her on the lips. ‘You’ll be Mrs Horowitz before you’re even a big Broadway star.’

## Chapter Eleven

Late June 1916

Even a war could not put Carlotta off from holding her annual garden party. In fact, she claimed, with all the misery that was surrounding them, it was only right they had a little celebration. Nesta didn't want to go. The thought of trudging back to London and leaving the idyll of Kingswood, filled her with dread. The threat of Zeppelin raids had been enough for her to pack David up and run away to the safety of the country, and she wanted to stay there. She'd moved to Surrey to stay with her second cousin Imogen and her family at Crosslands, the mansion which belonged to her husband. She'd spent a wonderful year here, re-acquainting herself with her father's only niece; their children all happy together and under the strict care of Nanny Kate. Now of course, they shared the worry of what was happening to their men on the Front. Imogen's husband and two brothers-in-law were fighting in France, and so were Roland and James. But here in the beautiful house surrounded by acres of land, it seemed impossible to realise the nation was at war. Friends in London had written to her complaining that they hardly had any staff because the young men had gone off to fight, and the girls were taking up jobs in munitions factories or volunteering as nurses. But here at Crosslands, Imogen still had a full quota of staff - apart from her young footman who had joined the Navy. The last thing Nesta wanted to do was to go to London and be confronted with the realities of the conflict; and she was tempted to turn Carlotta down.

She was forced to change her mind when she received a telephone call from Carlotta, expressing her concern that Nesta hadn't responded to her invitation. Carlotta had just had a telephone installed and used it every chance she had. Whenever she did, she would always complain that England was so far behind America with these things - the Yanks had been using telephones for ages.

'I want you to come and speak to Nancy,' Carlotta said, her voice sounding tinny as it came all the way from London. 'She always looked up to you when she was a child. She's just shutting herself away and refusing to socialise.'

'Well Edwin was only killed earlier this year. Perhaps she needs time to adjust.'

'She'll adjust better if she talks to people. I can't bear to see my own daughter behaving like a recluse.'

'I'll see what I can do,' Nesta replied with a sigh, wondering why she'd been appointed some sort of Samaritan to Carlotta's daughter. How could she empathise? She was lucky enough not to have lost anyone in the war yet. Nancy was a widow. 'Of course I'll be at the party.'

'Splendid,' Carlotta replied. 'Well goodbye, I'm hanging up the telephone now.'

She did as she said and Nesta returned the receiver to its hook on the wall. She walked through the house, and out into the garden, where Imogen was taking tea while the children played on the grass with Sybil, the young nursery maid who helped Nanny Kate out from time to time. David loved Christopher and Jonathan, Imogen's two young sons, who at six and seven, weren't much older than him. David was such a beautiful child; robust and glowing with health,

his thick hair sandy blonde, his eyes dark brown. No one ever questioned Nesta about his appearance. After all, they just thought he had her colouring and Roland's eyes. Most of the time she forgot he wasn't hers. She'd cared for him since he was four days old - how could anyone else ever consider herself his mother?

'Who was that on the telephone?' Imogen asked as Nesta sat at the table with her.

'Carlotta Booth,' Nesta sighed. 'She's insistent that I go to the garden party next week. She wants me to talk to Nancy, her daughter. Apparently she's been in a funk since her husband died.'

'Well that's to be expected,' Imogen replied. 'What does she want her to do? Throw some sort of party to celebrate?'

'To be honest, I think Carlotta would throw a party for any occasion, and she can't understand anyone who doesn't share her sentiment. So, I was wondering if it would be okay if David stayed here for a couple of days next weekend?'

'Of course. I was actually thinking of taking the children to the beach house down in Worthing for a few days. I could take David with me.'

'That would be perfect,' Nesta replied. 'I'd prefer to go with you, but mother would go mad if she knew I'd let Carlotta down.'

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The following Friday morning, Nesta asked Hudson, Imogen's butler, to take her to Kingswood Station; and as a special treat, Imogen allowed Nanny Kate to come with them, so David could say goodbye to his mother. They sat cramped together in the little car, David on Nesta's lap, looking so sweet in his sailor suit, firing his toy gun out the window at imaginary Germans. He'd been obsessed with the war ever since his father and uncle went off to fight and would ask Nesta when he'd be old enough to go too. Nesta would always tell him that by the time he was old enough to fight, there would be no more wars, because this was the one to end all wars.

'Will you see Papa in London?' David asked, still stalking his pray out the window.

'No darling,' Nesta replied. 'Papa is still in France. I'm sure the war will be over soon though, and he'll be back with us.'

'When I'm big I'm going to kill hundreds of Germans,' he stated. 'Kill the Hun! Kill the Hun!'

'David!' Nanny Kate gasped. 'Who taught you such a thing?'

David turned to look at the elderly woman and frowned, wrinkling his perfect button nose.

'Chris and Jonathan,' he stated.

'Well they're naughty boys and shouldn't be teaching you such things.'

'Why not?' Hudson laughed from the front of the car. 'If I hadn't been invalidated, I'd be out there killing Huns. Good for you David!'

They got to the station and Hudson waited outside while the women and David went up to the platform. Nesta hated the thought of leaving her son for three days, and hoped he didn't have

too good a time down in Worthing with Imogen. She always had this fear that whatever she did for him wasn't good enough and he would prefer someone else and would want to stay with them.

'Now, you will be good for Imogen and Nanny Kate won't you?' she asked him, picking him up for one last cuddle.

'Yes,' he said, leaning forward and giving her a kiss on the nose. He was such an affectionate child; and while Roland was away, she could indulge him. Her husband disapproved of the way she mollycoddled David; allowing him to take his teddy bear to bed and play tea parties when the female children of friends came to visit. But Roland wasn't here and Nesta could raise her son how she wished.

'I'll bring you back a present. What would you like?'

'A gun!' he exclaimed.

'You've got a gun,' she laughed. 'How about a boat that you can float in the lake?'

'Yes!' he gasped. 'Thank you Mama.'

In the distance, Nesta could hear the chugging of the steam train approaching the platform. She put David down and hugged him to her, kissing the top of his head.

'I love you,' she said.

'Come come now David,' Nanny Kate said, obviously embarrassed by this display of affection. 'Your mother will be back on Sunday evening.'

She took David's hand and pulled him away. He whimpered on being separated from Nesta, and held out his arm to her. Nesta wanted to run to him and forget about going to London, but she knew she couldn't. She had a social duty, and Carlotta was part of her circle. The train arrived and Nesta took her place in the First Class carriage. She was quite glad she'd paid to travel this way, as the other carriages were packed full of soldiers home from leave; and it would no doubt be quite rowdy. She pushed down the window and leaned out, waving to David, who was still grizzling and reaching out to get to her.

'I'll see you on Sunday!' she called as the train started to move off.

'Mama! Mama!' he cried, pulling to get to her. Nesta had to sit down and not look at him, too disturbed by his distress. She hated being separated from him, and dreaded when the time came, when he was seven, that he would be expected to go off to Sunningdale School as a boarder. Roland had done the same thing when he was seven and had put David's name down as soon as they returned from New York. Nesta couldn't bear the thought of being away from him weeks at a time; and wished she had some way of changing Roland's mind and persuading him that David would do just as well as a day boy - somewhere closer to home.

Returning to Belgrave Square was strange for Nesta. The only occupants were Simpkins the Butler - who at fifty-one, was too old to be conscripted, and Mrs Turner, the cook. Judith popped in nearly every day to make sure everything was running smoothly, but other than that, the house stood like a relic to the life Nesta had had before Roland had gone off to war. Simpkins was pleased to see her, taking her bags into the house, while Nesta went into the drawing room.

She found Judith in there, dusting the ornaments on the mantelpiece even though no one was here to appreciate them. Judith liked things to be just so.

‘Welcome home Mrs Villiers,’ she said. ‘Safe journey?’

‘Yes,’ Nesta replied, taking off her gloves and sitting down. ‘The train was full of soldiers, but I was lucky to be in First Class away from them. How are you? How is Peter getting on?’

‘He was injured in action last week,’ Judith said, the worry evident in her eyes. ‘He’s due to leave hospital in a week or so, then they’ll be sending him home to recover. Send him home for bleedin’ good if I had my way. Sorry Lady Villiers, I didn’t mean to use bad language.’

‘Don’t be silly, it’s a worry for all of us. Tell you what, why don’t you go and make us some tea and we’ll have a chat. We’re all in the same boat with this war.’

‘Certainly madam,’ Judith said, and she scurried out of the room.

Nesta’s relationship with Judith had changed since David’s birth. She could see the suspicion in the housekeeper’s eyes every time she looked at the little boy, and Nesta got the feeling she knew the truth. After all, she’d made out to everyone that she’d only had a little bleed when she was five months pregnant, but Judith had seen the bloodbath that had occurred, and there was no way a baby could survive that. Judith knew her place and never challenged her mistress about it, but it didn’t sit well with Nesta that a member of her staff had a hold over her. And if Judith ever wanted to be spiteful, she could tell Roland the truth. Whether he’d believe her or not, Nesta didn’t know. He’d changed somewhat since David’s birth. He didn’t go out as often and she didn’t hear any reports of him being unfaithful; but he was still distant with her most of the time and if he had the chance, would belittle her in front of people. If he found out the boy he cherished, and had so many hopes for, was actually the stolen son of a possible criminal, he might not be quite so charitable.

Judith brought the tea and made a point of not sitting next to Nesta, but on the chair closest to the window. She looked as though she had lost weight. Her already lined face was more wrinkled, and as she held the tea cup, Nesta could see a slight shake in her hands. Nesta couldn’t begin to imagine what it must be like to have son away at war. She thought she might die if it ever happened to David. It was bad enough knowing he was down in Worthing and not in her care. Let alone miles away in France, being shot at every day by Germans.

‘How’s little David?’ Judith asked, and just thinking of him in the housekeeper’s presence made Nesta blush.

‘He’s fine,’ she replied. ‘Obsessed with the war and determined to become a soldier when he grows up. I’m hoping he changes his mind.’

‘You didn’t bring him back with you?’

‘No, I don’t like him being in London, it’s too dangerous. You never know when there’s going to be another Zeppelin raid. He’s gone to Worthing with Lady Mellors and her boys.’

‘He must be loving having two other little boys to play with?’

‘He is,’ Nesta smiled. ‘He keeps telling me he wants an older brother and I have to inform him that that is impossible.’

‘What about a younger brother or sister? Have you thought of that?’

'I don't think so. David is all I need. He's quite the handful.'

'He must take after Master Roland. He was a tearaway when he was a little boy.'

'I bet he was,' Nesta said, wanting to change the subject. 'I can't wait for this war to be over,' she sighed. 'Then we can all get back to normal.'

'There's some reckon we can never get back to how things were,' Judith lamented. 'Too many men damaged by what they've been through. Too many people not willing to listen to the aristocracy any more. Not when they're the ones who sit in big houses giving out orders, while the ordinary young men do all the fighting.'

'That's not entirely true. Roland and James are both officers and they're on the front line.'

'Have they seen any action yet though?'

'No, not exactly, they're more involved in the logistics. But I daresay they've still seen their fair share of horror.'

'You should read the letters my Peter sends me. The terrible things he's had to do, and the living conditions!'

'Don't upset yourself Judith,' Nesta said, somewhat embarrassed by her housekeeper's morose tone. 'The war will be over soon, I'm sure of it. Then our men will come home and everything will be okay.'

Hudson drove Nesta to Carlotta's house, and even on the short drive from Belgravia to Chelsea, she could see how neglected London looked. Young women were on the streets, doing jobs men had only done before. The car passed a tram and it was being driven by a young girl who looked no more than twenty. Soldiers home on leave milled around on street corners, smoking cigarettes and pushing each other in horseplay. When the car pulled up outside Carlotta's - and Nesta emerged; a young soldier walking by wolf-whistled her. Nesta was astounded to be greeted by such behaviour, wondering what was happening to the world. It seemed like only yesterday she was on the Titanic, and common young men like him were treated as third class citizens, sent to their certain death, while the likes of her were given preferential treatment. Now they had the audacity to call out to her in the street. But a part of her couldn't blame them. They were fighting for her country - so she could live a free life. Didn't they deserve a bit of equality?

Carlotta's garden party looked more like a ladies' meeting rather than a social occasion. There wasn't a man under the age of forty in attendance, and Nesta found this quite shocking. The women were in all their finery, sipping champagne and making polite conversation; but she wondered how many of them laid awake at night worrying about what was happening to their sons and husbands and brothers. Whenever someone turned up with a telegram at Crosslands, Nesta would hold her breath and cross her fingers, hoping nothing had happened to Roland or James.

Carlotta looked rather splendid in a dress she'd had especially made in red white and blue, in order to appear patriotic (even though she was American). It was a beautiful, summer's afternoon and as she held court in her garden, swanning from one person to another, talking about the weather, holiday plans and the children's education; she made sure the conversation

was kept away from the war. There was an unpleasant scene when Sir Bernard Critchley challenged Carlotta about America's reluctance to join in, and with her unable to defend Mr Wilson's decision, the conversation was soon averted to something more suitable.

Nesta was just as bored as ever, and wondered how Imogen was getting on down in Worthing with the boys. She hoped David was missing her. She would often torment herself, convinced that he didn't feel the same bond with her as a child who lived with its real mother. She wondered if he had any memories of Alice. She knew this was stupid - he was taken away from her when he was just a few days old. But sometimes the guilt she still felt about snatching him would drive her mad.

Noticing that Nesta had drifted away from the throng a little and was by herself, pretending to admire the beautiful rose bush the gardener had cultivated, Carlotta took it as an opportunity to approach her.

'How is everything in Surrey?' she asked.

'Fine,' Nesta replied. 'Imogen's taken the children down to Sussex for the weekend. I hope David isn't getting up to too much mischief. He's so obsessed with the war, he'll probably try and swim out to any passing boat, hoping it'll take him to France.'

'Talking of which, Nancy is upstairs in her room. Could you please go and talk to her Nesta? I had Doctor Francis out last night because she wouldn't stop crying. I fear my next step will be the asylum.'

'Okay,' Nesta replied reluctantly, nervous about what she was going to face. Even so, it was quite a relief to be taken away from the party. Ever since the Titanic, she couldn't view her own class in quite the same way. Hearing them chatting on endlessly about trivial things, drinking too much champagne and celebrating their wealth just reminded her of those four days before that terrible accident; when birthright had saved so many like her, and sent those less fortunate to their deaths. She often wanted to shout at them and tell them to shut up, but always bit her tongue.

She went into the house and up to the top floor, where Nancy's room was. Nesta knocked on the door and there was a cough, rather than a response, and she pushed the door open. She received a shock to find the room stank of cigarette smoke and the air was so hazy, she could barely see. The bed was unmade, and sitting by it, with her legs up on the windowsill, smoking a cigarette, was Nancy. Nesta had last seen her a couple of years ago at her wedding to Edwin; and she'd made such a beautiful bride, with her long, curly, minky brown hair; blue eyes and cupid's bow mouth. She was so dainty and feminine, and she and the handsome Edwin had looked like something from a fairy tale. Unlike a lot of people of their class, they hadn't married for money or status. They'd married for love. Edwin was her brother's friend and she'd known him all her life and adored him.

With the image of that beautiful young bride in her white dress, in mind, Nesta was shocked to discover Nancy had chopped off all her lovely hair, and was left with a crop of curls that came to just below her ears. Even more alarming was the fact that her tiny body was swamped in a pair of Edwin's corduroy trousers, which she'd had to roll up, to stop herself from



falling over; and a long white shirt which was also obviously her husband's. She didn't acknowledge Nesta, just sat staring out the window, blowing smoke out of it, as if wanting it to land on all the guests in the garden and horrify them.

'I take it Mother has sent you?' she said without looking at Nesta.

'She's concerned about you,' Nesta said. 'May I sit down?'

'It's a free country.'

Nesta perched on the messy bed, and noticed the scrunched up handkerchiefs scattered around - no doubt filled with Nancy's tears. She wondered if she would react so badly if Roland died. She knew she'd feel sad and upset that David would have lost his father. But she couldn't imagine herself wallowing like Nancy was. If she was honest, most of the time she was happier away from her husband.

'What have you done to your hair?' she asked. 'It was always so lovely.'

'It was a burden. I don't want to look pretty and like a girl. Out there are thousands of women doing jobs men normally do; keeping this country running, and what thanks are they going to get? When the men come home they'll just be expected to return to being little women. Keeping house and raising the children.'

'There's nothing wrong with that. I daresay most of them would prefer that.'

'Any woman would prefer to earn her own money than be dependent on a man. Some of those women have never worked before. They've had husbands who've kept them so badly, they've had to starve just so their children can be fed. Now their husbands are at war and they're working and looking after their family properly. No woman is going to want to return to servitude.'

Nesta didn't know what to say. She didn't know where these ideas of Nancy's had come from. Maybe Carlotta was right; she did need a spell in an asylum - just until she'd come to terms with Edwin's death.

Nancy turned to look at her, those turquoise blue eyes full of fury and hurt and confusion. Nesta wanted to reach out and hug her. Despite the haircut and the men's clothes, she still looked like that frail little girl who'd got married the day before war broke out.

'Do you remember once when we had dinner? It was before I married Edwin, and still lived here. We were in Mama's drawing room and talking, and you were telling me how wretched you felt about how you were treated on the Titanic? That you were saved because you were rich, whereas poor people were left to die?'

'Well, yes, I remember saying it. But I also remember I'd drunk a little too much wine that evening and was tipsy and didn't know what I was saying.'

'No, I think you knew exactly what you were saying. And that's how it is Nesta. Before he died, Edwin wrote to me and told me how all the boys under him in his unit were no more than twenty-one, and all from poor families. Some of them could barely read and write, and had left school when they were twelve. Every single one of those men were slaughtered. And do you know where the generals were? Living in chateaus miles away from the Front Line. It's immoral Nesta.'

‘But it's the way things are. Have you any idea what it was like sitting in a lifeboat, watching that mighty ship break into two pieces and sink while people screamed for their lives? I took David to the swimming baths last year and I had to run out because the smell of the water and the sound of people shouting and calling to one another terrified me. I felt so helpless that night; so spoilt and privileged to be given the chance to survive just because I was born rich. I know it's immoral, but what can we do?’

‘We can fight it. I've been going to Socialist meetings and we're planning a march to protest about the war.’

‘What's the point of that? The war's been going for nearly two years now.’

‘That doesn't matter. If they know they're losing support they might just bring our boys home. What are they fighting for anyway?’

‘To stop German aggression.’

‘German aggression,’ Nancy nodded. ‘I see. So, just because they dare to try and empire build, just like we've done for the past hundred years; they have to be knocked down, and our boys killed in the process.’

‘This anger isn't going to bring Edwin back. It's just going to make you unwell.’

‘It's good for me Nesta. It gives me something to focus on. I'm not lucky like you. If something happened to Roland, you've got your little boy. I've nothing to live for. All I can do is to make sure a war like this never happens again.’ She reached out and grasped Nesta's arm, making her jump. ‘Come to the meeting with me tomorrow,’ she said. ‘When are you going home?’

‘Late tomorrow afternoon.’

‘The meeting's at half twelve. I could drive you to the station afterwards.’

‘You can drive?’

‘Yes. Eddy taught me before he went off to France. Mama won't notice if the car's gone or not. She'll be too busy sleeping off her hangover from today.’

‘I have no place at a Socialist meeting,’ Nesta said. ‘And neither have you.’

‘Please, just consider it. I know you hate people like my mother and her ilk. I've seen you at endless parties, trying to distance yourself from them. Socialism is the only answer. The world's going to change Nesta. The people who we've had as servants for hundreds of years, are now fighting alongside men like Eddy and Roland and James. They're not going to be willing to come back and doff their caps and say ‘Yes Sir, No Sir’. They're going to expect equal rights, and that will only happen under a Socialist regime.’

Nesta thought about it. Poor Nancy was so deluded and grief-stricken that this was her only way of coping. But if it gave her comfort, she didn't see the harm. Maybe if she went along to this meeting, she would see it was nothing for Carlotta to worry about. They were probably no more than a group of widowed upper and middle-class women who needed to vent their anger somewhere. She was sure Nancy was perfectly safe and once she'd got over her grief, she'd return to normal.

‘Okay I’ll come,’ she said. ‘But don’t expect me to be converted. I’m not convinced Socialism is the way forward.’

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Nesta had no idea what to wear to the meeting at the Free Trade Hall in Marylebone. She hardly thought it fitting to wear a fur stole or something equally ostentatious, so instead opted for a light blue summer’s dress with a thin jacket - as it felt like it might rain. She kept her hat simple and wore no jewellery. The women she was going to be meeting with were currently venting their anger towards the likes of her, and she hardly wanted to give fuel to their fire. She took a taxi over to Marylebone, and was rather disconcerted to find The Free Trade Hall to be a grubby looking place on the corner of a road containing equally grubby houses. Ragged children played on the street, their mothers gathered on doorsteps, gossiping. Nesta felt out of place in her clean, expensive dress; and the soot and dirt that covered every surface seemed to seep in and make her feel dirty.

Nancy was waiting outside, talking to another young woman. Once again she was dressed in Edwin’s clothes – this time a white granddad shirt and trousers held up with braces. Nesta had never seen such a queer thing, and wished Nancy could have worn a nice dress like her young companion had. She almost felt like holding her jacket open and shielding Nancy from the world.

‘Glad you could make it,’ Nancy said, slapping Nesta on the shoulder like a man. ‘Nesta this is Jane Holby. Jane, this is Nesta Villiers, the Titanic survivor.’

‘I’ve heard so much about your plight,’ Jane gushed, grasping Nesta’s hand and shaking it. ‘It must have been dreadful.’

‘It was, yes,’ Nesta replied, a little taken aback by the girl’s enthusiasm. She looked no more than twenty – even younger than Nancy; and Nesta wondered what her parents were doing allowing her to attend such places.

‘Come on in,’ Jane said. ‘We haven’t a large turn out, but I hope you’ll find something interesting today.’

Nesta followed Jane and Nancy into the smelly hall. The wood was dark, the floors had been cheaply polished and were slippery. It was laid out like a church, with pews either side of an aisle, and at the bottom was a small stage with a table upon it. Seated behind it were three rather stern-faced, robust looking women in large hats. Nesta looked around and saw there were few men here. There was one young boy at the front, who looked about sixteen, and a couple of elderly, scholarly looking men at the back, talking amongst themselves. There could have been no more than fifteen people in attendance, and Nesta wondered what they hoped to achieve. With so many respectable-looking young women here, there was nothing for Carlotta to worry about. This really was just a place for Nancy to come to get over her grief.

The three of them took their seats close to the front, and soon after, the largest and oldest of the women at the table stood up. Nancy leaned over to Nesta and whispered in her ear.

‘That’s Hermione North,’ she said. ‘She used to be best friends with Mrs Pankhurst, but they don’t speak any more because Mrs Pankhurst supports the war.’

Nesta just nodded and remained silent, thinking of all the names Roland had called Emmeline Pankhurst over the years. He claimed women like her were nothing more than rabble rousers and trouble makers, and that women had done perfectly well for years without the vote, so why should they get it now? Nesta would always silently disagree, thinking that decisions the government made affected them all, so why shouldn't women have a say in who was in charge? But it was never worth expressing these opinions to Roland. He would shoot her down in flames and claim she was being hysterical. It was easier to keep them to herself; but today there was something refreshing about being in a place where people thought the same as her.

'Thank you for attending!' the very posh, loud woman bellowed from the stage, her fat stomach visibly wobbling from under her skirt as she spoke. We have some guest speakers today - Mr Walter Southby from the Bethnal Green Workhouse, Mrs Ponsonby from the Board of Guardians for Whitechapel, and Mrs Rose Hopkirk who has recently lost her son in the war. There will be time for questions afterwards.'

Nesta looked at her watch, wondering how long this was going to go on for. Her train left at five fifteen and she desperately wanted to go home and see David. While Mr Southby spoke about the conditions in the workhouse in Bethnal Green, and how he was arguing with the owners that a bigger annexe should be built to house women who'd been widowed in the war, Nesta drifted off somewhat. She realised that it was July the first - James was thirty-three today. He should have been spending it here in England with her and David, not in a muddy trench in Northern France. She decided she would throw a party for him when he returned. She might even invite all the prettiest girls she could muster in the hope of finding him a wife - James had been on his own for far too long now.

Before she knew it, Mr Southby had stopped talking and the audience was clapping him. Nesta clapped too, out of politeness, although she'd hardly taken in much of what he'd said. Next came up Mrs Ponsonby, a member of both the Board of Guardians and the Labour Party. Her speech was a little more interesting. She spoke of the plight of the girls who were coming to her for help because they had been forced into prostitution to support their families while their husbands were at war. Mrs Ponsonby was a little, frail looking woman and to hear her talking of such a distasteful subject was quite alarming and yet fascinating.

'I recently came across a whole family of prostitutes living in a slum in Aldgate,' she said, waving her piece of paper at the audience. 'The mother and her two daughters were forced to sell their bodies to soldiers home on leave, just so they could live; and yet her husband and eldest son are fighting for this country. And what are they going to come home to? A country still filled with unfit housing, still ravaged by poverty. An ungrateful aristocracy who'll spit upon them and expect them to clean their water closets and muck out their horses. The youngest daughter in this family is thirteen and yet she looks like a woman of forty because of the wretched life she is leading - abused by men night after night after night. I am campaigning for the men who prey on vulnerable women like this, for their own immoral ends and greed for money, to be imprisoned.'

One of the elderly men at the back of the hall raised his hand and Mrs Ponsonby pointed to him, urging him to speak.

‘But madam,’ he said. ‘Surely these women are better off earning a living - however distasteful it is to us, then it is for them to starve to death in a ditch.’

‘But they are still starving,’ Mrs Ponsonby replied. ‘Their pimps are taking large percentages of their earnings. I found the baby of the eldest daughter crawling in the road outside their slum-house, scavenging for rotten potato peelings. We are one of the richest and most prosperous countries in the world and it is disgusting that people should live this way.’

Nesta was horrified by what she’d heard. She tried to imagine being so poor that David was starving and could only get sustenance from rotten food. She thought of the fund-raising she’d done when returning from America, for the women who were widowed from the Titanic disaster. She’d never actually visited these women, or seen the conditions in which they lived; and her imagination wouldn’t allow her to think of them living in hovels. But the truth was, she lived in a society where the rich were extremely rich and the poor were little more than beggars.

After Mrs Ponsonby finished speaking, there was a break, and Hermione North came down off the stage. She approached Nancy and Jane and sat in the pew in front of them, looking round.

‘How are the plans going for the march?’ she asked.

‘Very well thank you Hermione,’ Nancy replied. ‘I’ve written to every group around the country and invited them down to join us.’

‘Splendid.’ She looked at Nesta and frowned. ‘Who is this?’

‘This is Nesta Villiers. She’s an old friend of my family. Nesta, this is Hermione North, she’s organising the march we’re doing next weekend.’

‘So you’re a Socialist?’ Hermione said to Nesta.

‘I have social conscience,’ she replied nervously. ‘Although I wouldn’t consider myself a Socialist.’

‘Nesta was on the Titanic,’ Jane said excitedly.

‘Were you?’ Hermione frowned. ‘Dreadful affair. All those people dead, and most of them Third Class.’

‘I’m aware of that, yes,’ Nesta replied, hating to be reminded of it.

‘Another example of Imperialism. The rich were protected, whilst the poor were left to die.’

‘I’ve done all I can to raise money for those women widowed by the disaster,’ Nesta said defensively. ‘I hated the thought of them being left destitute.’

‘Good woman,’ Hermione said. ‘I bet most of your kind were just grateful to be alive, and to hell with the poor devils who perished in that freezing sea.’

Hermione went back up on stage and called for quiet. She then introduced the next speaker - a meek little woman called Rose Hopkirk. Her clothes were basic, her hair mousy and tied in a bun at the back. She had the ruddy complexion of someone who worked outdoors; and Nesta could see straight away that she did not belong to their class. Her eyes darted around the room in terror at the thought of having to speak to these people, and her hands were shaking as she held a piece of paper in her hand.

‘T-Thank you for letting me speak to you,’ she said, her voice barely audible, her accent cockney. ‘I don’t understand politics or anything like that, I’m just a mother of eight from the Elephant and Castle. I was asked to speak today because like you, I want the war to stop. My son, Private John Hopkirk was killed in action in France, three weeks ago. He was my eldest boy, a little tinker when he was a kid, and always getting into scrapes as he got older. But he loved his mum, went to church on Sunday, and always kept an eye out for his brothers and sisters. He joined up last year when he got to seventeen and was so excited to be going off and fighting for the Empire. But as soon as he got to France, he saw how things really were, and I want to read you this letter. It was the first letter I ever got from him.’

She raised the piece of paper she’d been holding, and held it quite close to her face.

‘Hello mum,’ she began. ‘How are you and how is everyone? I’m alright I suppose, but it ain’t half horrible here. The trench is cold and dirty and at night when you’re trying to sleep, the rats nibble at your face. You know what I was like mum, always a messy eater, I reckon they’re trying to get crumbs. It got a bit hairy the other day when Davy, one of the other lads, was up fixing the barbed wire. He got hit by a German bullet, but luckily it just grazed his shoulder. General Mountford came to see us yesterday and he reckons we’ll be seeing action any day soon. I can’t wait to get stuck into the Bosch. General Mountford reckons we just need one really big push and it’ll be over. Apparently the Germans are on the ropes. So I’m hoping to see you for Christmas mum. All my love, John.’

She wiped a tear and folded the letter up, putting it into her apron pocket, from which she pulled another piece of paper which she unfolded.

‘This is the last letter my son ever wrote me.’ She paused again, wiping another tear. ‘I got it one week before he died. ‘Hello mum. Please can you help me get out of here? I think I’m losing my mind. Last week there was a mortar attack and I was blown clean off my feet. When I came to, I had someone’s leg lying across my chest. After that I couldn’t speak for days and kept shaking, and Captain Adams threatened me that if I was putting on being mad so I couldn’t fight, then he would have me Court Martialled. It has rained non-stop for three days and my boots are ruined from the mud seeping in. It feels like my right foot is swollen and I can hardly walk on it. One of the young Privates – Collins, had to be taken to the field hospital because he kept us awake all night screaming. It was because he saw a German blown to pieces not more than six feet away. Yes, a German. I know they’re the enemy, but when you see them and look them in the eyes, you see they’re men just like you. They’re human beings and seeing someone die like that in front of you is too much. I’m sorry to be so down mum, I’ll be cheerier next time, apparently we’re due some sunshine next week. See you soon mum. John.’

With tears streaming down her face, Rose folded the letter and put it back into her apron. Nesta could feel her pain. For any mother to know their child was suffering like that and not be able to help would be unbearable. Then to lose them... She admired the woman’s dignity and wondered how she managed to hold herself together.

‘I only got this letter because one of his mates smuggled it out for him when he came home on leave. Otherwise they’d have never let him send it. My son will never write me another letter.

We can't afford to bring him home, so he's going to be buried in a grave in France. I've spoken to other mothers and they won't even have the comfort of knowing that. Their sons were left to rot in No Man's Land until the troops advanced and managed to capture the land, and by then the boys had turned to bones and couldn't be identified. I'm sorry, but before this I believed in God and King and Country, but now I don't believe in any of it. I wouldn't care if the Germans won the war tomorrow and came and invaded us. The people in charge of this country don't care about us, they never have. If they did, they wouldn't have let this happen to my boy.'

It became too much for her and she started to cry. She climbed down off the stage and sat in the front pew. The members of the audience started to clap, and Nesta joined them. This was the side of the war that the newspapers rarely reported. They were normally full of tales of our 'brave boys' on the front line. Making their deaths sound like sacrifices to the cause of the greater good. But every death left a mother like Rose Hopkirk behind.

Hermione took to the stage and thanked Rose, before starting the debate. Nesta couldn't pay any attention. She just kept thinking about that poor woman having no grave to go and visit. Someone like her would never be able to afford to visit France once the war was over; so it would seem like John had never existed. Just like some of those who perished on the Titanic - unidentified and now buried in unmarked graves in Canada with no one to visit them and lay flowers on their birthday.

The meeting finished and Nancy said she would go off to get the car. Nesta remained behind and took the opportunity to approach Rose Hopkirk, who was now chatting to Mrs Ponsonby.

'Your speech was very moving,' Nesta said. 'I'm so sorry for your loss.'

Rose looked at her and furrowed her brow. Nesta quickly offered her hand.

'I'm sorry, Nesta Villiers. My friend brought me here today. I was so moved by your son's letters. I was on the Titanic. I witnessed people crying for help as the ship sank, and it saddens me that many of them are now in unmarked graves in Canada and their families will never be able to visit them. I can't help them, but I'd like to help you. If you'd allow me, I'd like to pay for your son's body to be returned to England and given a proper burial.'

'Mrs Villiers!' gasped Hermione.

'Do you mean that?' Rose asked, her voice filled with suspicion. 'But you don't know me.'

'It doesn't matter. My husband and my brother are both at the Front. My son is only four, and I don't even want to begin to imagine what it would be like to lose him. Please, accept my gift.' She looked at Hermione. 'Have you any writing paper and a pen?' she asked.

'Yes, of course,' replied a bemused Hermione. 'I'll just go and get it.'

She went off and Rose offered her hand to Nesta.

'Thank you so much,' she said. 'I didn't come here tonight looking for charity.'

'No, you came here tonight to get your message across, and it worked. I want your address so I can write to you and we can make arrangements. So many of our boys are going to be left on those fields. We don't have to let your John be one of them.'

She took Rose's address, and promised she would write soon. She then left the taciturn, rather stunned woman and walked out with Nancy to the car.

'What did you think?' Nancy asked, before getting in. 'Have I converted you?'

'You're not going to make me a Socialist,' Nesta lamented. 'But I do see why you go to these meetings. It feels good to help others.'

'So will you come on the march?' Nancy beamed.

'No,' Nesta smiled. 'I don't think I'll be going that far.'

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Nesta went back to Kingswood and things returned to normal. The children had had a lovely time in Worthing, but she was pleased when David greeted her with a big hug. Her boy was her world and it made her heart ache even more for poor Mrs Hopkirk and the thousands like her who had lost sons. On the Monday, the newspapers were filled with the big push that had happened at the Somme in Northern France. Hundreds of casualties were reported, and a chill ran down Nesta's spine. She couldn't shake the sense of foreboding for the rest of the day - both James and Roland were stationed at Albert, which was where the battle took place. She didn't express her fears to Imogen, feeling she was being silly. There were thousands of men stationed there, and if only a few hundred had died, there was a likely possibility James and Roland were okay. She got on with her day, writing to Rose Hopkirk and telling her a bit more about herself and asking for details on where John currently was, and where she would like him to be buried.

While she sat at the desk in Imogen's study, she looked out of the window at David playing in the garden, with Christopher and Jonathan. He was pretending to shoot them and they were falling down dead, then getting up and laughing. She hoped they were right when they said this was the war to end all wars; she never wanted another one to happen. She wanted David to grow up and do something decent with his life - be it joining Villiers hotels, or becoming a doctor or a lawyer, or even a playboy who squandered all the family money. She didn't care. Anything was better than a dead soldier.

There was a knock on the door, and Hudson, the butler came in clutching a letter, his expression solemn. Nesta's blood ran cold and she started to shake - without even reading it, she knew it bore bad news.

'A young man from the War Office brought this for you madam,' he said gravely.

'Thank you Hudson,' she replied, trying to smile. She took the letter and waited for him to leave the room. Picking up the letter opener on the desk, she sliced the envelope open and pulled out the telegram. It simply read;

*Madam*



*It is my painful duty to inform you that a report has been received from the War Office notifying the death of 7832 Captain Roland Villiers of the London Regiment on the first day of July 1916. The report is that he was Killed in Action.*

Nesta couldn't bring herself to read the rest, expressing the sympathies of the King and Lord Kitchener. She dropped the telegram and clutched her stomach, staring into space, trying to take in what had happened. She was a widow. Roland, who she had at times hated, despised and loathed, was dead. All she could think of was that she was glad it was not James; and at the same time wondered if she would receive another telegram later saying he was dead too. Behind her she could hear David shouting and singing, and realised that she was going to have to tell the little boy that his papa would not be coming home. How could one explain something like that to a four year old?

The door opened and Imogen came in, wearing a white summer dress and clutching a tennis racquet.

'I wondered if you fancied a game old girl?' she asked perkily. Her mood immediately dropped when she saw her cousin sitting still, her complexion pale, a piece of paper at her feet.

'Oh no,' she uttered, rushing over to Nesta and kneeling in front of her. 'Which one is it?'

Nesta opened her mouth, but no words came out. Her mouth was dry, her throat closed. Imogen picked up the telegram and read it.

'I'm so sorry Nesta,' she said. 'I don't know what to say.'

'How am I going to tell David?' Nesta suddenly blurted out. 'How am I going to tell my little boy that the papa he adores is dead?'

'You don't have to tell him yet Nessie. Get used to the news yourself first. David's too young to understand anyway.'

'This bloody war!' Nesta spat. 'What's the point of it all?'

'We all know the point. If we hadn't gone to war, the Germans would have invaded by now. Roland didn't die in vain, try and remember that.'

Nesta went to bed for the rest of the day. She couldn't bring herself to cry, because she didn't know how she felt. She had stopped loving Roland a very long time ago, and if she was honest with herself, she had been happiest these recent times when he was away and she could do as she pleased. But he was her husband and the only father David had ever known, and she knew she would feel his loss deeply. Then there was Villiers Hotels. They were a major chain around Europe and now the head of the company was dead. His intention had been to groom David to take it over one day, but he was still only a small child - who would look after it now? James would have to do it until David was old enough to take it on. She wondered if Roland's death was some sort of punishment for her snatching David from Alice Fairfax. The past four years had been golden; Roland doted on the boy, and had even been relatively pleasant to her because she'd provided him with an heir. At the back of her mind, she'd always been expecting something to go wrong; either Alice to remember everything and track her down and demand her

son back, or David to fall ill, or for them to lose all their money. Her penance came in the fact that she was not even thirty-five and a widow. If God really wanted to rub salt into the wounds He would take James as well.

The following day she made sure she dressed in black, and wrote to Roland's elderly aunt in Jersey to inform her of her nephew's death. Roland hadn't come from a large family and so there was no one else to tell. She then wrote to the War Office asking if it was possible for his body to be returned to England so he could be buried in the family plot. She then sent Hudson out to send a telegram to her mother in New York. She still hadn't told David about his papa, and was waiting for the right moment to come. In the little boy's head, his father and uncle were in a foreign land, having great adventures like the ones that had been read to him from books. The thought of shattering his dreams was unbearable, and she still wasn't sure how she was going to do it.

When there was a knock on the door of the study, and Mrs Brookes, the housekeeper, came in, Nesta audibly caught her breath, convinced that the woman had brought another telegram; this time telling her James had died.

'There's a visitor for you ma'am,' she said. 'A Captain Redfern from the War Office.'

'T-Thank you,' Nesta uttered. 'Let him in Mrs Brookes.'

The housekeeper stepped to one side and into the room swept a very dashing man in full uniform. He took off his hat to reveal a head of copper hair, and did a little bow to Nesta.

'Mrs Villiers,' he said. 'I'm Captain Redfern from the War Office. May I sit down?'

'Yes of course,' Nesta said, motioning to the sofa in the middle of the room. She could barely find the strength to get up from the desk and walk over to join him. If something had happened to James, she didn't know how she was going to cope. She adored her brother, and his loss would effect far more than Roland's.

She sat beside the soldier, and braced herself for what he was about to say.

'I'm so sorry to hear of the loss of your husband, Captain Villiers,' the young man said. 'We will make any arrangements we can to have his body returned to you, if it is at all possible.'

'Thank you very much.'

'But I'm here to talk about your brother.'

'Is he dead?' she blurted out.

'No,' he replied. 'But he was injured at Somme, where your husband was killed. Captain Tanner has been blinded in one eye by shrapnel and also has a broken foot. Tonight he's leaving the Field Hospital and will be brought home to Epsom Hospital where they have a specialist in eye injuries.'

Nesta let out a sob of relief. She didn't care if James was blind or had lost both his legs or arms or anything. He was alive, and that was the most important thing.

'Thank you,' she cried. 'Thank you for telling me. I was so frightened that my brother had died too.'

'To be honest, it's a change to be giving someone good news. All I ever seem to do is give bad news these days. That's off the record of course.'

‘Of course. Will James be allowed to stay home now?’

‘If the sight in his right eye doesn’t return, then yes, he’ll stay home.’

‘Can I go and see him tomorrow?’

‘Of course you can,’ he smiled. ‘A friendly face might just be the thing to get him better.’

Nesta wanted to take David with her to the hospital the following day, as she thought having his little nephew around might make James feel better. But Imogen reminded her that this was no ordinary hospital visit. The ward would be filled with soldiers with possibly horrendous injuries and wasn’t the place for a little boy. So Nesta relented, promising David that he would see his Uncle James soon. When he asked if he would see his papa again soon, she glossed over the subject and said Papa was busy.

Hudson drove Nesta the short journey to Epsom Hospital, and as the car pulled into the drive of the grand Victorian building, she noticed some soldiers out on the grounds, sitting in their wheelchairs. One had a bandage all around his head, with only slits for his eyes and mouth, and Nesta shuddered to think what his face looked like under there. Another had both his legs and an arm missing, and even though his female visitor was trying to engage him in conversation, he responded by sitting staring blankly into space. It was a heart-wrenching and upsetting sight, and Nesta was scared at what she was going to face inside.

A young nurse took her into the ward where James was staying. It was packed full of beds, upon which lounged young men with various injuries - but none as horrific as the men outside. One young chap who was laying on his bed, playing cards by himself, wolf-whistled Nesta as she walked past. The nurse soon reprimanded him.

‘Now now Robbins,’ she said. ‘I’ll have none of that in here.’

She looked round at Nesta and frowned.

‘I’m sorry about that. After months on the frontline, they don’t know how to behave around women.’

James was sitting in a wheelchair beside his bed. An ugly bandage was wrapped around one side of his head, covering his right eye. A huge cast covered his right foot. Even in his pyjamas and dressing gown, Nesta could see he had lost weight. He looked gaunt.

‘Your sister’s here to see you Captain Tanner,’ the nurse said.

‘Um?’ he said, lifting his head. ‘Who said that?’

The nurse bent down to his level, smiling at him indulgently.

‘It’s me, Nurse Beesley. Your sister has come to see you.’

‘Nessie?’ he whispered. ‘Nessie’s here?’

Choking back her tears, Nesta reached out and grasped his hand.

‘I’m here darling,’ she said.

He turned his head to look at her, and even though his left eye could see her perfectly; he instead seemed to stare off into the distance.

‘Roland’s dead,’ he said.

‘I know,’ Nesta replied.

‘Come now Captain Tanner,’ the nurse said. ‘Don’t talk about sad things. Why don’t you let Lady Villiers take you out into the grounds?’ She threw Nesta a look, willing her to do it. She had no choice but to wheel James’ chair out onto the well-cut gardens. She found a bench and put the wheelchair beside it. James reached into his pocket and took out his cigarettes, but he could barely see to light it - not having adjusted to one eye yet, and in the end Nesta lit it for him.

‘David can’t wait to see you,’ she said. ‘He’s grown so much since you last saw him.’

‘He can’t see me like this,’ James spat. ‘I’m a wreck.’

‘No you’re not. You’re my handsome, brave brother who I adore and always have done.’

‘I’m not brave. Those men lying on No Man’s Land are brave. I was supposed to lead them Nesta. I was their Captain and yet I’m alive. I’m only alive because a pile of bodies landed on top of me. Can you imagine that Nesta? Laying underneath the bodies of young men you’ve had a laugh with, shared food with, given advice about girls to? Bits of their bodies lying on top of you still warm and twitching.’

He was visibly shaking and Nesta put out her hand to steady him. James had always been so debonair and handsome and strong, and now he was a quivering shell. A shadow of the man he once was.

‘Don’t torment yourself,’ she said softly. ‘I know something of what you’re going through. For months after the Titanic, I would lie awake at night, replaying the screams of those people as the ship sank, and I’d ask God why he saved me and let them die. But you get to a point where enough is enough and you have to move on. Because if you don’t, those people died in vain. God let you live for a reason James. I’m going to need you more than ever now. I’m on my own.’

‘I can never be the man I was,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘I can never get away from that Trench, in here.’ He banged his head with his palm. ‘It’s all in here and it won’t go away.’

He was becoming more and more agitated and it tore at Nesta’s heart to see him like it.

‘Oh Jamie,’ she sighed, using his childhood nickname. ‘My darling Jamie. It will be alright, I promise. You can go home soon. Imogen will let you stay with her, and you’ll be able to convalesce properly. I refuse to let you become a shell. You’re my wonderful brother and you’re going to get better.’

She realised he’d stopped listening to her, and was instead staring into space, tormented by the pictures playing in his mind. Nesta knew exactly what he was going through. Except when she’d left the Titanic, she’d had David as a distraction. How she wished James had children of his own, then he would have something to live for.

‘I’ll take you inside,’ she said. ‘It looks like it might rain.’

Hudson drove her back to Kingswood, and on the way, as they passed through little villages, Nesta wanted to get out and tear down the posters on display. ‘*Your Country Needs You*’, ‘*Women of Britain say Go*’; no woman in her right mind would send her husband or brother or son to the hell hole that was Northern France. She fought back tears, determined not to cry in front of a servant; but it was so difficult when she kept thinking about James and how broken he was. She thought back to the beginning of the war, when so many young men had

volunteered to fight for their country - not aware that the Germans had artillery that was far superior to theirs. That typical English cockiness had made them think they were invincible. After all, nations didn't build Empires from being weak. They never stopped to think that other countries were following their example and building heavy machinery and warfare. Now they were paying the price.

Something changed inside Nesta. So much had happened in the past few days to make her realise that what she'd begun to suspect that night when the Titanic sank was true - the world was brutally unfair and unjust. She thought of all those poor soldiers back at the hospital, hideously wounded, or like James, shocked and disturbed by what they'd experienced. What on earth was worth that? Certainly not England being able to conquer more territory.

She got home and Mrs Brookes informed her that Imogen had taken the children down to the local lake to go swimming. Nesta thanked her and went into the study. She picked up the telephone and dialled Carlotta's house. When she got put through, she spoke to Walsh the Butler, and asked him if she could speak to Nancy. The phone was put down for some time before it was finally picked up, and when Nancy spoke, she sounded as far away as her mother had the other week.

'Hello Nesta,' she said.

'Is that march still on this Sunday?' Nesta asked.

'Yes, it is. Why do you ask?'

'Because I'd like to join you. Someone's got to call for a stop to this bloody war.'

Chapter Twelve  
New York – July 1917

Alice fell back onto the bed, holding *The New York Times* above her head and reading aloud.

‘Alicia Bloom set the stage alight with her portrayal of the feckless Blanche in the new production of *Savannah Nights* at the Broadway Theatre. Her Southern Belle accent was impeccable and no-one would ever believe that Ms Bloom is actually English. Her classiness lifted this rather tawdry tale of forbidden love, to acceptable heights, and by far Miss Bloom saved the day. The script was weak and the staging poor but I would urge anyone to go see this play, just to observe the current darling of the New York Theatre scene.’

She put the paper down and gave a triumphant laugh. Allen pulled her into his arms and kissed the top of her head.

‘Didn't I tell ya all those years ago that you were going to be a big star?’ he chuckled. ‘Now you have the world at your feet.’

‘Maybe not the world. No one outside of America has heard of me.’

‘Yeah, but you wait until that movie you made with Charlie Chaplin gets seen around the world. You'll be a superstar.’

Alice wriggled away from her husband and climbed on top of him, bending down and kissing him upon the lips.

‘You have too much faith in me,’ she said. ‘People will just look at me and think, who's that scrawny broad trying to act with Charlie?’

‘No. Did RT Baines not say you were the most beautiful actress on Broadway?’

‘Okay okay!’ laughed Alice. ‘I give up. You're my number one fan and that isn't going to change is it?’

‘Nope.’

Alice climbed off Allen and went over to the window of their brand new Greenwich Village apartment. It was Independence Day, and it had obviously given the government an excuse to promote the war. All over lamp-posts and on billboards, young boys were putting up posters requesting men join up, saying their country needed them. Alice didn't want to think about the war. She'd heard such horror stories of English men being slaughtered on the battlefields; and up until earlier this year, she'd felt safe in the knowledge that America was refusing to take part. That had changed in April, when Mr Wilson decided to join the Allies and fight against the Central Powers. Now young men were being drafted to go and serve, and every day she dreaded the post arriving, and that letter, calling Allen up.

‘So Miss Broadway,’ he called from the bed. ‘What do you fancy doing this Independence Day?’

‘I did say we'd drop into Richard's party this afternoon,’ Alice replied, walking back over to the bed and sitting beside her husband, reaching out and stroking his floppy dark hair from his

eyes. 'He's trying to entertain the local wealthy ladies so they'll back his idea of a welfare system for women whose husbands are at war. Is that okay?'

Allen took her hand and brought it to his lips, kissing it tenderly.

'Anywhere you are, I'm happy,' he said. 'Even schmoozing rich old dames!'

That afternoon Richard was hosting a garden party for the ladies of the New York Social scene. He needed their money and support, and had confided in Alice that he thought he'd get a better response if she was there too. Most of the women in attendance would have seen Alice in *The Honeymoon* or her next play *A Wayward Progress*; and now she had wowed the crowds on her opening night in *Savannah Nights*, everyone was clamoring to meet her. Alice's ethereal beauty, English accent and perceived class had caused her to be a wow, and people were excited by both her and Allen. He was Al Kent, the exciting new writer of *The Honeymoon*, and his latest musical *Ebony Eyes*; and she was the beautiful young actress. They were the toast of New York and Richard knew that if anyone could persuade the good ladies to part with their cash, it would be them.

Alice wore a new dress to the function. It was rather daring in that it came several inches above her ankle, and the neck draped down low, showing the top of her bosom. Not that there was much bosom to show - a much larger lady wouldn't have been able to get away with it, but on Alice it just looked stylish and elegant. She'd bought it in Los Angeles when she'd been filming *The Adventurer*, from a designer called Dimitri on Rodeo Drive. She'd been taken with how the midnight blue satin shimmered and lightly skimmed her body, making her look more shapely than she was. She also chose not to wear a hat, instead fixing her hair in a bun at the nape of her neck. Allen could barely keep his hands off her once she was dressed, and she'd had to run away from him, laughing as she left the apartment block and got into his car. Allen still had the same rickety Model T he'd had when they'd married, and even though they were now wealthy and could afford something swankier, he liked to keep it for sentimental reasons.

New York looked wonderful in the sunshine. People had hung out bunting decorated with the Stars and Stripes; and children in their best clothes walked along eating cotton candy they'd no doubt bought from the fair in Central Park. What was noticeable was the large proportion of women on their own, or in groups. Thousands of men were being drafted each week and this was evident, when most of the males out and about were either children or elderly men.

'Hey how does it feel being English on Independence Day?' Allen laughed.

'It does feel rather weird that you're all celebrating getting rid of us,' she replied. 'Maybe it wasn't such a good idea for Richard to invite me to the party after all.'

'Garbage,' Allen scoffed. 'You'll be the belle of the ball.'

Alice sat back and quietly smiled at her husband's unwavering adoration. She loved being Mrs Allen Horowitz. After what had happened with Robert, it had taken her so long to truly trust a man; but she'd come to realise Allen was a million miles away from the bounder who'd made her travel on the *Titanic* at nine months pregnant, carrying a stolen ring. Allen loved her and looked after her, and supported everything she did. He'd even suggested hiring a private eye to try and find Bobby, but Alice had refused. Even though a day didn't go by that she didn't think of

her son, and wonder where he was and she would often see blond haired little boys of his age and wonder if he was hers. She knew she couldn't go on tormenting herself, trying to find him. She felt she had no choice but to accept that her son was now with new parents and probably knew nothing of her existence. She refused to believe what the doctors had said - that she imagined bringing him up to the deck. Alice knew she would have never left her baby in a cabin on his own to drown. She loved him too much to put him in danger.

'I think I'll go and see Ma and Pa after the party,' Allen said, awaking her from her reverie. 'Why don't you drop by once you've finished at the theatre?'

'Yes I could,' she replied, not sure she could face a late supper with the Horowitz's after such a long day. As much as she loved Gilda and Wilhelm - Allen's parents, they could be a little over the top. Gilda was every inch the Jewish mama who cooked all day long and nagged Alice for being too thin; claiming this was the reason she and Allen hadn't had a baby. Maybe she was right, but Alice had been thin when she got pregnant for Bobby. Even though she had a fabulous career, she would have loved nothing more than to have a child with Allen, but it never happened, no matter how hard they tried. 'But I think I'll be so shattered, I'll probably just want to go home and go to bed.'

'Ah that's a shame. Momma would love to see you. Independence Day would give her the perfect excuse to feed you and fatten you up.'

Richard's back garden had been decorated beautifully. A marquee was at one end, where a pianist was playing some gentle Rag music. Around the trees, the servants had wound bunting, and the maids had been given Stars and Stripes sashes to wear around their dresses. Daisy no longer worked for Richard. She was now Alice's personal assistant and she'd given her the day off to spend the holiday with her folks in Hoboken. Daisy was now married, and Walter, her husband had already been drafted and sent off for training. Daisy was so worried about what was going to happen to him, Alice reckoned the only comfort she would get would be from her parents.

They found Richard holding court with a couple of matronly looking ladies in voluminous dresses. One even had a fur stole around her neck - despite it being a hot July day. She was the one who spotted Alice first, nudging her companion until the two women were looking at the young actress rather than Richard. He turned and followed their gaze and smiled beamingly when he realised who was here.

'So glad you could make it!' he said, holding out his arms.

'Hello Richard,' Alice said, going up to him and kissing him on the cheek. He then shook hands with Allen, and turned to face the ladies.

'Ladies, this is my ward Mrs Alice Horowitz, although you probably know her better as Alicia Bloom. And this is her husband, Mr Allen Horowitz, although he's better known as Al Kent.'



‘What an honour it is to meet you,’ gushed the lady with the fur, offering her hand, and not giving Richard the chance to finish the introductions. ‘I saw you in *The Honeymoon*, and we’ve tickets for *Savannah Nights*. I think you’re amazing.’

‘Thank you,’ Alice smiled, always slightly embarrassed when people heaped praise upon her. It was a difference she noticed between the British and Americans. English people always underplayed everything, however good. But Americans saw the positive in things and weren’t afraid to express it.

‘Alice, this is Mrs Betsey Hasburg, her companion is Mrs Audrey Bryant.’

‘What’s Mr Chaplin like?’ Audrey asked excitedly. ‘Mr Bloomberg’s been telling us all about the movie you’ve made with him.’

‘He was very charming,’ Alice said. ‘A pleasure to work with.’

‘When I saw you in *The Honeymoon*,’ Betsey said, taking over once more. ‘I said to my husband, I swear that girl really is English. The accent was too good. Are you from London?’

‘Yes, yes I am,’ Alice replied.

‘My children live in London - such a wonderful city. Will you be returning?’

‘I don’t think so,’ Alice smiled, squeezing Allen’s arm, feeling bad about him being left out of the conversation. ‘We’re based here now. Before we know it, Allen will have a musical in every other theatre on Broadway!’

Betsey Hasburg was certainly a force to be reckoned with. She hardly left Richard’s side all afternoon, even though her husband – a very genial elderly man called William - was in attendance. She seemed most excited about Richard’s project, providing a welfare fund for the women of New York City who were widowed from the war. Controversially, the majority of these were predicted to be African-American, as they were the ones currently living in the most poverty. Some of the snooty ladies found the prospect quite distasteful, but Betsey got into the spirit of the thing. She claimed her daughter back in England was heavily involved in social welfare for the widows, and she felt they should do the same.

By the time Allen and Alice left, Richard and Betsey had roped pretty much all of the guests into contributing, and the feeling of doing good had made people high. Suddenly they were all in their own gay, little worlds, and dancing quite freely; and Alice and Allen took it as a chance to leave. Allen left the car and instead walked her to the theatre, ready for that night’s performance. The streets were filled with people celebrating. Young lovers seemed to cling on tightly to one another, frightened that this might be the last Fourth of July they would see together, and Alice hoped and prayed that the war would end soon and the Draft would stop and she could keep Allen to herself. How she felt about him made her realise all she’d felt for Robert Fairfax was a stupid infatuation. She’d fallen in love with Allen pretty much from the moment she met him and that had never changed, and she never wanted to be away from him.

‘I hate it when people go on as though I’m the talented one,’ she said, holding on tightly to his arm as they walked. ‘If it wasn’t for you, they’d have never heard of Alicia bleedin’ Bloom!’

Allen laughed and squeezed her hand.

‘But you’re the one they can see. And let’s face it, what would people rather look at? Your beautiful face or mine?’

‘Well I’d like to look at you all day. I just wish you’d get some recognition for what you’ve done. You’re thirty years old and you have two musicals on Broadway, and no one takes any notice. I think I’m going to do an interview with the New York Times and I’m going to talk endlessly about you, so people know you’re the one who made me.’

Alice joined the cast went for after-show Independence Day drinks, and by the time she got in from the theatre that night, it was definitely too late for her to think about going to her in-laws. She found the apartment empty, but was too tired to wait up for Allen. Knowing Gilda, she had probably fed him so much he'd fallen asleep in his father's armchair, and would end up staying the night.

Alice went to sleep thinking that when she finished her run in Savannah Nights that December, she would take some time out and really try for a baby. If she wasn't so busy, she might fall pregnant. A little one would make her and Allen's lives complete. They had more than enough money to live on without her working, and once the child was old enough, she would be able to go back. Maybe another baby would fill the gap Bobby had left.

She awoke the next morning to the sensation of her hair being stroked from her face. She opened her eyes and turned to see Allen was lying behind her, a loving smile on his face.

‘You look so beautiful when you sleep,’ he said. ‘I could watch you forever.’

‘What time did you get in last night?’ Alice yawned, turning onto her back.

‘Nearly two. Momma was a bit upset so I had to comfort her.’

‘What's she upset about?’

Allen said nothing, just reached back and picked up something from the bedside table and passed it to Alice. It was a folded piece of paper, and when she opened it, she almost dropped it again.

‘I guess the US Army still have me listed as living with Momma and Pop. It went there.’

Alice saw this simple Draft letter as the end of her world. All her prayers that Allen would be spared; that there would be some miraculous end to this terrible conflict, had come to nothing. She started to shake and cry, crumpling the letter up and throwing it on the floor.

‘You can't do that honey,’ he said, putting his arm around her. ‘If I don't go, I'll get put in jail for offences against the State or some crazy shit like that.’

‘Can't you buy your way out?’ she asked, reaching out and gripping his bare shoulders. ‘I've heard of people doing that. I'll pay some doctor to say you've got an illness. Please don't leave me, I'll die without you.’

She started to sob and he pulled her to him. Holding her tightly and kissing her hair.

‘It'll be okay. I'll have to train first. Who knows, the war might be over by then. The damn thing's been going on for long enough, it's gotta stop soon.’

‘I couldn't bear it if something happened to you,’ she wailed. ‘Not after losing Bobby. I can't lose you too.’

‘What did you say to that old broad yesterday? That one day every other musical on Broadway’ll be mine? Well I hold you to that. I ain’t going nowhere Alice, except to France.’ He laughed. ‘I bet I come back with enough material for a dozen new shows!’

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Three weeks later Allen went off to an army base near Washington for six weeks training. Alice knew he would be safe there and would get a couple of days leave before heading off to Europe, but even so; as she went to the station to wave him and the other conscripts off, her legs almost gave way from under her. An elderly Negro couple who were seeing off their grandson had to rush to her aid before she passed out completely, and propped her up as she waved Allen off from a bench on the platform, only getting glimpses of him between the crowds of people.

She was so unsteady, she wasn’t fit to drive herself home. Allen had taught her to drive the year before and she normally loved zipping about in the little Ford. But she felt so faint that the Negro man offered to be her chauffeur and drive her back. He and his wife lived in New Jersey and were willing to catch a train back after making sure Alice was home safely. Alice wept for the entire journey, both overcome with tiredness and sadness at Allen’s leaving, and at the kindness of these strangers.

She asked them to take her to Richard’s house, and when they all got out of the car, she gave them the hundred dollar bill she had in her purse; telling them to stay at a swanky hotel overnight and take a cab all the way home to New Jersey tomorrow. The humble old couple tried to refuse, pushing it back into Alice’s hand. But she insisted they took it. What did money matter to her when in two months time the love of her life would be thousands of miles away?

Richard wasn’t surprised to see her, and insisted she went straight to her old room. He ordered the maid to bring her some sweet tea and hot broth, and then phoned the theatre and said she wouldn’t be performing that night. Alice wasn’t hungry and barely touched her food. She felt an overwhelming tiredness and queasiness that she only recalled feeling once before. She remembered performing with The Howard sisters and almost fainting on stage; and Evie had to cover up for her by mirroring her swoon and making it look like part of the routine. Shortly afterwards Alice had realised she was pregnant for Bobby. She had mixed feelings about having a baby now. She’d longed for Allen’s child since they got married, but she hated the thought of giving birth while he was away at war. She then checked herself. She wasn’t even sure she was pregnant yet. It was probably just the stress of her husband being drafted that was making her ill.

Richard popped in to see her before he went to bed. Alice was so glad she had him in her life. Because if she didn’t, right now she’d feel so alone.

‘How are you feeling?’ he asked.

‘Exhausted. I think I might have to take the rest of the week off.’

‘He’ll be okay you know,’ Richard smiled. ‘But why don’t you come back here while he’s away? You don’t want to be in that big apartment alone.’

‘Thank you,’ she uttered. ‘I feel so lost Richard. We've never been apart. He even came to Hollywood with me. I can't bear the thought of him being in Europe. You read such horrible things in the newspapers.’

‘Stop working yourself up into a state. The war will probably be over soon, and Allen will come home without a scratch. Now, you take it easy and get some sleep, you look shattered. Why don't you start planning for when he comes home on leave next month? You can stay at my place in the Hamptons. Have some peace and quiet, just the two of you.’

Alice counted down the days until Allen's return from training; and was actually grateful to go back to the theatre. At least by pretending to be someone else each night, she could put her problems to the back of her mind. Savannah Nights was a straight play about a Southern belle who leaves her husband when she discovers her childhood sweetheart has become a widower; and sets about trying to ensnare him. Trussed up in the heavy ball-gowns she had to wear, Alice felt a little giddy; and to her alarm, for the first time ever, her breasts were wobbling slightly over the top of her corset. She was almost positive that she was pregnant and she couldn't help but start to feel excited. She wondered if she should tell Allen when he came home; and if she did, would he be willing to let her buy him out of the Army - just so he could be around to see his child born.

He finally came home to her in mid-September, and they had two days to look forward to before he was shipped out to Northern France. Allen was excited at the prospect of going to Europe, whereas Alice was just scared at how much he had changed. His floppy hair had been shaved off and his weedy arms were now bulging with muscles; those finely manicured ‘piano’ fingers had dirty nails and broken skin. He spoke little of what he had been taught or what they were to expect when they reached France - all he wanted was to be alone with Alice. He turned down Richard's offer of the Hamptons, and instead they ensconced themselves in their apartment, locking the door and shutting out the world. Alice kept wanting to tell him about the pregnancy, but would stop herself. Allen was so fired up about going to war – like he really wanted it now, she didn't know if she could do it to him. She knew her husband well enough, and he would feel obliged to be with her; then he'd feel disappointed in himself when all his fellow recruits went off without him.

So, she decided to keep quiet for now and they spent a blissful weekend in bed - Alice even learning to enjoy her new bigger, rougher husband. He made her laugh with some of the bawdy jokes he'd learnt, and stories about the other recruits - a band of men, all from different backgrounds, forced together for a common cause.

The night before he left, neither of them could sleep. Alice because she was so nervous, and Allen because he couldn't wait to get stuck in. They lay close together in bed, his arms wrapped tightly around her; and she wondered how long it would be before she'd experience this again.

‘If anything should happen to me, I want you to know I've left all the rights to my musicals to you,’ he said.

‘I don’t want the rights to your musicals. I want you.’

‘We gotta be practical Alice. I ain’t even talking about dying. I mean like if I get injured and can’t look after things myself. I want you to take charge. I’ve left my money to Mom and Pop. I figure they need it more than you - you’ve got your own wealth.’

‘Will you stop talking like this?’ she croaked, swallowing her tears. ‘Nothing is going to happen to you.’ She laughed and squeezed one of his muscular arms. ‘I was only panicking because you used to be so skinny. Now look at the size of you, you’ll have no trouble fighting those Germans off.’

The following morning Alice drove Allen to the Harbour; his kit bag in the back of the car, his army hat resting on his lap. As Alice drove along, she saw other women walking through the streets with young men in uniform, obviously heading for the same place. She would be leaving her husband at the same harbour she’d arrived at, in what felt like a lifetime ago. When they got there, the troop ship was already half full - young men hanging overboard, waving and shouting to the people gathered on the dockside. The sea of khaki was quite alarming and brought home the magnitude of this operation. The troop ship was almost the size of the Titanic, and in eight days it would be back to pick up even more men to take to Europe.

Allen got out of the car, fetching his kit bag from the back and putting his hat on his head. He looked so handsome, Alice wished someone would take a picture so she could keep it by her bed.

‘Well, this is me honey,’ he said, throwing his bag onto his back. Alice wrapped herself around him, squeezing him tightly, not caring about the rough uniform scratching her skin.

‘I love you,’ she cried. ‘I love you so much.’

‘And I love you too,’ he replied. ‘You take care of yourself and junior.’

Alice pulled away from him and looked at him, frowning.

‘How did you know?’

‘Just a hunch. Your boobs are bigger and I heard you being sick yesterday morning.’

‘I think I’m about three months gone. Hopefully you’ll be home in six months to see it born.’

‘Whenever I’m blue, I’ll think of you and our baby and it’ll keep me going.’

‘I should have told you before, but I knew how much you wanted to go; and if I told you about the baby it would have put you in an awkward position.’

‘Hey, it doesn’t matter,’ he said, stroking her face. ‘You don’t have to apologise for anything you’ve ever done Alice Horowitz. If I never return, I want you to know you’ve made me the happiest man who ever lived. But please, promise me you’ll go and see momma when you leave here. She’s real upset and needs to see a friendly face.’

‘I’ll look after her. I promise.’

‘Good. And tell her she’s gonna be a grandma!’

He grabbed her and kissed her once more, before being ordered into the column of men that were being led onto the ship. Alice stood with all the other weeping women, watching and

waiting until they appeared once more on the top deck. Alice wanted to laugh and tell Allan that he'd made it to the place she'd never been allowed on the Titanic - only when it was sinking. Allen loved jokes like that. But he wouldn't be able to hear her. Instead she waved and blew him kisses. He waved back, mouthing the words 'I love you'.

In all too short a time, the boat was packed and the horn blew - the mighty noise resonating around the Harbour. The ship began to move, steadily away, out to sea. Alice didn't take her eyes off Allen until she could see him no longer. She ran her hand over her still flat stomach, and silently spoke to her baby.

'Your Poppa will be back soon my darling,' she whispered. 'I lost your brother, I'm not going to lose my husband too.'

## Chapter Thirteen

### April 1918

Nesta was exhausted after an extremely busy day. That afternoon she'd hosted a birthday party for David and some of his little school-friends, and after two hours of the house in Belgravia Square being filled with the sound of screaming and shouting children, she had been ready to scream herself. Straight afterwards she'd had to leave her son in the hands of Josie, his nanny, and rush off to a Poor Law meeting in Shoreditch. The committee was meeting to discuss what was to be done with the provision of food to the local Workhouse. Everyone was feeling the effects of the German boats attacking the Merchant Navy at regular intervals, and supplies had frozen up for most people. Mr Westwood, the Guardian of the Shoreditch Workhouse saw fit to use it as an excuse to feed his charges the bare minimum, and when Nesta had visited the workhouse for the first time the previous year, she knew it was a sight she would never forget. Before that, she'd lived in the delusion that workhouses provided a warm bed for those who were destitute, with food and the chance to earn a few pennies so they could get back on their feet. In reality it was a squalid place, where people were expected to do the most mundane jobs - like sewing rough sacks to be sent to the Front Line, for twelve hours a day. Families were split up, with the men and women segregated; and now added to the inmates were soldiers home from the war and too injured to go back. Unable to find a job, they were at the mercy of the Board of Guardians, and when Nesta was there, a fight broke out between two of them. Once upon a time she would have run out screaming, but she'd remained behind and spoke to the Chaplin, asking him if more could not be done for these poor men.

So much had changed for Nesta in the two years since Roland died. James never regained full sight in his right eye, and so could not return to the war. Instead he took over the running of Villiers Hotels. Roland had left the company to David, but had made a proviso in his will before he left, that if he died in battle, James was to be caretaker in charge until David was twenty-one. Nesta knew her brother was still affected by what had happened in the war and didn't want him to be alone; and so she and David had left Kingswood and returned to Belgrave Square.

When David started a local prep school the year before, Nesta had taken it as an opportunity to visit the library and read more books on politics and Socialism. She attended meetings and rallies; and last year, when the food shortage was so severe and people were queuing for hours just for a loaf of bread, she'd volunteered in a National Canteen, serving meals to ordinary people who'd not managed to buy enough food to make a decent meal. Looking back, she couldn't believe how empty the first thirty years of her life had been - always sitting around waiting for something to happen. Now, with David and her work, her life was full.

She got home late that night, and at first found the house in darkness. She assumed everyone was in bed, and headed upstairs. It was only when she reached the top landing that she heard voices coming from James' room, and the giggle she heard was definitely female. Rolling her eyes in contempt, she went to go into her own room. But there came more giggles - like a group of people laughing at something, and unable to quell her curiosity, Nesta opened the door

to James' room and the sight she was greeted with was so shocking she almost passed out. James was on the bed, naked, and surrounding him were six girls, some naked, some just wearing their underwear. Nesta's foot kicked an empty champagne glass, and one of the girls on the bed - a blonde whose hair looked like a bird's nest, waved a bottle at her.

'Who's this?' she slurred. 'Is it your wife?'

'No I'm his sister,' Nesta replied, storming over to the bed and picking up the discarded, brightly coloured clothes that were on the floor. 'I want you all to get out.'

'But Nessie!' James laughed, not even bothering to cover his modesty. 'We're having fun.' He began pointing to each of the girls. 'This is Gloria, and this is Emily and this is....?' He frowned at the naked redhead. 'What's your name?'

'Lucy,' she laughed.

'Will you get out?!' Nesta shouted, and all the girls climbed off the bed and at varying speeds, got dressed. Nesta recoiled as James picked up his wallet from the bedside cabinet and started throwing notes on the floor. The girls scurried around, picking them up, like birds pecking at seeds. They ran out of the bedroom, squealing with delight at being paid, and Nesta hoped their noise wouldn't wake David up.

She threw a blanket over James and sat on the bed beside him, wondering if her lovely brother was ever going to come back. Before the war, he'd been devoted to Lucia, and when she died, he'd remained single, shunning women, despite being handsome and having plenty of offers. His body may have recovered - he had full sight in his left eye and partial sight in his right - but his mind had changed. He liked to go out drinking and bringing women home. He was often so drunk he couldn't attend company meetings, and Nesta would feel obliged to go along to the Villiers headquarters in Piccadilly and apologise for her brother's absence.

He was still so dashing, it was hurtful to think it was no more than an outer shell. That that evil war had ruined what had once been a fine man.

'Who were those girls?' she asked.

'Dancers. They came along to the Holbein to entertain us. I thought I'd continue the party back here.'

'I don't appreciate you bringing strange women back to my house, where my son is sleeping. You need to pull yourself together James. You've an important meeting to go to tomorrow morning, and you won't be able to in the state you're in.'

'I'm fine,' he grumbled, turning onto his side and immediately falling asleep. Nesta stood up and bent over, kissing him upon the cheek, and went to bed.

Nesta wished there was someone who she could speak to about James; but she was loathe to consult a psychiatrist for fear they would try and commit him to an asylum. He wasn't insane - just so badly disturbed by what had happened to him in France that he drank, gambled and womanised to help him forget. Perhaps when the war was over, and it was safe to travel again, she would suggest he took a trip to New York to see their mother. Betsey certainly wouldn't stand for his bad behaviour.



The next morning she got up early - as she liked to do, and helped Josie get David ready for school. With Roland dead, she had taken David's name off the list for Sunningdale and had enrolled him in St Ann's, a prep school in Ebury Bridge Road. He would go to Eton when he was thirteen, as both Roland and James had done; but for now she liked having her boy home each day.

As they sat in the breakfast room, it worried Nesta that she couldn't hear any movement coming from upstairs. James had a meeting with the board of Villiers today to discuss The Grandison, a rather dilapidated hotel in Earls Court that Roland had bought just prior to going to war. It had stood vacant for two years, but the company was still paying out money for its rates, and the wages of the man who guarded it at night to stop people breaking in for shelter. They had to make a decision as to what to do with it, and it was up to James to have the final say.

Excusing herself from the table, she went up to James room and let herself in. He was flat out on his back, arms stretched across the bed, letting out loud snorts. It was half past seven and the meeting was in half an hour.

'James get up,' Nesta shouted, opening the curtains and flooding the room with light. James grumbled and sat up a little, rubbing his eyes.

'What time is it?' he asked.

'Half past seven. You need to get ready and get over to Piccadilly.'

'I can't go,' he winced. 'I feel ill.'

'It's no wonder, after what you were getting up to last night,' she tutted. 'You've got to go, it's about The Grandison.'

'They don't need me,' he said, reaching for the champagne bottle beside his bed and taking a large swig. 'They can make a decision all by themselves.'

Nesta stormed out of the room in fury. She was so angry with James. By disregarding Villiers Hotels, he was disregarding David's future. Did he not want his nephew to inherit a viable company?

Something snapped inside of her. She'd gone to enough meetings and rallies to hold her own with the most fervent Workhouse Guardians or greedy landlords. She could cope with a bunch of middle-aged pen pushers. She changed into a simple dark brown dress and plain hat, and left the house. She caught a taxi over to the Villiers Hotels headquarters above the Congress Hotel - a grand building close to Piccadilly Circus; and as she travelled, she recalled the first time she went there, just after marrying Roland. His South African grandfather had built the company from scratch and the Congress had been his first hotel. A portrait of him still hung in the reception, and had now been joined by a photograph of Roland in his army uniform. In 1901 everyone had been fascinated by Roland Villiers' beautiful young bride. Now she was just taken for granted; and when she walked into the boardroom, it was assumed she was here, once again, to apologise for James.

'Hello Mrs Villiers,' said Perry Ridgeway, who had been Roland's right-hand man. He'd worked for the company since he was a fifteen year old general assistant. No one would ever

guess his origins now. In his suit, with his white hair slicked down, his moustache finely trimmed he was every inch the businessman. 'Can we expect Mr Tanner today?'

'No, he's unwell,' Nesta replied. 'I understand the situation regarding The Grandison is urgent and I was wondering if I could join you.'

There were derisive sniggers all around the table, and suddenly Nesta felt very small. She was a relatively young woman, standing at the head of a table filled with men much older than her who'd worked for both her husband and her father-in-law, and expecting them to value her opinion.

'Maybe we should postpone until Mr Tanner is better,' Ridgeway said.

'As I understand it, The Grandison is bleeding money from Villiers Hotels,' Nesta said. 'And if we don't do something soon it could cause serious financial problems.'

Without being asked, she sat down, remembering that she was here to represent the interests of her son. David was too young to have a say in what happened to Villiers, and James was too incompetent at the moment. Nesta was an intelligent, well-read woman, why shouldn't she hold an opinion?

'We have a number of options,' began George Blair, the accountant, addressing Ridgeway, rather than Nesta. 'One is to sell it, but in the current situation, that is unadvisable. We're not sure when war is going to be over, and most hotels in London are seeing low bookings.' He gave a wry laugh. 'Bed and breakfasts however, are seeing a large turnover, given the amount of young soldiers booking in with their, ahem, wives. The other option is that I have been approached by Jim Forbes, from Forbes Fortune, the building company; and he has the idea of maybe turning The Grandison into a large mansion block.'

'How would that work?' Nesta asked. 'Who would own it?'

'It would be another string to Villiers' bow,' Blair said, finally making eye contact with her. 'We would work with Forbes Fortune to convert the hotel into flats, and when they were sold, we would split the profits.'

'But who would buy them?' asked Maurice Houston, the general manager. 'Do we think professional people will be flocking to London after the war? After all, mansion flats are hardly family homes.'

'People often have them as pied à terre,' Blair explained. 'They stay in them when they visit London. I have a little flat in Paris that I use for the same purposes. Although of course I haven't been there recently.'

He suddenly realised he was in Nesta's presence, and that his joke about the war could be seen in bad taste.

'I'm sorry Lady Villiers.'

'Don't worry about it. I think we should meet with this Jim Forbes. It sounds like a much more viable option than selling the building.'

'Forbes reckons that it would be quite cheap to convert,' Blair said to her, seemingly grateful to have someone who shared his vision. 'There's running water and electric light and gas. So we wouldn't have to pay for installation.'

‘And it would give jobs to men home from the war,’ Nesta said enthusiastically. ‘It’s a very good idea.’

‘Well I think we’ll still need to consult Mr Tanner,’ Ridgeway said with a snort. ‘He is in charge.’

‘Yes, and if you recall, this is my son’s company,’ Nesta snapped. ‘And seeing as he is only six years old, it’s my place to look after his interests. Now, can we arrange a meeting with this Mr Forbes?’

‘I’ll see what I can do,’ Ridgeway said, backing down slightly; and as Nesta glanced down the table, she saw Houston give her a supportive smile. James had told her that most of the board didn’t have time for Ridgeway, and this made her feel better. Perhaps in time she could win them round.

Nesta went home after the meeting, and was still shaking a little from disbelief. She couldn’t believe she’d actually had the courage to storm in, uninvited, to a meeting between powerful men, and start stamping her foot. It was something she’d never have dreamt of once upon a time. Maybe it was becoming a mother; maybe it was cheating death on The Titanic. Whatever it was, she was determined never to be a doormat again.

She got home and received a surprise to find Nadine Byrne waiting for her in the drawing room. Nadine was a young Irish woman who worked as a nurse at St Mary’s Hospital, and in her spare time helped out with her local church, offering food and medical advice to people living in slums. Nesta was rather alarmed to see how agitated Nadine looked, her hair falling in wisps from under her hat, her face rather dirty. She looked as though she had been dragged through a hedge backwards.

‘Oh Nesta,’ she gushed, almost the moment Nesta came through the door. ‘I didn’t know who else to turn to.’

‘What is it Nadine?’ she asked, sitting beside her. ‘What’s happened?’

‘There was a fire in Durrant Street in Pimlico. Practically the whole street has burned down. It was a terrible slum and I think the houses were so shoddily put together it’s just been destroyed. At least ten people have been killed and there’s many more who haven’t got anywhere to go now. We’ve put them in a mission hall on Horseferry Road, but they need food and blankets. I’m trying to rally people.’

‘Okay, well it isn’t far from here. I’m sure we’ve got some spare blankets, I’ll check with Mrs Farrell and we’ll get going.’

Nothing could have prepared Nesta for the sight that met her when they reached The Mission Hall on Horseferry Road. Even worse was the smell – every sort of human odour permeated the air, all tainted with the stench of smoke. Whole families sat huddled together, covered in soot, while babies cried and old women winced in pain as the volunteers tried to examine them. People shuffled around aimlessly, covered in dirty blankets, muttering to themselves. It looked like hell on earth and Nesta wondered where they were going to start. They

were greeted by the Reverend Ellis from St Matthew's on Great Peter Street, who thanked Nesta for helping out, as she passed him the pile of blankets Judith had got from a cupboard in the cellar. Compared to some of the things the wretched people were wrapped in, they looked like the height of luxury.

'What is going to happen to these people?' Nesta asked.

'We have no idea. The landlord is a Mr Sanford who lives in Surrey. We've sent a telegram to him informing him of what happened, but by all accounts, it'll bother him little. We're currently contacting local workhouses to see if they'll take them in, but many of them are full.'

'It was him who started it,' an old crone who was crouching near Nesta's feet suddenly said. Nesta looked at her.

'I'm sorry?'

'I saw 'im,' the wizened old woman with a blackened face said. 'One of those big blokes he sends round to those what can't pay their rents. I saw 'im with a lighted rag in a bottle, heading for the Keatons' house. Set fire to it. Now they're all dead.'

Nesta looked at the vicar.

'Surely that's murder?'

'We can't prove anything,' he said. 'In conditions like that, fires start so easily.'

An idea came to Nesta. A shocking idea that she knew would horrify the board of Villiers Hotels. But these were desperate times, and they required desperate measures.

'I know somewhere they can go,' she said. 'My company has an empty hotel in Earls Court. I don't know what exactly is in there, but if I made my way over there and checked it out, maybe these people could move in and stay until we make further arrangements.'

'Are you sure?' Reverend Ellis frowned. 'Would there be any bureaucratic problems with this?'

'I shouldn't think so,' she replied. 'The company belongs to my son, and seeing as he's only six years old, I have to make decisions for him. The hotel is standing empty. It would be a shame to let these people remain homeless when there's a perfectly good building they could live in.'

Before she could chicken out, Nesta set off with Nadine to Piccadilly. Her heart was racing, terrified of the sort of reaction she was going to get to her proposal. On arrival, she asked to meet with Maurice Houston. He was the buildings manager, and he was also the only one who'd showed her any true support at the board meeting. They were taken to his office, and he looked a little alarmed to be greeted by them both.

'This is a pleasant surprise Lady Villiers,' he said, welcoming them in. He was a handsome man, a little bullish in appearance, like a prize-fighter squeezed into a suit. But he had a strong, noble face and thick dark hair, and there was something about him that gave a protective air.

'Call me Nesta, please,' she said, sitting before his desk. Nadine sat beside her. 'This is Miss Nadine Byrne. We do charity work together. Nadine, this is Mr Maurice Houston, the Buildings Manager for Villiers Hotels.'

Houston and Nadine shook hands and he sat back down.

‘What can I do for you Nesta?’ he asked.

‘There has been a fire in a row of houses in Pimlico. The whole street has been destroyed, leaving tens of families homeless. They’re currently being given refuge in a mission hall in Horseferry Road; but if they’re not re-homed soon, their only other option will be to either go into a workhouse or else find dwellings with some other unscrupulous landlord. I’d like to house them in The Grandison until something more permanent can be decided for them.’

‘The Grandison?’ Houston frowned. ‘Are you suggesting we move poor families into a top-class hotel?’

‘A top-class hotel that is currently standing empty. Are the rooms furnished?’

‘Yes, everything’s how it was when the late Sir Roland bought it. The furnishings are basic, but adequate.’

‘And there’s running water and gas and electricity?’

‘Yes.’

‘And the kitchen, is that functional?’

‘Yes.’

‘Okay, well if we find out who can cook amongst the people gathered there, we could appoint cooks and servers. The Church will probably provide basic food, and so all that would come from us would be the amenities.’

‘This is most irregular,’ Houston said. ‘Whilst I support the sentiment. I’m not sure how the other board members will feel.’

‘But Villiers Hotels belongs to my son, and no one else. And as his guardian, I am saying that I want the hotel used as a temporary home for these poor people.’

‘Okay,’ Houston nodded. ‘Let me put the wheels in motion and see what I can do. This might meet great resistance, I warn you. If it does, I have contacts within many of the workhouses and I’ll ensure these people are put in the most humane conditions. But I’ll try and persuade the board to let us use The Grandison. Just leave it with me.’

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Within a week, Nesta had caused quite a stir in the press. Word had got out of her charitable actions, and people had met it with derision and admiration in equal measures. It had taken her to persuade James that she was doing the right thing, and for him to argue her case to the board, before they relented and allowed the tenants of Durrant Street to move into The Grandison. Families were given suites on the top floor, single people rooms on the floors below. They were provided with three cooked meals a day; and a doctor who volunteered for the church set up a makeshift surgery in what was once the staff room. Letters started pouring into the Headquarters of Villiers Hotels from people asking if they could move into The Grandison - along with requests from local Poor Law volunteers telling of houses where families of fifteen or

twenty were crammed into one small, squalid room, asking Nesta if there was any chance of her helping to re-house them.

All of this got Nesta thinking. If only they converted the hotel into flats for the poor rather than for rich people who were only going to use them a couple of times a year. She guessed the board would never agree to it; after all, they only ever thought about making money and the meagre rent they would charge poor people would not provide Villiers with a healthy income - even though the hotels around Europe brought in a fortune. But the more people had, the more they wanted, and profit was everything to what had once been Roland's company.

Because of all the attention her actions had attracted, Nesta was soon meeting with people on a daily basis. Everyone from Christians, to committed Socialists and Marxists, were worried about the slums that still littered London, and how there was a need for decent public housing for the poor. She received a visit from Henry Beresford, a philanthropist from Manchester who was in London on business and requested to meet her after hearing about her kind act. He came to Belgrave Square and Nesta was shocked to find he wasn't some elderly man who thought he should do some good with his life before he died, but rather a young man no older than thirty-five who walked with a pronounced limp. Even though his suit was well cut, and he was obviously wealthy, he did not flaunt it and impressed Nesta how, when he spoke to her, he didn't use that patronising tone favoured by older men. He addressed her like an equal, explaining how he was invalided home from the war in 1915, but what he had seen in the trenches was enough to make him want to do something with his wealth. His family had owned mills in and around Manchester for a hundred years, but after mixing with young men from much poorer backgrounds, and hearing of the living conditions they had to endure back home, he realised he had a duty to improve their lot.

'I visited a slum not long after I came home,' he explained to Nesta. 'I had never seen anything like it. People living in cramped rooms with not even a gaslight; and unable able to afford to buy coal to keep them warm. Children running around barefoot. A hundred people sharing one privy. It was disgusting, and I was even more shocked when I discovered these people weren't beggars who'd fallen from the path of righteousness because of drinking or hard-living. They were the people who worked in my family's mills. The mothers and wives of men I'd fought with. The landlord would charge them rent, not for the property, but for the amount of people who lived in it. So even women who were earning a decent wage in the mill or a munitions factory, had to spend most of their earnings on keeping a roof over their heads.'

'It's the same here,' said Nesta. 'I knew of a landlord who if he didn't receive his rent one week, would evict the family by moving another family in and forcing them out.'

'That's why I decided to become a landlord. We had a vacant mill in Bury that had stood empty since before the war. I did a deal with the local Parish in that they would put half the money and I would put the other half and we converted it into small self contained flats; with an

inside privy on each floor, so it would be shared between no more than three families. We employed men who had been sent home from war, but were well enough to work, to convert it and paid them a wage. We then only moved people in who worked; but we set a fixed rent for each flat that was much lower than the slum landlords were charging. If people ran up arrears for more than four weeks they would be evicted, but that hasn't happened once in the past two years. Give people a decent home and they become decent people.'

'Do you make much money from it? I'm only asking because the board of Villiers will want to see they can make a profit.'

'We make a small profit, half of which gets ploughed back into a fund which pays out for any repairs that may need doing. Why I wanted to see you today Lady Villiers is that I wondered if you would be interested in doing the same thing here in London.'

'Yes,' she said eagerly. 'Yes I would. The board of directors want to convert The Grandison into a mansion block for rich people to have as pied d' terres while they're in London. I want to convert it into flats for the poor, like your place in Lancashire. But they're only interested in making money.'

'Who does The Grandison belong to?'

'Villiers' Hotels.'

'And who does the company belong to?'

'Technically my son, but he's only six years old. So my brother is taking care of things until he takes over.'

'So it doesn't belong to this board of directors?'

'Well, no it doesn't.'

'So the way I see it, you've every right to do as you wish.'

'But I would have to use Villiers money to convert it.'

'Use your own money. I take it you do have your own money?'

'A little. But I do have a lot of jewellery I could sell. I have all my grandmother's diamonds, they must be worth thousands of pounds.'

Beresford gave a slight smile.

'Well if you could bear to part with them, why don't you sell them and invest with me in your dream?'

‘You’d go into business with a woman?’ she uttered.

‘No, I’d go into business with someone with a conscience. As soon as I read about what you did with those poor people, I knew you were someone special - someone who thought the same way as I do.’

Nesta couldn’t help but feel excited at the idea. It was what she’d wanted to do all along; but she knew she couldn’t make the decision herself. No one would take her seriously.

‘Okay,’ she replied hesitantly. ‘I’ll have to discuss it with my brother, and he’ll have to broach it to the board of directors. They’ll do all they can to block me, but I’ll do my best to win them round. But don’t hold your breath.’ She laughed. ‘They’ll probably try and have me committed for being a hysterical woman or something like that.’



## Chapter Fourteen

Alice's bedroom smelt like a florists. On every surface there was a bunch of beautiful smelling flowers, all of them from her fans and fellow actors, wishing her well in her confinement. The baby hadn't even been born yet and she wondered what sort of gifts would be lavished upon her when it did arrive. Richard was insistent that she took it easy, so right now she was lying on her bed, trying to find a comfortable position in which to eat one of her many boxes of chocolates and read Allen's letter. He was full of hope that the war would soon be over as apparently America joining the Allies' effort had really made a difference. The Germans were showing signs of flagging, and knowing this made Alice feel so much better. If the Germans surrendered soon, hopefully Allen would be back before the baby got too big.

This pregnancy was so much different to Alice's last one. By the time she was nine months gone with Bobby, she'd been wracked with worry, scared that the plan to steal the diamond would backfire and she and Robert would be arrested before they'd even boarded the Titanic. This time her baby wouldn't be born in a cabin on a doomed ship; instead Richard had paid for her to stay at a top private clinic in Manhattan. Alice had even toyed with calling the baby Lucky, seeing as everything was going so well. But Lucky Horowitz sounded like a gangster, so she settled on Bella for a girl, or Richard for a boy. She just wished it would one day meet its older brother. It seemed so unfair - little Bobby was going to have a younger sibling out there and yet he'd know nothing about it.

There was a knock on the door, and Daisy entered. She looked so different to how she'd been when she was that mousy little maid. Today she wore a smart, two-piece suit with a blouse and tie. Her hair was set just so and she'd even livened her face up with some lipstick.

'How are things?' she asked, sitting upon the bed.

'I think junior's practising his high kicks,' Alice laughed as the baby poked her in the ribs once more. 'It's not at all comfortable.'

'Do you think you'd be up to meeting someone?'

'Who?'

'RG Cornelius.'

'RG Cornelius?' Alice repeated. 'The theatre impresario?'

'Yes,' Daisy nodded excitedly. 'He's desperate to see you. He's waiting downstairs.'

'I can't meet him like this! I'm nine months pregnant! He'll have to come back.'

'But he says it's urgent.'

'Well you'll have to dress me in something that hides the bump. The poor man will be so embarrassed if he has to see me looking like this.'

Daisy helped Alice out of bed and into a maroon dress that was quite loose fitting, she then wrapped a large brightly coloured shawl around her to help disguise her pregnancy. Everyone knew she was expecting, but nice ladies did not flaunt their predicament. Hiding her body under

layers of clothing reminded her of getting onto the Titanic, pretending to be Robert Fairfax's fat sister. She wondered what one of the world's most famous theatre impresarios wanted with her at this time. She was likely to be out of action for months.

He was waiting for her in the drawing room, where he had squeezed his fat body into Richard's favourite Queen Anne chair. Alice winced, thinking about what it was doing to the upholstery. He levered himself out of it and waddled over to her, making her laugh when she saw his stomach was even fatter than hers!

'Miss Bloom!' he said, his fluffy moustache blowing outwards as he spoke 'How beautiful you look.'

'Thank you Mr Cornelius,' she laughed. 'But you don't have to lie, I look like a Zeppelin airship! Please, sit down.'

Cornelius squeezed himself into the chair once more, and Alice manoeuvred herself down onto the sofa. She asked Daisy if she could fetch them some coffee and once she'd left the room, Cornelius started talking.

'How is your husband doing?' he asked. 'It must be a worry for you.'

'It is, but I got a letter from him this morning that he sent last week, and he says it's going really well over there. It seems the Americans have made a real difference and the Germans are losing battles.'

'Well, the quicker he comes back, the better. Broadway's crying out for another Al Kent musical. My sister saw *The Honeymoon* seven times!'

'I'm very flattered, and so would Allen be if he were here. I'll pass your compliments on in my next letter to him.'

'So, when is the little one due?'

'Any time now,' Alice replied. 'And it can't come a moment too soon as far as I'm concerned. I'm exhausted.'

'And are you planning on returning to the theatre when baby's born?'

'I don't really know, I haven't given it much thought. I would really need to talk it over with Allen.'

'I'm only asking because from next Spring, I'll be producing the biggest musical Broadway has ever seen. It's written by Eddy Conn, have you heard of him?'

'Yes of course, he wrote *Songs of Love*.'

'That's right. Well this musical is called *Charley Rose* and it's about a young English girl who stows away on a boat to America, and becomes a big star.'

Alice blushed right to her core. Who had told him about her? Only Allen knew the truth. Had someone been spying on her?

'It's based on some novel from years back,' Cornelius said dismissively, not realising the relief Alice felt. 'But that was about some negro girl who stows away on a boat coming from the West Indies and goes to England and marries a Lord. Eddy has changed it to be about an English girl coming here. It's kinda a play on how great America is, and how the English have needed us

in the war. Eddy too has heard that it might be over soon, and well, I reckon those brave guys coming home will need something to perk them up; and what better than a feel-good musical?’

‘Sounds a wonderful idea,’ Alice replied. ‘I take it you want to offer me a part?’

‘I want you to be Charley Rose,’ he said, looking her directly in the eye. ‘I don’t want nobody else playing her.’

‘I’m very flattered,’ Alice said. ‘But I couldn’t make a decision like that without talking it over with Allen. Admittedly the baby would be a year old by then, but there’s things like rehearsals and costume fittings that would take up my time beforehand.’

‘You’d manage to do it,’ Cornelius grinned. ‘There’s hundreds of broads with kids out there, still hoofing it every night. Tell me you’re not tempted. Acting’s in your blood isn’t it?’

‘Well, yes, it is,’ she giggled. ‘But I want to be able to look after my child too.’

She was interrupted by the door opening and Daisy coming in. She was expecting her to be carrying a tea tray, and was shocked to find the only thing in her hands was a piece of paper. Even more worrying was the pained expression on her face.

‘A young man just delivered this,’ she said, passing the paper to Alice. ‘It’s for you.’

A feeling of dread enveloped Alice. Her heart started to pound and her hands shook as she took the letter from her assistant.

‘Was he in uniform?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ Daisy replied quietly.

Alice gave an audible sob, and almost tore the telegram up without opening it.

‘Is everything okay?’ Cornelius asked.

‘My husband’s dead,’ Alice replied.

‘Don’t say that,’ said Daisy. ‘It might just be to say he’s been injured or he’s coming home on leave.’

With all eyes on her, Alice tore open the envelope and pulled out the letter. It was typed and from the US Army, reading;

*Dear Mrs Horowitz*

*It is with regret that I write to inform you of the death of your husband, Lieutenant Horowitz of the 8th Division. Lieutenant Horowitz was bravely clearing enemy landmines when he was mortally wounded. Unfortunately it will prove impossible to repatriate his body, therefore he will be given a grave in France. We will of course contact you with further details. Once again please accept the deepest sympathies from the US Army and President Wilson.*

*General Frederick Hausman 8th Division*

Alice felt like someone had literally knocked the air from her lungs. She struggled for breath, and when she finally did start breathing again, it was accompanied by a painful sounding

scream. Daisy rushed to her, gripping her around the shoulders and holding her tightly, as the screams turned to sobs. Alice was so grief-stricken she could barely take in what was going on. She heard more voices but didn't realise they belonged to all the servants - who had been alerted by the noise and thought there was a murderer in the house. She wriggled away from Daisy and pushed herself up, wandering around the room, her hands shaking in front of her. She heard someone shout 'call a doctor' but she wasn't sure who. All she could see in front of her were the words on that telegram, and they were so unbearably horrible it made her feel delirious.

Even though from the moment Allen went off to war, Alice had steeled herself for it. Nothing could have prepared her for this crushing feeling of despair. Allen was her world; they were so happy and about to start a family. He couldn't be dead. She felt as though she may as well die too if he was.

Someone managed to sit her back down, and there was great commotion, with people coming and going. But Alice didn't know who it was. All she could think about was going to France so she could see him once more. She didn't care if he'd been blown to bits; just a glimpse of something of him would be enough. She had to say goodbye. She'd never got to say goodbye to him.

'Daisy,' she uttered. 'Daisy go down to the Cunard offices, see if they can get me on a ship to France. I've got to go and see him.'

'You can't go to France,' Daisy said, sitting beside her and taking her hands. 'It's too dangerous. Besides, you're about to give birth.'

'I don't care!' she cried. 'I gave birth on the Titanic! I can give birth on a ship again. Go and get me a ticket. I want to bring my husband's body home.'

Daisy disappeared from the room and Alice hoped she'd gone to do as she'd asked. Alice looked around; Cornelius was still there, and when he saw he had her attention, he smiled glumly.

'I'll make sure there's a minute's silence in every theatre tonight,' he said. 'This is a great loss to the show-business world. Al was a fantastic young writer.'

The door opened and Daisy walked in, accompanied by an elderly man carrying a leather doctor's bag. Fury raged in Alice when she saw this, and she levered herself up, storming over to Daisy and hitting her across the face. Daisy yelled in pain and clutched her stinging cheek.

'I told you to go and get me on a boat, not get a doctor,' Alice cried. 'I need to see my husband.'

'Come now Mrs Horowitz,' the doctor said, laying a hand upon her shoulder. 'You're in no fit state to travel, and hitting your servant isn't the answer.'

Alice realised what she'd done and reached out to Daisy, who was still touching her reddening cheek.

'Daisy I'm so sorry,' she cried. 'I'm so sorry.'

She started sobbing again and this time the doctor, who introduced himself as Doctor Carter, put his arms around her and led her up to bed. Alice lay down, wishing she could curl up into a ball and disappear, but her big tummy prevented her doing this, so she lay prone on her

back. Doctor Carter rolled up her sleeve. She felt a sharp pain in her arm and within moments, melted away.

The next time Alice became conscious, she was somewhere else - outside a theatre on Broadway. She could smell the mixture of cheap perfume, rubbish, and fried onions from the hot dog vendor at the end of the street. She could hear the chatter of other girls - their funny accents mingling. Suddenly someone was beside her, a young man so handsome it took her breath away. He told her he loved her English accent and he pulled her away from the crowd, making her his special one, he then asked her to be his leading lady.

She opened her eyes, expecting to be outside the Stardust Theatre, and as soon as she saw she was in her bedroom, that terrible feeling of disappointment crushed her and with a yelp, she started to cry again, calling out for her husband.

The door opened and Richard came in, a hapless look on his face. He rushed to the bed and sat upon it, reaching out and wiping her tears away.

‘My darling Alice,’ he said, and she could see tears twinkling in his kind eyes. ‘My poor Alice, I'm so sorry.’

‘Would they have written to Gilda and Wilhelm? They must be told.’

‘I've told them,’ he said softly. ‘I've just come from there. Gilda's inconsolable. I've paid for Doctor Carter to go and see her. This is such a terrible tragedy.’

‘It's my punishment,’ she stated.

‘Punishment for what? You've never done anything wrong?’

‘For lying. That's why Bobby was taken from me too.’

‘What are you talking about Alice?’ he frowned.

‘Allen is dead, and I feel as though I am dying too, so this is my confession. Only Allen knew the truth about me, but I want you to know it too. My name isn't Alice Fairfax, it's never been Alice Fairfax. I'm Alice Higgins. I can remember everything that that happened to me before I sailed on the Titanic. I was running away to New York with my lover, Robert Fairfax. I wanted to get married before the baby was born, but Robert wanted me to pose as his sister so we could smuggle out the ring.’

‘The ring? Your engagement ring?’

‘Yes. It belonged to his mother's family, and because his sister Alice died when she was a baby, it was just lying in a vault. Robert had the chance of a business opportunity in New York and thought that he could sell the ring and use the money. He had a contact from prison make him forged papers saying it belonged to me. I'm not a Lady, I was born in a slum in Battersea and that's where I lived until my aunt took me away and taught me how to sing, dance and act. I've been on the stage as a music hall performer since I was ten. I also used to dance at gentlemen's parties and that's how I met Robert. So there you have it. I'm a liar.’

Before Richard could respond, the most horrific pain shot through Alice's body, making her scream out.

‘Is it the baby?’ Richard gasped.

‘Yes!’ she cried as another pain buckled her. ‘Oh dear God forgive me! Please don't let my baby die.’

She was still delirious from the sedative but this just made her feel more confused and the pain seemed worse. Richard rushed out of the room, and Alice was convinced he'd stormed out because he was angry at her for lying; and once more she'd be forced to give birth alone.

Richard re-entered the room, holding her coat, followed by Daisy, who was holding the bag she'd had packed for days, ready for when she had to go off to the clinic.

‘Can you walk?’ Richard asked.

‘I don't know,’ she cried. ‘I don't even know where I am.’

With Richard and Daisy's help, Alice got off the bed and was taken to the Hamilton Clinic in Manhattan. Only New York's richest gave birth here, and unlike the state hospitals, it hadn't been given over to the Army for the war wounded. It was tranquil and looked like a swanky hotel, and Alice was given a private room and a fleet of nurses all around her. She couldn't stop crying - both from physical and mental pain. Allen should have been here sharing this with her instead of lying dead on a battlefield thousands of miles away. With every contraction, she would wince in pain but not cry out, convinced it was her punishment and she had to take it. God hated her for all she'd done and she'd never be happy again.

Her feeling of despair lifted somewhat when she heard a bird-like cry fill the room.

‘Congratulations Mrs Horowitz,’ the obstetrician said. ‘You have a beautiful baby girl.’

‘A girl?!’ Alice cried, desperate to see her.

‘Yes, here she is.’

The doctor lifted the infant up and brought her up to Alice's chest. The ugly gnarled cord was still attached to her and she was covered in mucus and blood. But she had a fine set of lungs on her, screaming at the top of her voice, and Alice started to cry, wondering if Allen was here in the room with them, seeing his beautiful daughter.

‘She's perfect,’ Alice whispered. ‘Absolutely perfect.’

Alice hated being parted from her child while she was cleaned up and weighed. She kept her eye on her at all times, terrified that, like Bobby, she was going to be taken away from her. It came as a great relief when she was handed back to her, all clean and wrapped up in a white blanket. Alice could see she had dark hair, and when she briefly opened her eyes, they were clearly brown. She was more robust than Bobby; her skin less mottled and her cry much louder. Alice loved her dearly, but her heart ached for her first-born. Bobby should have been here to see his sister. Along with Allen, who would have adored his baby girl.

‘What are you going to call her?’ the young Irish nurse who was tidying the room, asked her.

‘I don't know,’ she replied. ‘I was going to call her Bella after my aunt. But I found out my husband died today.’

‘Oh I am sorry,’ said the nurse. ‘Was he at war?’

‘Yes. I want to name her after him, but Allen's such a man's name.’

‘Why don’t you call her Alana?’

‘Alana?’

‘Aye. I went to school back in Dublin with a girl called Alana O’Foy. She was a right cow, but that don’t matter none. Your little girl’s gorgeous.’

‘You sound just like my aunt Bella,’ Alice smiled. ‘She was from Dublin. It’s a lovely accent.’

‘In that case you’ve got to give your girl a Gaelic name. Alana’s beautiful.’

‘Just like her,’ Alice said, gazing down at her daughter. ‘Hello Alana Horowitz.’

Alice was allowed visitors once she and Alana were settled. First in was Richard, and Alice burned red - embarrassed at the confession she’d made before going into labour. She only hoped he thought she was delirious from the sedation and hadn’t meant any of it. At least he still wanted to know her; but then again he may have been coming here to tell her and the baby to get out of his house. She still had the apartment in Greenwich Village, but she hated the thought of going back there – it held so many memories of Allen.

‘She’s gorgeous,’ Richard smiled, looking down at Alana, who was sleeping peacefully. ‘Have you given her a name?’

‘Alana Isabelle.’

‘That’s a beautiful name. How are you feeling?’

‘Tired, confused. I feel so happy because I’ve got a lovely baby, but so sad because I haven’t got Allen. I don’t know how I’m supposed to feel.’

‘All those things you were telling me before you went into labour...’

‘It was all nonsense,’ she interjected. ‘I was confused.’

‘I already knew some of it,’ he said quickly.

‘What?’

‘I already knew some of it. Alice, I’m a very rich man as well you know, and it’s an unfortunate part of being very rich that when someone enters my life, I have to make checks. Many years ago, when I first met you, I paid a private investigator in England to make enquiries. The only Lady Alice Fairfax that was born around the same time as you, died when she was two years old. I then discovered she had a brother called Robert Fairfax, who died when he was thirteen.’

‘What?’ Alice frowned. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘I have no idea who your beau was, but he wasn’t Robert Fairfax. He was an impostor.’

‘But how did he find out about the diamond?’

‘I’ve no idea. Perhaps he was a childhood friend of the real Robert Fairfax, or a cousin or something. But the Private Investigator did ask around and found out that a young girl called Alice Du Pont, otherwise known as Alice Higgins, was knocking about with a young man calling himself Robert Fairfax; and I assumed it was you. I knew nothing about the ring, I thought that was genuinely yours.’

‘Are you going to tell the police?’ Alice panicked.

‘Don’t be silly. You don’t have it now, so what does it matter? As far as I know, the ring has never been reported as missing. And even if the Fairfax family were to discover it was gone, who was to say you didn’t take it in good faith, thinking Robert meant to marry you? Nothing can be proved.’

‘If you knew all this, why didn’t you say anything?’

‘Because I figured for you to keep up the pretence for so long, you had to be running away from something. I grew to love you like a daughter, then you met Allen, and suddenly who you were before didn’t matter.’

‘I only never told the truth because I didn’t want to go to prison. I was so happy when I came here. You loved me like my father should have done, and when I married Allen, and became Alice Horowitz, it was like Alice Higgins or Fairfax never existed.’

‘I wish my Private Investigator could have found Bobby for you too, but he hit a brick wall. With so many people perished on the Titanic, it was virtually impossible to get reliable witnesses to speak.’

Alice couldn’t believe that Richard had known the truth about her for all this time. The fact that he hadn’t said anything just made her realise how much he loved her and this touched her.

‘Thank you,’ she uttered. ‘Thank you for being so kind to me.’

‘And thank you for making me so happy,’ he smiled, reaching out and stroking her face. ‘I want to be there for you and Alana. I know it’s going to be difficult, not having a poppa to look after her, but I’ll do all I can for the both of you. And if you’ll allow her to, I’d like her to call me Grandpa.’

‘I’d love her to,’ Alice cried, wiping a tear away. ‘She’ll be a lucky little girl having you in her life. I just wish Allen was here to see her too.’

‘He can see her,’ Richard smiled. ‘I bet he’s looking down at her and he’s so proud. Talking of which...’ He banged his hands on his knees and stood up. ‘I’m going over to see Gilda and Wilhelm, tell them they’ve a grand-daughter. I hope Gilda’s well enough to take notice.’

‘I hope so too. Allen’s spirit will live on in Alana, I can feel it. With her in our lives it’s like he’s not left us.’





## Chapter Fifteen

November 1921

It was Nesta's fortieth birthday and she was being given the best present she could ever imagine. After three years of hard work, financial wrangles, opposition from the board of Villiers Hotels, and juggling her social work and caring for David and James, Grandison Court was finally opening. Using money invested by Henry Beresford, the local parish church and the money Nesta raised from selling her grandmother's jeweller, the shabby hotel had been turned into a block of functional flats for poor people. While the work had been done, Henry had ensured the people made homeless from the Durrant Street fire were re-homed in more acceptable houses in a street of small workman's cottages in Bow, that had been bought by the church and turned into charity homes. Finally, in a controversial move that astonished all around her, Nesta had gone into partnership with Henry; forming Tanner Beresford Homes. People were shocked that she'd used her maiden name, but Nesta knew Villiers Hotels wanted to distance themselves from this new venture; and besides, it gave her a sense of satisfaction that it was something belonging just to her.

She had even allowed David to take the day off from school so he could witness his mother's achievements; and he stood with her as they listened to a speech given by Reverend Ellis. He stood on the main door to the block, thanking all the press and local councillors who had attended, and most of all Nesta and Henry for the hard work they had done. Nesta stood with David in front of her, holding onto his shoulders, hoping he was proud of her.

Henry then joined the vicar on the step and addressed the crowd that had gathered.

'Now,' he said. 'If everyone would like to follow me, we will take you on a tour of the new dwellings.'

The two men opened the heavy, double wooden doors and stepped into what used to be the lobby of the hotel. It was now a walkway, which led to another door that opened out onto the former delivery yard that had been transformed into a small play area for children. Nesta had asked David what he thought children would like, and he'd told her a hopscotch pitch on the ground and a climbing frame and swing would be appreciated, so that was what had been put in. They went back indoors and everyone followed Henry into one of the downstairs flats. The old ballroom and dining rooms had been converted into four self contained flats for elderly people who could not manage stairs. There was a bedsitting room, small kitchen area and a shared bathroom. Everything smelt fresh and new, and Nesta felt so proud that this had been her idea. She'd visited slums where old people lived on top floors of rickety houses; and to witness them trying to climb the stairs whilst carrying their groceries, was a distressing sight. At least here everything was on the level.

They went up what used to be the grand staircase to the next floor, where they all packed into one of the small flats. This one was designed for people with no more than four children -

the ones for larger families were on the top floor. There was a sitting room, a small kitchen with a gas range, and a sink with running water; a bedroom for the parents to sleep in and another bedroom with two sets of bunk beds for the children. Along this corridor, there were six flats like this, with two shared bathrooms on each corridor.

‘Aren’t you afraid these people will just turn it into another slum?’ one of the journalists called out.

‘No,’ Nesta replied. ‘People tend to adapt to their environment. If they live in a sewer, they’ll behave like rats. If they live in a palace they’ll act like a king. These flats are luxurious compared to what they are used to, and I think you’ll find their gratitude will cause them to treat it with respect.’

‘And how have you selected the people who will live here?’

‘We have had recommendations from local parishes and we’ve chosen the people most in need of help. The majority of the people moving in have come from a slum in Fulham. The water pipe in their yard had broken and the landlord refused to fix it. They were forced to fetch filthy water from the river to use for cooking and cleaning, and we felt they were most needy. The houses have been cleared, and those who cannot afford the rent on these flats have been moved into decent Poor Law institutions.’

‘And what’s in it for you?’ another journalist asked, with a cynically smug smile on his face.

‘The pleasure of doing good,’ Nesta replied incredulously. ‘Doesn’t it make you feel better when you do an act of kindness?’

‘But this place could have made you thousands of pounds had you kept it as a hotel.’

‘Yes, but I wouldn’t have been able to sleep at night knowing there were people suffering while my bank balance prospered.’

Nesta and David returned to Belgrave Square later that afternoon. David was very excited by all that had happened that morning and asked if he could stay home from school the next day, and sulked when Nesta told him no. David was determined that he wanted to fly aeroplanes when he grew up, and she tried to explain that he wouldn’t be able to do that if he didn’t get an education.

She spotted Colette and Susan, her two youngest maids, coming towards them; arm in arm and chatting excitedly. It had been the young girls’ afternoon off and they usually did something together. Whatever it was today had left them particularly animated.

‘Where have you two been?’ Nesta smiled as she met with them.

‘We went to the new picture house on Fulham Road,’ Colette said. ‘It looks like a palace in there, you should see it ma’am.’

‘What did you see?’

‘Jane Eyre,’ Susan said. ‘I didn’t want to see it, I wanted to see the Charlie Chaplin at the Regal in Kennington, but Colette persuaded me to go, and I’m so pleased ma’am, it’s such a lovely film, and Alicia Bloom is so beautiful.’

‘But Jane Eyre isn't meant to be beautiful,’ Nesta replied. ‘She's supposed to be plain.’

‘Well I s'pose they have to make her beautiful so people will watch the film.’

‘My mother knows Alicia Bloom,’ Nesta said. ‘She does charity work with Ms Bloom's friend Richard Bloomberg. Would you like me to write to Mother and ask her to send over Ms Bloom's autograph?’

‘Yes please!’ both girls gasped. ‘She's so lovely. I wish I could look like that.’

‘There's nothing wrong with you how you are,’ Nesta smiled. ‘Now come on, let's go in, it looks like it's going to rain.’

Nesta got in and found James in bed. She'd wanted him to come to the launch that morning, but he'd been too hung-over from the night before - and he still hadn't moved. Nesta sent David to his nursery, where Nanny Josie would help him with the homework he still hadn't done from last week. When Nesta went into James' room, she found him sitting in bed, wrapped up in his silk dressing gown, smoking a cigarette and staring into space. When he did this, she was never sure if he was just sulking (his latest girlfriend - an eighteen year old 'actress' called Mimi, had chucked him for one of his friends) or if his mind was somewhere else. The war continued to make its mark on him, even though he had been home for five years. He was a different person to the one who'd left, and Nesta was beginning to think she'd never get her lovely brother back.

‘This place is a tip,’ she spat. ‘We'll get Louisa to give it a good clean tomorrow.’

‘I don't want it cleaned,’ he grouched. ‘I've got everything how I want it.’

‘I was rather hoping you'd have joined me today,’ Nesta said, opening the curtains. ‘It was the biggest day of my life, and it would have been nice to have my family there.’

‘I couldn't face it,’ he groaned. ‘My heart is broken.’

Nesta went over to the bed and sat upon it, looking at her brother in despair. He looked dreadful. A scruffy beard covered that chiselled chin, his skin was blotchy through too much drink, and his hair was long and wavy - knots forming on the end where he hadn't brushed it for days. Nesta cursed the war and cursed all those people who were still insistent that it had been necessary. What good had it done? Thousands of men were shells of who they'd once been. Germany was now in abject poverty, with people starving as they tried to pay back their war debt. And the Americans now thought they were the most powerful nation on earth, after their intervention had helped the allies win. It seemed the empire the men had fought so hard to protect was starting to become nothing more than a relic from the past; and soon it would be the USA people were looking to, not England.

‘Why don't you go and see Mama?’ she suggested, reaching out and stroking back his messy hair. ‘It's two years since she and William came over. I'm sure she'd love to see you again.’

‘But what about the company?’ he asked. ‘Who'll run it?’

‘Let's be honest darling, you do very little as it is. The board have got quite used to me turning up at their meetings. I think they're even beginning to take me seriously! At the last

meeting they were talking about opening a hotel in New York or Chicago. Why don't you take a trip out there to have a look at some buildings? You could stay with Mama for Christmas. She'd love that.'

'But what about you and David?'

'We have more than enough friends to spend Christmas with. I just want you to get better James. I hate seeing you like this. Why don't you come to the concert with us tonight? I'm sure Adele could get you another ticket.'

'No,' he whimpered, snuggling back down in bed. 'I just want Mimi back.'

Nesta knew she was fighting a losing battle and left the room. She decided that the next day she would go to the Cunard offices in Piccadilly and ask them to book James on the next available sailing to New York. If anyone could sort him out, Betsey could.

Leaving her brother to his self-pity, Nesta got ready for her night out. Her friend Adele Stanley, an heiress who had thrown herself into first the Suffragettes, then the cause of the welfare of the poor, was taking Nesta, along with a couple of her friends, to the Albert Hall, where they were to watch a young singer called Gabriel Garcia. He was an American of Spanish descent, who had attended music school in England before the war and had been taught by Adele's husband Francis, who was an opera singer. Gabriel had been making great waves in America and Italy, and was now appearing in Don Quixote at the Royal Opera House. But for one night, he was playing a solo concert in aid of The International Save the Children Union.

Nesta decided to get dressed up for her night out. She didn't normally like flaunting her wealth, but tonight was for a good cause, and besides, Adele always wore clothes that were far too flamboyant. Nesta had bought a new dress for the occasion; it was made from green silk and in the new style, hanging down straight and shapelessly, falling several inches above her ankle. The straps were thin, with the left one encrusted with jewels, but Nesta could get away with it; her body was as firm as a woman half her age - her breasts perky, her skin still smooth and flawless. She tied her long blonde hair into a bun at the side of her head, applied enough make up without looking like mutton dressed as lamb, and put in the diamond earrings Roland had bought her as a wedding present. She looked more beautiful than she had at thirty, and she was convinced it came from the confidence she felt inside.

Kissing David goodbye, she set out in the taxi to the Albert Hall. It was one of her favourite venues and she was looking forward to spending the evening in the box Adele had hired. The women were meeting outside the hall, and as soon as the taxi pulled up, Nesta spotted Adele. Even amongst all the women in their furs and sparkling jewels, her friend's elaborate head-dress stuck out. She wore a turban with a huge ostrich feather sticking out the front, and a pure white fur coat that came to the floor. Nesta suddenly felt quite inadequate in her silk dress and mink jacket.

'Here's the birthday girl!' Adele crowed, her arms wide open, as Nesta emerged from the taxi. She was accompanied by her friends Cosmo Perry-Phelps - a much plainer woman wearing a black dress, and Mabel Cummings, who Nesta always thought as a bit of an idiot. Mabel never

seemed to take her charity work very seriously and Nesta had once had an argument with her when she stated that she couldn't understand why women wanted the vote anyway. They barely said hello, and made their way into the auditorium. Nesta remembered a time when it would be considered quite scandalous for four ladies to be seen out without male escorts; but since the war - when women had done so much - it had become more acceptable.

The box was close to the stage, and over the balcony Nesta could see the orchestra tuning up. The air was filled with chatter, and it felt great to be alive. Sometimes she felt guilty at how her life had blossomed after Roland's death. But for so long he had oppressed her and belittled her, and without him around, she had the freedom to do as she liked, and she had achieved so much.

'I hope you're coming with us to the after-show party Nesta,' Adele said. 'Gabriel's holding a soiree at The Empire Hotel. I want you to meet him, he's such a dear.'

'I should really be getting home Adele. It would be a bit cheeky to expect Josie to stay up late.'

'She's paid to look after the child isn't she?' Mabel said snootily.

'She is, yes. Perhaps I should ask if I can use the telephone here and call her and let her know.'

Soon afterwards, the concert started and Gabriel Garcia walked on stage to rapturous applause. He was a tall, slim boy wearing a smart evening suit. His dark hair was unusually long - curls lapping around his ears and the back of his neck. The music started playing and he began to sing Ave Maria. He had a beautiful, deep tenor voice which filled the whole auditorium and belied his youthful appearance. Nesta could see him quite closely and was, to her embarrassment, rather taken with him. He was beautiful, with big, dark eyes, olive skin and a chiselled bone structure. He used dramatic gestures whilst singing, and as Nesta looked down, she could see every woman in the audience gazing up at him.

'What do you think?' Adele whispered in her ear.

'He's very good for someone so young,' Nesta replied. 'How old is he?'

'Twenty-five. You should have seen him when Francis used to teach him. He was a chubby little thing with no confidence. Now look at him, quite the looker isn't he?'

'Yes, but he's practically young enough to be my son, so I can't see him in that way.'

Adele just gave a wise smile and retreated back into her seat. Nesta blushed and returned to watching Gabriel. He sang songs of romance in English, Italian, and Spanish, and every one struck Nesta in the heart. Her world was usually full of the worst life had to offer - people living in terrible conditions; battling against the men who wanted to stop her fulfilling her ambitions; trying to cope with James and his moods. And to be serenaded by a handsome young man, singing the prettiest songs, in his beautiful sincere voice, was like a light in her dark existence. Nesta guessed all the young girls in this audience would probably leave here tonight just a little in love with Gabriel Garcia - and she couldn't blame them.

The performance went by far too quickly, and when the lights went up and Gabriel walked off stage, Nesta felt rather disappointed not to be in his company any longer.

‘Right,’ said Adele, standing up. ‘Off to the party we go.’

Nesta knew that Josie was perfectly capable of keeping an eye on David. He was nine years old now, and highly unlikely to get up to any mischief; but she still felt bad about leaving him. However the desire to get to know Gabriel better was so powerful she knew she couldn’t fight it. She convinced herself that it was nothing to do with the fact that he was so attractive - he was far too young for her, but rather that he was talented, and she wanted to find out more about him.

The women left, and Adele hailed a taxi to take them to The Empire Hotel in Knightsbridge. Cosmo, Mabel and Adele chatted excitedly amongst themselves, but Nesta remained quiet. All she could think about was seeing Gabriel again, and felt rather embarrassed to have become so smitten with a boy who was fifteen years her junior. In the years since Roland died, she’d been far too busy with her career to notice men or worry about romance. But there was something about Gabriel that had stirred her, and made her realise what had been lacking from her life for so long.

The Empire Hotel held many memories for Nesta. It was where she'd gone on her first date with Roland. Chaperoned by her Aunt Hortensia, they'd met and spent the afternoon drinking tea; with Roland giving her playful, furtive glances over the top of Hortensia's head and making her laugh. Indeed the party tonight was in the same room; but instead of genteel ladies meeting for afternoon tea, it was filled with various people from the world of show-business. A pianist was playing jaunty jazz music, and a couple of young girls in skirts that fell only to their knees had got up and were dancing. This scene of frivolity was so far away from Nesta's normal lifestyle that she didn't quite know what to make of it. As expected, Adele knew everyone, and was greeted by a big, bruiser of a man with black, slicked back hair that looked as though it had been coloured with boot polish, a handlebar moustache, and a grey suit that looked as though he'd been squeezed into.

‘Adele!’ he crowed, holding out his arms. ‘Beautiful as ever!’

‘Well thank you Manny,’ she said, hugging him and kissing him upon each cheek. She pulled away and looked at her friends. ‘This is Manny Goldstein, Gabriel's manager. Manny, this is Mrs Cosmo Perry-Phelps, Mrs Mabel Cummings and Lady Nesta Villiers.’

‘Enchante,’ the man said, trying to make his cockney accent sound French. He took each of the women's hands and kissed them. Mabel did a stupid giggle like a schoolgirl and Nesta threw her a filthy look.

‘Come, join me at my table,’ Manny said, leading them through the throng of people. The sound of champagne corks popping seemed to soundtrack the proceedings as well as the piano, and Nesta couldn't help but think how things had changed since the war. She remembered the austerity, the food shortages and people feeling they shouldn't be too jolly because it was disrespectful to the boys away fighting on the Front. Now it was as though everyone wanted to grab life by the throat. Scared it was going to be snatched away from them at any moment.

Nesta was a little disappointed to find Gabriel wasn't at Manny's table. Instead, there were men from Apollo, the recording company he was signed to, and their wives - along with Manny's

wife Ethel. Nesta was introduced to everyone, given a glass of champagne and left to listen while Adele regaled the table with her tales of partying at Knole the previous weekend with Vita Sackville West, and how the house had been filled with the most wonderful writers and artists. Nesta envied her friend's joie de vie, and wished some of it could rub off on her.

She noticed Manny spot someone and he stood up, beckoning to them.

'Here's the man of the moment!' he crowed and Nesta looked round to find Gabriel walking through the room. Everyone stood up and clapped him, and he started laughing, dismissing them playfully with a wave of his hand. Again Nesta's heart flipped on seeing him and she blushed, wondering what she was going to say if it was required of her to speak to him. He reached the table and went over to Manny, briefly hugging him. Manny then faced the three women at the end of the table and introduced them all. Gabriel nodded at each of them as their names were said; but as his eyes met Nesta's, something happened. For a moment, he lingered, furrowing his brow slightly as though he felt he knew her from somewhere. That was exactly how she felt about him. But it was not possible. They'd never met before today.

The moment ended with Manny thrusting a glass of champagne into Gabriel's hand and sitting him down beside him, gazing at him like a proud father.

'This boy's going to be the biggest star in the world,' he announced, slapping Gabriel on the back. 'Tell 'em who you're gonna be singing for next week.'

'The King and Queen,' Gabriel replied.

'The King and Queen,' Manny repeated. 'They're having a party at Buckingham Palace and my boy is going to be singing for them.'

'How are you finding London this time?' Adele called across the table. 'I bet it's a lot different to how it was when you were here in 1910.'

'It is,' Gabriel replied. Nesta couldn't place whereabouts in America he was from. It certainly wasn't New York - she was as familiar with that accent as she was her own. His was softer, more well-spoken. 'There's more automobiles.' He laughed. 'And there certainly seems to be more pretty girls around.'

As he said this, his eyes fell on Nesta and she looked away, blushing. Adele then addressed everyone on the table.

'My husband used to teach Gabriel how to sing,' she said. 'He was just a shy fourteen year old then. Now look at him. Quite the thing.'

'And you Adele,' he smiled, with a little bow. 'Are still as beautiful as I remember you. You must allow me to dance with you later. Indeed with all of you lovely ladies.'

'I-I don't dance,' Nesta blurted out, terrified at the thought of being alone with him.

'You don't dance!?' he smiled. 'I bet you're always being asked to dance.'

'Not Nesta,' Mabel chipped in sarcastically. 'She's always too busy doing her charity work.'

'Charity work?' he asked. 'I'm intrigued.' He looked at the man who sat between him and Nesta. 'Charles, why don't we swap places? I want to know all about this charity work.'



Charles (the head of Apollo Records) wasn't going to argue with his rising star and compliantly swapped places with him. Nesta blushed deeply as Gabriel came to sit beside her, and close up, she could see just how beautiful he was. His skin was flawless, his eyes were so dark, they were almost ebony; and that gorgeous hair, with its loose curls, was shiny and healthy looking. He fixed all his attention on her, and made her shrink a little into her seat.

'So, what charity work do you do?' he asked.

'I partly own a charity that builds homes for poor people,' she replied, her voice croaky with nerves. 'We opened our first block in Earls Court today. People start moving in tomorrow.'

'Wow!' he said, blowing out his cheeks. 'That's impressive. So your husband doesn't mind you dedicating all your time to the poor and needy?'

'I'm a widow,' she replied. 'My husband died in the war.'

'I'm sorry to hear that,' he answered, although he hardly did sound sorry. 'I fought myself. I was in the Navy. Have you any children?'

'A little boy, David. He's nine and he misses his father a lot.'

'I bet he does. But still, he's got a lovely mamma to look after him, so he's a lucky boy.'

'You flatter me,' she blushed.

'It's an easy thing to do,' he replied softly.

Suddenly he was interrupted by a young girl his own age, stepping up to him and touching him upon the shoulder. She was pretty and lithe, wearing a sparkling, silver dress, her cigarette in a glamorously long holder. Nesta at once felt old and frumpy.

'Gabriel,' the girl said excitedly. 'You must come and meet my friend Bonnie, she simply adores you.'

'Don't be so rude Miri,' Manny called out across the table. 'Gabriel's talking to Lady Villiers.'

'No, it's fine, really,' Nesta said.

'See, it's fine,' Miri said, tugging at Gabriel's sleeve. 'Come on, come and meet Bonnie.'

'I'll speak to you later Nesta,' Gabriel said, getting up and following the young girl to the other side of the room.

'I apologise for my daughter,' Manny said to Nesta. 'I did try to teach her some manners.'

Nesta tried to concentrate on the conversation that was going on around the table, but all the time she wanted to turn around and see what Gabriel was doing. Was Bonnie as pretty as Miri? And would he lavish her with the same attention and flattery he'd used on Nesta? She knew her reaction to him had been ridiculous - he was almost young enough to be her son. But he had stirred something in her that she found impossible to control. She'd never reacted to anyone like this, not even Roland; with him she just remembered feeling grateful to have found someone who cared enough to marry her.

Gabriel took to the piano and did a rousing version of *My Mammy*. He hammed up his beautiful voice, and had everyone in stitches. On stage he'd seemed such a serious, heartfelt performer, and yet in real life he was funny and lively and very confident. When he finished singing, the pianist took over and went back to playing his energetic Rag Time music.

‘Now!’ Gabriel shouted, clapping his hands together. ‘I insist everyone gets up and dances.’

Nesta cringed when she saw him heading her way. He stopped before her and held out his hand.

‘Seeing as we were so rudely interrupted,’ he said.

Nesta blushed and took his hand, her body shaking as their skin touched. Gabriel pulled her up and their bodies slammed together. They were the same height and they fitted together perfectly. He gazed into her eyes and gave that wide, confident smile only American men seemed to possess.

‘Now Nesta,’ he said. ‘You’re going to prove to me that you can dance.’

He pulled her onto the dance floor and whirled her about quickly, making her giggle. She spotted the young girls, who were dancing with far inferior young men, shooting her dirty looks for having the star of the show all to herself. Nesta didn’t care; it felt wonderful to be young and careless again. This new style of music was fun and cheeky, and girls were even dancing to it on their own.

It was like being on a fairground ride, as Gabriel held her and spun her this way and that, getting faster and faster. Soon she was begging for mercy and they both stopped, returning to the table. Adele gave Nesta a smile of approval, but Mabel looked most displeased.

‘See, you can dance,’ Gabriel laughed as they both sat down.

‘Only because you were whirling me round,’ Nesta panted, holding her chest. ‘But it was great fun.’

‘There Nesta,’ Cosmo chuckled. ‘What a perfectly exquisite birthday present for you - being whirled around a dance-floor by a handsome young man.’

‘It’s your birthday?’ Gabriel asked.

‘I’m afraid it is,’ she replied.

‘Well, that calls for a song’

He slipped off his chair and knelt on the floor, arms stretched wide.

‘Happy Birthday to you!’ he sang ‘Happy Birthday to you! Happy Birthday dear Nesta, Happy Birthday to you.’

Nesta blushed and clapped, and everyone else in the room applauded. As Gabriel got up, he grasped her shoulders and kissed her upon the cheek, causing Mabel to hiss in disgust.

‘I better go mingle,’ Gabriel said. He then bent over and put his mouth to her ear.

‘Come up to my room in half an hour. It’s room one hundred and nine.’

He stood up and went off to talk to his adoring public, leaving Nesta stunned. She had never been propositioned in such a way in her life. She’d only ever slept with Roland, and he’d waited for her until their wedding night - when it had become an obligation. From then on, it had always been done out of duty or the desire to get pregnant; and sometimes when she didn’t even want it at all. She never in her wildest dreams thought she’d be asked to go to the room of a twenty-five year old boy.

‘What did he say to you?’ Cosmo asked.

‘Oh, he just said he hoped I had a lovely evening,’ Nesta giggled.

Someone must have asked for another song, because Gabriel took to the stage and sung a beautiful ballad in Spanish. He sounded so seductive, and Nesta couldn’t help but be tempted to take him up on his offer. She knew it was immoral and irresponsible, and if anyone found out, it would cause a terrible scandal. But Gabriel had hypnotised her, making her want him in a way she’d never wanted anyone. She didn’t think it was possible for a woman to even feel that way.

Gabriel finished singing, wished everyone goodnight, and declared that he was going to bed to rest his throat. He was given another standing ovation and rushed off, briefly making eye contact with Nesta as he went. She didn’t know what to do. Did she follow her head and call for a taxi to take her straight home? Or did she follow her heart and go upstairs with Gabriel? She looked around the room at the young girls, their faces still flushed with desire after watching him, and she’d never felt more attractive. He could have had any of them, and he’d chosen her.

‘I must be leaving as well,’ she said to Adele, from across the table. ‘I’m very tired.’

‘So soon?’ Adele frowned. ‘Did all that dancing wear you out?’

‘Just a little,’ Nesta smiled. ‘If you’ll excuse me, I’ll find someone to call me a cab.’

She stood up and looked down at her friend; and suddenly she was aware that her legs were shaking just a little.

‘Thank you for a lovely evening Adele,’ she said. ‘I shan’t forget it in a long time.’

Nesta walked out of the room and into the lobby. Before she could change her mind, she called for the lift, and when it arrived, she pressed the button for the first floor. Deep down she knew she would regret her actions, but she was unable to stop herself. As she stepped out into the long corridor, she could barely walk. She looked for room 109, and when she found it, she hesitated, then knocked on the door. It soon opened and Gabriel stood there, a knowing smile on his face. He’d removed his jacket, and had loosened his tie, the crisp whiteness of his shirt complimenting his tanned skin.

‘I knew you’d come,’ he said, stepping back and allowing her into the room. It was one of the more modest rooms in this ostentatious hotel, but it still had a four poster bed, deep carpets, antique furniture, silk wallpaper and an en-suite bathroom. Gabriel, sat on the bed and looked up at Nesta as she paced about.

‘Why me?’ she asked. ‘Why did you choose me?’

‘Because you were the most beautiful woman in the room.’

‘But I’m fifteen years older than you! It’s immoral.’

‘So why did you come here then?’

Unable to look at him any longer, Nesta strode over to the window and looked out at the dark night.

‘Because I was flattered,’ she replied. ‘Now I feel very foolish. I know nothing about you, except that you’re almost young enough to be my son and you’ve got it into your head that you’re attracted to me.’

She heard Gabriel get off the bed and come over to her. He stood close behind her, their bodies not touching; but enough for her to feel him there. He ran his hands up her bare arms and his lips brushed the back of her neck, making her shiver in delight.

‘Okay,’ he said, kissing her neck once more, his mouth then moving to her ear. ‘I’m twenty-five years old. I was born and raised in San Francisco. My father is a journalist and my mother was a dancer before she got married.’ He kissed her ear once more. ‘My grandparents on my pop’s side were from Andalusia and my grandparents on my mom’s side are Portuguese. I came to London when I was fourteen to study under Francis Stanley, and returned to America just before war broke out. I served with the US Navy, and when I came home I went straight back into singing. Is that enough for you?’

Nesta turned around and looked at him. She longed to kiss him, but held back. Still not sure what she was doing.

‘Do you have a sweetheart back home?’ she asked.

‘No,’ he replied with a shake of the head. ‘There was someone but she broke it off cos I was never in one place.’

He came closer to her, brushing her lips with his. Without thinking, Nesta responded and started kissing him in return. Somehow she didn’t want to know any more about him. She felt in just one evening they had shared an unspoken conversation - there was a familiarity that made them feel as though they already knew all there was to know.

Nesta didn’t get home until three in the morning. It had been so tempting to stay with Gabriel for the night, but she knew the servants would start to talk if she didn’t return. It was vitally important that no one found out what she had been doing, because the gossip could ruin her. But this didn’t stop her floating on air as she walked up the stairs to her bedroom. She knew she wouldn’t be able to sleep – instead she would lie awake reliving every kiss and every caress. She’d close her eyes and see Gabriel’s perfect naked body before her. It was strange, Roland had been twenty-five when they married, but his body had always seemed old and out of condition, whereas Gabriel was so young and muscular.

After undressing for bed, Nesta sat at her dressing table and brushed her golden hair. She couldn’t remove the smile on her face, and she was convinced she looked younger. She’d felt like a virgin with Gabriel. Despite their age difference, he was far more experienced than her and had known exactly what he was doing. It made Roland’s clumsy attempts at passion look even more pitiful and Nesta couldn’t get enough. Gabriel had asked her to come to his hotel again the next afternoon and while she’d protested and said she never could, and that this had to be a one-off. She knew she would go. For the first time in her life, someone had made her feel like a beautiful, sensual woman; and as long as no one else found out about what she were doing, she didn’t see the harm in carrying on their encounters. It wasn’t as though they were harming anybody.

Chapter Sixteen  
New Years Eve – New York 1921

Alice stood in front of the mirror, looking at her dress, wondering if it was a little too much. She'd bought it from Barney's in Rodeo Drive when she'd been filming in Los Angeles back in the summer, and it had seemed so daring and outrageous that she'd been taken with it. Now she was convinced the sun had gone to her head and made her buy something quite inappropriate. The dress was long and grey, with silver thread woven intricately throughout it, giving it a shimmer. The back draped down low, just above her buttocks, and the neck-line was similarly low – cut down to her navel. Fortunately Alice was still flat chested and could carry it off without it looking obscene, but she still had hung rows and rows of pearls around her neck, draping them down over her chest, just for decency's sake.

There was a knock on the bedroom door and Claudette, Alana's nanny, came in, with Alana up in her arms.

'Oh Miss Alice,' she said in her deep Louisiana accent. 'You look so beautiful.'

'You look like a princess Mommy,' Alana smiled.

'Thank you darling,' Alice replied. 'I'm glad you approve. You don't think it's too much Claudette?'

'You're a movie star,' Claudette said. 'Course they're gonna expect you to look too much. Anyway, Miss Alana wanted to see her mommy before she went out, so I'll leave you two to it.'

The nanny put Alana down, and backed out of the room. Alice scooped her daughter up, breathing in the scent of baby soap and talc. She looked so adorable in her pyjamas; her freshly washed, shiny black hair hanging down over her shoulders. She was the spitting image of her father and Alice adored her.

'You promise to be a good girl for Claudette and I'll take you skating in Central Park tomorrow,' she said.

'I promise,' said Alana. 'And you promise to take me skating?'

'Cross my heart and hope to die.'

'Okay,' the child shrugged. 'I'll be good.'

'I wish I could take you with me. But it'll only be a load of grown ups acting silly.'

'Is Grandpa going?'

‘Yes, Grandpa’s going. If we’re lucky, maybe he’ll come skating with us tomorrow.’ She kissed her daughter’s cheek and put her back down. ‘But first you’ve got to be a good girl for Claudette. So you go back to her, and I’ll see you in the morning.’

Alana hugged her mother’s legs and giggled, running off out of the room. Part of Alice wanted to go to Betsey Hasburg’s party, but most of her wanted to stay with her baby.

Betsey Hasburg was holding her New Years Eve Party at the De Vere Hotel on Times Square. She had invited all the people she did charity work with, and this year had extended an invitation to Richard and Alice. She’d asked each guest to bring something with them that could be auctioned at the end of the evening, to raise money for her latest charity - a hostel for homeless seamen in Brooklyn. Alice was taking a signed picture of Mary Pickford that the actress had given her when she’d made her last movie. She knew that Alice was Richard Bloomberg’s ward and had kindly donated the framed photograph in the event of an auction or charity fundraiser. Alice wasn’t vain enough to donate a photograph of herself - even though she guessed a fair number of her fellow guests would.

Alice and Richard were now neighbours. Feeling she couldn’t live off his kindness forever, she had bought the house next door to his when the occupants moved overseas. It was a huge house – far too big for just her and Alana; and times when they were in California, making films; the only people in there would be the servants. But Alice couldn’t bear to be away from Richard, and it was comforting to know he was only a few feet away.

He was waiting in his limousine for her outside her house, and looked so dapper in his top hat and tails. Alice climbed in beside him and hoped he wouldn’t disapprove of her dress.

‘Wow!’ he said. ‘Did they run out of material when they made that?’

‘You don’t think it’s a little risqué?’ she asked, rubbing her arms to get rid of the goosebumps. ‘I wish I’d brought a coat with me.’

‘It is a little risqué. But it’s for a party, and you’re the beautiful movie star. People will expect you to look glamorous.’

‘Well, I am thirty in two weeks time. I feel positively old compared to some of the young starlets that are coming up. Seems like yesterday that was me.’

‘But you have experience on your side,’ Richard said, patting her hand. ‘And that makes you all the more beautiful.’

They arrived at the hotel, and Alice was not at all surprised to find press photographers gathered outside, standing by the red carpet that was rolled out for them to walk on. As soon as

Alice and Richard stepped out, the flashbulbs went crazy and Alice stood and posed for them. She knew she would be on the front of all the papers the next day. Not only because of her dress, but because she was also sporting a radical new hairdo. She'd had all her hair chopped off into a chin length bob, and in an age when women still had long hair, she knew it would cause a stir.

Once the press men had got their fill, Alice and Richard went into the hotel. The lobby was festooned with garish Christmas decorations, and a young man in a smart evening suit, was chasing after a girl in a sparkling gold dress, who was squealing with laughter. A waiter came forward and offered them both a glass of champagne – which made Alice gasp.

'How has Betsey got away with this?' she asked Richard, eagerly accepting a glass. It was so unusual to be offered alcohol in these days of Prohibition.

'Knowing Betsey, she either doesn't give a damn if she gets busted; she's slipped the Police Chief a few hundred dollars to keep away; or she's found some minor caveat in the law that says there's nothing wrong with consuming alcohol made abroad. Either way, I ain't complaining!'

They went into the ballroom and were greeted with the sight of people dancing to the jaunty music the band in the corner were playing. Even more shiny, gaudy decorations hung from the ceiling, and people were throwing paper streamers at each other. However, as soon as one of the young, female guests noticed Alicia Bloom had arrived, the atmosphere changed, and a hiss of whispers soon filled the air as people turned to look at her. Word had obviously reached Betsey, because suddenly there was a loud call of:-

'There you are!'

The crowd seemed to part like the Red Sea, and Betsey came through - dressed like some sort of overweight Winter princess in a white dress with a white fur trim around the neck, cuffs and hem. She looked ridiculous, but Alice couldn't laugh. The woman had been kind enough to invite them and she had to remain polite.

'Betsey you look lovely,' she lied, kissing the woman upon both cheeks.

'And so do you,' Betsey replied, pulling away from her and examining her. 'It's sinful how you're so skinny. How do you do it?'

'I always have been,' Alice laughed. 'I had hoped childbirth would have given me a bust, but that didn't work either.'

'And look at your hair,' Betsey crowed, reaching out and touching Alice's sleek bob. 'Where did you get that done?'

'My mother-in-law did it. She used to be a hairdresser, so I went to see her.'

Alice didn't reveal that Gilda had been trying to put a permanent wave into her hair, and it had gone wrong, and the only solution had been to chop it all off. She was far too loyal to do that!

'Well come on through you two,' Betsey said. 'There's someone I want you both to meet.'

She led them to the far side of the room, where there stood a very uncomfortable looking man. He was dressed smartly, but his hands were behind his back and he wore a pained expression, looking as though he wanted to be anywhere but here. It was a shame because he was very handsome, with short, swept back, dark blond wavy hair and a well boned face. William Hasburg was trying to make conversation, but he barely seemed to be listening.

'Richard, Alicia, I would like you to meet my son James. James, this is my good friend Richard Bloomberg, and I'm sure you recognise Miss Alicia Bloom.'

James finally removed his arms from behind his back and shook hands with Richard. He then took Alice's hand and brought it to his lips, kissing it.

'Enchanted, Miss Bloom,' he said, and his cut-glass, English accent made Alice jump slightly. She recalled Betsey saying both her children were based in London, but she'd assumed they were American.

'Please, call me Alice,' she smiled.

'I'm a great fan of your pictures,' he said.

'Thank you,' she replied. 'Although an actress is only ever as good as her script.'

'What's that you've brought?' Betsey asked, looking at the photograph wrapped in brown paper, that Alice was holding.

'It's a signed photo of Mary Pickford,' Alice replied, passing Betsey the package.

'How wonderful,' Betsey said. 'Although I would have preferred a photo of you. You're far more beautiful.'

'I never realised you were English,' James said to Alice. He gave a wan laugh. 'I suppose if we could hear you talk in your films, I would have known.'

'Apparently they're working to develop talking pictures,' Alice said. 'A lot of the stars are worried. They look great on screen, but if you heard them talk! Boy would people laugh!'

'Richard why don't we go and talk to Edna Delahunty?' Betsey said, grasping Richard's arm. 'She's holding a sponsored boat race on Lake Michigan next week. She's dying to meet



you.’ She looked at William. ‘Darling, go and rescue Gloria Chesterfield. She’s been standing there on her own for past half hour.’

William did as he was told, shuffling off to speak to the elderly woman who was currently clutching a glass of orange juice, watching the world go by. Richard and Betsey walked off, and James and Alice were left alone.

‘Do you ever feel as though you’ve been set up?’ James asked.

‘A little,’ Alice replied. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘I’m not,’ he laughed. ‘It’s not every day one gets to talk to a movie star.’

‘So, are you living here permanently?’ Alice asked.

‘No, I’m here for a holiday. My sister thought I could do with a break, so booked me a place on a boat coming over. It was my Christmas present.’

‘I must say it’s nice to hear an English accent. I love New York, I’ve lived here for nearly ten years. But I still feel like a fish out of water. My daughter’s already getting the accent, although hers is a bit more Southern because my nanny’s from Louisiana.’

‘How old’s your daughter?’

‘She’s three going on thirty. She only allowed me to go to this party tonight because I promised to take her skating in Central Park tomorrow.’

‘Children can be so manipulative. My nephew got me a football for my birthday last year, just so he could play with it.’

‘You haven’t any children of your own?’

‘I haven’t been blessed, no.’

Alice had almost forgotten how difficult the English found making conversation with strangers. Americans could talk about anything with relative ease, but it was an English thing not to be too probing or intrusive when meeting someone new.

‘So you live in New York?’ he asked, after a long pause. ‘Not Hollywood?’

‘No. Richard’s based here and Alana adores him so I’d hate to separate them.’

‘It’s just so frustrating not being able to get a drink anywhere. Mother only managed to get the champagne in tonight because she gave a large donation to the local Chief of Police’s favourite charity.’

‘There are loads of places you can get a drink around here!’ Alice laughed. ‘There’s a speakeasy on every corner!’

James frowned.

‘Aren't they're illegal?’

‘Of course they are, but no one bothers them.’

‘I suppose I should avoid drink anyway. That's the reason I was sent here in the first place. I've gone off the rails a bit and I need to get myself together.’

It was hard to believe this stuffed shirt, straight-laced chap had ever found it in him to go off the rails. He was so handsome, with his perfect bone structure, thick hair and sad blue eyes, but Alice noticed the right one drooped slightly. He must have seen her looking because he reached up and touched the skin beside his eye.

‘I was wounded in the Battle of the Somme,’ he replied. ‘Left me with one eye, but I was one of the lucky ones.’

‘Sorry, I didn't mean to stare. My husband was killed in the war too.’

‘Dreadful affair,’ he said in his clipped tones, his arms returning behind his back in that defensive manner once more. Alice suddenly felt incredibly sorry for him. He was lucky in that he'd survived, but she could tell he was carrying survivors guilt around with him. She'd read of people who, like her, had survived the Titanic, and had become gibbering wrecks for weeks afterwards. Feeling guilty because they'd lived while so many had perished. Alice hadn't felt such guilt - she was unconscious for two weeks afterwards and when she did get better, her only thought had been what had happened to her baby.

‘I don't suppose you feel like checking one of these speakeasies out do you?’ James asked. ‘I feel awfully stifled in here - so much noise.’

Alice went to refuse. Despite many offers, she'd not been on any dates in the three years since she was widowed. No one could match up to Allen, and she also had Alana to think of - she didn't want to bring any Tom Dick or Harry into her daughter's life. But there was something about James - he seemed lonely, and she got the feeling he would have only been able to cope with a raucous party with alcohol inside him. Is that how Allen would have been had he survived?

‘Why not?’ she smiled. ‘Although we'd better make sure your mother doesn't mind. This is her party, after all.’

Betsey was seemingly delighted that her son was going off somewhere with Alice. James told a lie and said they were going for a meal, fearing Betsey would have gone spare if she'd

known he was going off to drink liquor. They then left the hotel and the freezing wind bit straight into Alice's bare skin; causing her to rub her arms and chatter her teeth. Like a gentleman James removed his overcoat and draped it around her shoulders. Seeing as he was about five inches taller than Alice, the coat was rather long, but she immediately appreciated its warmth.

'Right, where to?' James asked.

'I've heard that Deuces on Fifty Second Street is very good. Fancy a walk there?'

'Why not?'

They walked off, Alice keeping her head down, both to protect her from the wind, and to stop people from recognising her.

'I can't believe I lied to Betsey so she didn't get angry,' James laughed. 'I'm thirty-eight and I'm still scared of my mother.'

'Betsey is a very formidable lady. But I guess she's only looking out for you.'

'I know, but mothers can be so stifling don't you think?'

'Well I wouldn't really know because mine died when I was young. But I do know I intend to watch Alana like a hawk. No boys will be allowed near her until she's twenty one!'

'So how did you meet Richard Bloomberg?' James asked.

'He rescued me from the Titanic would you believe? I fell over and knocked myself unconscious and he carried me onto a lifeboat, and I've been with him ever since. I don't have any family in England, and Richard's become like a substitute father.'

'My sister was on the Titanic as well. It's so rare one meets a survivor. So many died.'

'Trouble is, the Titanic seemed like such a big thing. Then the war happened and somehow it paled into insignificance. All those millions of men lost.'

'Were you married long?'

'Five years. I wish Alana had met Allen. She'll never have any memory of him. She was born the day I found out he'd died.'

'That's terrible. I have to confess, so many times I've watched your pictures and found you so startlingly beautiful that somehow I'd neglected to think you were a real person with a life, and feelings, and all the horrid things that people endure. You just seem like a goddess up on that screen.'

‘And I don’t look like a goddess in real life?’ she smiled teasingly, kicking herself for flirting with him.

‘You’re even more beautiful in real life,’ he replied. ‘I feel very honoured to be here with you.’

They arrived at Deuces, and for a moment Alice thought she had come to the wrong place. Claudette often came here with Michele, her fiancé and raved about what a great club it was, but all Alice and James were confronted with was a closed restaurant with the name Deuces written above it in neon lights. It was only when a side door opened and a young Negro man came out, adjusting his hat, shortly followed by a very lithe looking girl in a close fitting dress, that Alice realised the club was indeed in the basement. She hoped they would be allowed in, and that it wasn’t exclusively for Negroes - or members only.

Just inside the innocuous looking red wooden door stood a massively tall black man squeezed into a pin-stripe suit. As soon as he saw Alice, he gasped and covered his mouth with one of his massive, paw-like hands.

‘Oh my God, Alicia Bloom!’ he gasped.

‘Don’t broadcast it,’ she giggled. ‘We don’t want everyone knowing I’m here.’

‘Come in Miss Bloom...Mr...’

‘Tanner,’ said James.

‘Mr Tanner. Come on in. It’s a privilege to have you both here.’

They went down the dark staircase and into the club. It was not much more than a fairly small cellar transformed into a bar; with tables and chairs scattered around, and a jazz record playing on the gramophone. The lights were dim and the atmosphere was very sensual. Most of the patrons were Negroes; dancing close to one another on the small dance-floor in the corner. Alice and James went up to the bar and ordered two scotch on the rocks. They then found a table by the wall and sat down. The candle on the table flickered, exposing the cracked plasterwork and damp patches. Alice bet in the cold light of day, this place looked like a dive.

James drunk his whiskey quickly and went to the bar to get another one. He drank this one more slowly, but Alice could see him gradually unwind before her eyes.

‘At least back in England I’ll be able to get a drink wherever I like,’ he said.

‘Are you going back?’ she replied, and to her surprise she felt disappointed. She was enjoying his company more than she cared to admit, and had rather hoped he would stick around New York for a while, and they could perhaps become friends.

‘Eventually,’ he said. ‘I should really get back to work. I’ve been neglecting things of late.’

‘What do you do?’

‘I run Villiers Hotels. It used to belong to my brother-in-law but he died in the war. Now it belongs to David, my nephew, but he’s only nine, so he can’t do anything. My sister has been doing her bit, but I know the men on the board aren’t happy with her poking her nose in. So I’d better get back to it.’

‘Do you have a wife back in England?’ Alice gave herself another mental kick. It was none of her business, and she was giving him the wrong idea. She blamed the whisky – it was so unusual to drink alcohol these days, it had gone straight to her head.

‘No, I’m widowed too. My wife, Lucia died in 1910, and I’ve never met anyone who matched up to her. We were childhood sweethearts. I went to study art in Tuscany for a year when I was sixteen and I stayed in Lucia’s father’s hotel. My parents went spare when we got married when we were eighteen. But I was madly in love and headstrong and all we wanted was to be together.’

‘How did she die?’

‘She had a brain tumour. We didn’t know she was so ill until it was too late. Not that they could have done anything anyway.’

‘And you’ve never found anyone since?’

He shook his head.

‘After she died, I threw myself into working for Roland. I moved in with him and Nesta and helped Villiers expand. But Roland and I were conscripted into the same regiment in the war. Roland was killed at The Somme, and obviously I survived. But after you’ve witnessed something like that, you’ve seen that hell can actually be here on earth, and you stop caring about trivial things, like work and money and ambition. You live for the moment because you realise how futile life is. I suppose I’ve been getting up to all the things I should have done as a young man, when I was dedicating myself to Lucia. But one can get away with it at eighteen. At thirty-eight, it just looks foolish.’

Alice was very flattered at him opening up to her like this. She wondered if he felt comfortable with her because she was English. He really was very handsome. The candlelight emphasised his high cheekbones and the slight slant to his eyes that gave them a kindly appearance. Alice didn’t like the fact that she was attracted to him. It still felt so disloyal to Allen.

‘So do you think this trip to New York has refreshed you?’ she asked.

‘Well, it’s made me realise I can’t live with my mother for any longer than two weeks!’ he laughed. ‘And I really want to get back to Nesta and David. But on the plus side, I have gone to a speakeasy with one of the most famous women in the world. Not many people can say that.’

‘Did your sister used to live in New York? Is that why she was travelling on the Titanic?’

‘No, she was going over to Mother’s wedding to William. She wouldn’t have sailed if she’d known she was pregnant. She gave birth to David on board.’

He chuckled, but Alice didn’t. She was shocked that another woman did the same as her.

‘S-She had a baby on board?’

‘Yes. She didn’t even know she was pregnant. She gave birth the day they set sail. David has great fun telling his school pals that he was born on a sinking ship. Not that it was then; it was perfectly okay when he was born.’ He paused. ‘Are you okay Alice?’ he frowned. ‘Is it upsetting you, talking about the Titanic?’

‘No. I’m a little shocked that someone else gave birth as well. I too had a baby on the Titanic.’

‘Really? What a coincidence.’

‘Yes. I had been led astray by my fiancé and found myself in a predicament. Me and my brother were coming to New York to start a new life, where no one knew us. We were supposed to sail on the Adriatic earlier in the year, but Robert swapped the tickets for the Titanic, he thought I’d be fine. But the baby decided to come on the day we sailed. I had a little boy... Bobby.’

Alice momentarily closed her eyes and took a deep breath to quell the pain. When she talked about it, it all became so real again. She could feel Bobby’s little body in her arms, smell the sweet scent of a baby, hear his bird-like cries.

‘Did he die?’ James asked softly.

‘I don’t know,’ she replied. ‘My last memory of the boat was climbing up some crowded stairs to get to the top deck, and I know I had Bobby in my arms. But from then on, I don’t remember a thing. The next time I woke up, I was in Richard’s house and had been unconscious for a fortnight. Richard put an appeal in the paper for the person who took Bobby to hand him back. Lots of stories came out afterwards of people grabbing children just to get into a lifeboat, and Richard was convinced someone had taken Bobby for that. But no one ever came forward. I know I should accept that he’s probably dead, that my memory’s playing tricks on me and in my panic, I rushed out of the room, and left him there. But I can’t. Something in here,’ she clutched her chest. ‘Something in my heart tells me my little boy is still out there, alive and well.’

‘What a tragic story. Were you travelling Third Class? I heard they got a rum deal.’

‘Second class. If I’d been Third Class, I probably would have died.’

‘Listen to us,’ James laughed. ‘It’s New Years Eve and we’re moping about.’

As if on cue, the man behind the bar told someone to turn the gramophone down, and announced to the crowd that there was ten seconds to go until it was 1922. Everyone – including James and Alice, counted down, and when the clock struck midnight, everybody cheered and clinked glasses. James darted forward and kissed Alice on the lips – making her jump.

‘Happy New Year,’ he said.

‘And to you,’ she replied. ‘I hope 1922 brings you everything you want.’

‘I hope so too,’ he answered with a flirtatious smile. It was amazing how drink had changed his entire nature. ‘Look, I’m not going home for another week or so, why don’t we see each other again?’

‘I don’t know,’ she hesitated. ‘I always vowed I’d stay true to Allen.’

‘You’re a young, beautiful woman. Do you think he’d want you to be lonely?’

‘No...’

‘Well then. Let me take you somewhere tomorrow.’

‘I’m skating with Alana tomorrow,’ she replied. ‘You can come with us if you want.’

‘Skating! I haven’t skated since I was a boy. Okay, it’s a date. We’ll go skating tomorrow. Can I pick you up from home?’

‘Yes, I suppose so. It’s nine nine nine Park Avenue. You can’t miss it, it’s a bit white villa.’

‘Splendid,’ he smiled. ‘Suddenly 1922 is looking far more interesting.’

They shared a taxi back; it dropped Robert off at Betsey’s first, then took Alice onto her own home. Once James had gone, she started to cry, discreetly looking to the sky and begging Allen to forgive her. She wished there was some way she could talk to him, ask him if he gave her his blessing to move on. She knew she could never love anyone like she loved him; but James was a nice man and she felt relaxed with him. He’d hit rock bottom and was trying to find his way out, and Alice could sympathise with that. She’d suffered a lot in her almost thirty years and sometimes all she wanted was a little happiness. She enjoyed her career and she adored Alana; but every woman longed for a pair of big, strong arms wrapped around them

occasionally, and there was something protective about James. He made her feel safe, and if she was honest with herself, she wanted to see him again.

Her fraught state of mind caused her to dream that night. Alice rarely dreamed, but this one was particularly vivid. For the first time ever, she was back on the Titanic; but it was like nothing she'd ever remembered before. It was beyond her usual memory of being pushed up a staircase by people eager to escape. She was on deck, and Bobby was still in her arms. There were people everywhere, milling around, asking questions, shouting out to each other. Men were letting off flares overhead, a band was playing somewhere. She saw a woman standing amongst another group of women and she felt her hand reach out and tap her on the shoulder. The woman turned around to face her, and Alice could see she was beautiful; with alabaster skin and blonde hair, and a haughty expression. Alice asked her what was happening. She could hear her own voice. It was common-sounding and so different to how she spoke now.

'I'm not quite sure,' the woman replied. 'I think there's been some sort of collision and we've got to get into the lifeboats whilst they sort it out.'

'It's freezing up here ain't it? I might just go back inside.'

'No, you mustn't,' the woman insisted, laying her hand on Alice's arm. 'They really were quite insistent.'

Alice suddenly felt scared, convinced Robert was trapped inside.

'But I need to find my chap. I don't know where he is.'

'They're putting women and children in first, then the men. He'll be okay.' The woman peered into Bobby's blanket and smiled.

'He's oblivious to it all,' she laughed.

'Good job too,' Alice replied. 'Lucky he can't sense how scared his mum is.'

'How old is he?'

'Three days. He was born on here.'

'Really? What's his name?'

'Bobby.'

'That's a lovely name. And don't you be scared...'

'Alice.'



‘Don’t be scared Alice. Look at the size of this ship. Nothing serious could go wrong.’

Alice could feel herself watching the lifeboat starting to be lowered, and all the women in fancy furs and jewels pushing and shoving to get in it. Bobby started to whimper and Alice wondered if they were going to be able to get in it too. Then someone called out that there was only room for one more. The woman she had been talking to was now at the front of the deck and she turned to Alice, when she started whimpering.

‘Why don’t I take your baby?’ the woman said. ‘I’ll bring him back to you once we go back on board.’

In her dream, Alice just handed the baby to this stranger, without hesitation - convinced she was going to die, and not wanting her precious son to go down with her.

‘Take him,’ she said, thrusting him into the woman’s arms. ‘Please look after him.’

‘Of course I will,’ the woman said. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Alice Higgins.’

‘I’m Nesta Villiers, if I don’t find you, find me.’

Alice awoke with a start, sitting up and gasping. Her head hurt and she was shaking. For nearly ten years she’d carried around this fog inside her brain, never able to remember what had happened that night on the Titanic. And now she saw it all in amazing clarity. How had she managed to forget the face of the beautiful blonde woman who had offered to hold her baby? This woman - Nesta Villiers, had obviously taken Bobby and passed him off as her own. The most immense feeling of fury welled up inside Alice and she got out of bed, ready to go along to Betsey Hasburg's house and demand to know whereabouts in London Nesta lived. Then she would get the first boat over to England and demand her son back. But the fury soon dissipated into a feeling of painful sadness. That woman had been the only mother Bobby had known for almost ten years. He would have no memories of Alice, and to go marching into his life demanding to get him back would upset him deeply.

She burst out crying, longing to see her baby again. Her arms ached for him and she wondered what sort of little boy he was now. The Villiers were obviously very rich, so he would never have wanted for anything. But that wasn't the same as having his real mother around.

Desperate to hold her child, Alice got up and went into Alana's room and lifted her out of her bed. The little girl grumbled and wrapped her arms around her mother's neck, laying her head upon her shoulder. Alice took her back into her bedroom and put her in the bed, getting in beside her. She held Alana close to her and wept, her heart aching for all the years she'd lost with

Bobby. Did he look like his sister? Did he ever have dreams about being born? Of Alice walking around the cabin, holding him close and singing to him? It was so unfair - she had two children, not one, and they should have both been with her. She hated Nesta Villiers with a vengeance. That woman had allowed her to live for nearly ten years with the terrifying suspicion that she had left her baby behind in the cabin to die. She'd mentally beat herself up for it, and it was all for nothing.

Suddenly there was a little voice.

'Why are you crying Mommy?'

Alice looked down to find Alana looking up at her, big brown eyes full of puzzlement.

'Mummy's just a bit sad. I was thinking of someone I used to know.'

'Where are they?'

'In London,' Alice uttered. 'They're in London.'

'Why are you crying about them?'

'Because I miss them.'

'Why don't you go and see them? Is London far away?'

'Yes, London's very far away.'

Alana's simple question got Alice thinking. She knew she couldn't go and demand answers from Betsey - she had no proof she was David's mother, she never got the chance to register him, and the only people who were aware of his existence were more than likely at the bottom of the ocean. Except for Nesta Villiers. Alice knew her only hope of seeing her son again was to ingratiate herself with the family, and that meant only one thing. Despite not wanting to be disloyal to Allen's memory, she would have to make James Tanner fall in love with her. She'd do anything - give up her career, leave New York, whatever it took, to go to London just to be with her son once more. Despite not seeing him since he was three days old, her love for him burned as strong in her heart as it did for Alana. They were her babies and they should be together. It wouldn't be a hardship to seduce James. He was a nice man, handsome and seemingly kind. She silently thanked God for bringing him into her life. Because even if her plan failed, at least she knew her son was alive and well, and she hadn't inadvertently killed him.

James turned up at two o'clock the following afternoon. He looked well prepared for the cold, wrapped up in a leather jacket, thick woollen scarf and gloves. It had started to snow slightly and sprinkles of it lay on his hair.

'You look like a snowman!' Alice laughed. 'Come on in, we're almost ready.'

She took James into the drawing room and offered him a cup of coffee, which he accepted, and then rang for Joan, her maid, to make some drinks. Alice almost felt sorry for using James to get to David. She didn't like the thought of toying with people's feelings, but desperate times called for desperate measures.

She sat next to James and resisted the urge to ask him all about his nephew.

'Do they still have skating in Hyde Park?' she asked.

'Yes. Nesta took David there last year. He loved it.'

'Has your sister married again?'

'No, she dedicates all her time to her work. I'm really proud of her. When she was married to Roland, she was in his shadow and I always thought she let him bully and belittle her. But after he died, she threw herself into helping those affected by the war, especially women who'd been widowed and left penniless. She's gone into partnership with a philanthropist from Manchester and they've set up a charity that provides housing for poor people living in slums.'

'It's a wonder she finds any time for David,' Alice said, trying not to sound bitter.

'She makes sure she does a lot of her work while he's at school. When he goes to Eton, she'll be able to do more.'

Alice was rendered a little speechless at the thought of Bobby going to Eton. The son of a girl born in a Battersea slum, going to one of the country's most prestigious schools...it was quite something.

'Anyway,' James said, looking at her and smiling. 'We're not here to talk about my family. You're far more interesting. Do you have any more movies lined up?'

'Not at the moment. I've been offered the leading role in a new musical that's opening at the Vaudeville at the end of the year, but I'm undecided. I don't want to be out night after night and leave Alana, so I might turn it down. At least with a movie, I can take her with me on set.'

The door opened and Joan returned with the drinks, and following closely behind were Claudette and Alana. Alana looked adorable in her little woollen coat, beret and furry scarf.

'I'm so sorry Miss Alice,' Claudette said. 'She wanted to know who the visitor was.'

'That's okay,' Alice smiled, holding her hand out to her daughter. 'Come and meet James, Alana.'

Claudette let go of the little girl's hand and she walked over to Alice, standing before her, staring at James.

‘Alana, this is James. James, this is Miss Alana Horowitz.’

James took Alana's little hand and shook it.

‘Pleased to meet you Miss Horowitz,’ he chuckled.

‘Are you going skating with us?’ Alana asked, her American accent sounding even more pronounced in the company of a man with a well-spoken English voice.

‘Yes,’ he replied. ‘Do you mind?’

‘No. And will you buy me a snow cone afterwards?’

‘Alana don't be so cheeky!’ Alice laughed. ‘Go and finish getting ready with Claudette, then we'll go.’

The large rink in the middle of Central Park was packed full of skaters. They were mostly families with children, and as Alice and James held onto Alana's hands and gently skated around the ice, Alice had to admit it felt nice to have someone else to share things with. For all of Alana's life, she had been alone, and if she and Richard had taken the little girl out, people would naturally assume he was her grandfather. But she guessed that most people would be thinking James was Alana's father, and while this seemed disloyal to Allen, at least it made Alana look like all the other children who had both parents.

Alana had the time of her life, and after a while could skate confidently by herself in front of the two adults. She laughed as she glided round, and it brought tears to Alice's eyes. Alana had that same cheeky, devil-may-care attitude as Allen, and it made her miss him so much. The pain of his loss was just as raw as it had been when he'd died three years ago.

‘Are you alright?’ James asked, and it made Alice jump. She didn't realise he'd been looking at her.

‘It's just Alana,’ she said. ‘She reminds me so much of her father.’

‘You still miss him?’

‘I'll always miss him.’

‘I wish Lucia and I had had children. It would have been so nice to have a part of her live on. You're so lucky to have Alana, she's beautiful.’

‘Maybe you'll meet someone else and have children,’ Alice said.

‘Who knows. There's so many things I want to do, but I worry about my future. When David takes over Villiers, I wonder if he'll want me working for him. If I don't have a job, then what will I do?’

‘What do you want to do?’

‘I want to write. I want to write a novel about the war, about what really happened on the Western Front, but I wouldn't know where to start. I liked writing stories as a boy, but I've never kept it up.’

‘There's nothing wrong with you taking it up again. All people like to go on about is how we won the war and how justified it was. When in reality there are millions of us paying the consequences for it, every single day. Someone needs to speak the truth.’

‘I don't want to add failed writer to my long list of wrong-doings,’ he sighed.

‘That's not the attitude. You should at least try.’

‘Okay, maybe I will,’ he smiled. ‘I guess if you'd never tried, you'd have never become a top actress.’

‘Well I have to confess, it did fall into my lap slightly. I went to the audition for *The Honeymoon* with my friend, to give her support. I was helping her prepare, and when Allen heard me sing, he begged me to audition. So I did, and the rest is history.’

‘Did you do much singing and dancing back in England?’

‘I don't really remember. My memory is very vague about my life back then. The doctors reckoned the knock on the head I got on the *Titanic* affected part of my memory. There are patches, and I vaguely remember being on stage. I must have done acting because it's come so naturally to me.’

‘So you really don't think you have any family over there?’

‘Well no one came forward for me when the accident happened, and I have a very vague memory of my parents dying.’

‘What was your surname before you married Allen?’

‘Fairfax. Not a common name, so you'd have thought someone would have noticed me.’

‘That's a shame, but at least you have Richard and Alana.’

‘Yes, and they're the only family I need.’

After their time was up, they got three snow cones and took a slow walk home. Alana was chatting happily about her day, and James was playing along with her. Alice felt bad about her plot to use him to get to David. He was such a nice man, and she had not felt so comfortable with someone since Allen. But she couldn't let sentiment get in the way of her plans. James was here to serve a purpose and nothing else.

'Why don't you stay for dinner?' she asked him. 'You say that Betsey drives you mad. Spend the evening with us.'

'Thank you,' he smiled. 'That sounds lovely. Why not?'

They went back to the house and Alice and James gave Alana her supper, before bathing her and putting her to bed. Alice asked Cook to roast a chicken for dinner, and fetch some good wine from the cellar. James had great fun with Alana, reading her a bedtime story, and doing the voices of all the characters in *The Wind in the Willows*. Alice watched on, sad at the fact that Allen had never had the chance to do this for his daughter. He would have probably made up his own stories for her, *and* acted out the parts.

Once Alana was tucked up in bed, they went downstairs to the dining room, where Alice lit the candles on the table, and turned off the light to give it a more romantic feel. They were served a starter of consommé, and drank the sauvignon Alice kept in the cellar.

'Where did you get this from?' James asked.

'It was a gift from Richard. He has a huge wine cellar in his house in the Hamptons and when I moved in here, he donated several bottles to me. The Police aren't coming round smashing up people's personal supplies yet, so I think I'm safe.'

'Do you think you would ever go back to England?' he asked. 'Just for a visit?'

'Maybe. My agent is always nagging me to do a promotional tour of Europe, seeing as my films are so popular over there. But I don't want to disrupt Alana, or else leave her here for three months.'

'After spending an afternoon with Alana, I think she'd see it as a big adventure!' he laughed.

'You're probably right. She sees no fear.'

'She's a lot like David. He's obsessed with dangerous things. From the time he was about six, he's been determined to become a pilot when he grows up. He's fascinated by planes. Nesta frets because they're such treacherous things, but David is insistent.'

Alice paused for a moment. Her children obviously took after her. Although as a sensible thirty year old, it was hard to remember what it was like being a reckless child - had it not partly been that spirit of adventure that had brought her to New York in the first place?

‘Perhaps it was the fact he was born on the Titanic,’ she managed to say. ‘If you're born on the most dangerous ship in the world, then you're bound to have no fear.’

‘I'm sure Nesta would love to speak to you. The only people she's spoken to about it were the bosses of White Star Line and the widows of Third Class passengers who died. It would be nice for her to talk to a survivor.’

‘Maybe, or maybe she's tried to put it to the back of her mind. I think that's what a lot of people have done.’

‘We've all been through so many horrific things,’ James lamented. ‘Let's hope the future is a brighter place for Alana and David.’

James had no idea of the irony in what he'd just said; and Alice could only smile. In her dreams, brother and sister were reunited and happy.

‘I have to confess that I haven't been a saint since I returned from the war.’ He laughed. ‘My latest heartbreak was over an eighteen year old dancer called Mimi. But of all the women I've met, you're the first one I've really been able to talk to.’

‘You probably just feel as though you know me because you've seen me in movies. Lots of people come up to me and talk to me as if they know me.’

‘It isn't that. I felt a connection with you the moment we met last night. If you're honest with yourself Alice, you felt it too.’

‘Well, I've never introduced another man to Alana before.’

‘Have dinner with me tomorrow night. Let me take you somewhere.’

‘I don't want to rush things,’ she said hesitantly, using her best acting skills.

‘I won't rush you into anything Alice, but I really am very fond of you, even though I've only known you for a short time.’

‘Okay,’ she replied. ‘In that case I accept.’

‘Thank you. I'll book a table at the finest restaurant in town.’

Alice had lunch with Richard the following day, and it took all her strength not to tell him what she'd discovered. Richard was a man of integrity and he would never support her scheme to dupe James into falling in love with her. He would either tell her to leave things be - David was a big boy now and wouldn't want his world to be torn apart. Or else he'd advise her to be honest and tell James the truth, which was the last thing she wanted to do. If she did that, all that would happen would be he would close ranks with his sister, and they would probably spirit David away somewhere. Instead, she remained tight-lipped, except to mention she was having dinner with James that night.

'It's about time you had some romance in your life,' Richard said, chuckling at Alana, who was outside in the garden, supposedly building a snowman with Claudette; but having more fun throwing snow at her nanny and giggling. 'You're far too young to be on your own.'

'He hasn't asked me to marry him!' Alice laughed. 'We're just going to dinner.'

'But he must be special for you to introduce him to Alana.'

'I must confess, I do get lonely,' she said. 'But there's no point in getting too attached to James - he'll be going back to England soon.'

'Well it's nice for you to enjoy some male company until then.'

Alice decided to apply a little psychology when dressing for her date with James that night. Temptation was to dress provocatively, to excite and seduce him. But she didn't want him to see her as a one-night option. She wanted him to see her as the sort of woman he could build a future with, so she opted for a plain dark blue dress, with a red trim around the hem. The neck was slashed and the sleeves were long, so no flesh was exposed. As she sat at her dressing table, brushing her hair, Daisy sat behind her on the bed, looking through the papers. It was Claudette's evening off and she'd volunteered to babysit Alana.

'Have you read this?' she asked. 'Lord Henson is staging a production of *The Honeymoon* at The London Palladium. Allen would have been so excited to know his play was being staged in your home town.'

'Wouldn't he just?' Alice said, and already an idea was forming in her mind, a way of getting to London with James without making it look suspicious. 'Have they cast it?'

'Doesn't say they have. Why, are you thinking of doing it?'

'I don't know. I think Allen would have liked me to play Daphne for the opening run. But I guess I'm just being a sentimental fool.'



James had booked them a table at Rudy's on Fifth Avenue. It was New York's most expensive restaurant and Alice guessed he'd either used his connection to Betsey Hasburg, or else dropped in the fact he was dining with Alicia Bloom to get a table. It was far removed from the speakeasy on New Years Eve. In here, the only Negroes were the ones who did the cleaning when the place was shut. All the serving staff did their best to disguise their New York accents, trying to sound British. The menu was written only in French, and there was simply no suggestion of alcohol here - no secret rooms that served illicit glasses of whisky or champagne that had been smuggled in from France. With her meal, Alice had a glass of peach blush that Raymon, the head chef had made himself, adding a little bi-carbonate to make it fizz; while James just stuck to water.

'This feels like when you're first allowed to have dinner with your parents and their friends,' he laughed. 'You know they're going to start drinking alcohol once you've gone to bed, but at the time you've all got to sit around being awfully civilised.'

'I suppose you can't wait to get back to London,' Alice said glumly. 'Where everything is normal, and you can drink.'

'Maybe,' he sighed. 'But New York does have its attractions.' He paused and finished his glass of water. 'Actually, I was wondering if you fancied accompanying me to Chicago next week? I'm going there for a couple of days to check out some buildings, with a view to converting them into hotels.'

'I've never been to Chicago,' she said. 'Okay, let's go. Sounds like fun.'

'Fabulous,' he smiled, daring to reach out and grasp her hand. 'I'll be the envy of every man there.'

Alice knew it was now or never. He was making it clear he wanted her, and she had to react to him, but not be too obvious. She didn't want him thinking she was a slut.

'Would you like to come back to mine for a nightcap?' she asked. She lowered her voice. 'I've got a bottle of scotch hidden in a cupboard. My cook's brother does secret runs out to Canada and stocks up.'

'Sounds wonderful,' James smiled. 'I must say, alcohol does taste much nicer when it's forbidden. Like a lot of things in life.'

They took a taxi back to her house, and all the way there, Alice shook like a leaf. She hadn't slept with anyone since losing Allen. In fact she'd only slept with two men in her whole life. She hoped James didn't expect her to be some sort of sex bomb just because she played one on camera. The thought of sharing her body with another man filled her with dread, not

excitement; and she still felt incredibly disloyal to her husband. James held onto her hand as they travelled, his palm sweaty with anticipation. Alice was thankful that he was so good-looking. It would have been a nightmare if Nesta Villiers' brother had been hideous and she'd had to feign desire in order to seduce him.

Keeping true to her word, she told him to go and sit in the drawing room, while she went down to the kitchen, where cook kept a bottle of Jamesons in the ingredients cupboard. Alice took it out, got two glasses and went back up into the house. When she went into the drawing room, she saw James had loosened his tie and was relaxing on a plump, beige cord sofa. He smiled lasciviously at her as she entered.

'I hope you don't mind Jamesons?' she asked, as she sat beside him.

'Anything tastes nice in this dry old town!' he chuckled.

She poured them both a generous glass of whisky and she swallowed hers down quickly to quell her nerves. She hoped he didn't notice that she was shaking.

'I think I'm going to buy my sister a big bunch of flowers when I get home,' James said with a sigh. 'I could have cursed her when she practically forced to come here and see Mother; but if she hadn't, I'd have never met you, so I have a lot to thank her for.'

'You've got to remember we can't get too serious. You live in London and I'm based here.'

Alice was a little shocked when he leaned over and started kissing her neck. His mouth moving up to her ear.

'I'm not thinking of the future,' he whispered. 'I'm just thinking of tonight.'

'I haven't made love to anyone since I lost Allen,' she uttered.

'I'll look after you,' he said, nibbling her earlobe. 'I promise that.'

He turned her face to him and brushed his lips against hers, and for a moment Alice recoiled. Kissing was such an intimate act, and even though she had done it time and time again with male co-stars, it wasn't the same as kissing someone romantically. It was only the thought of eventually seeing her son that enabled her to close her eyes and return James' passion.

They went up to her bedroom, and to Alice's surprise, all of James's British reserve went out the window when he finally got his hands on her. It felt like being mauled by a bear and was alien compared to Allen, who'd been tender and funny. Alice did all she could to relax and appear to be enjoying it, remembering how desirable James was and how lots of women would love to be in her position. Thankfully, his passion for her got the better of him and it was soon

over - and as he rolled off her onto his back and reached for his cigarettes, Alice did her best not to curl into a ball and push herself as far away from him as possible.

‘That was wonderful,’ he panted. ‘I’ve wanted to touch you from the moment we met. Would it alarm you if I told you I think I’m falling in love with you?’ ‘W-We hardly know each other.’

‘It doesn’t matter. I feel as though I’ve known you all my life. Everything has looked so bleak to me since I returned from the war. But you’ve made realise there is hope.’

His words were so romantic, but Alice couldn’t feel anything. She could only focus on her son and getting him back...and how wretched she felt after sleeping with someone else.

‘I suppose I’d better go,’ he said. ‘Mother will only start questioning me if I stay out all night.’

‘Yes, and it might confuse Alana if you’re here in the morning.’

He reached out and stroked her hair; a loving expression on his face that made Alice feel like even more of a cow for leading him on.

‘Lunch tomorrow?’ he asked.

‘I have to see my agent tomorrow morning,’ she replied. ‘But I’ll call you afterwards.’

‘Okay. Well make sure you do!’

He finished his cigarette, dressed and left. Alice darted into her bathroom, ran a bath full of hot water and bubbles and leapt into it, staying in until the water was cold. She wept until her lungs hurt, feeling as though she had betrayed Allen. She’d last felt this dirty when she was fourteen and had gone to her first party for Albie Smith. A dirty old man had tried to pin her against a wall and kiss her, and she remembered feeling violated and disgusted with herself, and that was how she felt now. She’d slept with another man purely to get something, and even though it was so she’d eventually have access to her son; it still seemed immoral. She hoped Allen forgave her, and she guessed her plan would go spectacularly wrong if he didn’t.

By the following morning, Alice had pushed her woes to the back of her mind, and got on with the matter in hand. She left Alana with Claudette; dressed in her smartest suit and mink stole, and set off to see her agent Jacob Bing, on Lexington Avenue. Jacob was very strict about only seeing people by appointment; but Alice hoped - as one of his highest-paid clients - he would make an exception for her.

She stormed into the office, and Patty, his secretary jumped out of her skin at being confronted with Alicia Bloom, at nine o'clock in the morning.

'Is Mr Bing available?' Alice asked, without sitting down.

'I-I er, I'm not sure,' Patty uttered, quickly flicking through the diary on her desk. 'I'll have to check and find out.'

'Don't bother,' Alice said. 'I'll go and see.'

'Yes, but...'

Before Alice could take any notice of the young secretary, she had barged her way past reception, knocked briefly on Jacob's door, and went in. She found him wedged behind his desk, his fat belly spilling over it; and as he spoke on the phone, the sleazy smile on his face told her he was talking to one of his mistresses. Jacob had plenty of other women – all of them only with him because they thought he could make them a star.

He put his hand over the receiver and looked up at Alice, a furious frown on his fat face.

'Wadda you want?' he snapped.

'It's important,' she replied, sitting down at his desk.

He took his hand off the receiver and fixed a smile on his face to make his voice sound warm.

'I gotta go honey,' he said. 'Someone's come into my office.'

He put the phone back onto its hook and looked at Alice, shaking his head in disapproval.

'You know you can't just come barging into someone's office demanding their time, however bigga movie star you are.'

'Well you haven't thrown me out have you?'

'What do you want Alice?'

'Cuthbert Henson is reviving The Honeymoon at the Palladium in London. I want to play Daphne.'

Jacob started spluttering cigar smoke everywhere, and Alice thought he was going to choke.

'You want to go to London?' he finally managed to say once he'd finished.

'Yes.'

‘Are you mad? I got a cupboard full of letters from movie producers in Hollywood wanting you to star in their films. I got another cupboard full of scripts for plays. By God if you could split yourself into pieces you could star in every goddam theatre on Broadway. Why do you want to go to London?’

‘Because for one, I’m from London and I’d like my daughter to see it. And mostly, this will be *The Honeymoon*’s first run on a London stage and I think Allen would like me to play the part.’

‘I can’t just phone Henson up and start demanding he casts you. He might already have someone in mind.’

‘I’m one of the biggest stars in the world. Do you really think he’d turn me down? He knows I’ll bring in an audience.’

‘And I suppose you want some ridiculous fee for it too?’

‘No, I’m happy to take the basic minimum. I don’t want the money. I just want to go back home.’

‘You’re crazy, but I’ll see what I can do.’

‘Thank you Jacob,’ she gasped. ‘Thank you so much. You don’t know how much this means to me.’

‘No, I don’t understand you at all. You’re gonna lose me money, but I’m still gonna do this for you. *I* must be mad!’

## Chapter Seventeen

March 1922

For the first time ever, Nesta was visiting a beauty salon. She'd just come from a meeting with Henry Beresford and the owner of Wades Construction, where they had been discussing the building of a block of flats in Kennington on the site of a slum close to Waterloo, and she was heading to the more salubrious South Kensington and the salon of Madame Elise - beautician to the rich and vain. She asked Madame Elise for her most expensive treatments, which involved having various foul smelling potions rubbed into her face, while hot towels were draped around her head.

The reason for her panic was that James was returning from his latest trip to the United States, and with him he was bringing his lady love - the world famous Alicia Bloom. While Nesta had never seen any of her films, she had seen enough photos of her to know she was exquisitely beautiful and impossibly skinny, with sleek dark hair and big, alluring eyes. She was a goddess and it terrified Nesta to know she was going to be visiting her home.

James' infatuation with the movie star had come like a bolt out of the blue. He'd come home at the end of January raving about how wonderful Alice was, how crazy he was about her, and how adorable her little girl was; and within two weeks he'd booked himself onto another boat to go back over to New York. He'd been out there ever since. But they would now be returning home in two days time because Miss Bloom was going to start rehearsals for a production of her former husband's play at The Palladium. The thought of introducing Gabriel to the gorgeous young film star was enough to cause Nesta sleepless nights - frightened he would compare the two women and see her as old and past her best.

Nesta got home from Madame Elise's salon with her skin feeling as though it had been drenched in oil that hadn't been wiped off. She went straight up to her bedroom and checked herself out in the mirror and saw she barely looked any different. But she had to get on with things and started getting ready for the coming evening. There was a charity performance of Don Quixote at the Royal Opera House, and the King and Queen were attending. She knew Gabriel was nervous about appearing in front of royalty, and had insisted she attend. He reckoned knowing she was there would help him relax.

The house was so quiet without David in it. Imogen and John had taken him sailing off the coast of Cornwall with Christopher and Jonathan, and Nesta missed him so much. Thankfully he would be back in time for his tenth birthday next month. She was planning a big party for him just to show how much she loved him.

But for tonight she had to concentrate on looking her best for Gabriel. She wore a beaded Chanel dress in deep burgundy that she'd had imported from Paris, and got her most expensive jewellery from the safe.

The bell rang and Nesta looked out of the window to see Adele's car parked in the middle of the road. Nesta grabbed her coat and left the house to find the chauffeur waiting for her on the doorstep.

'Good evening Lady Villiers,' he said, doffing his cap.

'Good evening Parkinson,' she replied, and she headed down to the car. Like a gooseberry, she was accompanying Adele and her husband Francis, who as Gabriel's patrons, felt they should be there to support him. Francis was sitting in the front passenger seat, leaving Adele and Nesta to sit together. Adele looked suitably over the top, in a striped, silk dress with sleeves made of floor length net, making her look like some sort of strange Geisha. It might have suited a woman of twenty-five, but on Adele, it just looked as though she'd got dressed in the dark.

Parkinson got back into the car and they set off. Even now, four months into their passionate affair, Nesta's heart still beat fast in anticipation when she was going to see Gabriel. No one knew about them. He would come to her house after a show - once the servants had gone to bed, and he would leave before they got up; or else Nesta would go to the little flat he had rented in Covent Garden and they would spend the afternoon in bed, before he had to get ready for that night's performance. Gabriel made her feel alive in a way no-one else ever had, and she was obsessed with him. He dominated her every thought. She dreamt about him at night and she wished there was some way they could marry and be together forever without it causing a terrible scandal.

'We're meeting someone at the Opera House,' Adele said in a conspiratory tone. 'Sir Michael Holland. He's terribly nice, just got back from India. He owns a huge tea importing company out there, but has decided to come back to Blighty. He's a bit out of the loop, so I thought I'd invite him along tonight.'

'I see,' was all that Nesta could say, although she got the distinct feeling she was being set up. Adele was always saying it was time Nesta moved on and found someone else, and this meeting with Michael Holland was more than likely an attempt at match-making. Nesta could see this evening was going to be difficult.

They arrived at the Royal Opera House and went straight to the bar, where Sir Michael was waiting for them. He was a very tall, good-looking man with a head of thick, dark wavy hair, and kindly brown eyes. And while he looked very respectable, and dapper in his evening suit, Nesta could feel no attraction to him. No instant stirring like she had the moment she'd set eyes on Gabriel.

‘Michael,’ said Adele with a wry smile upon her face. ‘This is Lady Nesta Villiers. Nesta, this is Sir Michael Holland.’

‘Delighted to meet you,’ Michael said in his very clipped tones, taking Nesta’s hand and shaking it briefly.

‘Nesta does wonderful things for charity,’ Adele fizzed. ‘Don’t you Nesta? Tell Michael about Grandison Court.’

‘I, er own a block of flats in Earls Court that houses people in need of cheap dwellings,’ Nesta said, embarrassed at being encouraged to talk favourably about herself. ‘It’s my ambition to clear London of all slum housing.’

‘Very commendable,’ Michael said. ‘If not a little over-ambitious.’

This comment riled Nesta, but she remained polite and smiled sweetly, changing the subject.

‘Adele tells me that you own a tea import company?’

‘Yes. But I’ve come back to England to set up a new company importing French wines.’

‘Sounds very interesting,’ she lied. In truth he was one of the dullest men she had ever encountered and she wished Adele didn’t feel it was her place to set her up with people.

‘Well I suppose we’d better be getting to our box,’ Adele said, sensing the awkward atmosphere. ‘We don’t want to get there after the King.’

They made their way to the box Adele had hired that was directly opposite were the Royals sat. To Nesta’s mortification, she was sat next to Michael, and by the strained look upon his face, she could tell the whole thing was making him feel uncomfortable too. Strangely, this made her warm to him a little. She guessed the introduction hadn’t been at his request. He looked as though he wanted to be anywhere but here and she knew how he felt. All eyes were on the Royal box, and when the trumpeter in the orchestra played a fanfare, everyone stood up. The curtains at the back of the box parted and King George, in his naval uniform entered, accompanied by Queen Mary in her usual lace, along with various people of the royal court. The orchestra then played the National Anthem, whilst the audience stood on ceremony and the King and Queen sat down. Once it was over, people resumed their seats and Michael leaned over to Nesta.

‘One always gets the terrible urge to cough at a time like this,’ he said quietly, and Nesta couldn’t help but giggle at his irreverence.

The opening overture to the opera started and without thinking, Nesta sat forward a little, desperate to see Gabriel. Once he came on stage and began to sing, all thoughts of anything else



left her mind and she could only concentrate on him. She so hoped that he would be able to see her later tonight.

At the interval Adele and Francis went off to the bar, but Michael and Nesta remained behind.

‘Do you go to the opera often?’ Michael asked her.

‘When I can,’ she replied. ‘But my charity work and looking after my son takes up so much of my time. You?’

‘I used to, before I went to India.’ He gave a strained laugh. ‘As you can imagine, they’re not big on Puccini in Calcutta.’

‘I imagine so. Well now you’re back here, you’ll be able to catch up.’

‘Yes, I do so feel as though I’ve been out of the loop for a long time.’

‘Have you found somewhere to live or are you with friends?’

‘No, I have a flat in Chelsea. I’ve had it since I was a young man. It’s enough for me.’

‘Well you must come round to dinner one night. I live on Belgrave Square. My brother is coming home from America in a couple of days time and he’s bringing his companion with him.. Alicia Bloom...’

‘The actress?’

‘Yes; so I’ll be compelled to host a dinner to welcome her to England. I insist you come.’

Nesta mentally kicked herself for doing this. It had only been a polite gesture, and not a way of letting him know she was interested in him. Michael had a lonely air about him and she wanted to help him fit in. She hoped he didn’t get other ideas.

‘Thank you,’ he said. ‘That’s very kind of you. I’ve never met a film star before.’

‘Neither have I. But James reckons she’s lovely; and my brother is usually a good judge of character, so I’ll take his word for it.’

Adele and Francis returned, and shortly afterwards the second act commenced. From time-to-time Nesta felt Michael’s eyes upon her, and she wondered what she was going to do now. He was clearly impressed by her, but she wanted no-one but the young man upon the stage. She couldn’t wait for the performance to be over so she could go backstage and see him. She would use any excuse she could just to be alone with him for five minutes.

It finally ended, and after three curtain calls and another round of God Save the King, it was time to leave.

'I've booked us all a table at The Birdcage,' Adele suddenly announced.

'I can't make it,' Nesta apologised. 'I've a meeting tomorrow morning and it's important that I get my sleep.'

'Well that is a shame,' Adele said. 'It's so difficult to get a table at The Birdcage as well.'

'I'm afraid I'm going to have to pass too,' Michael said. 'I'm sailing over to France tomorrow and I'm leaving very early. I was wondering if Lady Villiers cared to share a taxi with me.'

Nesta knew she had no choice but to leave and miss out on seeing Gabriel, and it filled her heart with disappointment.

'Okay,' Adele sighed. 'In that case you two run along. Don't do anything I wouldn't do!'

With a heavy heart, Nesta left the theatre with Michael. He suggested that they walk to the Strand to catch a cab; but they still couldn't avoid the stench of rotten vegetables and potato dust coming from Convent Garden Market.

'London feels like a different world after so long in India,' Michael mused. 'Everything seems so coarse and dirty, and the people so rude.'

'You'll get used to it,' Nesta replied, trying not to snap; but she was offended. He had no doubt never got a glimpse of the side of London she was regularly exposed to; and yet still he felt fit to judge. 'I couldn't think of living anywhere else.'

'Most of us live here out of necessity. If I had a choice I would live in my parents' house in Abingdon, but that would be impractical.'

He really was a bore and reminded Nesta of everything she hated about. English men - the stuffiness, the insistence that they were experts on property and the right places to live. Roland had been exactly the same.

Thankfully the cab journey was short and she didn't have to talk to him very much, just enough to ascertain that he had never married, and Nesta spoke briefly of David and that was it. They reached Belgrave Square and like a gentleman, Michael got out of the cab and opened the door for Nesta. He stood straight backed, looking decidedly uncomfortable with the prospect of saying goodbye.

'Thank you for a charming evening Lady Villiers,' he said.

‘Nesta, please.’

From his inside pocket he got a business card and passed it to her.

‘Just in case you ever want to buy any wine,’ he quipped.

‘Certainly. Thank you. I will call you with that invite to dinner with my brother and Miss Bloom.’

‘Thank you.’ He offered his hand. ‘Good evening Nesta.’

She shook his hand.

‘Good evening Sir Michael.’

He managed a nervous smile.

‘Just Michael will suffice.’

‘Good evening Michael.’

He got back into the taxi and it drove off. Nesta mounted the stairs up to her front door and let herself in, wondering how she was going to shake the attentions of Michael Holland. He was obviously keen on her, but she couldn't make herself feel the same way.

She had only just got her coat off when there came a loud banging on the door. It was an alarming sound and she was going to ignore it until she heard Gabriel call out;

‘Nesta open the goddam door!’

She rushed to the door and opened it to find Gabriel standing there scowling like a small child. He was still wearing his stage make up and his usually handsome face looked positively grotesque.

‘What is it?’ she asked as he barged into the house.

‘Who was that man?’ he shouted.

‘What man?’

‘That man who got out of the taxi with you? Who was it?’

Nesta was aware they were standing in the lobby and that the servants down in the basement would be able to hear. She took Gabriel's arm and led him into the drawing room, shutting the door behind her. She could see he was shaking with fury and it frightened her.

‘He was just a friend of Adele's who happens to live in Chelsea. We shared a taxi, it means nothing.’

‘I thought you were coming backstage!’ he fumed. ‘When you didn't turn up, I jumped in a taxi and came straight here. I was watching you with him. What did he give you?’

‘A business card, that's all. He's a wine importer, we might be able to do business.’

‘Give it to me.’

‘Gabriel don't be silly..I.’

Her speech was interrupted by Gabriel's hand slamming into the side of her face. It knocked her sideways and she fell onto the floor, pain exploding in her jaw. He had never struck her before and she was astounded by his cruelty.

‘It's in my coat pocket,’ she uttered. ‘Out in the hall.’

Gabriel stormed out, slamming the door behind him. Nesta staggered to her feet, the pain in her face so bad she was convinced something was broken.

She sat down on the chaise lounge and took deep breaths to stop herself from shaking. She was terrified that Gabriel was so angry with her he wouldn't want to see her again. She cursed herself for accepting the lift with Michael Holland. Why hadn't she been stronger and said no? She hadn't wanted to go anyway.

The door opened and Nesta flinched slightly, scared Gabriel was going to hit her again. He walked towards her, ripping up the business card. He then threw the pieces of paper all over her.

‘You never, ever talk to another man like that again!’ he shouted. ‘If you do, we're over.’

Nesta fell to her knees, reaching out and grasping his legs.

‘No,’ she cried. ‘No, don't leave me. I won't speak to another man, I promise.’

‘I can't be with you if I can't trust you.’

‘You can trust me. I love you. I've never loved anyone like you. Please, don't leave me Gabriel.’

He pulled away from her and crossed the room, sitting down and taking out his cigarettes. He lit one and threw the match into the fire. He then sat back, stretching his arms across the back of the sofa. The expression on his face changed. Behind the make up, she could see he was looking at her with a lustful glint in his eyes - and Nesta felt relieved that he'd stopped being angry with her.

‘Come here,’ he said.

She got to her feet and walked over to him, standing before him like a child awaiting punishment or reward.

‘Take your clothes off,’ he demanded.

‘Gabriel!’ she gasped. ‘The servants are just downstairs.’

He leaned forward and the expression changed from lust, to anger again.

‘I said, take your fucking clothes off.’

With shaking hands, Nesta set about removing first her jewels, then her clothes. She was both thrilled at doing this, and terrified of the thought of being caught. She was also alarmed by this new side to Gabriel. But instead of being put off by his violence, she found his jealousy arousing. He loved her so much, seeing her with another man had driven him to this. And right at that moment, he could do anything he wanted with her.

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Nesta wasn't happy that the bruising on her face hadn't gone down by the time James arrived back from America. She had no choice but to cover her skin in pan-stick and hope her brother was so enamoured with his beloved Alice that he wouldn't notice. The plan was that they were going to take the train from Southampton up to London and to The Ritz, where Alice had a suite booked. They were then leaving her daughter with her nanny and her personal assistant, and coming over to Belgrave Square. Nesta had made sure the servants had polished the place from top to bottom. The finest and most expensive wines were chilling, should Miss Bloom want a glass; and Nesta herself dressed in her favourite white lace, drop-waisted gown, rolling her hair up perfectly and making sure she looked as immaculate as she could with a bruised jaw.

She paced around the drawing room, and when she heard the taxi pull up outside, she jumped out of her skin. She ran to the window and watched as James got out, then walked round to the other side of the car and opened the door. It was hard to get a proper look at the movie star, as she was covered up in a white woollen coat and a white cloche hat. But what Nesta could clearly see was the beaming smile upon her brother's face as he looked at Alice - she'd never seen him so crazy about someone – not even Lucia.

They walked up the front steps and Nesta came away from the window, not wanting them to spot her. She heard Judith open the street door, and went and stood by the fireplace, ready to greet them.

There was a knock on the door, and Nesta told Judith to enter. The housekeeper came in and following behind her were James and Alice.

‘Hello darling,’ James said, rushing into the room and taking Nesta's hands. ‘How are you?’

‘Fine,’ she replied. ‘I trust you had a safe journey.’

‘It was splendid, splendid.’ He stepped back and beckoned for Alice to come forward. She was as tall as Nesta and so thin she looked as though she could be snapped in two. When she raised her head to look at Nesta, something happened as they made eye contact. Nesta couldn't explain it even to herself, but she felt as though she recognised those big brown, smouldering eyes from somewhere - and it wasn't just from movie posters. It felt as though they'd met in person at some time before.

‘Nesta darling, this is Miss Alicia Bloom. Otherwise known as Alice Horowitz. Alice, this is my sister Nesta.’

Alice came forward and took Nesta's hand, grasping it within hers.

‘It's lovely to meet you,’ she said in a sweet sounding, well-spoken voice. ‘James has told me so much about you.’

‘Likewise,’ Nesta replied. ‘Although most of James' critiques are about how beautiful you are.’

‘He's biased,’ Alice said, winking at James. She may have been English, but her habits were distinctly American. An English lady would never wink at her sweetheart.

Nesta looked at Judith who was still hovering by the door.

‘Judith can you fetch some tea?’ she asked. ‘Or if Mrs Horowitz would like something stronger...’

‘Oh no, tea would be lovely,’ Alice said. ‘I haven't had a proper cup of English tea in ten years.’

Judith left the room and Nesta told James and Alice to sit down. Alice removed her hat and it was quite a shock to see such a striking hairstyle on a young woman. Her glossy dark hair was cut into a sharp bob that fell just below her chin, a blunt fringe lay on her eyebrows, framing her perfect face. Her jaw was square and strong, her nose small and perfect; and her thick, pouting lips complemented those beautiful eyes. She was quite possibly the most stunning woman Nesta had ever seen, and it scared her to think Gabriel would eventually meet her. Alice was nearer to his age, and in show-business. Would he find her more interesting? How serious was she about James?

‘So you're appearing at The Palladium?’ Nesta asked. ‘That sounds very exciting.’

‘It is. I simply couldn't pass up the opportunity to star in my husband's play on its first London run.’ She laughed. ‘If I hadn't, he would have sent a thunderbolt down to get me.’

‘And your little girl is here with you?’

‘Yes, I've left her back at the hotel. She didn't like the journey over here very much. I had no idea Alana suffered from sea-sickness, but I'm betting she'll be fine by tomorrow. She wants me to take her to Big Ben and the Tower of London and St Paul's Cathedral. I'm sure the excitement of all that will prompt her to recover quickly. James tells me you've got a son...?’

‘Yes, I have, David. He's in Cornwall at the moment, sailing. He'll be back in a few days. The house is so quiet without him.’

‘I bet it is. You complain about their noise, but when they're not around, you miss them desperately.’

‘Well, I hope you'll be able to come to dinner tomorrow night,’ Nesta said. ‘I've invited some friends over who will be eager to meet you.’

‘And we'll be able to have wine without looking over our shoulders!’ James laughed.

‘I sent you to New York for that very reason,’ Nesta tutted, wondering if Alice was leading him astray. ‘Alcohol isn't the answer to everything.’

‘Do you see what I have to put up with?’ James said to Alice with a playful glint in his eye. ‘I'm almost forty and my sister still speaks to me as though we were in the nursery with Nanny.’

‘She's just trying to protect you,’ smiled Alice, reaching out and chucking his chin. ‘It's what sisters are for.’

‘Do you have any brothers or sisters?’ Nesta asked.

‘My brother died,’ Alice said quietly. ‘I have no other family.’

‘You two have probably been acquainted before,’ James said. ‘You were both on the Titanic.’

‘Really?’ uttered Nesta and for a moment, the queerest thought came over her. Surely this wasn't.... It couldn't be possible. Alice Higgins had been a little guttersnipe posing as a Lady. She then checked herself for allowing her nerves to get the better of her. ‘I'm sorry to hear that. Such a terrible experience for everyone. I apologise for my brother bringing it up. I for one don't really like talking about it.’

‘No, me neither,’ said Alice. ‘One just feels so guilty for surviving when so many others weren't so lucky.’

Alice was nothing how Nesta had imagined her to be. Despite being one of the highest paid actresses in the world, she seemed very sweet and humble and awfully fond of James. They left to have lunch with some friends of James down in Kingston, and Nesta took her solitude as an opportunity to telephone Gabriel. She'd paid for him to have a phone installed in his flat, just so she could speak to him whenever she needed to, and now meeting Alice, she felt even more nervous about them being at dinner together. Alice was ten years younger than Nesta, in her prime and would show her up for the older woman she was. She wondered if she could put Gabriel off going to dinner without upsetting him. He'd shown her the other day what a furious temper he had.

She called him from the drawing room, with the door firmly shut so the servants couldn't hear. When the phone was picked up by a young woman, Nesta almost dropped it in shock.

‘Can I speak to Gabriel please,’ she uttered.

‘Who is it?’ the girl asked, her voice heavily accented.

‘Lady Villiers.’

‘Wait.’

Nesta wondered who the hell this girl was, and her imagination started running away with itself and convincing her he was being unfaithful.

‘What is it Nesta?’ Gabriel asked, his tone impatient. She got the feeling he still hadn't forgiven her for talking to Michael Holland the other night.

‘Who was that who answered the phone?’ she asked.

‘Manuela, she's joined the cast and we were just rehearsing. Are you accusing me of being unfaithful to you Nesta?’

‘No of course not. I'm sorry. I was just wondering if you were still coming to dinner tomorrow night?’

‘Yeah, I was going to call you about that. It's one of the guys in the orchestra's birthday and he's going to The Albatross for some after-show drinks. I was going to go along. I thought maybe you could come over on Thursday and we could have some time together then.’

‘Yes!’ she gasped, relieved that he wouldn't be meeting Alice. ‘That would be perfect. I can't wait my darling.’

‘So what's this Alicia broad like? As gorgeous as on the silver screen?’

‘Unfortunately, yes. She seems very nice too. Her and James are crazy about each other. It's nice to see him happy again.’

‘Well you have a good time tomorrow night with her and you can tell me all about it Thursday.’

‘I will. I'll count the hours until I do.’

Nesta put the telephone down, and before she went downstairs to tell Cook the menu for the next night, she called Adele and asked for Michael Holland's number. Whilst he was a crashing bore, she had promised to invite him for dinner with Alicia, and if she didn't have a male escort then she would be the odd one out. She cared not one jot if Michael became smitten with the actress - at least if she invited him out, Adele might stop match-making so much.

Her friend was delighted that Nesta wanted Michael's number and as she launched into a routine about what a great chap he was, Nesta said she had to go and hung up.

She called Michael at his office in Bayswater and he seemed pleased to be speaking to her.

‘I was just thinking about you,’ he said. ‘I've seen the newspapers and the photos of Miss Bloom arriving at Southampton, and I wondered when I was going to get my invite.’

‘That's what I'm doing right now. Would you like to join us for dinner tomorrow night?’

‘I'd love to. I've been reading a newspaper article about your ventures. You're quite the pioneer.’

‘Didn't Adele tell you that?’

He chuckled.

‘No, Adele just went on about how pretty you are. My father usually holds a ball at Claridges each year in aid of a charity. Perhaps this year we could do it for your Foundation.’

‘That sounds like a splendid idea, thank you,’ she gasped. ‘Let's talk about it tomorrow night.’

‘I look forward to it. See you tomorrow. What time would you like me?’

‘Seven.’

‘I'll see you at seven tomorrow Nesta. Goodbye.’



‘Bye.’

She put the phone down and pondered for a moment, wondering if he really was interested in charity, or more interested in getting to her through it. Either way, the Foundation would benefit, and if she was seen to be getting friendly with him, it would keep Adele off her back.

## Chapter Eighteen

James didn't understand why, out of all the beautiful parks in London - Hyde Park, Green Park, Regents Park; Alice had chosen to spend a Sunday afternoon in Battersea Park. James rarely ventured south of the river, and with Battersea having a reputation for being quite a rough area, he wondered why Alice wanted to bring Alana here. What he didn't know was that she wanted her daughter to see where her Aunt Bella had brought her as a little girl. They walked around the boating lake - the men sitting on the banks fishing, smiling at the pretty little girl in her boater, who found them so fascinating. She asked if a fairy tale princess lived in the large bricked Pump House, and Alice told her that it was where the men pumped the water that went back into the lake. They went round the bandstand and along the Central Drive, passing the nannies and mothers helps like the ones who'd been there when Alice was a child.

It was a beautiful Spring day and Alice wished she could share all the beauty of her hometown with Allen. Alana always said when the sun shone brightly in the sky it was her Poppa looking down on her and smiling, and Alice hoped that this was true.

Alice could also tell no one about the excitement she was feeling about going to see Nesta later. David had come home from his sailing trip, and they were going there for afternoon tea. It made Alice's head spin to think she would see her son for the first time since he was three days old. There were plenty of pictures of him in frames around Nesta's house, and she could see he was the spitting image of Robert Fairfax. He had that same fair hair and impish grin. But a photograph wasn't the same as seeing him in the flesh. Alice knew the only thing that stopped her from confronting Nesta and forcing her into telling the truth was that she didn't want to disrupt David's life. As much as it made her feel sick to the stomach; Nesta was the only mother he had ever known and she didn't want him to think of her as the wicked witch who'd ruined his whole life.

They left the park and drove over to Belgravia in James' new car. The closer they got, the more tearful Alice became - her whole body shaking in anticipation. She'd spent ten years thinking constantly of this little boy, wondering what had become of him, and all this time he'd been living as Betsey Hasburg's grandson.

By the time they reached the house, Alana had fallen asleep - exhausted by her day in the fresh air. Judith took her up to one of the spare rooms and James knocked on the door of the drawing room. When Nesta called for them to come in, and James opened the door, Alice felt as though she couldn't breathe. They entered the drawing room to find Nesta sitting upon the largest of the sofas, and next to her was a little boy in a smart blue shirt and grey short trousers. His sandy blonde hair was swept to one side and his complexion had the ruddiness of someone who had been at sea for some time. Alice felt faint at finally seeing her son, and actually staggered backwards a little.

‘Steady on old girl,’ James quipped.

‘I-It must be all the fresh air,’ she replied.

‘David why don't you go and say hello to our guests?’ Nesta said to the boy.

He got up off the sofa and walked over to James and Alice. To her chagrin, a stray tear fell down Alice's cheek and she fought the urge to run to him, scoop him up and keep him close to her forever.

‘Hello Uncle James,’ he smiled.

‘David this is Mrs Horowitz,’ said James.

‘Alice, please,’ she said, overwhelmed at how beautiful and polite - and tall, her darling Bobby was. He offered her his hand and she shook it, never wanting to let it go.

‘A handshake!’ she joked. ‘Normally when I meet handsome young men, they kiss me upon the cheek.’

She bent down and David kissed her briefly on the cheek, and it made her heart weep with joy to be finally embraced by her son.

‘Is it true you live in America?’ David asked her, and when he looked up at her, blinking those big blue eyes, he looked so much like Robert she had to look away for a moment.

‘Yes darling, I live in America.’

‘Have you been in an aeroplane?’ he gasped.

‘Let Alice sit down David,’ Nesta snapped and Alice wanted to shout at her and tell her not to be beastly to her son. Instead she bit her tongue and sat on the sofa opposite Nesta, delighted when David sat beside her, leaving James to sit with his sister.

‘As it happens, I have been in an aeroplane,’ she said to David. ‘My friend flew me in his little Curtiss to his house in the Hamptons from New York. I was so scared I closed my eyes for the entire journey.’

‘Can I go to America and fly in his plane?’

‘I'm sure you could if you asked him nicely enough.’

‘I do wish he would find a more practical hobby,’ Nesta sighed. ‘It's not as though there's an abundance of planes around for him to see.’

‘What did you think of sailing Champ?’ James asked his nephew.

‘It was okay,’ he pouted, reminding Alice of herself as a child. ‘But I only liked it when we were fishing. I caught a really big fish. I think it was skate.’ He looked at Alice once more and bounced excitedly. ‘Do you know Charlie Chaplin?’ he asked.

‘Yes I do,’ Alice replied. ‘I’ve made two movies with him.’

‘Do you know Buster Keaton?’

‘I’ve been acquainted with him, yes.’

‘Do you know Fatty Arbuckle?’

‘No, I must confess I’ve yet to meet him, but I’ve heard some interesting stories about him.’

‘Nanny Josie takes me to see films on a Saturday morning, while mama visits her friends.’

There was a knock on the door, and Judith the housekeeper came in followed by a young girl in a maid’s uniform who was cowering shyly behind her.

‘Would you like tea Lady Villiers?’ Judith asked Nesta.

‘Yes thank you Judith,’ Nesta smiled. She looked round at the maid. ‘Are you alright there Susan?’

‘The silly girl wants to trouble Miss Bloom for an autograph,’ Judith tutted. ‘I’m so sorry Miss Bloom, it won’t happen again.’

‘Don’t be silly,’ Alice smiled at the timid young maid. ‘Come on in Susan.’

The young girl entered the room, and Alice glanced over and saw the disapproving look on Nesta’s face; which drove her on to be even nicer to her. The maid passed her a leather-bound autograph book and a pen.

‘It’s an honour to meet you Miss,’ she gasped breathily, her accent reminding Alice of her own, a long long time ago. ‘I saw you in Jane Eyre and you were the most beautiful thing I ever saw.’

‘Thank you, that’s a very kind thing to say.’

She opened the book and saw the scented pink pages were filled with names of stage actors of the day. She guessed Susan spent her time hanging around stage doors, no doubt with her own dreams of stardom. So, in another act of defiance against Nesta, she wrote inside the book;

*To Susan*

*You're far too pretty to be a parlour maid.*

*With love and best wishes*

*Alicia Bloom x*

She passed the book back to Susan, and when the young girl read what she'd put, she gasped and ran out the room. Judith looked at Alice and tutted once more.

'I'm so sorry about that Miss Bloom, we'll leave you in peace now.' She looked at Nesta. 'I'll be up with tea shortly.'

She backed out of the room and David saw this as an opportunity to start asking questions again.

'Why did she want you to sign that book?' he asked.

'Because she collects the autographs of famous people. I...I used to know a little girl who toured round theatres and would collect the autographs of all the famous people she was on the bill with. Some people like to do that sort of thing.'

'David why don't you show Alice how you play the piano?' Nesta suggested. She looked at Alice. 'He has the most wonderful aptitude for it. We're hoping it eventually takes the place of flying!'

David did as he was told and went into the adjacent room. He sat down at the baby grand that was near to the window and started to play a classical piece that Alice did not recognise. He played with flourish and confidence, and she recalled Aunt Bella telling her how her mother had been an accomplished piano player as a young girl, back in Dublin. Alice could see that David had clearly taken after his grandmother.

'Has he had lessons?' she asked Nesta.

'A couple, but that was only because one day when he was five, he sat down at my friend Imogen's piano and rattled off a recital he'd heard being played on her gramophone. When we came back to London, I paid for him to have lessons with a woman in Eaton Square, but after two trips, she told me that he was far too cocky and full of his own talent for her liking. What she really meant was he was far too advanced.'

'He's a very clever boy,' Alice said, once again swallowing down her tears.

‘I like to think so,’ Nesta smiled proudly. ‘And I cannot wait to meet Alana. James' letters are always full of the things she's done.’

‘Hopefully she'll wake up soon. Her trip south of the river has worn her out.’

‘Yes, Battersea Park really is quite beautiful,’ James said. ‘I was surprised.’

‘You're an awful snob!’ Nesta laughed. ‘Talking of Battersea. I was wondering if you would do something for me Alice.’

‘Oh yes?’ Alice was suspicious. Had Nesta discovered something about her?

‘Yes, there was a gas leak in a street in Battersea that's mainly occupied by elderly people. They've had to go and live in a Salvation Army hostel until they can be rehoused, and they're a little down in the dumps. I was wondering if you would consider coming to sing for them.’

Alice thought Nesta had a bit of a cheek, asking her to do something for nothing. But if it meant hanging around here, it also meant she'd get to see David regularly. Plus she could turn it to her advantage.

‘I'd love to,’ she smiled sweetly. ‘But on one condition.’

‘What's that?’

‘I want David to accompany me.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Well maybe if David found piano playing fun, instead of aeroplanes; it might be something he would consider doing in the future.’

‘What a splendid idea.’ Nesta looked into the other room. ‘David could you please come here?’

The little boy stopped playing the piano and came and stood next to his mother.

‘Darling how would you like to accompany Alice on the piano at a concert next week?’

‘Really?’ He gasped, turning to look at Alice, his cheeky little face full of excitement.

‘Yes,’ Alice smiled. ‘Can you read music?’

‘A little.’

‘Well I can, and I'll teach you really quickly and you can play for me.’

‘You don't have to put yourself out Alice,’ Nesta said. ‘I could pay for him to have a few lessons.’

‘I want Alice to teach me,’ he pouted.

‘It would be a delight to teach such a fine young man,’ Alice smiled. ‘We'll make sure it's lots and lots of fun.’

Judith and Susan came in with sandwiches, cakes and tea, which they placed on the small dining table in the room with the piano. Just as they were leaving, Judith laughed.

‘Someone's upstairs calling for their mama,’ she said. ‘Do you want me to fetch her Mrs Horowitz?’

‘I'll go. Just tell me what room she's in.’

Alice couldn't wait to introduce Alana to her brother. She had fallen in love with David and wanted nothing more than to have her two babies together. She carried a still sleepy Alana into the dining room, where everyone was now seated around the table.

‘Oh Alice!’ Nesta gasped. ‘She's so beautiful.’

‘What did I tell you?’ James smiled.

‘Alana,’ Alice said. ‘This is Nesta and this is David.’

‘Hello,’ Alana grumbled sleepily. Alice sat next to David and slyly looked from one child to another. She noticed that they both had her mouth. She wondered if anyone else would notice. She always remembered that first day she was introduced to Nesta, the flicker of recognition that had gone across her face; and even now Alice wondered if she'd guessed who she was.

When Nanny Josie came to take David upstairs for bed, Alice lost all interest in being here. She made up some story about having an early morning rehearsal the next day, and asked James if he could drive her back to the Ritz. Alana fell asleep once more and they lay her on the back seat, while James and Alice sat at the front. Driving through London, she was always shocked at how few cars there were. Horses and carts were still far more popular - whereas back in New York, it seemed half the city had an automobile.

‘Did you know there's a house become available on Eaton Square,’ James said. ‘My friend Bertie Hooton has moved out of it.’

‘Yes...’

‘I was just thinking, it would make a lovely family home. Seven bedrooms, three of them en-suite, a spacious servants' flat in the basement...’

‘Are you insinuating that I buy it?’

'I'm insinuating that *we* buy it. As a married couple.'

Alice felt as though she had struck gold. It had been her grand plan to make James fall in love with her and ask her to marry him, and it had worked. If she was part of the family, she'd have access to David all the time. She just felt sad that it meant leaving New York, and Richard, behind.

'But I'm based in New York,' she protested weakly.

'There's theatres here; and if you want to make a movie, you could always go over to Hollywood. I wouldn't stop you. I wouldn't stop you doing anything you wanted to Alice. But I can't live without you because I love you.'

It was the first time he'd ever said this to her, and Alice wished she felt the same way in return. But she didn't. She was very fond of James; he was a nice man and treated her like a queen. But she could never love anyone again. Not after Allen.

'I don't know what to say,' she uttered. 'I do love you, but we've only known each other a few months.'

'We're not children Alice. We both know what we want and how we feel. I love you and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. When I came home from the war I felt as though my life was over and there was no hope. You've made me look at things differently.'

Alice was bowled over by his romantic words and felt guilty that she didn't feel as passionately about him. But James was a means to an end, nothing else.

'In that case, yes,' she said. 'I accept. I will marry you.'

'Oh thank you Alice. I'll make you so happy you'll never regret leaving New York.'



## Chapter Nineteen

It was April the 10th 1922, exactly ten years to the day that Nesta embarked on that fateful journey on the Titanic, and it seemed as though her life had finally come full circle. It should have been a happy time – the day before her son’s tenth birthday; but instead she was reeling in fear. The previous night she’d held a dinner party, and Adele Stanley had attended; who, in her own gregarious and tactless way, had insisted Alice talk about her time on the Titanic. It was a subject Alice normally avoided, claiming it was too painful. But James had been tipsy and had excitedly told of what exactly had happened to his fiancé on board the doomed ship. He regaled Adele with how Alice gave birth and lost her baby whilst trying to escape; and how she fell and banged her head and was rescued by a billionaire called Richard Bloomberg. It was at that moment Nesta realised that her brother was going to marry the real mother of her child. Alice had told him to be quiet and that she didn’t want to rake it all up, but the damage had been done. Nesta had felt her world come crashing down, terrified that Alice had deliberately infiltrated the family to get her hands on David. James had crowed about how she’d lost her memory between leaving her cabin and waking up in Richard Bloomberg’s house, but Nesta feared it was all lies. Alice seemed to have been quite taken with David from the moment she met him, and she couldn’t help but wonder if it was because she knew he was her son.

Nesta felt quite foolish. Alice had mentioned this friend Richard before, but she’d never put two and two together. Maybe it had been denial. Deep down she’d realised it the moment she and Alice met. Something had passed between them, a knowledge that they’d met before. Nesta hoped and prayed that Alice’s memory loss was genuine and she didn’t know the truth, but she couldn’t take that chance. She couldn’t risk Alice getting her hands on David and taking him away from her. So she had no choice but to enrol him into a boarding school. It broke her heart to think that her boy would be sent away after Easter and she wouldn’t see him again for several weeks. But it was better than the thought of Alice snatching him and whisking him away to America.

With David at school, she would be able to throw herself into her work. She was now one of the most famous campaigners in London. Grandison Court was a great success, and she and Henry were about to embark on the building of a block of twenty purpose-built flats in Kennington. Tanner Beresford were moving into offices in Horseferry Road and they were taking a girl on to help out with fundraising. A lot of charities got money from people leaving legacies in their wills, and Nesta was hoping this could be a new step for them. It was all very exciting; but it would not be the same, knowing that her son wasn’t at home.

David was having his party a day early because it was Alice’s opening night in *The Honeymoon* the next day. How Nesta wished she’d not caved into James’ pleas that they hold it early so Alice could attend. Since Alice’s arrival, David’s future ‘aunt’ had been all he’d talked about, and Nesta found it extraordinary how he’d obviously felt a bond with his natural mother without realising who she was. Nesta had made sure the party was spectacular - hiring a clown

and a magician, just so David was impressed with her. She'd also bought him a train set that would run around the entire perimeter of his bedroom. It was electric and she'd bought it on a trip to Paris to see Gabriel sing. She hoped if she spoiled him, David would put Alice Horowitz to the back of his mind; and by the time he came home from school for the summer holidays, he wouldn't want to know her.

Nanny Josie brought David home from school, and he gasped in delight on seeing that the house had been transformed. Nesta had hung paper chains and balloons off every available surface. Out in the garden a stage had been erected on which the magician would appear; and the clown, already in his garish outfit, was out there arguing with his manager. While Josie took David upstairs to get changed, Nesta went into the drawing room and made sure Judith and the maids had put out the copious jellies, sandwiches and jugs of lemonade she'd asked for. There was a ready-made present for pass the parcel, and a board with pin the tail on the donkey drawn on it.

She then went upstairs to David's bedroom, and saw he had changed from his uniform into a shirt and shorts. Josie was now brushing his hair.

'Before we go downstairs I have something for you,' Nesta said. She went into her bedroom and from her wardrobe got the huge box in which the train-set was kept. With a struggle, she carried it into David's bedroom and put it on the floor.

'Happy Birthday darling,' she beamed. David ran over to the box and tore the wrapping paper open. He gasped when he saw what it was.

'A train set!' he exclaimed. 'Thank you Mama!'

He threw his arms around her neck and kissed her on the cheek.

'We'll ask Uncle James to set it up for you later.'

'What a lucky boy you are David?' Josie gushed.

'It's super,' he said. 'I can't wait to play with it.'

Gradually the other children and their nannies arrived, and within minutes Nesta questioned her sanity in allowing so many little boys to invade her home. David and his friend Bernard were running around pretending to be aeroplanes; another two were scrapping, and someone had vomited into a china plant pot. Nesta was just glad she wasn't the one who had to clean it up.

The children had all gone out into the garden to watch the magician, when Alice, James and Alana arrived. Alana looked adorable in a little blue flapper dress, a silk ribbon with a rose attached, around her head. Alice was in a very similar outfit and looked stunning as normal. James was carrying a huge box and Nesta was worried about what they had bought David.

'Everyone's in the garden,' Nesta said, leading them outside. 'Shall I take that present?'

'No, we're alright,' Alice replied. 'I want to give this to David myself.'

They all went out into the garden and to Nesta's dismay, as soon as David spotted Alice, he gasped and broke away from the other children, running over to her, hugging her tightly.

'Hello Aunt Alice!' he said.

'Hello David darling,' she said, kissing the top of his head. 'Happy Birthday.'

Alice took the box off James and put it on the floor in front of David. He excitedly tore off the red paper and opened the box, squealing when he pulled out a large replica plane. It was a scale model, and was particularly spectacular. Alice knelt in front of him and spun around the propeller at the front.

‘It’s a..’ she went to say.

‘Sopwith Antelope!’ gasped David.

‘Clever boy,’ Alice smiled. ‘You see, when you’re a famous movie star, people do you all sorts of favours and when I told those very nice people at Sopwith that it was my favourite little boy’s birthday, they said they’d happily build him a scale model of the Antelope. So that’s your birthday present.’

‘Thank you!’ he gasped, standing up and wrapping his arms around Alice’s neck. Nesta felt sick and angry. Whether Alice knew she was David’s mother or not, she knew darn well the plan had been to stop him being so obsessed with planes, and she here was, buying him a model of one. It was irresponsible and Nesta’s temper got the better of her.

‘Perhaps Uncle James can build your train-set later on,’ she said.

‘Look, the wings move!’ David gasped, totally ignoring her. He picked up the plane and ran off to the rest of his friends. Nesta looked down at Alana, who was watching the other children, but looked too shy to join them.

‘Why don’t you go and join the others?’ she suggested. ‘Professor Magiko is about to start.’

Alana looked up at her mother for approval.

‘Go on darling,’ Alice said. ‘It’ll be fun.’

‘James, why don’t you take her?’ Nesta suggested. ‘I’d like to chat to Alice inside for a moment.’

‘Come on you,’ James said, scooping Alana up and carrying her over to the children. ‘I’ve never known you to be shy before.’

Once they were out of earshot, Nesta turned to Alice.

‘Could you come into the dining room please?’ she asked, and she walked off without giving Alice the chance to refuse.

Nesta led Alice back into the dining room and closed the doors, making the noise from the party more muffled. She knew it was a foolish thing to rile Alice -just in case she did know the truth; but Nesta was David’s mother in all intents and purposes, and Alice had disobeyed her wishes so blatantly, she felt she couldn’t let her get away with it. Alice sat down at the dining table and looked a little dismayed when Nesta chose to remain standing. But she had to; it gave her a feeling of power – something Alice seemed to be stripping away from her rapidly.

‘You should have asked my permission before buying that aeroplane,’ Nesta said, trying to remain calm.

‘I don’t see why,’ Alice snapped. ‘David loves it.’

‘You know I don’t want him to be obsessed with planes. That’s why you gave him piano lessons.’

‘It’s a toy plane! I’m not taking him up in a real one! I never would. It would be far too dangerous.’

‘Well I don’t want you spoiling him like it again. He’s got to learn he can’t have everything he wants.’

‘David will be my nephew by marriage from next month. I’ve every right to spoil him?’

‘No you haven’t. Please, just leave him alone Alice.’

A strange expression flickered across Alice’s face and she stood up and walked towards Nesta. For a moment she wondered if she was going to slap her. Instead she just walked around her.

‘Feeling a little threatened are we? Scared you’re neglecting your son in favour of your young lover?’

‘Who told you that?’ Nesta fretted.

‘Margi Deacon. She’s in the chorus of The Honeymoon. We were chatting in rehearsals the other day and she was telling me how she used to work as a dresser at the Royal Opera House, and that you used to hang around backstage for Gabriel Garcia like a stupid young girl.’

‘That’s slander,’ Nesta blushed, shocked that other people had noticed and were gossiping. If their affair became public knowledge she would be ruined. ‘It doesn’t mean a thing.’

‘I’m not going to judge you Nesta.’ Alice stood close behind her, her mouth practically whispering in her ear. ‘But imagine this for a moment. Your young, beautiful, virile lover means a lot to you doesn’t he?’

‘You’ve got the wrong idea...’

‘Oh just be honest Nesta.’

Nesta could only nod. Mortified at her indiscretion becoming public, and terrified of what Alice was going to do or say.

‘He’s probably the most precious thing in your life apart from David isn’t he?’

‘Y-Yes.’

‘Okay. Well say one of your rich friends was short of an escort one night. She needed a handsome young man to accompany her somewhere, and you lent her Gabriel, and she promised to treat him well and give him back the next day. How would you feel if the next day came and she wouldn’t give him back to you?’

‘W-What do you mean?’ Nesta asked this, but she knew exactly what Alice was getting at; and she knew darn well her future sister-in-law was perfectly aware of who David was. Nesta started to shake and felt quite faint, convinced she was about to lose her son forever.

‘How would you like it if another woman took the most precious thing in your life, promising to give him back and yet ran off with him and you never saw him again?’

Nesta’s legs gave way from underneath her. She managed to stagger to a dining chair and sat down. She had dreaded this day for the past ten years, and now it had come, she didn’t know what to do. Could she deny it? How much did Alice remember? Memory could play tricks on people.

‘Do you know it took me ten years to remember?’ Alice said, clearly hitting her stride. ‘I could remember everything else. The steward telling me to take my baby from the cabin to go up on deck. Walking up the stairs; even the stupid conversation that was going on behind me between these two women, one of them thinking it was probably some sort of drill. But from then on, it was all a blank- everything that happened after that; until I woke up in Richard’s house and he told me I’d fallen over and bumped by head. I spent years being told by people I’d probably left Bobby, my darling baby, in the cabin and he’d died. Can you imagine how that feels Nesta? People accusing you of killing your own child.’

‘It must be terrible.’

‘It was horrific. But something deep inside told me he was still alive. It was only when I met James and he mentioned his sister’s name, that it all came back to me. That *you* were the one who offered to take Bobby onto a lifeboat and give him back to me afterwards. Except you never did, did you?’

‘I thought you were dead! I had no way of finding out who you were. You told me your name was Alice Higgins; and when we got onto The Carpathia, there was no Alice Higgins on board.’

‘I was scared and I panicked and used my real name. And I would buy your story except that James told me you stayed in New York for a couple of months after the Titanic. So you would have seen Richard’s appeal in the newspaper, and still you couldn’t bring yourself to give me my baby back.’

‘I had grown to love him by then. I’d told everyone that he was mine. What was I supposed to do?’

‘Be honest! No one would have been angry with you. You did a kind thing and saved a baby from what you thought was a certain death. But when you realised his mother was alive you gave him back.’ She laughed. ‘I would have been so grateful I’d have probably let you carry on seeing him. But no, you continued with your charade - telling people he was yours.’

‘Is that why you’re with my brother? To get to David?’

‘I started a relationship with James before I knew anything about David.’

‘Well we can’t tell him the truth now, it’s gone on too long. He thinks I’m his mother. I *am* his mother. You had him for four days, I’ve had him for ten years. You’ve got Alana and you’re young enough to have more children. I can’t have children. I had four miscarriages before getting David. I went to New York because my husband was going to put me into an asylum if I didn’t produce an heir.’

‘So my son came along at a wonderfully convenient time for you.’

‘It wasn’t like that. I wanted a baby so much. I loved him from the moment I took him from you. Please Alice, I beg you. Don’t take him away from me.’

Alice came forward and knelt before Nesta. Those usually doe-like brown eyes filled with nothing but pure hatred.

‘The only reason I’m not telling David is because he loves you and this is the only home he’s known. But you will never stop me from seeing my son, and I can buy him whatever he wants. Is that understood?’

‘I’m sending him to boarding school after Easter to get him away from you.’

‘If you do that, I’ll tell James – and the press – all about Gabriel Garcia’

‘Maybe I’ll tell James that you’re just using him to get to my son.’

‘My son. And James wouldn’t believe you. He’s madly in love with me and besides, what sort of monster would he think you were? Stealing a baby and passing it off as your own?’

‘The thought of my beloved brother marrying you sickens me. Who are you? Why did you say your name was Alice Fairfax?’

‘I was travelling as Alice Fairfax because that was my lover's name; and we were going to marry when we got to New York.’

‘Are you a criminal?’

‘No I bloody am not! I was a music hall performer before I left England. I met Robert Fairfax and he told me he was the son of a newspaper magnate who'd disowned him. When I found out I was pregnant he asked me to marry him and gave me an engagement ring. But he reckoned he had a business opportunity in New York and that we should go there and get married. I was a naïve twenty year old and I fell for it all. Robert said we should travel as brother and sister as it would look more respectable. What his true motives were I don't know because he's lying at the bottom of the ocean and will never be able to tell me.’

‘It still means you've told my brother lies.’

‘Says the woman who had a ‘miraculous’ birth on the Titanic! The woman who’s letting the world think she’s courting Michael Holland, when in reality she’s fucking the arse off Gabriel Garcia...’

‘Okay, truce, truce!’ Nesta blushed. ‘I apologise for never returning David to you. But we can't change the past and this is his home and I'm the only mother he's ever known.’

‘Maybe. But I'll make sure he thinks I'm the best aunt in the world. And as I said, if you dare send him to boarding school, I’ll make sure the world knows what sort of lying, dirty slut you really are.’

Nesta cried off from the rest of the party, claiming she had a headache. She retired to her room and sat at her desk, writing a long letter to Richard Bloomberg, telling him the truth about his ward. She hoped that he would disown Alice for lying and maybe even report her to the police for fraud. Then she would have to return to New York to stand trial, and if she went to prison, she would be away from James and David forever.

The party finished and gradually all the children left. Nesta stood at the window and watched Alice, James and Alana leave. She knew she had to do all she could to make sure James didn't marry Alice. To tell him the truth was an impossible option. It would mean she'd have to reveal her own crime, and she could go to prison for stealing a baby. She wondered if she could

pay someone to pretend they were having an affair with Alice. It would break James' heart for a while, but at least it would get that woman away from David.

Nesta was just about to get into bed, when Colette knocked on the door and told her there was a telephone call for her from a Mr Garcia. Nesta's heart leapt into her throat, wondering what Gabriel wanted at this time of night. She thanked Colette and went down to the drawing room, where the phone was off its hook, lying on the desk. Nesta closed the door and ran to it, desperate to hear his voice.

‘Are you okay my darling?’ she cried.

‘Yes! Come to the flat!’

‘But it’s eleven o’clock at night.’

‘Get a taxi. I need to see you now.’

He hung up and Nesta stood there staring at the mouthpiece. How the hell was she supposed to get to Covent Garden at this time of night? The logical thing to do would have been to ignore him. But she never could. She was too scared he would get angry for not obeying him and find someone else more receptive. Nesta had no choice but to go along with it. She ran upstairs to Nanny Josie’s room and knocked on the door. She was greeted by the nanny in her nightgown, an alarmed expression on her face.

‘Is everything okay ma’am?’ she asked.

‘Not really Josie. There’s been a fire at a workhouse in Southwark. The poor people have nowhere to go. I’ve got to go and see if I can help. I’ll be back as soon as I can.’

‘Very well Lady Villiers.’

‘Thank you Josie.’

Nesta went back into her bedroom and got dressed, making sure she wore something that Gabriel liked. He would always complain when she wore dowdy clothes - he liked her to look young and modern. So she hunted through her wardrobe for the blood red, dropped waist dress he always loved to see her in. She rolled her hair into a bun, wrapped her mink coat around her shoulders and left the house. There were no taxis in Belgrave Square and she knew she had no choice but to walk onto Kings Road. It was a most unusual sight to see a lady walking alone at night, and when she did pass people, they gave her queer looks. Blushing, she carried on until she reached Sloane Square, and hailed the first cab that came along. She asked the driver to take her to Covent Garden and sat in the back, her hands shaking from both anticipation and nerves. She had no idea what Gabriel wanted and was frightened that he was going to finish with her. He never ceased to tell her of the large amount of girls who would wait by the stage door after every performance - each of them desperate for his autograph. What if he'd fallen for one of them and no longer wanted to see her? The thought of this made Nesta's throat constrict. To be without Gabriel would be like to be without air. Apart from David, he was her reason for living and she would have happily given up everything for him.

Gabriel welcomed her into his tiny attic flat, and by the glassy look in his eyes, she could tell he had been drinking.

‘Nesta!’ he gasped, pulling her into an embrace. ‘Come on in.’

She walked into the little sitting room, and looked around, almost expecting some woman to come out and tell her to leave because Gabriel was hers.

‘Can I get you a drink?’ he asked, going over to a cabinet in the corner, where a bottle of whisky was open.

‘I’m okay thank you,’ she replied, sitting upon the sofa and wriggling to move away from the spring that was sticking in her bottom. Gabriel poured himself a glass of whisky and sat beside her. He was almost bouncing up and down with excitement.

‘I just had to tell you this. I’ve been invited to sing with the Vienna State Opera for two months, starting in May.’

‘V-Vienna?’ she uttered.

‘Yes. Isn’t it wonderful? And I want you to come with me.’

‘I beg your pardon.’

‘I want you to come with me Nesta. Can you imagine it? Two months in springtime Vienna. It’ll be divine.’

‘But what about David? What about my job?’

The jovial expression left his face. His jaw became set and his shoulders sagged. Nesta shook with fear. This was how he always looked before he lost his temper.

‘So your job’s more important than me?’

‘No of course it isn’t. But what about David?’

‘He’s got a nanny hasn’t he? It’s only two months.’

‘But that’s a long time. I can come and visit you.’

‘You either come with me, or you never see me again.’

‘But Gabriel, I...’

Out of the blue he reached out and grasped her round the throat. The pain was excruciating and Nesta could feel the air being squeezed out of her body. She clawed at his hand, trying to free herself, but it was to no avail. When he’d been drinking he developed a monster strength that no one could beat. He pushed her back into the sofa and climbed on top of her, never once letting go of her throat.

‘You are coming with me or else I’ll kill you,’ he snarled. ‘Do you think I haven’t killed someone before?’

Nesta tried to gasp a reply, but it was impossible to speak.

‘I killed a man in the war,’ he said through gritted teeth, spit spraying Nesta in the face. ‘I looked him in the eyes and I blew his brains out. And you know what? I didn’t feel a thing. I could easily kill you.’

Nesta had never been more frightened in her life. She was scared he might carry out his threats, but she was even more scared that he was starting to hate her. She could live with his violence. She couldn’t live without him.

‘Okay I’ll come,’ she managed to gasp. ‘I’ll come.’



He let go of her throat, and Nesta went dizzy as all the blood came rushing back into her head. Gabriel climbed off her and flopped back down onto the sofa, panting.

‘I hate it when you make me do that to you Nesta,’ he said, his voice becoming calmer. ‘You know I don’t like hurting you.’

‘I’m sorry,’ she gasped, sitting up and clinging to him. ‘I’m so sorry. Of course I’ll come to Vienna with you. It’ll be wonderful.’

‘I’ve been hearing stories about you Nesta. I saw Adele the other day and she was telling me how she and Francis, and you and that guy Michael Holland went to the races together, and how fabulously you and Michael were getting on. Are you being unfaithful to me Nesta?’

‘Of course not. I’m only pretending to see Michael to get Adele off my back. She insists on match-making otherwise.’

‘Because if I found out you were cheating on me, I’d kill you.’

‘Why would I cheat on you? You’re everything to me.’

He looked at her and smiled, although it didn’t reach his eyes - they remained cold and hard.

‘Well get into that bedroom and prove it to me then,’ he said. ‘I’m going to make sure you show me exactly how much I mean to you.’

Nesta didn’t get home until the next morning, and by the time she got back, Josie had taken David to school and James had gone to work. She felt bad that she hadn’t been there to see her son before he left, but she was rather glad he was spared the sight of the ugly bruise around her neck, or the fact that she found walking painful after Gabriel’s brutal love-making. She thought of all the times she had witnessed broken women - bruised and battered by vicious husbands who they refused to leave. She would question their sanity when they’d claim he needed her, but now she understood. Even though Gabriel hurt her, belittled her and at times terrified her, she always felt he was doing it because he loved her and was frightened of losing her. After they had sex, he would often cling onto her and weep and shake. Like James, he had seen terrible things in the war and it had disturbed him. Nesta loved him so much, she couldn’t bear to push him aside, leaving him to face his demons alone. She convinced herself that one day he would put it all behind him and change. By then he would be a little older and they could maybe build a future together.

After bathing, she dressed, draping a long scarf around her neck so no-one would see her bruises and set off to Piccadilly to see James. Ever since he’d met Alice, he’d knuckled down and returned to his job with gusto. The building of the new hotel in Chicago was full steam ahead and he was even looking into buying into a train company that provided luxury travel to the Continent. The plan was for it to rival The Orient Express, and would make Villiers a fortune. It jarred in Nesta’s throat how good Alice was for her brother and she had no idea how she was going to separate them now.

James was in his office busy dictating something to his secretary, and Nesta apologised for disturbing him.

'How did it go?' he asked after his secretary had left and Nesta had taken her place at his desk.

'I'm sorry?'

'The fire. Josie told me about it.'

'Oh it was dreadful,' she lied. 'Don't know what we're going to do. But one of the ideas put forward was to rebuild the workhouse using a model of one built in Vienna. The head of the Poor Union has asked me to be one of a party of people going over to Austria to see how this workhouse functions.'

'Vienna?' James smiled. 'A wonderful city.'

'Well I doubt where we're going will be very nice. The only thing is, I'll be away for two months starting from the end of next month.'

'That doesn't matter. It's a wonderful opportunity for you.'

'But what about David? He can't come with me, he has to go to school. I was thinking of sending him down to Kingswood to stay with Imogen and John. I could probably get him into a school there.'

'Nonsense! David can come and stay with us.'

'You and Alice?'

'Yes. We'd have moved into Eaton Square by then and there'll be plenty of room for him.'

'I'm not sure about that. You don't know what sort of people Alice will bring home. One hears such stories about theatre people.'

'Don't be ridiculous Nesta! Alice is a top actress, not some showgirl like Mimi.'

'How much do you actually know about her James? Do you believe this story of hers that she can barely remember anything before she was on the Titanic? It's highly convenient. What if she's hiding something?'

'She isn't hiding anything. She remembers some things from her life before. She was a young wealthy woman who got led astray by a cad who got her pregnant then left her. She and her brother were sailing to America to start a new life, and that's it. Do you think it should concern me that she wasn't some timid virgin before she married Allen Horowitz? I care not one jot. I love the woman I met, and that's who I'm marrying.'

'I don't trust her. She seems to bewitch every man she meets.'

'Ah you're talking about David. Yes he thinks the world of Alice, but he loves you more.'

'Do you think so?'

'I know so. You're his mother. Alice could never take your place. But you've got to remember she too should have a little boy David's age; but he died on the Titanic. She probably sees David as the son she should have had.'

Nesta almost laughed at the irony of what he was saying. But she kept a straight face.

'Well if you do have David living with you, I want you to have the final say in what he does. Not Alice. I'm leaving him in your care, not hers.'

'Okay, although I do think you're being unfair on her. She's quite lovely.'



## Chapter Twenty

June 1922

Alice was over the moon to be the person attending David's school play. They were staging a version of The Pied Piper of Hamelin, and David was providing the musical accompaniment. Naturally, Miss Arnold, his headmistress was insistent that Alice said a few words before it started, and she was more than happy to do this. Alana had come too, as she would be attending St Ann's from Easter next year, and Richard - who had come over for the wedding and was still here. Alice loved having all her family with her and wished it could be like this forever.

The play was taking place in the school assembly hall, and behind the curtain lots of children were milling about in their costumes. Alice stood in front of David, who looked very smart in his shirt and bow tie. He had already been sick once that morning and she gripped him by the shoulders, trying to quell his nerves.

'Now, when I was a little girl, I had a friend of your age who was on the stage,' she said. 'And whenever she got nervous about going on, she would tell herself that all the people in the audience were really smelly and that she was superior because she didn't smell.'

David laughed at this, and it was nice to see him happy at last.

Alice kissed him on both cheeks and told him to go to his piano. He walked out onto the stage and Alice heard the audience applaud. It filled her with pride to hear her little boy being clapped, and she was so absorbed in this, she jumped out of her skin when Miss Arnold appeared.

'If you could make your way to the front of the stage, we're ready to begin,' she said, clasping her hands together.

'Me?' Alice said. 'Oh, right, thank you.'

Alice walked out onto the stage and it felt strange to be playing to fifty people, rather than a couple of thousand; and it made her feel as though she was a young girl again, back in the music hall on a Monday night when hardly anyone would turn up. She had rehearsed this introduction so many times she could say it in her sleep. She struck a dramatic pose, arms opened wide, a menacing expression on her face.

'Once upon a time in ancient Germany,' she began. 'There was a plague of horrid creatures with twitching noses and biting teeth. Who would rid the town of this terrible vermin, and save that village we know as Hamelin.'

They were probably the worst lines Alice had ever performed, but the children in the audience liked it, and the adults clapped as she swept off the stage to behind the curtains, where the children dressed as villagers were waiting to make their entrance. Miss Arnold pushed a couple of them and they ran on. She then came over to Alice and grasped her hands.

'That was wonderful Miss Bloom,' she gushed. 'Such an honour to have an actress of your calibre on our stage.'

'Please, I'm Mrs Tanner here,' Alice smiled. 'I'm David's aunt, nothing else.'

‘Even so, to have a star such as yourself helping us out is quite the coup. You will stay for the little after-show soiree won’t you?’

‘Yes of course,’ Alice said through gritted teeth; although she could think of nothing she’d like less than dodging gushing parents, all trying to get free tickets to The Honeymoon. But this was David’s – and soon to be Alana’s school, so she went along with it. That fake smile never leaving her face.

The drinks and nibbles were held in Miss Arnold’s office, and while the adults chatted, the children were allowed to go out into the playground to enjoy the early evening sunshine. Alice stood at the window and watched David and Alana. He was holding the little girl’s hand and helping her onto the climbing frame that covered the sandpit. The two of them had grown so close in recent weeks, it broke Alice’s heart to know she couldn’t tell them that they were brother and sister. Although, by the way her clothes were feeling slightly tighter, and this morning when she awoke, she felt sick; she guessed both children would soon be getting a new brother or sister. Alice didn’t even particularly want to be pregnant – it would clash with the play. But at least if she had James’ baby, she would have a hold on this family forever.

Richard and James were talking to Miss Arnold, and Alice could see that the headmistress was rather taken with Richard. He may have been thirty years her senior, but he was still a handsome man; and with that lovely voice and his immense charm, it was easy to see how he would win the heart of a frustrated spinster. Alice wished Richard would stay in England permanently. She’d missed him so much, and he was the only person apart from Nesta who knew the truth about her. He told her about the letter he’d received from Nesta, telling him everything, and how he’d written to her in reply, informing her that these were facts that he was already aware of, but thanked her for her concern! He advised Alice never to tell David the truth, because it would be too much for him; and however much it hurt Alice, she knew this to be true. Instead, she would always be reduced to play the role of favourite aunt.

There was a tap on her shoulder and she turned around to find a young woman standing opposite her. She wore a very respectable tweed suit, and her dark hair was bobbed like Alice’s but wavy. She was strikingly pretty, and there was something familiar about her delicate features and big, dark eyes.

‘Alice?’ she frowned. ‘Is that you?’

Alice suddenly realised she recognised the well boned face, wide mouth and playful glint in the eyes. It transported her back to another life.

‘Evie?’ she uttered. ‘Evie Howard?’

‘Yes,’ she nodded. ‘Although it’s Evangeline Spalding now. I’m married to Charles Spalding the MP. Our little girl Madeline goes to the school.’

Alice panicked, realising that Evie knew her as Alice Higgins. She also knew the full story of Robert Fairfax and the trip to New York, and Alice couldn’t risk her saying anything in front of James.

‘You know all the time I’ve seen your films, I was sure I recognised you,’ Evie smiled. ‘But we were always led to believe you’d died on the Titanic.’

Alice was torn between wanting to catch up with her former friend, and wanting to keep the pretence to her husband.

‘Why don’t we meet for coffee tomorrow?’ she suggested. ‘There’s a lovely little café on Sloane Square called The Lavender, we could meet there. Say about eleven o’clock?’

‘Yes, that sounds lovely,’ Evie replied. ‘So, what happened to you?’

‘I’d rather not talk about it here,’ Alice said quietly. ‘There’s things James doesn’t know if you see what I mean.’

‘Of course. Well okay, I’ll see you tomorrow. I can tell you all about Robert Fairfax.’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘That man you went away with wasn’t the real Robert Fairfax.’

‘I know that. Richard, my friend, found that out. But I’ve no idea who that man was.’

‘Well Alice my dear,’ Evie smiled enigmatically. ‘You can find out tomorrow.’

‘I can’t wait,’ Alice fizzed, glad to have a friend in England. Everyone she knew was through James; and it was nice to have someone around who’d known Alice Higgins – even if it did have to remain a secret.

They left the school and all headed back to Eaton Square. Richard was staying with them and had fallen in love with the area; and Alice was trying to persuade him to buy the house two doors down that had become vacant - just so he would stay close to her.

All three adults gasped in shock when they turned the corner and saw a policeman standing on the doorstep, hands behind his back, rocking back on his heels, as if he was bored. Alice thanked God the children were with her. At least she knew nothing was wrong with them.

‘Can I help you?’ James asked as they reached the house. The young policeman turned around and came down the steps.

‘Mr Tanner?’ He asked.

‘Yes.’

‘I’m PC Fox from Belgravia Station. I was wondering if we could have a word in private.’

Alice panicked. She wondered what the procedure would be if they’d found out about the Moore diamond. Would they question her directly or would they insist on speaking to her husband?

They went into the house and Richard took the children up to bed, while Alice and James led the policeman into the drawing room. Alice had made sure her front room wasn’t stuffy and filled with antiques like Nesta’s. All her furniture was modern, the colour scheme bright. Indeed Nesta once commented bitterly that the American influence had clearly rubbed off on Alice - they had no sense of heritage either.

James and Alice sat on a plump, cream coloured sofa and the policeman sat opposite them on a matching chair. He looked no more than twenty, and Alice suddenly felt terribly old.

‘There has been an incident in Vienna,’ the young policeman said, and Alice kicked herself for fleetingly hoping Nesta was dead. Then she could keep David permanently.

‘Your sister Lady Ernestine Villiers has been injured in a fall.’

‘How injured?’ James asked.

‘She has a broken leg and a shattered jaw. It's a rather delicate matter.’ His eyes darted to Alice, then back to James.

‘Oh don't mind me,’ Alice laughed. ‘There isn't much I haven't seen or heard.’

‘Okay, well Lady Villiers was injured because she was attacked by a young man.’ He looked down at his note pad. ‘A Gabriel Garcia.’

‘Really!?’ Alice gasped. ‘What did he do?’

‘I-I'm sorry?’ James uttered, looking at his wife. ‘You're talking as if you know him.’

‘I don't know him, but I know of him. Look, Nesta swore me to secrecy okay!’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Nesta has been having a thing with this young opera singer called Gabriel Garcia. Apparently he's singing with the Vienna State Opera and I suspect that's the real reason why she's gone over there.’

‘And you didn't think to tell me.’

‘She swore me to secrecy!’

‘If I may continue,’ the young policeman said loudly. ‘Lady Villiers has been taken to the Vienna General Hospital and Mr Garcia has been arrested. It is alleged that he pushed Lady Villiers down a flight of stairs.’

‘What was she thinking?’ gasped James. ‘Has she gone insane?’

‘I can't comment on that. But if you call into the station tomorrow morning, we'll be able to give you full details of where she is, so you can make arrangements with regards to bringing her home.’

‘Yes, of course,’ said James. ‘Thank you for letting me know.’

He showed the policeman out and returned to the drawing room. Alice guessed she was in for a lecture. She wanted to feel sorry for Nesta, but it was so hard. She couldn't help but feel whatever happened to her was just punishment for stealing David.

‘You should have told me,’ James said, sitting where the policeman had been. ‘I could have stopped her going.’

‘She's a grown woman and it's her life to do as she pleases.’

‘I don't understand why she told you. You're hardly the best of friends.’

‘Maybe it was for that reason. She didn't care what I thought. I shouldn't speak for her, but I do know she was quite smitten with him.’

‘How old is this man?’

‘About twenty-five. She's been seeing him for some time I believe.’

‘I must go over and get her,’ James fretted. ‘What has she done? Nesta's always been so sensible. And what about Michael Holland? I thought she was stepping out with him.’

‘I think Michael's been nothing but a cover for her affair with Gabriel.’

‘Poor Nesta. She's lost her mind, I'm sure of it.’

‘It's not impossible,’ Alice said, deciding to influence him just a little. ‘I've read that there are people who even today, have gone completely insane after being on the Titanic. Just the same

as men like yourself, who saw other men being killed on The Front; women like Nesta had to sit in a lifeboat and watch as hundreds of people drowned. It surely is enough to send someone quite mad. I think poor Nesta might only be feeling the effects of being a survivor, now.'

'But what's that got to do with having an affair with a boy almost young enough to be her son?'

'Perhaps it's the only way she can cope. She does do so much by herself. She runs the house, looks after David, runs her company. I'm not her biggest fan, but she has my full admiration for taking on so much. I think maybe when she comes home she should go into a sanatorium for a few months.'

'I'm not putting my sister into an asylum!'

'No, not an asylum. Just a nice home out in the country where she can have total rest. Mrs Richards can keep Belgrave Square running. We can look after David, and I'm sure Henry Beresford is more than capable of taking care of the company. Then Nesta can come back when she's ready, refreshed and able to cope.'

'Do you really think that would work?'

'Yes. She clearly wasn't thinking right to take up with such a young boy. It's all a symptom of her fragile state of mind. Let's bring her home and get her in somewhere nice. She may even start to like me if she was thinking clearly.'

James smiled and leaned forward, reaching out and grasping Alice's hand.

'You really are a good egg,' he said. 'Nesta's been quite beastly to you, and you're just thinking of her welfare. I don't know what I'd do without you.'

James left early the next morning. He was going to go to Belgravia Police Station to get all the details, then drive on down to Dover to try and get a boat over to Paris - where he would catch a train to Vienna. He wanted as few people as possible to know about this unfortunate episode and asked Alice if she could find a sanatorium for Nesta to go into. She made up her mind she would find one as far away from London as possible; and preferably one that had a minimum stay time of six months. But before she saw to that she took David to school and left Alana with Richard; then made her way to The Lavender, a little café on Sloane Square, next to the underground station. The customers were local ladies who lunched and used it as a place to catch up with friends and have a gossip about their husbands, away from the servants.

Alice spotted Evie as soon as she entered the café. She was sat looking out of the window, a wistful expression on her face. She had hardly changed in ten years. Only the flecks of grey in her hair gave away that she was in her mid-thirties. She had the same gauche manner, and when she spotted Alice and waved, she still looked like that rather silly girl she'd known all those years ago. She stood up and held out her arms, making the teapot and saucers rattle.

'Alice, darling,' she gushed, grasping Alice's shoulders and kissing her on both cheeks. 'You look lovely.'

'Thank you,' replied Alice, sitting down. 'So do you?'



‘Are you kidding? I’m hardly the gorgeous young thing I was when you last saw me. I’m a mother of two now.’

‘Two! How old are they?’

‘Well, Madeleine is five. She was a rat catcher in the play yesterday. Then there’s Harry, he’s twenty months.’

‘Do you still dance?’

‘Oh gosh no. I gave that up as soon as I met Charles. He’d been ensconced in Cambridge and didn’t quite know how exotic our act was. So I stopped it and he’s none the wiser.’

‘How did you meet?’

‘At a party. It was two weeks before war started. Charles was home from university and waiting before starting at his father’s law firm. Then war broke out and he decided to enlist. He was sent home in 1915 because he was too close to an explosion and was deafened in one ear. We got married and have been blissfully happy ever since.’

Alice was listening to what Evie was saying, but all the time she was distracted by two women in the corner who were sitting staring at her, whispering and laughing.

‘Doesn’t it annoy you?’ Evie asked. ‘People always looking at you?’

‘I’m used to it. But I have to say the Americans are a lot more forthright than the English. They’ll come up to you and tell you they’re your biggest fans and they adore you. The English just stare and point. But I’ve made my bed, I’ve got to lie in it. But what about you? What happened to Esme and Aggie?’

Evie looked down and stirred her tea. Her joyful expression had changed and Alice felt sorry for upsetting her.

‘We lost Aggie in 1918,’ she said. ‘Her sweetheart died at Paschendalle and Aggie never recovered. She threw herself off Westminster Bridge in the dead of night, when no one could save her.’

‘I’m so sorry Evie,’ Alice said. ‘I didn’t know.’

‘Of course you didn’t,’ she said, smiling bravely. ‘Esme’s in Australia. She was working as a VAD out in the Middle East during the War and met Tyrone. He’s a sheep farmer in Perth. They live on a big farm and Esme’s just about to drop my first niece or nephew.’

‘And Spencer, what happened to him?’

‘Spencer’s in prison. Apparently he didn’t pay a penny in tax from the moment he left school. They finally caught up with him and now he’s languishing in Pentonville.’

‘My goodness, so you really haven’t got anyone from the old days around you.’

‘Not a soul.’ Evie smiled and reached across the table, grasping Alice’s hand. ‘That’s why it was such a delight to see you again. So come on, tell me how you came to be the big film star.’

Over two pots of tea, Alice told Evie everything that had happened to her from the moment she and Robert set sail on the Titanic. She knew she could trust Evie and didn’t hold anything back. It felt liberating to off-load the burden of her secrets, and Evie listened without judgement.

‘I couldn’t bear to sit back and watch another woman bring up my child,’ she shivered. ‘You’re so brave.’

‘I only keep quiet for David’s sake. Nesta’s the only mother he’s ever known. It would break his heart to be told she was nothing to do with him.’

‘And you really think you’ll be able to get away with having her put away into a home?’

‘If I have my way I will. What sort of woman runs off with a boy of twenty-five, leaving her child at home? She doesn’t deserve to be a mother anyway.’

‘Well I don’t know if they’d be able to help, but Charles’ aunt had Tuberculosis a couple of years ago, and she went into this sanatorium in Hastings to recover. I think most of the patients had TB, but you never know, they might be able to help you. I think it was called The Wellington.’

‘Thanks Evie, I’ll contact them and see if they’d take her. Hastings is pretty far from London - and David.’

‘Sounds as though she’s not right in the head anyway.’

‘Precisely. Anyway, you were going to tell me about Robert Fairfax.’

‘Oh yes. Well, a few months ago Joseph Fairfax died and there was a piece in The Times about the fact that his company had been bought by an American organisation because his only son was killed at The Somme, and so there was no heir. This got Charles talking, and he told me that he’d gone to Sherborne with Joseph’s younger son, Robert, who died from an asthma attack when he was thirteen. So I said that was impossible because my friend had been engaged to Robert Fairfax. Charles then told me about Edmund Barton, Robert’s best friend at school. Edmund was Joseph’s chauffeur’s son, and Joseph paid for Edmund to go to Sherborne. Apparently, it seemed there was some sort of scandal because Robert and Edmund looked like twins and people reckoned Edmund was actually Joseph’s son. They were very close, and when Robert died, Edmund took it really badly and went off the rails. He’d claim he could see Robert’s ghost, and he’d wear his clothes and pretend to be him. He left school at sixteen and no one heard of him again. Charles guessed that your Robert was probably Edmund.’

‘Well he had to be someone who had intimate knowledge of the family. So my son’s father’s name was probably Edmund Barton?’

‘Looks like it. I think he went around posing as Robert and scrounging money off people by pretending to be a millionaire’s son.’

‘I had such a lucky escape. I think if he’d survived and we’d have gone to New York, we’d both be in prison by now!’

Alice felt buoyed after her meeting with Evie. They promised to meet once a week at The Lavender, and Alice looked forward to it immensely. She went home and had some lunch before going to see Doctor Brooker, the physician who lived a few doors down. James had explained that his predecessor, Doctor Perkins had been a bit of a quack who didn’t really know what he was doing. But when he died, and Doctor Brooker moved in, it had caused great excitement because he was only about thirty and much more with it. His surgery was in the basement of the house and when the young girl behind the reception desk saw who had walked in, she gasped and stood up as if addressing royalty.

‘Miss Bloom,’ she gasped.

‘Mrs Tanner actually,’ she smiled. ‘Is Doctor Brooker available?’

‘I’ll just go and see. Wait there, please.’

The meek little girl came out from her desk and scurried to the back of the building, disappearing into a door. She remerged shortly afterwards and nodded at Alice.

‘Yes he’s available,’ she said. ‘Go on through.’

Alice went into the small surgery and discovered Doctor Brooker indeed to be very young. He was a slight man, with thinning hair and horn rimmed glasses, but his smooth complexion and nervous smile gave away his youth. He told her to sit down and asked her what was wrong.

‘It isn’t me,’ she said. ‘Although I do think I’m pregnant.’

‘Would you like me to do a test?’

‘If you want to give me a bottle, I’ll bring a sample in tomorrow morning. What I want to talk to you about is my sister-in-law. She’s had a breakdown and is currently in Austria after being beaten up by her young boyfriend. I hasten to add that she’s forty years old and he’s twenty-five. You see Nesta’s like me, she’s a Titanic Survivor, and I do think it has affected her. She also lost her husband at The Somme, and I think it’s all got to her. My husband has gone to Vienna to bring her home, but I’d like her to go somewhere to recover once she’s back.’

‘Like a sanatorium?’

‘Yes. My friend has recommended one in Hastings called The Wellington. I was wondering how one goes about admitting someone to such a place.’

‘Well she’ll have to be assessed by a professional such as myself. Then I would contact the home to find out if they have room and if they could help her. If she has lost her mind, there is a chance she might need to go into a county asylum.’

‘Oh no, I think it’s just a temporary thing. She’s bottled up her feelings about the Titanic and losing Roland, and it’s all come out now in this strange behaviour.’

‘Well, call here as soon as she comes home and I will assess her. Quite often a stay in a sanatorium is all someone needs to get themselves together, and they come out as good as new.’

‘I hope so,’ she smiled sweetly. ‘Nesta is like a sister to me and it’s painful to see her so troubled. I’d do anything to help her get better.’

Alice walked home with a smile on her face. While Nesta was in the sanatorium, she would do all she could to persuade James that they should keep David on a permanent basis – even when Nesta came back to London. After all, she was of a fragile mind, and couldn’t be trusted with a child. At least then Alice would be able to keep her boy with her until 1925, when he went off to Eton.

As soon as she got in, she was greeted by Alana, who ran down the stairs and jumped up into her arms, giving her a big kiss on the cheek.

‘Where have you been Mommy?’ she asked.

‘I went to see an old friend. Then I had to go and see a gentleman about something very important. Where’s Grandpa?’

‘In there,’ Alana said, pointing to the drawing room. ‘I’m upstairs with Claudette. We’re painting pictures. Grandpa’s with a man.’

‘Well you’d better get back to it then,’ Alice said, putting her daughter on the ground and kissing the top of her head. ‘Paint mummy a lovely picture.’

‘I will,’ Alana said and she ran off back up the stairs. Alice watched her go, then went into the drawing room, wondering who Richard was entertaining. She found him sitting on the sofa beside a young man in a rain coat, clutching a note pad. Without him saying a word, Alice knew he was a journalist. She’d met enough in her time to spot one a mile off.

‘Alice this man has come to speak to you about Nesta,’ Richard said.

‘Reg Chisholm, the Daily Mail,’ the young man said, rising briefly to shake Alice’s hand.

‘I have nothing to say,’ Alice snapped. ‘This is a private matter.’

‘But is it true that your sister-in-law, the social campaigner Nesta Villiers, has been having an affair with a young opera singer who is now under arrest for trying to kill her?’

‘I know very little of my sister-in-law’s situation,’ Alice replied snootily. ‘And even if I did, the last thing I’d do would be tell the press. Now if you would kindly leave.’

‘But..’

‘No buts, please go.’

Dejected, the young man stood up and shuffled out of the room. Alice saw him onto the street, and went back into the drawing room, flopping down beside Richard.

‘I thought you’d have loved to dish the dirt on her?’ he smiled.

‘No, because she’d know it came from me. To the world I’m the loving sister-in-law and that’s how I want it to stay.’

‘When did you become so scheming?’ Richard asked.

‘When that woman stole my son,’ Alice replied. ‘Whatever happens to her, it’s nothing she doesn’t deserve.’

Chapter Twenty One  
July 1923

Nesta stood at the window of her room, and just for a moment, she wondered how she was going to leave these tranquil surroundings. For a year she had lived in this home, and until she'd been physically able, this view had been her only contact with the outside world. Ken, one of the long-term patients was the chief gardener and he kept the grounds in immaculate condition.

But the day had come for Nesta to leave and deep down she was glad. When she'd arrived at The Wellington, she'd insisted she wasn't mad, but they hadn't listened and put her in the wing where those suffering from 'a nervous disposition' were kept. And although she had a room of her own, during the day she was encouraged to mix with the other patients, and some of these were people with genuine problems; including men who were still disturbed by the war and had been rendered so insane they would pounce on women and dry hump them like a mad dog. When this happened they would be moved to the county asylum half a mile down the road; and this was what all the patients feared. They would accept any treatment that was given to them and comply, just to avoid being sent to the loony bin.

There was a knock on Nesta's door and she told whoever it was to come in. The door opened and James walked in along with Doctor Brooker; and although Nesta felt like scratching their eyes out for putting her in this place, she remained calm and just dug her nails into her palm.

'Hello Nessie,' James said, trying to butter her up. 'Ready to go?'

'I've been ready to go for the past year,' she replied smartly.

'Why don't you sit down Nesta?' Doctor Brooker suggested. 'We need to have a little chat before you go.'

Nesta sat down in the chair by the window, and Doctor Brooker sat on the bed in front of her. James remained standing by the door, a nervous expression upon his face - as though he was scared she was going to launch herself at him at any moment.

'How are you feeling Nesta?' Doctor Brooker asked.

'I feel perfectly okay,' she snapped. 'There was never anything wrong with me in the first place.'

Brooker didn't reply, just turned around and looked at James.

'Everyone's looking forward to seeing you Nessie,' James said, coming forward and sitting on the end of the bed. Alana can't wait to show her new brother off to you.'

'And what about my son? How is he?'

'David's fine. He gave a wonderful piano recital at the end of term concert last week. He really is an accomplished player.'

'I can't wait to see him.'

'Yes, that's what we've come to talk about,' said Doctor Brooker. 'We all agree that in your current frame of mind, it's probably for the best that Mr and Mrs Tanner remain as David's guardians.'

‘No!’ she gasped. ‘He’s my son, he should be with me.’

‘Nesta you need to concentrate on yourself,’ James stressed. ‘The last thing you need is an eleven year old boy troubling you. He’ll only be round the corner, you can see him whenever you like.’

‘She’s put you up to this hasn’t she?’

‘Who?’

‘Alice. She’s always wanted to have David to herself. She’s put you up to it.’

‘It was actually my suggestion,’ said Doctor Brooker. ‘I don’t feel someone in your condition is in a position to take care of a child. I’ve read your case notes and there’s still some concern about your depression causing you to behave irrationally; and we can’t risk David being exposed to that sort of behaviour. He’ll be going to boarding school soon anyway; then you’ll be able to have him with you in the holidays.’

Nesta wanted to scream and protest and demand that David be returned to her immediately; but she got the feeling if she did this, she would be kept in here. She had to choose but to comply with this bullying and do all she could to get David away from Alice without appearing mad. Perhaps she could have her killed. She’d encountered a thousand and one street toughs in her time that wouldn’t think twice about murdering a woman.

‘If that’s what you wish,’ she replied. ‘But there’s nothing wrong with me.’

Brooker gave James another one of those looks and got up off the bed, saying he was going to speak to matron.

‘I suppose we should go out to the car old girl,’ James said, banging his hands upon his knees. ‘I expect a porter will bring out your bags.’

It was a long, rattling journey back to London. James and Brooker sat in the front, chatting happily, while Nesta sat in the back, half looking out at the winding country roads, half thinking about her future. Her number one priority was to get David returned to her. Without being told, she knew Alice was behind her being sent to The Wellington and in a strange sort of way, she found the irony funny. Part of her motive for stealing David had been to stop Roland locking her away in a sanatorium, and Alice had got her revenge by doing just that. But Nesta didn’t care about doing the right thing by Alice, she just wanted her son back, and would do whatever she could to get him.

She also thought about her career. The arrest and later conviction of Gabriel had caused a terrible scandal, and Nesta was aware that a lot of people would have lost respect for her. But what no one could understand was that Gabriel was like an addiction to her. Even though he’d tried to kill her by pushing her down the stairs of their apartment because she’d returned from shopping early and caught him in bed with a prostitute, and caused a scene. She wouldn’t change a thing; because the tremendous highs she had experienced when she was with him had been so phenomenal, that every bit of pain was worth it. She’d told the psychiatrist in the sanatorium that she now hated Gabriel and never wanted to see him again; but she’d only said it so he didn’t think she was mad. In reality, if Gabriel escaped from prison and asked her to run away with him, it would take a great deal of effort to say no.

But despite feeling this way, Nesta knew it was wrong. Gabriel was a violent young man who could have quite easily killed her; and it was absurd how she could feel so strongly about someone who'd done her such damage. But she was lucky. She was a wealthy woman with her own home, servants and a son who had a healthy trust fund to see him through the rest of his life. There were thousands of women out there who had fallen for a handsome face that concealed a monster. But they'd had no private income; no one else to provide for their children if they escaped, and it wasn't right. Just because they were women, it didn't mean they had to endure everything a man metered out. Nesta wanted to provide shelter for women who had chosen the wrong person to fall in love with. Because she knew how easily that was done.

'You know Mother wants you to go and stay with her in New York,' James called from the front of the car. 'Why don't you go?'

'No, I'm staying here. I've been away from my son for long enough.'

'Well maybe we can try and get Betsey over here. She'd love to look after you, and I know she's dying to see Max.'

*Blasted Max*, Nesta thought to herself. Alice had now produced three healthy children and had all of them living with her. Nesta had read in the papers, that when Alice had gone back on stage when Max was just two months old, there had been uproar in the press - with people accusing her of being a bad mother, and it had made Nesta laugh to see her sister-in-law's halo slipping somewhat.

They got back to Belgrave Square, and James and Doctor Brooker saw her into the house. It smelt strongly of beeswax and she guessed Judith had gone overboard with polishing - to hide the fact the house had been neglected in over a year. James asked if she wanted to go up to bed and she said no. She just wanted Judith to make her a cup of tea and everyone to leave her alone while she caught up with her correspondence.

Once she was finally alone, Nesta broke down - crying because she felt so lonely. The house used to be so full of life - with David and James and all the servants. Now it was just her and Judith. Everyone else had been dismissed because she was away, and she wasn't sure if she was going to take anyone new on. Nesta hated being alone and wished God would stop punishing her for stealing David. Hadn't she paid a high enough price by falling in love with a man who'd almost killed her?

She stopped crying and decided to go to bed. But before she had the chance to go upstairs, the front door bell rang. She waited for Judith to come upstairs to answer it, but there was no sign of her; so Nesta had no choice but to open it herself. She almost closed it again in shock when she saw Michael Holland standing there - that nervous, hesitant expression on his face. He lightly lifted his hat and gave a restrained, regimented nod.

'Good evening Nesta,' he said.

'Hello Michael,' she blushed, embarrassed that he would now know she had been using him as a cover for Gabriel.

‘Your brother told me you were coming home today, so I thought I'd call on you and see how you were.’

‘That's so kind of you,’ Nesta said. ‘Please, do come in.’

She led him into the drawing room, en-route checking herself in the mirror in the hall to make sure her eyes weren't too red from crying.

‘Would you like a drink?’ she asked, seeing there was a decanter filled with whisky on the sideboard.

‘A scotch would be nice, thank you. May I sit down?’

‘Of course.’

He sat on the sofa and removed his hat, laying it beside him. Nesta poured them both a glass of scotch and sat next to him. She should never tell him how grateful she was to him for extending the hand of friendship. While she was in The Wellington, the only person outside family who had visited her was Henry Beresford. No one wanted to know her and she guessed that was how her life was going to be from now on.

‘How are you feeling?’ he asked, clearly embarrassed at enquiring about something so personal.

‘I'm very tired. The journey back from Hastings was quite bumpy. You know how country roads are.’ She paused, knowing she had to get things out in the open - whether Michael was comfortable with it or not. ‘Look, can I please say how sorry I am about how I treated you in the past? I was under some sort of spell and I..’

He raised his hand to stop her.

‘Nesta, please. I don't want you to apologise. You did nothing wrong. We've all done foolish things and you paid a high price. All you can do is move forward.’

Nesta was moved by his kindness. He really was a handsome man, and his lovely brown eyes made her want to hug him. She couldn't believe he forgave her for behaving so appallingly.

‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘Thank you so much.’

‘What I've actually come to tell you is that I have set up a foundation of my own. It's nothing ambitious, just a trust that gives assistance to poor young people who want a decent education.’

‘That sounds a wonderful idea. What prompted you to do that?’

‘A few months back I walked into my library to find one of the maids reading my Dickens compendium. She started apologising and I told her not to be so silly, and asked how well she could read. She told me her father could read and had taught her to understand words far beyond those taught in the parish schools. So I got her to read four pages of Nicholas Nickleby to me and she did it so beautifully and eloquently that I was quite moved. She told me her ambition was to be a secretary but she couldn't afford to go to secretarial college. I thought it a terrible waste of a fine young mind, so I paid for her to go to college and she now has a job as a typist with The Daily Mirror in Fleet Street. But she got me thinking about other young people like her who are bright and have ambition but not the money to do anything about it. So I've set up The Holland



Foundation to raise money to sponsor young people to attend college or university. It's early days and I would rather appreciate the help of a seasoned fundraiser such as yourself.'

Nesta couldn't take any more of his benevolence and started to cry. She didn't even feel embarrassed about crying in front of people anymore. That was one benefit of being in The Wellington. Emotions had been allowed, and during her time there she had cried in front of many people, and people had cried in front of her - something that had been an anathema before.

'Maybe I've come to see you too early,' Michael said, offering her a handkerchief.

'No, no not at all,' she uttered. 'It's just that I feel so desolate and lonely. I've been punished for falling in love with someone unsuitable; but I'm not mad. I've never been mad. Now I'm going to be shunned by my friends, and treated by my family like someone who's ever so slightly unstable. I can't even have my son living back here.'

'Whyever not?'

'Because Dr Brooker, James and Alice all feel I'm a danger to him. I would never hurt a hair on that boy's head. He means everything to me.'

'Well you must be allowed to see him. You're his mother.'

'I don't know. I think I'm just supposed to sit here in Purdah for the rest of my life.'

'That is totally unacceptable. Do you think they would let you see David if I was with you?'

'I don't know.'

'A child needs to be with his mother, and I think that tomorrow morning we should go round there and demand that you see him.'

'Why are you doing this for me?' she asked. 'I treated you so cruelly.'

'Because you are a good woman who was led astray. As we're being so frank with one another, I will be honest with you. When I was in India, I became very good friends with the wife of the local governor. Like you, I lost my head somewhat. It became public knowledge and I was outcast amongst my friends, and that was why I chose to come back to England. Very few of us are free of sin Nesta, and I cannot judge you when I'm guilty of straying from the righteous path myself.'

'Thank you,' Nesta uttered. 'Would you really do that for me? Would you come with me tomorrow to see David?'

'Of course, then perhaps we could have lunch somewhere.'

'That would be lovely. At least I'll have something to wake up for in the morning.'

Nesta barely slept that night. She felt vulnerable being in the house on her own after spending the past year sleeping in a room in the middle of a busy ward - knowing there were nurses on duty who could come to her aid at any moment. For the first six months at The Wellington, she'd been given a concoction of tablets that kept her sedated, but a new psychiatrist started there and he thought it was better for people to discuss their problems. So she'd been taken off her tablets and made to see him every day to talk about everything that had happened to her. She even told him the truth about David, but she could tell he refused to believe what she

was saying. She'd been grateful to be free from the fog of sedation, but at this moment, she wished she had those tablets back so at least she could blank out all the troubled thoughts in her mind.

Michael arrived dead on ten o'clock the following morning, and had to spend half an hour assuring Nesta they were doing the right thing. Nesta longed to see David. He'd never been allowed to visit her at The Wellington, and all she'd had was James' letters telling her of her son's achievements. She wondered if he'd even want to know her after spending so long living with Alice. For all Nesta knew, she may have painted her as some sort of monster, and the boy might well be terrified of seeing her.

She started to shake as they neared the house on Eaton Square, and Michael took her arm and linked it through his.

'David is your son and you're entitled to see him,' he urged. 'Don't let them bully you.'

The door was opened by Mrs Halford, the housekeeper, and the woman was clearly flustered. She'd obviously had instructions in how to deal with Nesta, but she still wasn't sure what to do.'

'L-Lady Villiers,' she uttered.

'I've come to see my son.'

'M-Master David is....wait there.'

She scurried back into the house and Nesta kept her patience, despite having the urge to storm in and find David herself. The drawing room door opened and Alice emerged, wearing a brightly coloured silk robe, her hair in a turban, holding a chubby baby dressed only in a nappy, in her arms.

'What is it Nesta?' she snapped. 'Oh, hello Michael.'

Michael raised his hat.

'Good morning Mrs Tanner. Nesta would like to see David.'

'It isn't convenient, he's with his piano teacher..'

'Whether it's convenient or not, I want to see my son.'

'Please don't cause a scene Nesta. Come back later on.'

'Nesta won't be available later on,' Michael said. 'We have prior engagements.'

Alice tutted and stood to one side, letting them in.

'He's in the conservatory,' she grouched.

Without a moment's hesitation, Nesta and Michael barged into the house and walked through to the conservatory at the back. Nesta didn't think a glorified greenhouse was the appropriate place for a piano, but taste never had been Alice's strong point. David sat at the piano, while a dramatic looking woman with black hair and bright red lipstick stood by. David looked up and when he saw Nesta, he let out a loud cry of '*Mama!*', and to her delight, he got up from the piano and ran to her. She could see that he had grown at least three inches in the year since she'd last seen him; and as he wrapped his arms around her waist and snuggled in tightly, he came to her shoulder

‘My darling,’ she whispered, kissing his hair. It felt so lovely to see him again; and to know he had obviously missed her was just the boost she needed.

‘Don’t crowd your mother,’ Alice groused from behind Nesta. ‘She’s only just come back.’

David pulled away and looked up at Nesta. She saw that some of the boyishness had left his face. His jaw was wider and stronger-looking and his eyes more deep set. It made her cry to think she’d missed out on so much of her son’s life, and she felt so guilty for choosing Gabriel over him.

‘What was Australia like?’ he asked. ‘Did you see kangaroos and koala bears?’

Nesta didn’t know how to answer this. She’d had no idea what James and Alice had told him, and felt rather aggrieved that they’d said she was somewhere she’d never been, and wouldn’t be able to give him an accurate description.

‘Yes I saw all those things,’ she replied. ‘But let’s talk about it another time. I want to hear what you’ve been doing.’

‘I am supposed to be teaching him piano,’ the overly made up woman snapped in a very strong French accent.

‘Nesta why don’t you come and have a cup of tea, and you can chat to David later?’ Alice suggested.

‘Yes of course,’ she said. ‘I’ll see you later darling.’

She kissed David once more and followed Alice out of the conservatory and into the drawing room. She was met by a scene of chaos she would have never tolerated in her house. Alana was sat at the coffee table, drawing pictures with coloured pencils. Claudette, the nanny was on the sofa, folding piles of Max’s nappies, and Daisy, Alice’s personal assistant, was at the desk at the other end of the room shouting down the telephone at someone. To Nesta, it was indicative of the guttersnipe Alice truly was. She had no idea how to conduct her home properly and had managed to turn an expensive Chelsea house into a slum.

‘Come into the breakfast room,’ Alice said, passing Max to Claudette. She walked out of the room and en-route, called down the stairs leading to the servants’ quarter.

‘Mrs H, can we have some tea in the breakfast room?’

Nesta winced at how common Alice was, and worried what sort of effect this would have had on David over the past year.

‘I have some business in Sloane Square,’ Michael said tactfully. ‘I’ll call for you in an hour or so Nesta.’

‘Yes, thank you Michael,’ she replied. ‘I’ll see you then.’

Michael saw himself out and Nesta followed Alice to the little room on the left that they used as informal dining room. Over the fireplace was a huge painting of Alice playing Cleopatra, and Nesta cursed under her breath at how vain and shallow her sister-in-law was. But then again, it wasn’t as though she could be like normal people with class - who hung family portraits on the wall. Alice’s family were all living in a hovel somewhere.

Nesta sat at the table, while Alice went to the mirror on the opposite wall, removing the turban, and shaking out her wet hair like a dog after a bath.

'You look well,' she said to Nesta, combing her fingers through her hair. 'James said you looked a bit peaky yesterday.'

'It's a long journey back from Hastings,' Nesta replied. 'Why did you tell David that I'd gone to Australia?'

Alice came and sat before her, that cocky expression never leaving her face.

'What were we supposed to tell him? That his mother was in a sanatorium, recovering from being attacked by her young lover?'

'Why didn't you just say I was in America with mother?'

'Well we didn't know if Betsey was going to come over at some point, so he would have found it strange if you hadn't come back with her. It was easier to say you'd gone somewhere so far away that it was impossible for you to come back.'

'I know it's part of your plan to hold onto him as long as possible. But I want him back with me. You know full well there's nothing wrong with me. Having me put away was just a way for you to keep David.'

'Don't lecture me about trying to keep David through devious means Nesta,' Alice snapped. 'You of all people have no right to do that.'

'Why is it so important for you to keep him? You've got a daughter and another son to look after now. I've got no one. You don't seem to understand that the little boy you love so much, is the little boy I made him into. Did you see his reaction when I walked into that room? He missed me. A child needs to be with his mother, and whether I gave birth to David or not, I did everything for him for the first ten years of his life, and I'm the only mother he knows.'

'Don't blame me,' Alice said, raising her hands in the air. 'It was Doctor Brooker's idea as much as mine for David to stick with us. I mean, what if some other young, handsome man with a terrible temper comes calling, and your head gets turned again? He might not just hit you this time.'

'You bitch!' Nesta cursed, hating swearing. 'You monster. It should be you locked up, not me. No one really knows who you are. My brother married you under false pretences. For all I know, you were running away to America because you murdered someone.'

All conversation was halted when Mrs Halford brought in the tea tray. Sensing an atmosphere between the women, she retreated quickly, shutting the door behind her.

'David's happy here,' Alice said. 'Even though he doesn't know Alana and Max are his real brother and sister, he treats them as though they are. He adores Max. If he goes back to your house he'll be so lonely.'

'He can come and see your children whenever he likes. I wouldn't be that cruel.'

'Well you're preaching to the wrong person Nesta. It's up to Doctor Brooker.' She stood up and straightened her robe. 'Anyway, I must be getting dressed, I've a matinee performance in a couple of hours. See yourself out and don't think about trying to take David home with you, because if you do I'll call the police.'

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Over the course of the following two weeks, Nesta saw Michael Holland every day. They often took lunch together, or he would visit her office to discuss fundraising activities for his foundation. She couldn't deny that it was nice to have a man around; and with his encouragement, she threw herself into work. Tanner Beresford received a huge boost when an elderly woman called Lady Phyllis Bell left her entire estate to them. She had read of their charitable works, and having no family, thought she would let them make the most of what she left. The huge injection of twelve thousand pounds would go towards building a new block of flats in Islington, where there had been a recent cholera outbreak due to poor sanitation in a Slum close to the Angel. Lady Bell had also left a huge house in Cheam in Surrey. It had six bedrooms, three bathrooms and copious grounds surrounding it. Nesta wanted to turn it into a house for women who needed to escape men who were beating them. It was an ambitious project and she knew it would meet with strong opposition, but it was a cause close to her heart.

As the days went on, she grew fonder of Michael and realised she enjoyed spending time in his company. He wasn't flash like Roland, or passionate and exciting like Gabriel; and quite often he liked to remain silent and let her do the talking. But when he did speak, it was with integrity and honesty, and he supported whatever she did. For his birthday, she got him tickets to a matinee performance of the Ballets Russes' performance of Swan Lake at The Theatre Royal. It was Nesta's way of saying thank you for all the help he'd given her in getting her back into work; and making sure the Tanners let her see David every day after school. Without Michael she would have sat at home sulking and festering, and nothing would have been achieved.

After the show, they went for a late lunch at La Belle, a little French restaurant close to Trafalgar Square. Michael picked at his food and seemed pre-occupied, and Nesta suddenly felt scared he no longer wanted to see her. This fear made her realise how much he meant to her, and she was worried that if he abandoned her, she would be sent spiralling again and would end up back at The Wellington. To stop him saying the words she didn't want to hear, she talked incessantly - about the show; about David, even about the argument she'd had with the Vicar of St Cuthberts in Bow who insisted that by encouraging women to leave violent men, she was breaking up families. Anything was better than hearing she was being rejected once more.

'Nesta I need to talk to you!' he practically shouted, just to stop her from waffling on. Nesta came to an abrupt halt and braced herself for what he was going to say.

'What is it?' she asked quietly.

'I've been wanting to say this to you for some time but I've not found the courage. We've become very close over the past few weeks and I've grown very fond of you. I was giving it some thought the other day and concluded that if you were to stand a chance of getting David back, you'd be more successful if you had a husband. I'm aware that I'll never match up to your first husband, who was a war hero; or indeed the other young man who was passionate and

exciting. But I care for you deeply Nesta and you can't deny that we get on very well. So, what I'm really trying to do is ask you if you'd care to marry me.'

Nesta gave an audible gasp. She hadn't been expecting that. She'd been so convinced he was going to push her away, she literally couldn't respond to him.

'I see I've startled you,' he uttered. 'I'm so sorry Nesta.'

'Don't be silly,' she managed to say. 'I thought you were going to tell me you didn't want to see me again.'

He gave a rare smile and those warm brown eyes lit up. Something in Nesta's heart melted and she realised that she loved him. It was a feeling different to any she had experienced before, but she couldn't imagine her life without Michael in it.

'Never,' he said. 'I think if I'm honest, I felt akin to you from the moment we met. I've always rather hoped you'd wake up one morning and realise you felt the same way.'

Nesta reached across the table and grasped his hand.

'Do you know? I think I just did. When I thought you were going to tell me you didn't want to see me anymore, it filled me with such terror that I could hardly breathe. I do believe that is love. So yes, I accept your proposal Michael. And it has nothing to do with getting David back. Nothing will change Alice and James' minds so it seems.'

'Thank you Nesta,' he smiled, laying his hand upon hers. 'Thank you so much. I'll do everything in my power to make you happy. I promise.'

'I know you will. And I do think we should stop by at James' and tell them the good news. Alice so revels in all things horrid happening to me; it'd be nice to wipe the smile off her face by letting her know I actually have something to celebrate.'

Nesta felt giddy like a teenager as she and Michael took a slow walk back to Chelsea. After all that had happened with Gabriel, she'd abandoned hope of ever finding love again; and yet Michael made her feel more safe and secure than any man had ever done before.

'When do you want to marry?' he asked, after stopping at a flower seller and buying her a rose.

'My birthday might be nice,' she said. 'It's three months away and gives us lots of time to prepare.'

'I suppose with our work, we should both be based in London. But I always thought when I got married I would take my wife back to a house in the country. There's a lovely cottage in the grounds of my parents' estate in Abingdon, and it would be perfect for us and David, if he was to come to live with us.'

Nesta couldn't imagine not living in London - so much of her work was based here; but if they took David to Oxfordshire it would be far enough from Alice to stop her having any influence on him.

'I suppose I could learn to drive and buy myself a car,' she pondered. 'Then I could come into London when needs be.'

'You really mean it?!' gasped Michael. 'I though you'd pooh-pooh the idea.'

'No. Apart from work, London has no attraction for me now. This will be just the fresh start I need.'

Nesta was so glad that Alice had finished her run in *The Honeymoon*, otherwise she would have missed hearing her news. They arrived at Eaton Square and to her horror, as they turned the corner, David came speeding towards them on a pushbike.

'Hello Mummy!' he shouted, with no intention of stopping.'

Before Nesta could ask him what he was doing, he had zoomed round the corner.

'She's letting him play out like some sort of street urchin,' Nesta fumed. 'We'll soon see about that.'

Michael could barely keep up with her as she stormed along to the Tanner house, and up the steps to the front door. It was open, but the polite thing to do would have been to ring the bell. But Nesta had no time for pleasantries. She marched into the house, and into the drawing room, where James was sitting reading *The Times* and Alana stood on the coffee table while Alice knelt on the floor with pins in her mouth, fixing the hem on her daughter's fancy pink dress.

'What do you think you're doing sending my son out on a pushbike?' Nesta fumed. 'I didn't even know he had a pushbike!'

'Richard sent it over for him last Christmas, and I'd appreciate it if you didn't shout in front of Alana.'

Nesta looked at the little girl who stood there with that puzzled expression children always got when adults shouted.

'Alana go and find Claudette,' Nesta ordered.

Alice slammed the pins on the table and got up, storming round to Nesta. For a moment she ducked, convinced she was going to slap her.

'How dare you tell my daughter what to do?!' Alice raged.

'And how dare you send my son out on a bike, like some sort of ruffian?'

Alice didn't say another word, just scooped Alana up and carried her out of the room. James looked up at his two guests and smiled nervously.

'Sit down, please, both of you.'

Nesta and Michael sat on a sofa and James offered them a drink - which they refused.

'You know David's quite safe on that bike,' he said.

'You don't know who he's mixing with. I know from first hand experience that there's some very undesirable dwellings on the other side of Ebury Bridge. What if he cycles that way and gets set upon by street children?'

'That's not going to happen. He just cycles around these streets. He might knock for his friend Cyril Sweetman who lives around the corner, and that's about it.'

'That's very well, but I doubt if Cyril's mother or nanny would allow him to go out and play on the streets.'

The door opened and Alice re-entered without Alana. She sat beside her husband and viewed Nesta with suspicion.

'Don't you want David to have a normal childhood?' she snapped.

'Of course I do, but children like ours don't play out. Maybe it was different when you were a child.'

'Ladies please,' groaned James.

'Yes, let's be civil,' said Michael. 'We've come with good news. I've asked Nesta to marry me, and she has graciously accepted.'

James and Alice both shot them looks and Alice gave a little cough.

'Well that's splendid news,' said James clapping his hands together. He got up and walked over to them - shaking hands with Michael and kissing Nesta upon the cheek. 'When's the big day?' he asked as he sat back down.

'We thought November, on my birthday. That gives us plenty of time to get the house in Oxford ready.'

'You're moving to Oxford?'

'Yes. My parents own Elliot House in Abingdon,' Michael explained. 'There's a cottage in the grounds and I thought it would be the perfect home for the three of us.'

'Three of us?' repeated Alice.

'Yes,' Nesta replied smugly. 'David's going to move in with us.'

'B-But he can't leave London!' Alice protested. 'He's at school here.'

'I'll get him a governess for a while. Then he can go to Eton.'



‘I don’t agree to it,’ Alice said, sitting back and folding her arms. ‘He’s not going anywhere.’

‘You’ve got no say in the matter I’m afraid,’ Michael said. ‘Nesta is David’s mother. She is of sound mind, and in November she will be my wife. If you try and stop her from getting custody of David, I will consult my lawyers, and we don’t want that happening do we?’

Nesta could have grabbed Michael and kissed him right then, but instead she just remained still; trying to hide her smug smile.

‘I want David to come home tonight,’ Nesta said. ‘Could you pack his things?’

Alice gave a sob and ran from the room. Nesta could feel no pity for her. She’d kept hold of David for far too long, when she had no legal right to keep him here. His birth certificate read ‘David Villiers’ - Nesta was listed as his mother, Roland his father. Alice was nothing to him, and as far as Nesta was concerned, from now on David was going to see his ‘aunt’ as little as possible.

Chapter Twenty Two  
May 1936

Eaton Square was in a state of chaos and at times Alice felt as though she was going insane. She was trying to learn her lines for the film she was soon to start making at Shepperton Studios, and James was attempting to work on his second novel. But the house was filled with the sound of screeching girls and no-one could concentrate. Tonight was Alana's coming out party and she had invited six of her closest friends round to help her get ready; and as normal with young girls, they couldn't be quiet.

The whole coming out party was a joke. The point of being a debutante was for a young woman to be introduced into Society with a view to securing herself a husband. But Alana had no intention of getting married for a very long time. Her ambition was to follow her mother into films, but Alana being the show off she was, she still expected the same sort of party as her friends. It did make Alice laugh to herself. All the debts in Alana's circle were the daughters of Lords and Ladies and Baronets. Alana was the daughter of a showgirl from Battersea and a poor Jewish songwriter. But because she'd been raised by James Tanner for most of her life, she was considered upper - class and was entitled to all the benefits.

The noise was so unbearable that in the end Alice had to come out of the drawing room, and just as she did, Hermione Roe, Alice's best friend, came running down the stairs, dressed in just her petticoat – screeching and giggling.

'Hermione will you please get back upstairs?' Alice tutted. 'Imagine if it had been Mr Tanner who'd come out instead of me.'

'Sorry Mrs T,' Hermione giggled and she ran back upstairs.

'Can you tell my daughter I want to speak to her now?' Alice called.

'Okay!' Hermione replied as she disappeared around the bend. Just then the front door bell rang and Alice left it to Mrs Franklin, the housekeeper to answer it. She hoped it wasn't another of Alana's annoying friends – six was enough.

Her daughter came flouncing down the stairs. Even wearing just a silk robe, no make up and her long, dark hair flowing freely, Alana looked wildly glamorous. She was exquisitely beautiful - with Allen's wide eyed innocence and Alice's sensuous lips and tall, slender figure. Seeing her daughter in full bloom made Alice feel old and past it.

'Are you okay Mummy?' she asked.

'Will you please keep the noise down? Papa is trying to finish his book.'

'I'm sorry, I...'

Her speech was halted as she became distracted by whoever it was at the front door. Alice turned around to look, and for a moment, she almost passed out when she saw Robert Fairfax standing on the step. In a blur, she wondered if he'd actually survived the Titanic and had found her after all these years. Then she checked herself; Robert Fairfax would be about fifty by now, whereas this young man looked exactly as Robert had at twenty-five; which meant it could only be one person.

'D-David,' she uttered, running to him.

'Hello Aunt Alice,' he smiled, opening his arms to embrace her. Alice hugged him and had to stop herself from crying. She hadn't seen her son in three years. After graduating from Cambridge he'd gone straight to work for Villiers Hotels in New York and she'd missed him desperately. She pulled away and looked up at him, shocked at how much he'd matured. At twenty-one he'd still looked boyish, but at twenty-four he was now a man.

'What are you doing here?' she gasped.

'Didn't Uncle James tell you?' he smiled. 'He's giving up running Villiers and I'm taking over.'

'No he didn't tell me,' Alice said, ushering him into the house. David spotted Alana and smiled lovingly.

'Hello Squirt,' he said using the nickname he'd given her when she was a little girl.

'David!' she cried, running to him and wrapping her arms around him. The study door opened and James emerged, a playful expression on his face.

'Hello old chap,' he said.

'Hello Uncle James,' David replied, and the two men shook hands.

'Why didn't you tell me you were giving up running the company?' Alice asked her husband.

'Because I didn't want to spoil the surprise for you,' he said. 'I knew how excited you'd be at seeing David again.'

Alana pulled away from David and looked up at him, eyes filled with pleading.

'Say you'll come to my coming out party tonight?' she whined.

David laughed and unbuttoned his overcoat to reveal he was indeed wearing his evening suit. Alana squealed and jumped up and down, clapping. Alice looked at her daughter and remembered she wasn't dressed.

'Alana will you at least go upstairs and put some clothes on? We've no wish to see you half naked.'

'Okay,' Alana pouted. She turned to go, but then turned back round and looked at David. 'Can I go on your arm tonight?' she asked. 'All my friends will be so jealous.'

'David might have another young lady to take tonight,' Alice said.

'No, it's just me,' he smiled. 'And it would be an honour to escort you Squirt.'

Alana giggled and ran upstairs. Alice took David's arm and led him into the drawing room, looking at James as well.

'I think you'd better come in too,' she tutted. 'Keeping secrets from me!'

Alice sat down next to David and couldn't stop staring at him. He was so handsome and grown up, and it made her want to cry when she thought of that tiny baby she'd given birth to all those years ago. She'd missed out on so much of his life, and she'd never hated Nesta more.

'So where are you staying?' Alice asked.

'I've a suite at the Villiers Hyde Park at the moment, but I'm buying a flat on Sloane Street..'

‘You'll be so near!’

‘Yes. Mama's not happy. She wanted me to move into Elliott House and commute each day, but it seems pointless. Besides, I'm twenty-four, what life is there for me in Oxfordshire?’

It made Alice secretly pleased that her son had chosen to move near to her. Whatever Nesta had done for him, no-one could break the bond that lie between them. David would always be drawn to her.

‘So you're really giving up work?’ she asked James.

‘I'm fifty-four,’ he said with a shrug. ‘There's no harm in taking early retirement. David's more than capable of running Villiers. I want to get on with my writing.’

‘You are alright with that aren't you?’ asked David.

‘Of course I am. If it means having you here all the time, I'd put up with anything.’

Alana's party was being held at the Villiers in Marble Arch. The cream of English society had been invited, and a part of Alice wished her daughter would meet a nice young man and settle down. Alana could be quite flighty. She'd been threatened with expulsion from Heathfield several times for sneaking out to go to parties; or for wearing make up, or yawning her way through hymns. Alice could envisage her daughter falling for a bounder like Robert Fairfax just because he was exciting, and she didn't want Alana going within a hundred feet of someone like that.

Sometimes parents didn't attend coming out balls; but given Alana's behaviour, both James and Alice felt it best that they went along. As Alana entered on her brother's arm, all eyes fell on her. She looked stunning in a maroon silk Vionnet dress, with a back that draped so low it skimmed her backside. She'd pinned her hair up and fixed a maroon silk rose just above her left ear. She looked so beautiful and oozed a confidence the other eighteen year olds here could only dream of.

The parents that had attended were ensconced in an ante room off the main ballroom - where they could still keep a watchful eye on their children, without being intrusive.

Alice and James were sat at a table with the Duke and Duchess of Derbyshire, whose daughter Clarissa was here. The Duke was a fat, pompous, obnoxious man who always made comments about the Tanners' lack of breeding, and disparaging remarks about James being the son of an American. He had no idea that Alice remembered once dancing for him at a party, when they'd both been much younger. He'd been so drunk he'd allowed Elsie - one of her fellow dancers, to give him sexual favours in front of everyone else!

‘Who's the young fellow?’ the Duke asked, watching Alana and David dancing energetically to the lively jazz music the band were playing.

‘That's my nephew David,’ James explained. ‘He's back from America to take over the company.’

‘Should cousins be dancing like that?’ the Duchess asked. ‘They're awfully close.’

‘David and Alana have known each other practically all their lives,’ scoffed Alice. ‘They're like brother and sister.’

Alice was glad when she noticed Evie and Charles enter the room with their daughter. Madeleine was so different to her mother as a young girl. Evie had been so slim and graceful, but Madeleine was a dumpy, shy little thing. She went off to join the party, and Evie and Charles joined Alice's table. Evie looked stunning in a petrol blue silk dress similar in style to Alana's. Alice was grateful for the distraction, and to her amusement, she caught the Duke looking at Evie and furrowing his brow. No doubt he had been one of the many titled young men who'd gone to see the Howard Sisters, and somewhere in his memory she lurked - a lot younger, and not wearing any clothes.

'Is that David dancing with Alana?' Evie asked as she sat down.

'Yes,' Alice smiled proudly.

'They're a little close aren't they?' Evie said, raising her brow to her friend. She was the only person on the table who knew David's true identity.

'That's what I said,' the Duchess piped up. 'Alana isn't going to attract any suitors if she's dancing with her cousin all night.'

'No you're right,' Alice said, a little disconcerted that her daughter may well have some sort of crush on her own brother. 'Will you excuse me?'

Alice got up and went through to the other room where, to her horror, the music was now slower and more sensuous, and Alana was still dancing with David, her arms around his neck. Alice weaved her way through the hoards of young people all dancing in the same way, and stepped up to her daughter; tapping her on the shoulder.

'Alana I didn't pay for you to have this party so you could spend the whole time dancing with your cousin,' she snapped.

Alana turned around and looked at her mother furiously, pouting those big lips.

'I'll dance with whomever I like,' she snapped.

'No, Aunt Alice is right,' David said, stepping away. 'I'm hogging you. Algy Hooton is over there chaperoning his little sister. I'll go and catch up with him, I haven't seen him since Eton. If you'll excuse me.'

He gave a courteous little bow and stepped away. Alana put her hands on her slim hips and snarled at her mother.

'Why do you have to be such a bore?' she snapped. 'You're ruining my party.'

'This is supposed to be your coming out party Alana. Not a smooching with your cousin party. Now mingle. You love showing off, I thought you'd be happy.'

Alice walked back into the other room feeling bad for shouting at Alana; but the alternative was worse. For her to get a crush on her own brother was perverse - even if she did think they were only cousins.

David left early, as he was driving up to Oxford to see his mother the next morning and wanted to be fresh for his journey. Once he was out of the way, Alice decided it was safe for her and James to go home and leave Alana to it. She was now dancing gaily with Bruce Inglis, the

son of Sir Miles Inglis, the racehorse breeder; and by the joyful look on her face, all thoughts of her cousin had left her mind and Alice felt relieved at this.

When they arrived home, she got a surprise to find Mrs Franklin, the housekeeper waiting for them in the drawing room. She usually went to bed early, and judging by the fact that she was in her night-dress and robe, it looked as though something had got her up. Her expression was grave, and for a moment Alice panicked, frightened something had happened to Max at school. Like his sister, he was a rather spirited boy, and she'd been called to Eton on a number of occasions to explain his behaviour.

'Are you okay Mrs Franklin?' Alice asked.

'There's been a telephone call,' the woman said. 'It was a lady called Maisie Satchell.'

'Richard's housekeeper?'

'Yes. Mr Bloomberg has had a stroke and he wants to see you before it's too late.'

'What do you mean too late?' Alice uttered.

'Maisie seemed to think that things weren't looking too good.'

Alice felt her legs go from under her and she slumped down onto a sofa. James sat beside her, wrapping his arms around her shoulders to stop her from shaking.

'But Richard can afford the best care,' she said. 'He can go anywhere for treatment.'

'That's all I was told. I'm sorry Mrs Tanner.'

'I must go to him,' Alice said to James. 'In the morning will you help me get onto a passage across?'

'Of course I will. The Queen Mary's sailing from Southampton on Wednesday, we'll try and get you on that.'

'No!' Alice yelled. 'It's the maiden voyage. I'm not going on it. There must be another ship.'

James reached out and tenderly stroked her hair.

'It won't be like the Titanic,' he said softly. 'They've more than learnt their lessons from that.'

'If you insist,' she replied. 'But I want to say goodbye to my children before I leave. Just in case I die.'

'You're not going to die.'

'I want to see my children. I'm going to drive to Eton tomorrow to see Max.'

'Oh you are silly. But if it's what you insist.'

James managed to pull some strings and got Alice a place on the maiden voyage of the Queen Mary – Cunard's new super ship. Alice said goodbye to Max and Alana, and without James knowing it, had gone into the Villiers' office and said goodbye to David, who thought she was completely mad, and laughed and told her he would see her when she came back. It filled Alice's heart with sadness that if she was to drown, she would go to her grave never having told her son the truth. She loved him so much and dreamt of the day he would call her 'Mama', but she knew that would never happen anyway. That was a privilege only given to Nesta.

Even though she was sailing on a brand new, state-of-the-art ship, Alice spent most of her time holed up in her state room, reading her script. She was too nervous to go up on deck, especially once they'd sailed out of Cherbourg and headed for those dreaded ice fields in Newfoundland, where so many including Robert...Edmund Barton, lay. She used the telephone in her room to call Richard's house and spoke to Maisie, who told her that he was stable, but not getting any better. The thought of Richard dying broke Alice's heart. He may have been almost eighty, but she'd convinced herself he would be around forever. She loved him like a father and there was no question of him dying without her being at his side.

When they finally docked safely in New York, Alice said a silent prayer of thanks to God; and as she stepped out onto the dock, she was surprised to be approached by a well-dressed middle aged man, who seemed almost nervous.

'Mrs Tanner?' he said, and Alice realised he wasn't just some fan who'd plucked up the courage to speak to her. They would have addressed her as 'Miss Bloom.'

'Yes?' she enquired.

'My name is Rory Deacon, I'm Richard's friend. He told me to come and meet you.'

'He can speak then?'

'A little.' He laughed. 'Enough to give orders and ensure you're looked after.'

They walked out to his car, but Alice felt a little worried. She wondered who this man was. Had he found out in some way that she was on the ship, and was pretending to be a friend of Richard? What if he was some kind of maniac?

'Have you known Richard long?' she asked as they set off.

'Twenty years. I was an intern at the factory in Boston and he came to visit one day and we hit it off. We've been good friends ever since.'

There was something about this Rory's manner that made Alice stop and think. Having worked in the theatre most of her life, she was more than familiar with homosexuals - it was the one place on earth where very few people cared about it. Indeed as a little girl, she once caught Herbert Cavendish kissing another man; and he made her swear not to tell Bella about it. She'd never suspected Richard of being like it, but it was strange how a handsome, intelligent and kind man like him had never married. In the whole time she'd known him, there had never even been a woman friend. But there were nights when he didn't return home and she'd just assumed...

'How is he?' Alice asked. 'Maisie seems to think it's the end.'

'It looks as though it is,' Rory said sadly. 'It was bad enough for him to want me there with him. And indeed you. All the way from England.'

'I would have come from anywhere to be with Richard,' she said sadly. 'If I may be so bold Rory, can I ask, were you and he lovers?'

Rory almost drove off the road when she asked this.

'What did you say?' he gasped.

'I asked if you and Richard were lovers. I always wondered why someone as handsome and kind as him never found a woman. I don't care if you are. I've spent my life in the theatre. I'm not fazed by anything.'

‘I don't know what to say. It's not a question people normally ask. But I know Richard adores you like a daughter, and families shouldn't have secrets. So you may as well know the truth. Yes, Richard and I are in love.’

‘Wow! He should have told me. It wouldn't have worried me.’

‘Poor Richard has spent his life looking over his shoulder, scared that people might find out. We could go to jail for it, so he had to be discreet. And as for you, he was probably worried about what you'd think of him.’

‘That's silly. There isn't anything Richard could do that would stop me loving him.’

They got back to Park Avenue and Rory carried Alice's luggage in while Alice went straight up to Richard's bedroom. Before she even saw him she started to cry, thinking of all the happy times they'd shared. If he hadn't rescued her, she didn't know how her life would have turned out.

She opened the door and walked in. He was in bed, and a young Oriental nurse was sitting beside him holding his hand. On seeing Alice, the girl stood up and adopted a defensive stance.

‘Who are you?’ she asked in her heavily accented voice.

‘It's okay, I'm Alice - his ward.’

‘A-Alice,’ he gasped from the bed and she could see he was trying to hold his hand out to her. With a sob, Alice ran to the bed and threw herself upon it, wrapping her arms around him, sobbing.

‘D-Don't cry,’ he rasped. ‘You're here now.’

‘Stay with me,’ she cried. ‘You can't leave me. I love you so much.’

‘And I love you,’ he said. ‘My only regret is that you're not my real daughter.’

Alice sat up and looked at him, clearing away her tears.

‘Why didn't you tell me about Rory?’ she asked.

‘I didn't want to disgust you,’ he whispered, and she could see tears twinkling in his eyes.

‘You could never disgust me. You forgave my sins. Sins far worse than anything you've ever done.’

It was horrible to see him so weak - his skin as ashen as his hair. She turned and looked at the nurse, who was folding some towels at the foot of the bed.

‘Is there anything I can do?’ she asked.

‘No,’ the nurse said with a regretful shake of the head. ‘It is too late. But he smile for the first time now you here. You make him happy. That's enough.’

Alice remained by Richard's bed, just holding his hand and watching him sleep. Rory took it as an opportunity to have a rest, as he had stayed by Richard's side since he'd arrived three days ago and was exhausted. Alice found it hard to stop crying, hoping some miracle would happen that would make Richard better. At least she was comforted in that she could say goodbye to him. Even now she would sometimes lie awake at night thinking of Allen and crying; wishing she'd had the chance to see him one more time before he died. James would often put his arms around her and hold her until she stopped weeping, and he would never ask what was



wrong. It was at times like this she realised how much she loved her husband. He had started off as a means to an end, but over the years he'd been a wonderful companion and a fantastic father, and Alice had grown to love him deeply. But not how she loved Allen.

'Don't cry,' Richard said when he woke up. 'I've had a wonderful life, and I hope I'm going to a better place.'

'I can't live without you,' she wept.

'Of course you can. You've lived for all these years without Allen. You can live without me. I'll make sure Allen's looked after.'

'You do that,' she sobbed. 'And tell him I can't wait to see him again.'

'I'm so tired Alice,' he said quietly. He then took a breath and became suddenly still.

'R-Richard,' she uttered. 'Richard wake up.'

He was gone and Alice burst out crying, clinging onto him, not wanting to let him go. Even though she'd been twenty when she met him, somehow Richard felt like a part of her childhood. He knew the young girl full of hopes and dreams and despair at losing her baby, and he'd turned her into the confident young woman who became the successful actress. She had so much to thank him for, and she'd never said it.

'T-Thank you,' she cried, even though he couldn't hear her. 'Thank you for everything you've done.'

The Bloomberg household became a dark place over the next few days. Neither Alice or Rory could cope with losing Richard and found their own ways of grieving. Rory remained in his room, crying and pouring over photograph albums. Alice kept herself busy by organising the funeral and making sure that Richard got the send-off he deserved. He was to be interred at The New York Marble Cemetery, where most of the City's notable people were buried. Alice invited all of his wealthy and important friends – including her mother-in-law. Betsey offered to come and stay with her to comfort her; but as fond as Alice was of her, Betsey could be a little overbearing and tended to dominate everything, and Alice needed to honour Richard in her own way.

She did however, ask Betsey to accompany her to Bloomingdale's to buy an outfit for the funeral. She chose a simple black linen dress with pink roses embroidered around the cuffs, collar and hem. Betsey then insisted they went to the restaurant for some tea, telling Alice she looked drained and in need of revival. In truth, she longed to go home and see her children and James; but at the same time felt she had to remain in New York to make sure all Richard's affairs were left in order before she returned to England.

'I spoke to Nesta last night,' Betsey announced, pouring the tea and checking out the other finely dressed ladies in the restaurant to make sure none of them looked better than her. She

might have been seventy-five, but she looked ten years younger and liked people to appreciate it. ‘She isn’t at all happy about David moving to London. I tried to explain to her that he’s a young man who needs to experience life. But she’s convinced he would be better off living with her and Michael in Oxford.’

‘I guess she just wants her son near to her – it’s understandable.’

‘She needs to cut the apron strings. By the time she and James were David’s age, they were both living in London and I was here, thousands of miles away. But I coped.’

‘It is hard though. I spoke to James yesterday and apparently Alana is playing up again. She’s going out all the time and not telling him where she is and he’s worried she’s getting into trouble. When I get home I’m going to do all I can to get her some acting work. Alana gets up to mischief if she’s got too much time on her hands. If I can make sure she’s busy, perhaps she’ll keep on the straight and narrow. I just feel so helpless being over here and not able to help her.’

‘You have to let them make her own mistakes Alice,’ Betsey said, laying her hand upon Alice’s arm. ‘I know it’s hard. Do you imagine I would have let Nesta anywhere near that opera singer? Of course not. But her life is her own and she had to find things out for herself.’

Richard’s funeral was so big that the traffic stopped and crowds lined the streets to watch the dignitaries arriving at St Vincent’s Church. There were gasps and whispers when Alicia Bloom stepped from a car, looking dramatic in her black dress and dark glasses. But Alice wasn’t worried about public adulation today. All she wanted was to say goodbye to her oldest and best friend. She stood up in the packed church and spoke about Richard, telling how he rescued her and what a fantastic person he was.

Afterwards, a few chosen guests went back to Richard’s house, where the staff had laid on a buffet. Alice and Rory both played host, even though Rory was a nervous wreck. He’d been Richard’s secret; kept in his house in Boston and only being exposed to the private side of Richard’s life. He wasn’t used to mixing with business people and politicians and movie directors, and Alice could tell he felt a little overwhelmed by it all. Gradually people left, each of them shaking Alice’s hand and telling her what a wonderful day she’d organised and what a fantastic man Richard was. One of the people left behind was Louie Wallis, the head of Wallis Studios in Hollywood. He and Richard were friends because they’d both done charity work together, and Alice knew him from back when she’d started out making films in 1917, and he’d been a humble camera man. Now he’d grown fat and content on the riches of running one of Hollywood’s biggest studios, and he looked every inch the mogul; sitting on Richard’s favourite sofa, dropping cigar ash on it and trying to discreetly scratch under his badly fitted toupee. He told Alice to sit down and chat, and she felt too tired to refuse.

‘You’re looking good doll,’ he said, checking her over. ‘How old are you now?’

‘Louie!’ she gasped. ‘You don’t ask a lady her age.’

‘Come on,’ he laughed. ‘You got to be knocking forty-five.’

‘Maybe,’ she replied with an enigmatic smile.

‘You’re still a beautiful woman. What are you doing in England?’

‘I’m soon to start making a film called *Fallen Woman*. I play a woman who’s just come out of prison and is making her way in the world.’

‘What do you want to make that depressing shit for?’ he snarled. ‘You should be making epics. Things that show off your beauty. Come and work for me.’

‘In Hollywood?’

‘Yeah. I could give you a five movie contract. A house in Beverley Hills. Imagine it Alice. Year round sunshine.’

‘I couldn’t possibly,’ she said. ‘My family are based in England. My son’s at Eton.’

‘Hell we’ve got private schools in California. He could go to one of ‘em.’

‘No, it’s a lovely offer, but I can’t accept. My life is in England now. I can still make films, but they’re on a much smaller scale and quicker to make. My first duty is to my family.’

‘Well the offer’s open all the time doll. I’ve got a pile of scripts on my desk that would suit you. Just think of it Alice. You’re a stunner now. In five years when you’re knocking fifty, it might all be gone. Then who’ll want to employ you?’

‘You have such a way with words Louie,’ she laughed. ‘I can’t think of the future right now. I’ve just buried the nearest thing I had to a father. He’s all I can concentrate on.’

The following day Alice and Rory went to the offices of Lucas & Montgomery, Richard’s attorneys for the will reading. Alice didn’t care what Richard had left her. The only thing she wanted, she couldn’t have, and that was to have him back. Richard’s affairs were looked after by Augustus Lucas, the most senior lawyer, and it was he who welcomed Alice and Rory into his office, offering them coffee, which they both declined.

‘It is a delight to meet you,’ Lucas said to Alice with a lecherous smile. ‘I have been a fan of yours for many years.’

‘That makes me sound so old,’ she laughed.

‘Oh that wasn't my intention. I'm so sorry.’

‘Don't be silly. I was joking. But we are here to talk about Richard, not me.’

‘No you're quite right. We might as well get on with this will reading and done with it.’

He picked up his spectacles from the desk and put them on. He then took some papers from a folder and read them briefly, before clearing his throat.

‘This is the last will and testament of Richard Isaac Bloomberg, of sound mind. To my closest friend Rory Deacon, I leave the sum of one million dollars, twenty five percent shares of Bloomberg Foods, and my house in the Hamptons. To my honorary daughter Alice Tanner I leave the sum of one million dollars; my Park Avenue house, the jewellery that belonged to my mother, and my art collection. To Alice's daughter Alana Horowitz I leave the sum of five hundred thousand dollars to be held in trust until she is twenty-five. To Alice's son Maximillian Tanner, I have left fifty percent shares in Bloomberg Foods, with a view to him taking over the company when he is twenty-five.’

‘He's left Bloomberg to Max,’ Alice uttered.

‘Yes,’ Lucas smiled. ‘He explained to me that your husband James is a writer and doesn't have a company to pass down, so he thought as an honorary grandfather he would leave shares in Bloomberg to Max.’

‘That was so typical of Richard,’ Alice said, choking back a sob.

‘Anyway,’ Lucas sighed, returning to the will. ‘I wish for the other twenty five percent shares to belong to my charity the Bloomberg Foundation, so that twenty five percent of all Bloomberg profits will go to it. I also wish for any remaining property and possessions to be sold, and the money to go to my Foundation.’

And that was it. Richard had left Alice and her family fabulously wealthy, and Max set up for life. But nothing could make up for the fact that this wonderful man was out of their lives forever.

Rory and Alice left the attorney's office and went back to Richard's house. Rory retreated to his room to pack for his trip home to Boston. He wanted to return to his elderly mother, as the hustle and bustle of New York life was getting a little too much for him. He was panicking that now he was a shareholder in Bloomberg Foods, he would be expected to run it, and Alice explained that until Max got older, the company would be run by the Board, and all his shares meant was that some of the profits went to him.

While Rory packed, Alice went into Richard's bedroom and opened the large wooden box he kept on his bedside cabinet. It contained his sentimental jewellery - the expensive family pieces were kept in a vault in Wall Street. But at home he liked to keep the bits and pieces that meant something to him. One of the things in there was his mother's wedding ring. It was made from thick Russian gold and had become a little tarnished over the years. Alice rubbed it against her skirt, getting some of the sheen back, and took it with her into the room in which Rory had stayed. He was currently packing his possessions into his modest leather suitcase, and Alice wondered what effect suddenly having a million dollars would do to this humble man.

'I've got something for you,' Alice said, and she held out the ring.

'I don't understand,' said Rory.

'It's Richard's mother's wedding ring. You and he could never marry, so I want you to have this.'

'Thank you,' he uttered, wiping away a tear and taking the ring. 'It's beautiful, thank you.'

Alice was glad she could make Rory happy, and she had one more thing to do before she could start making arrangements for her journey home. She called Gilda and Wilhelm in the Bronx, and told them to get a taxi over to the house, and that she'd pick up the tab when they got there. Gilda started protesting, saying it was going to cost too much money, but Alice told her to just get going. Rory left, and Alice was alone. It was half past three, so she knew it would be half past eight back in England. She called the Operator and requested a transatlantic call. Within half an hour she was put through to her home, and it was nice to hear James' voice. He sounded as though he was on the moon, but at least hearing him gave Alice a sense of comfort. She told him of Richard's will, and how their son had been set up for life. She asked him how Alana was behaving, and what he told her chilled her to the bone.

'You'll need to speak to her when you get home,' he said. 'I've discovered who she's sneaking out to see. It's David.'

'D-David?' Alice uttered. 'Our David?'

'Yes. Olive Denton phoned me to tell me she'd seen them together at The Ivy, and they were acting like a pair of lovebirds.'

'They can't be together. It's wrong.'

'Well they're not doing anything illegal. They're only cousins by marriage, but they're family all the same and people are talking.'

'Is she there? I've got to speak to her.'

‘No, she's at an audition. I sent Daisy with her as a chaperone, to make sure she's actually going where she said she was.’

‘You've got to stop them seeing each other. It's immoral. What does Nesta say?’

‘She and Michael are holidaying in Nice, they're back on Thursday. David's having a flat warming dinner on Saturday, we'll talk to them then.’

‘I'll see if I can get a passage on a ship so I'm back by then.’

‘You'd have to sail today to get home by Saturday. It isn't that urgent Al, it's probably just infatuation on both parts.’

‘No, you don't understand. I'm coming home.’

Alice hung up and immediately called the Cunard office to see if they had a boat sailing back to England that day. When she was told that there were no sailings due till the following week, she started to cry, desperate to get home and stop her children from doing something disgusting. She lied and said there had been a family bereavement and begged for help. The young girl on the other end took pity on her, and said that if she contacted an agent called Wahlbergs on Times Square, they might get her onto the Normandie, which was sailing the next day. Alice had heard of the huge French ship and its record speeds across the Atlantic and she hoped she could get on it. The girl gave her the number of Wahlbergs and all they could offer her was a Third Class ticket. Alice didn't care - she'd endured hardship for the first twenty years of her life. She could do it again for four days.

Wilhelm and Gilda turned up and greeted her warmly, expressing their sympathy about Richard, and asking after Alana. Alice paid the taxi driver and welcomed the elderly couple into the house, asking Maisie to make them some refreshments. She took them into the living room and laughed at how they perched themselves on the edge of one of Richard's plump Italian sofas, as if they felt they had no right to sit on it.

‘I've got to go home tomorrow,’ Alice said, sitting beside them. ‘But I wanted to give you something before I left.’

She reached onto the coffee table and took the keys to the house and passed them to Gilda.

‘These are for you,’ she said. ‘It's the keys to this place?’

‘What are you talking about child?’ Gilda uttered.

‘Richard left me this house in his will. I've no use for it so I want you two to have it.’

‘What would we want with this grand house?’ Wilhelm asked in his still strong German accent.

‘Live in it!’ she laughed. ‘You’ll have Maisie the housekeeper to look after you and you’ll be near to everything.’

‘Bless you,’ Wilhelm smiled, grasping Alice’s face and kissing her on both cheeks. ‘My son will be looking down and smiling at you.’

‘I hope so,’ Alice whispered. ‘I know he’d want me to look after you both.’

‘And tell that granddaughter of mine that she can come and stay whenever she wants!’ Gilda said with a waggle of her finger. ‘That last photograph of her you sent me, she looked too thin. She needs fattening up.’

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Alice arrived in London on Saturday afternoon. The Normandie had docked at Le Havre, and she’d taken a P&O ferry over to Dover, followed by the boat train to London. She was exhausted and ached all over. The bed she’d had in a tiny cabin shared with two German women was like something she would have slept in when she was a young girl touring the music halls. The women themselves - Gertrude and Ana, were lovely; and once they’d got over the fact they were sharing a room with a famous actress, they’d all had a laugh. They were travelling to Germany to try and smuggle out members of their families who had been forced into Ghettos by the Nazis. It was a dangerous mission and Alice admired them for their courage. What Hitler was doing to the Jews in Germany terrified her. Although Alana would not be classed as Jewish because her mother wasn’t, those tyrants were so fervent in their persecution, Alice guessed if they got their hands on her daughter they wouldn’t care. Europe was becoming an increasingly dangerous place to live and this, along with Alana’s infatuation with her own brother made Alice begin to consider taking up Louie Wallis’s offer.

By the time she got home, James was in the bedroom getting ready for dinner, while Alana had already gone over to David’s place to help him prepare. Alice’s blood ran cold just thinking of it. She remembered being young and in love with Allen, and helping him prepare dinner. Hijinks, like throwing food about, often lead to other things. She hoped Alana and David hadn’t slept together - what if she got pregnant?

‘Why didn’t you stop Alana going over there?’ Alice fretted, flopping down upon the bed.

James stopped fixing his tie and came and sat beside her, taking her hand and squeezing it.

‘Don’t you think that by trying to split them up you might be driving them together?’

‘No! What’s the matter with Alana? She’s a beautiful girl and can have her pick of men, why does she want her own cousin? I think we should go and live in Hollywood.’

‘What?’

‘Louie Wallis went to Richard's funeral. He offered me a five movie contract and a house in Beverley Hills. Alana wants to be an actress; if she went out there she'd stand more of a chance.’

‘No!’ James snapped. ‘It's out of the question. We're not going to live in America. Now tidy yourself up or we'll be late for David's dinner.’

David's new flat was in a mansion block on Sloane Avenue, and as James pulled up outside, Alice started to shake. She hoped and prayed Nesta had talked some sense into her son and stopped him making this terrible mistake.

David welcomed them into the flat with a cheery smile. It was beautifully decorated and smelt of the food he was cooking. David took Alice and James' coats and gave them a guided tour. The rooms ran off a long corridor, and to Alice's horror, there was only one bedroom. Which meant if Alana had stayed here, they must have slept together. At the back of the flat was the dining room, and adjacent to that was the kitchen, where Alana stood in a indigo blue evening dress, covered with a striped apron, whisking something in a bowl.

‘And may I introduce my beautiful cook,’ David chuckled. ‘Miss Alana Horowitz.’

‘Hello Mama,’ Alana smiled. ‘I would hug you but I'd get flour on you. I'm trying to make a soufflé. Did you have a good journey?’

‘Not really,’ Alice snapped. ‘I had to share a cramped Third Class cabin all the way from New York. Then had to sail again from France to here, just so I could stop you from being stupid.’

‘We're not breaking the law Aunt Alice,’ David frowned. ‘We're not even blood cousins.’

‘But when you were children you lived together like brother and sister. Doesn't that mean anything to you?’

‘Oh Mama that was years ago,’ Alana scoffed. ‘Lots of cousins marry.’

‘Marry?’ Alice repeated.

‘I was going to do it properly and ask your permission first,’ David said, putting his arm around Alana's shoulder. ‘But I couldn't wait. I've asked Alana to marry me and she said yes.’

Just as he said this, the front door bell rang and Alice guessed it was Nesta and Michael.

‘I'll go,’ David said, practically running out. ‘Excuse me.’

‘What do you think you're doing?’ Alice fumed, storming over to Alana. ‘You're not pregnant are you?’

‘Of course I'm not pregnant, what do you take me for?’

‘Have you slept with him?’

‘That's none of your business!’

‘Al please,’ groaned James.

‘It's disgusting,’ Alice cried, feeling herself becoming more hysterical. ‘They have to stop it right now.’

‘Why are you over-reacting?!’ Alana shouted.

They were joined by Nesta, Michael and David. A horrified expression on Nesta's face.



‘What is all this shouting for?’ she crowed. ‘I could hear you from down the hall.’

‘They’re getting married!’ Alice practically screamed. ‘You’ve got to stop them.’

‘Married?’ Nesta frowned. She looked at David. ‘What are you doing that for?’

‘We love each other,’ David said. ‘Is that so hard to believe?’

‘They just don’t want us to be happy,’ Alana whimpered and Alice felt terrible when she saw she’d made her daughter cry.

‘I do want you to be happy darling,’ she said. ‘But I don’t want you throwing your life away at eighteen.’

‘Okay we’ll wait until Alana’s twenty-one,’ David said defiantly.

‘No you won’t,’ said Nesta. ‘Alice is right. You’re both too young and you don’t know your own mind.’

‘I’m running one of the biggest hotel chains in the world! How can I not know my own mind? You’re all being ridiculous. I’m going to marry Alana as soon as she gets to twenty-one, whether you agree to it or not.’

Alice made a grab for Alana’s arm.

‘Come on,’ she said. ‘Let’s go home and talk about it.’

‘No!’ Alana protested. ‘Leave me alone. You can’t tell me what to do.’

‘She can,’ Nesta sighed loudly. ‘She’s trying to stop you marrying your own brother.’

A deathly silence descended across the little kitchen and everyone stared at Nesta. Alice was shocked that her sister-in-law had actually had the courage to tell the truth; and she was wondering how Nesta was going to explain it away without incriminating herself.

‘What are you talking about?’ asked Alana.

‘David is your brother,’ Nesta said. ‘We never wanted you to find out, but you’ve left us no choice.’

‘Mama how could you say such a thing?’ David gasped. ‘That’s a terrible thing to lie about.’

‘It isn’t a lie,’ said Alice. ‘I’m your mother David.’

‘I don’t think a kitchen is the place to be discussing such a thing,’ Michael suddenly piped up. ‘Let’s go into the drawing room.’

Bizarrely, everyone agreed with him and silently trudged into the drawing room at the front of the flat. Alana and David sat together on a tapestry sofa, whilst James and Michael placed themselves in armchairs, leaving Alice and Nesta standing by the mantelpiece, centre stage like a pair of actresses. Alice felt torn in two. For so long she’d wanted to tell David the truth, but the last thing she wanted to do was break Alana’s heart.

‘How can you be my mother?’ David asked. ‘I didn’t meet you until I was ten.’

‘I stole you from Alice,’ Nesta said, surprising Alice with her honesty. ‘Roland...who you think of as your father was a cruel man. All he wanted was an heir to Villiers, and so when I kept having miscarriages, he started to threaten to divorce me or have me put away in an asylum so he could find someone else. I got pregnant in the summer of 1911 but I miscarried in the November. No one knew except Mrs Farrell. Roland was in Paris and James was in Italy. James didn’t even

know I was pregnant, so it felt right not to say anything at all. Then in the spring of 1912, I knew the time was coming when Roland would be returning to England and I'd have to explain that I didn't have a baby. So I decided to take myself off to New York to your gr... to Betsey's wedding. The night the ship sank, I was up on deck and there was only room for one person in the lifeboat. I started talking to Alice. I thought she was in Steerage and unlikely to get on a boat, so I offered to take her baby for her, and I got into the lifeboat. She told me her name was Alice Higgins, so when we were rescued and there was no one on the Carpathia by that name, I assumed she'd died. Then one day I got talking to Richard Bloomberg on deck - I'm surprised he never remembered me. He told me he was looking after a young girl called Alice Fairfax who'd been knocked unconscious and kept waking up and asking for her baby. I know it was wrong, but I pushed the suspicion to the back of my mind. I'd had you with me for several days by then and I'd fallen in love with you. You felt like my baby.'

'This is all lies!' David cried, burying his head in his hands. 'Why are you saying this?'

'Because it's true,' Alice said softly. 'I gave birth to you on the eleventh of April 1912 in a cabin on the Titanic. I had you with me for three days, then on the day it sank, that woman stole you from me.'

'Why didn't you look for me then?'

'I was unconscious for two weeks after the accident. I'd had a terrible knock to the head, and then got pneumonia after being exposed to the cold. By the time I woke up, I'd forgotten large chunks of my life before sailing. I really did think my name was Alice Fairfax and I'd been travelling to New York with my brother. In reality Robert Fairfax was my boyfriend and we were going to marry when we got to America. But Robert died on the ship, and I was rescued by Richard. Gradually things came back to me and I knew my name was actually Alice Higgins and I was a working-class showgirl from Battersea.'

'What!' James cried, standing up. 'You never told me this!'

'Oh James this isn't about you, this is about the children.'

'Who are you?' he uttered. 'Who did I marry?'

'I was born Alice Higgins, in Battersea. My mother was an Irish singer, my father worked on the railways. When my mother died my Aunt Bella took me in and it was she who taught me how to sing and dance. When I was ten I entered a music hall act with a man called Herbert Cavendish, pretending to be his little boy. Then when I was too old to do that I joined a dance troupe. We also performed dances at private parties, and it was at one of these parties I met a young man who claimed to be Robert Fairfax, the son of the newspaper baron Joseph Fairfax. We became close and I discovered I was pregnant by him. He asked me to marry him, but said it would be better if we married in New York. I was young and naïve and just went along with him. He got us Second Class tickets for the Titanic and said it would look more respectable if I pretended to be his sister, Lady Alice. So when Richard found me, my boarding card said Lady Alice Fairfax and for a few days, I really thought that was who I was. Then it slowly came back to me. But I didn't want Richard thinking less of me so I kept quiet. Richard then put a notice in

the paper asking for the person who took my baby to come forward, promising that he wouldn't go to the police. He was also offering a reward of a thousand dollars.'

'That was when I did something despicable,' Nesta joined in. 'When I saw the article about Richard, I panicked. I'd told Betsey that I thought I'd miscarried then had given birth on the Titanic without even realising I was still pregnant. It was a pretty unbelievable story and I thought if Mama saw the article she'd put two and two together and start to get suspicious, so I came running home to England. I told everyone the same story - that I didn't think I was pregnant, so I'd thought it would be safe to sail to America; and over time, even though at the back of my mind I knew what I'd done, I came to think of you as mine David. My mind would play tricks on me and I became convinced I'd given birth to you.'

'You stole someone's child,' Michael said slowly, realisation seeping in. 'You're a criminal.'

'I'm his mother,' Nesta whined.

'They should have kept you in that sanatorium,' Michael hissed.

'I'm his mother!' Alice cried. 'When no one came forward after the appeal by Richard, I began to think he was dead.' She looked at David. 'I had a memory of taking you from my cabin and upstairs to the deck. Then I couldn't remember anything after that until I came round in Richard's house. I lived for years convinced I'd actually left my baby...Bobby, in the cabin, to die.'

Even now, after all these years and with that very baby sitting in front of her, a handsome, strapping young man. That thought, that suspicion she'd inadvertently killed her own child, still made her cry.

'When did you remember?' James asked. 'Was it when you met me?'

Alice nodded.

'I'm sorry. As soon as you said your sister's name it came back to me. I remembered that she'd taken my baby. She was the one who'd stolen him off me.'

'So you only married me to get to David then.'

'At first, yes. But as the years have gone by I have grown to love you James. I swear that. I'm so sorry.'

'You're sick, the pair of you,' David raged, getting up and storming to the other side of the room, gripping his forehead. He looked round at Alice.

'So that's why you were always so fond of me. Would go out of your way to be with me.'

'You're my baby,' she cried. 'I've loved you from the moment you were born and I held you in my arms. When I saw you again, when you were ten, it was one of the happiest days of my life. It would break my heart to see you and Alana playing together and not be able to tell you, you were brother and sister. But Nesta and I both agreed that telling you wouldn't solve anything. She had been your mother for all those years, and it would be unfair to confuse you by telling you the truth.'

Alana made a gulping noise, covered her mouth and ran out of the room. Alice ran after her, and saw her dart into the bathroom, where she was violently sick into the toilet.

‘Oh Alana,’ Alice sighed, rubbing her back. ‘I’m so sorry my darling.’

Alana retched until she was dry, then flushed the toilet. She went to the washbasin and splashed her face, and the look of hatred in her eyes, as she gazed back at her mother, filled Alice’s heart with terror.

‘And what good would it have done? It would have hurt David to know the woman he thought was his mother was nothing more than a criminal.’

‘But what about me?’ Alana cried. ‘What about me? I lost my virginity to my own brother!’

Alice cried out, and it was her turn to start retching. She’d hoped that hadn’t been the case - that Alana had been making David wait. This was the most horrible thing that had ever happened to her.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she whimpered. ‘Alana please say you forgive me.’

Alana slumped down on the edge of the bath and started to cry. Alice wrapped her arm around her shoulders and pulled her to her, kissing her sweet smelling hair.

‘I should have told you,’ Alice said. ‘I’m so sorry Alana. Please don’t hate me. I couldn’t bear it if you hated me.’

‘I feel disgusting,’ Alana whimpered. ‘I’m a freak.’

‘You’re not a freak. You thought you were in love and you made love with him. It’s perfectly natural.’

‘You should report Nesta to the police. She’s no more than a common thief.’

‘What good would it do? It happened so long ago.’

‘Can we go home?’ Alana whispered. ‘I don’t want to be here any more.’

‘Would you like to go to America?’ Alice asked, realising that staying in England would be impossible now. It might mean she’d never see David again, and while the thought of that broke her heart, Alana was her main priority - and Max. And they would be better off in the United States.

Alana pulled away and looked at her.

‘To stay with Grandma and Grandpop?’

‘Maybe. They’re living in Richard’s old house now. He left me it in his will, so I’ve given it to them. He also left you five hundred thousand dollars that you’ll get on your twenty-fifth birthday, so you’ll be set up for life.’

‘Wow, that was very kind of him.’

‘Richard loved you like a granddaughter, you know that. I was offered a contract with a studio in Hollywood and I turned it down, but it’s still open. If we moved to LA we could make a fresh start.’

‘I’d like that. Even though I’ve lived here most of my life. America has always felt like my home.’

Alice kissed her hair once more and squeezed her tighter.

‘That’s because your poppa was American,’ she said, a tear falling down her cheek. ‘You’re so much like him, it’s understandable.’

Suddenly James appeared in the doorway, a stern and disgusted look on his face.

‘Alice can we talk in private?’ he asked.

‘I’m comforting Alana. She needs me.’

‘You’ll be hearing from Anthony Haswell,’ he said. ‘I want a divorce.’

‘I’ve done nothing wrong!’ she cried. ‘It’s your sister who’s the criminal. Not me.’

‘You duped me into marrying you so you could come to London and see your son. You’re a liar and a fraud. I thought I’d married Lady Alice Fairfax. In reality I’ve been married to some ruffian from Battersea. Which I wouldn’t have minded, except that I would have preferred to have been told the truth from the beginning.’

‘Can’t you even try to see my point of view?’ she pleaded. ‘I was desperate to see my son.’

‘I know, and I was the idiot who brought you to him. I want a divorce and I want custody of Max.’

‘No! Max needs to be with me.’

‘Max is perfectly happy at Eton, and in the holidays he can come to me.’

‘But we’re going to LA. I’ll never see him.’

‘You made that choice when you lied to me Alice. Besides, as Max gets a little older, if he wants to come and see you, I won’t stand in his way.’

‘How can you be so cruel Papa?’ Alana cried. ‘Max is my brother.’

‘And he’s my son. And I’m not your Papa, my name is James.’

He turned and stormed off and Alice realised she had lost him for good. She let go of Alana and stood up, gripping her daughter by the shoulders.

‘Go down to the street and hail a taxi,’ she said. ‘Tell it to wait, I’ll be down in a minute.’

Alana nodded, stood up and hugged her mother. She then ran out of the bathroom, crying, and Alice waited until she heard the street door shut. She took a deep breath, splashed her face with water and went back into the drawing room. She found Nesta on the sofa, being comforted by Michael, as she wept on his shoulder. James sat on a chair, staring into space; and David was at the window, looking down into the street, and Alice realised he was watching Alana.

‘I’m so sorry David,’ she cried. ‘Please say you forgive me.’

‘You’re nothing to me,’ he said. ‘I want you to leave please.’

‘How can you say that? How can you forgive her and not me?’

‘I haven’t forgiven her. I want her to leave as well.’

Nesta shot round and looked at him.

‘David no!’ she gasped.

‘You’re sick,’ he said. ‘You’ve always been sick. My father should have had you committed. Then you’d never have stolen me.’

‘And what life could she had offered you?’ Nesta cried. ‘Living in New York with a girl pretending to be someone else.’

‘At least I would have known who my real mother was.’

He turned and looked at Alice.

'I loved you so much.' He gave a wan laugh. 'I've lost count of the amount of times I wished you were my real mother. But now I know you are, I hate you.'

'No David,' she uttered. 'Don't say that.'

'You should have told me the truth as soon as you came back to England when I was ten. So what if she got into trouble? She broke the law by stealing me off you. I was a little boy, I'd have quickly adapted to you being my mother.' He hung his head. 'Then I'd have never fallen in love with my own sister.'

He looked around the room, at Nesta and Michael, and James and finally Alice.

'Can you all go please? I want to be on my own.'

'He's right,' Michael said to Nesta. 'He needs time to get used to things. I'm going to look after you Nesta. I'll get you the help you need.'

'I'm going to America,' Alice said to her son. 'Please say you'll let me come home and visit you sometimes.'

He shook his head.

'I never want to see you again. You've ruined mine and Alana's lives. I can never forgive you for that. At least I know Mama...Nesta is sick in the head, and I can make that excuse for her. You're just cold and calculating. You lied to Richard; you lied to Uncle James, and most of all you lied to your own children. I don't know how you can sleep at night.'

'I'll always love you,' she said. 'Remember that.'

Alice couldn't bear to be in the room any longer and ran from it, crying. She left the flat and ran down the stairs to the street: where a black cab stood by the kerb, with Alana in the back. Alice climbed in and it drove off. She looked at her daughter and laid her hand on her knee.

'It's just you and I now darling,' she said. 'Let's go home, and tomorrow we'll arrange our trip to America. At least we're wanted there.'

## Chapter Twenty Three

September 1939

It was a beautiful late summer's day, and as Nesta walked into the village of Abingdon to get some groceries, she found it hard to believe that the country was once again at war. It was common knowledge that this war would not be kept to the battlefield. Advances in airpower meant the Germans would do their best to attack Britain. But right now, everything appeared so normal. The advert for the Oxford Advertiser outside Mrs Adams' newsagents read 'War is Declared', but that was the only indication anything was amiss.

Normally, Mrs Cray, the housekeeper would go into the village to get the provisions, but she had gone back to her home city of Birmingham to organise somewhere for her grandchildren to go. Places like Birmingham and other inner cities were at most risk of bombing, and Mrs Cray wanted her family out of danger. Mrs Simmons, the postmistress was going to take them in; and already there were whispers around the village about the havoc these city children would bring.

Nesta went into the butchers and found two local women in there gossiping. As soon as they spotted her, their chatter stopped and they made rather strange movements verging on curtsseys.

'Hello Lady Holland,' Sid, the butcher said. 'It's nice to see you.'

'Mrs Cray is still in Birmingham,' Nesta replied. 'I thought I would do the shopping for a change. You know our usual order.'

'The butcher went back to his work and Nesta smiled at the two middle-aged women in their headscarves, their eyes viewing her suspiciously. Even now she found village life difficult, and sometimes longed to return to the anonymity London. She missed her charitable work, and hated that her only input into Tanner Beresford was when Henry Beresford drove to Oxford and held meetings with her.

'I expect we'll have rationing soon,' she said, trying to break the ice.

'Will that affect you?' The taller of the women asked Nesta in her distinct country burr. 'I was a maid up at the house in the last war and Lord and Lady Holland still seemed to eat like royalty.'

'Ooh I've a feeling it'll be a lot worse with this war. To hear my husband speak, one would think the end of the world was nigh!'

'You've got a son ain't you?' The woman asked. 'Will he be joining up?'

'I er, don't know,' Nesta blushed. 'He's very busy in London, so I don't get to see him often. Although I'm sure he'd be keen to do his bit.'

Luckily the women switched to reminiscing about the horrors of the last war, and Nesta dropped out of the conversation. The last thing she wanted was the village gossips to know that her son barely spoke to her. That she'd only seen him for one Christmas since the night those terrible revelations came out - and that was only because she and Michael had gone to James's for the holiday and David was there.

She was grateful when the women got their food and left, and she could relax. There was a downside to living in the local stately home, and that was that she became the subject of gossip and speculation. Nesta longed for the anonymity of London and wished she could go back. But the price she'd paid for coming clean about David was that Michael treated her like some sort of feeble-minded invalid who was incapable of being trusted to do anything responsible. When his parents died within weeks of each other in '37, they'd moved into Elliott House and it had become her own private sanatorium.

She walked home, and as she entered the grounds of Elliott House she was surprised to find a strange car on the drive. Even though she and Michael now occupied the large mansion and had ten bedrooms, several bathrooms and three reception rooms, they rarely socialised; and it was unusual to find a visitor's car there.

Hawkins, the butler came out to meet her and took her shopping basket down to the kitchen. He told her there was a lady called Mrs McIntyre waiting for her in the front reception room, and Nesta wondered who on earth it was. She pushed the door open and for a moment, did not recognise the slim, middle-aged woman sitting on the sofa closest to the wall. She wore a plain grey suit, her fair hair pinned neatly at the back. It was only as she turned to look at Nesta that she recognised the piercing green eyes.

'N-Nadine?' she uttered. 'Nadine Byrne.'

'Nadine McIntyre actually,' she smiled, her Irish accent still strong. She got up and walked over to Nesta, holding out her hand. Nesta shook it and leant forward to kiss her upon the cheek.

'How are you?' Nesta asked.

'Exhausted,' Nadine said, sitting back down. 'I've just started working for the Ministry of Health as an advisor.'

'What happened to you?' Nesta asked, sitting beside her. 'You just seemed to disappear.'

'I went to Canada to stay with my aunt, and whilst there I met a man called Matthew McIntyre and we got married. I lived out there until last year, when Matt died, and I came back here.'

'I'm sorry to hear you're a widow. Do you have children?'

'No, we were never blessed in that department. How is David? He must be about twenty-seven by now.'

'He's very well thank you,' Nesta said quickly. 'He's very busy running the company, so I hardly see him.'

'And James? I heard he had divorced Alicia Bloom, is that right?'

'Yes. She's a very selfish woman and wanted to go and live in Los Angeles and James refused to go. So she left him.'

'That's a shame. James always seemed such a nice man.'

'How did you find me?'

'I went to the Tanner Beresford offices and they told me where you were.'

'Shall I ring down for Hawkins to bring us up some tea?'



‘If you like. Or I saw a lovely little pub on the way here. I wondered if you fancied a little mid-afternoon snifter.’

Nesta hesitated, not sure if she could take going into a pub and having all the locals staring at her. But she had so few friends these days it would be nice to spend some time with someone other than her husband or the housekeeper.

‘Okay,’ she said. ‘Why not? Let’s go.’

Nesta had never been to the Bull & Crown, the pub on the outskirts of the estate; and wondered what she was going to find. It had just opened for afternoon trade and was empty apart from the landlord and an old man sat at a corner table nursing a pint. Bold as brass, Nadine went up to the counter and ordered two gin and tonics, while Nesta found them a table to sit at as far away from the door as possible. She’d rarely ever drunk in public houses and felt very self-conscious, wondering what Michael would say if he knew she was here.

‘I feel very daring,’ Nesta laughed when Nadine sat down. ‘Drinking in pubs isn’t something I’m entirely familiar with.’

‘Well it’s time you started. You used to be a bit of a pioneer when I knew you. What happened?’

‘Lots of things. You must have heard about what happened with Gabriel Garcia?’

‘Well yes, of course. But that was pushing twenty years ago. You always had fire in your belly. That’s why I’ve come to see you today, to see if you could do me a favour.’

‘What sort of favour?’

‘Well it’s my job at the Ministry of Health to get vulnerable children evacuated from London. The intelligence we’ve received so far is that the Germans are most likely to attack areas where there are heavy industry and docks. There’s a mass evacuation of children from the East End taking place. But there are other areas as well. At the moment I’m trying to find a home for a pair of orphans from Battersea. It looks like the area’s going to be a prime target. There are factories all along the river, as well as the docks, the railway and the Power Station. I know these children from my charity work - Annie and Kenny Brady. Their mother was abandoned by their father, and now she’s died from pneumonia. They’re currently in an orphanage in Balham but it’s full to capacity and they’re trying to re-home them. Annie and Kenny are lovely children and I was wondering if you could foster them.’

‘How old are they?’

‘Kenny’s seven and Annie is five.’

‘They’re very young. It’s a long time since I looked after a little child. I’m a rather old.’

‘Nonsense. What happens if David makes you a grandmother? Will you refuse to look after your grandchildren?’

Nesta’s heart filled with sadness when she realised that she would probably never have anything to do with her grandchildren, when they came along. David wouldn’t let her near them.

‘Are you okay Nesta?’ Nadine asked.

‘David isn’t talking to me!’ she blurted out. ‘We had a terrible argument three years ago because I didn’t approve of the girl he was seeing and he’s barely spoken to me since.’

‘Oh Nesta that's terrible. You and David were so close. Surely he'll come round again?’

‘I don't know. We rarely see each other and when we do it's strained. I said some terrible things and I don't think he'll ever forgive me.’

‘Well that explains why you're so sad. Perhaps Annie and Kenny are just the thing you need.’

‘I don't know, it's such a responsibility.’

‘You used to love responsibility! Do you remember when there was that fire in Pimlico and you rehoused all the displaced people in your husband's hotel? That was outrageous, but you did it. That's the Nesta I knew.’

Nesta wished she could go back to being that woman; but losing Gabriel, then David, saw to the end of that. She'd been hurt so much, the fight had left her and it was so hard to care about anything.

‘Well I'll have to talk to Michael,’ she said. ‘It's his house and he might not want to have children staying there.’

‘Of course,’ Nadine said, retreating a little. ‘But I'll leave you my number at the Ministry. Call me as soon as you've had the chance to talk to him, and don't worry if he says no. I'm sure we'll find somewhere else for Annie and Kenny.’

When she got home, Nesta went straight to the kitchen to start preparing dinner for her and Michael. Mrs Cray usually did it, but with her being away there was no one else to cook, so it fell to Nesta. When they'd first married and went to live in the cottage in the grounds, Michael's parents had lived in the main house and had had a whole fleet of servants. But over time the maids left to get married, and the young girls from the village now usually went to Reading for work. Over time, the staff had tailed off and now all they were left with was Hawkins, Mrs Cray, and Jim, the gardener who came in over the summer.

As Nesta prepared the beef casserole she'd learned to make and had become her signature dish, she thought about these two children and what it would mean to her life if they came to stay with her. She missed being a mother, and it was true; if David did marry and have children, she'd never see them. The house was often so quiet and stuffy with it being just her and Michael. But Michael had never been around small children and she wondered if he would even want them in his home.

A part of Nesta abhorred the thought of rough street children invading Elliott House. As much as she'd made it her life's work to help them get on and live in better conditions, she was aware that they were usually poorly mannered, sickly and didn't think twice before stealing something. She couldn't see Michael agreeing to them staying; and she couldn't blame him really. But her maternal instinct was crying out for someone to hold. David may have been pushing thirty, but she longed to see him and hold him and look after him. There was a void in her life and she did wonder if those children would fill it.

Michael arrived home from London at eight o'clock, and they took supper in the small dining room adjacent to the front reception room. As they dined, Nesta found herself thinking about what Annie and Kenny would make of living in a house like this. It would seem like a palace to them. What damage could they do? What would the locals say about it? She had so much to take into consideration.

'You're quiet darling,' said Michael, swigging down his glass of red wine. 'Are you okay?'

'I had a visit from a girl I used to do charity work with today,' she said. 'She wants me to take in two children from London.'

'Really? How old are they?'

'Seven and five. They're orphans from Battersea, which kind of puts me off. It's where that woman's from.'

'I'm sure not everyone from Battersea is like Alice, Nesta,' Michael scoffed.

'I know. But as much as I've made it my work to help children like that, I don't know if I could face having two of them living here with us. I've seen how they behave. Many of them have never had any possessions of their own, so they have no respect for other people's things and just destroy them.'

'But they're practically babies. What are they Boys? Girls?'

'A boy and a girl, Kenny and Annie. Do you really think you could cope with such young children?'

'Well I'm in London a lot of the time. You're here on your own, and I do worry about you Nesta. You used to be so vibrant and had such a zest for life and a want to do good. But it's all died now. Along with David giving up on you, you've given up on life. Maybe you need something or someone else to live for.'

'Are you saying we should take them in then?'

'What would be the harm? I think you miss being a mother.'

'I've never been a mother.'

'Nonsense. Just because you didn't give birth to David, it doesn't mean you're not his mother.'

'I don't think he feels that way.'

Michael reached across the table and grasped her hand, squeezing it tightly. He smiled at her. The warmth in those deep brown eyes never abating, despite his advancing years.

'Why don't you telephone your friend and tell her that you'd like to meet the children? She can bring them up here for the day, and if you really feel as though you couldn't cope with them, then you don't have to take them in. But I think for your own peace of mind, you should at least give them a chance.'

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Nesta felt so nervous about meeting Annie and Kenny Brady that she barely slept for days beforehand. The fog of her depression had made her forget what it was like to want to do good

for others; and that woman who'd broken so many barriers to achieve so much, seemed like someone else. Once upon a time, the thought of two little orphaned children coming to visit her for a day would have filled her with excitement, but now, instead, she was convinced she was going to hate them, or they would dislike her; or they'd break something and Michael would demand that they didn't come to stay with them. A few other families in the village had taken in children from London - even though not much had happened in the two weeks since war was declared, and Nesta had seen them out playing on the village green - their thinness and loud voices a clear indication that they weren't local. People had complained about the sweet wrappers discarded without care, and things stolen from the shops. Nesta hated the thought of people losing respect for her because she'd brought such children into the village.

Nadine arranged to bring them on Sunday so Michael could meet them too. Nesta made sure Mrs Cray cleaned the house from top to bottom, and she helped the housekeeper make butterfly cakes, paste sandwiches and a fresh batch of lemonade. She then stood at the window, staring out, waiting for them to arrive. When she spotted Nadine's car weaving its way down the drive, she started to chew at her thumbnail to calm her nerves.

'They're here,' she said to Michael, who was sitting reading *The Telegraph*. 'This is going to be a disaster.'

'Just calm down darling,' he said. 'It'll be fine.'

The car pulled up outside, and Nadine got out first. She then opened the back door and first of all emerged a little boy in short, grey trousers, a striped tank top and blue shirt; his dark blonde hair slicked down in a neat side parting. He had a stern little freckled face, that did not show any emotion at being taken to a strange house for the first time. Nesta wondered how disturbed he was at losing his mother and being taken to an orphanage.

Last to emerge was the little girl, and as soon as Nesta saw her, her heart melted. Annie Brady was as pretty as a picture. Tall for her age, but whippet thin; her chocolate brown hair shiny and with a natural curl at the end. It had been tied up with a pink ribbon on one side and it matched the pink candy stripes in her dress. When she smiled at Nadine as she took her hand, her little face lit up, and she skipped as she walked to the front door, while her brother trailed solemnly behind.

'What are they like?' Michael asked.

'The little girl's adorable,' Nesta said. 'But the boy looks as though he's going to be hard work.'

The front door bell rang and Nesta came away from the window, sitting beside Michael, and waiting for Hawkins to answer it. For the first time in a long while, Nesta felt something aflame inside her. These children may have posed a challenge, but that urge was there to try and

rise to it and make their lives better. All the time she'd been waiting for them, somehow, in her mind they'd become demons - ragged street children who'd wreck her idyll. Now seeing them, she could see they were just two small, attractive youngsters who needed some stability.

The drawing room door opened and Hawkins came in, that stern expression not leaving his face.

'Mrs McIntyre for you madam,' he said.

As he spoke, Nesta could hear childish giggling coming from behind the butler, and as she looked, she could just see Annie fidgeting about.

'Thank you Hawkins,' she said, and the butler stepped to one side. Nadine entered, still holding on tightly to Annie. Kenny walking behind.

'Hello Nesta,' she smiled. 'Michael. Let me introduce you to Annie and Kenny Brady. Annie, Kenny, this is Lord and Lady Holland.'

The little girl let go of Nadine's hand, stepped forward, grasped her skirt and gave a perfect curtsy. Even Michael laughed out loud at her precociousness, and this made Annie giggle, covering her mouth with her hands; mischief filling her big brown eyes. She was so beautiful – the sort of little girl Nesta would have loved to have had as her own. Nadine then urged Kenny to come forward, and the little boy walked sullenly forward. He had obviously been prompted, as he went straight to Michael and offered his hand, which Michael shook. He then did the same to Nesta and as she shook his hand, she looked into his sad brown eyes and just wanted to hug him and make him feel better.

'Pleased to meet you Kenny,' she said. 'Why don't you both sit down and I'll ring for my housekeeper to bring some tea and cakes.'

'Is this Buckingham Palace?' Annie asked as she walked over to the sofa and sat down. She was followed by Kenny and Nadine, and Nesta phoned down to the kitchen and asked Mrs Cray to bring up the food.

'No this isn't Buckingham Palace,' Michael replied. 'It's Elliott House. But I did visit Buckingham Palace once and it was awfully nice.'

'I like your dress Annie,' Nesta said to the little girl. 'It's very pretty.'

'Auntie Nadine gave it me,' Annie said, her rough cockney voice belying her pretty, somewhat exotic looks.

'Well aren't you a lucky girl?' She looked at Kenny, who sat on his hands, staring at his feet. 'And what about you Kenny? What do you like doing? What's your favourite toy?'

‘My cart,’ he replied abruptly. ‘I made it meself and I used to take Mickey for rides in it.’

‘Who's Mickey?’

‘My dog.’

‘You've got a dog?’

‘Did have a dog,’ Nadine said. ‘He had to go to another home when the children went into the orphanage.’

Over the tops of their heads she pulled a face, indicating the dog had actually been put to sleep. Nesta felt so sorry for this poor little boy - losing his mother, his home and his best friend too.

‘I had a cart when I was a little boy,’ Michael smiled. ‘I stole the wheels off my sister's pram to make it. Nanny hit me so hard I couldn't sit down for a week! I bet it would be great fun to make another one.’

Nesta noticed Kenny glance up with interest, then quickly look down again, remembering his place.

Mrs Cray brought up the tea, and laid the things on the coffee table. Both children looked too scared to take anything, and in the end Nesta had to prompt them to help themselves. They both ate quickly, shovelling the food down as though they didn't know when they were going to eat again. With a full tummy, Kenny began to relax a little and even showed some animation when Michael mentioned that part of the estate included the paddocks where racehorses were kept. The little boy asked if he could see them and Michael promised to show him the next time he came, and Nesta realised her husband wanted them to stay.

Annie whispered something to Nadine, who then looked at Nesta and Michael.

‘Annie would like to show you her singing and dancing,’ she said. ‘Would that be alright?’

‘Of course it would,’ smiled Nesta. ‘Sounds very exciting.’

The little girl jumped off the sofa and went to the bay window, where there was a clear space. Without music or any cues she began to dance gracefully, like a ballerina and sung *You Must Have Been a Beautiful Baby*. She had a lovely voice and didn't put a foot wrong. When she finished, she bowed and everyone clapped. She then returned to her seat and leaned against Nadine, sucking her thumb. Nesta had fallen in love with these children and wanted them to stay more than anything. She had to discuss it with Michael first - but by the way he was smiling and playing along, she guessed the answer would be yes.

The children left at six, and Michael suggested they take in the beautiful late summer evening out on the lawn while Mrs Cray prepared dinner. He made them both a gin and tonic and they made their way out to the small garden at the side of the house, sitting in the two deckchairs.

‘What do you think?’ Nesta asked tentatively.

‘Charming,’ he replied. ‘Annie is a dream, but I think young Kenny is going to take some coaxing.’

‘I do feel so worried about them going back to London,’ Nesta shivered. ‘What if tonight's the night the Germans start bombing?’

‘I doubt if that will happen. But I do think to put your mind at rest you should phone Nadine and say we'll take them.’

‘Do you mean it?’ she gasped.

‘Yes,’ he smiled. ‘They're just what this house needs. I reckon maybe we could go to London and pick them up, and stop off at Battersea Dogs Home and get Kenny a new friend.’

Close to tears, Nesta could only reach across the table and grasp her husband's hand.

‘I do love you,’ she whispered. ‘So very much.’

She heard the French door open behind her and turned to see it was Hawkins, once again with that officious expression upon his face.

‘You've a visitor madam,’ he announced. ‘Mr Villiers.’

‘Mr Villiers?’ she frowned. ‘My son?’

‘Yes madam.’

Without a second thought, Nesta leapt out of her chair and ran back into the house. She had no idea what David was doing here, and she didn't care. She just longed to see him once again. He was waiting for her in the drawing room, standing by the fireplace. At first she thought what an unusual colour her son's grey/blue suit was; but as he turned to face her, the full horror of what he was wearing hit her.

‘Hello Mother,’ he said, his smile forced and uncomfortable.

‘David,’ she uttered, and unable to help herself, went up to him and kissed him upon the cheek. She stood back and looked at the smart uniform again and for a moment all she could see was that little boy who was mad about planes and dreamt of growing up to be a pilot.

‘I was just visiting Alistair Osbourne up in Henley,’ he said. ‘So I just thought I'd drop in and see you.’

Nesta gingerly reached out and touched the rough cloth of the suit.

‘How long have you been in the RAF?’ She asked.

‘Just two weeks. I'm based at Uxbridge. I'm still training, but hopefully by Christmas I'll be able to take to the skies.’

‘Why David?’ she cried. ‘I thought you were happy running Villiers.’

‘I am and I'll go back to it. But you know I've always wanted to be a pilot. Well now's my chance - and serve my country at the same time.’

‘But it's so dangerous.’

‘It'll be an adventure. Don't worry about me Mama, I'll be fine. I just wanted to stop by and make my peace, just in case I don't have the chance to see you again.’

‘Don't talk like that David,’ she snapped.

‘I'll never understand why you did what you did and I don't think I ever will, but I forgive you. You were always a good mother to me.’

‘That's because I love you,’ she cried. ‘I'll always love you.’

‘I know,’ he said. ‘Anyway I've got to be driving back to base.’

He bent and kissed her cheek - the first affection he'd shown her since that fateful night.

‘Goodbye Mother,’ he said. ‘If I'm home on leave at Christmas I might drop by and see you.’

Before Nesta had the chance to answer, he walked out, slamming the door behind him; and Nesta got the feeling that he still had so many things he wanted to say.



## Chapter Twenty Four

August 1940

Alice had never been in England when there was a war on, but it didn't surprise her to see that as usual with the British, life just carried on as normal. The streets may have been lined with sandbags, and there were men in uniform patrolling around, but people still went to work, drank in pubs and visited the theatre. She had been lured to London to star in a two week run of *Private Lives* at the Garrick. It coincided with Max finishing at Eton, and she had written to James, asking that when she returned to America she take their son with her. He had agreed - not out of kindness towards Alice, but because just like her, he didn't want Max to be tempted into enlisting. Max hadn't achieved good enough grades to go to university and even though he wanted to help his father run Villiers whilst David was fighting in the war, both James and Alice had the suspicion he would eventually want to follow his 'cousin' into the armed forces.

It was the last night of *Private Lives*, and a party was being held for the cast at The Carlton Hotel, Marble Arch. Alice was exhausted and just wanted to get back to the Villiers down the road and go to bed. No one quite knew when the Germans were going to start bombing England, and it frightened her to be away from Max. Also, she was aware that her son was sweet on Betty, a little waitress who worked in the hotel restaurant; and whilst he'd promised her he'd stay in the suite and read, Alice guessed he would go downstairs and bother Betty while she tried to work. But Alice had no choice but to go to the party - if only for a while. Bob Miller, the producer had bent over backwards to get her on the London stage one more time, and the least she could do was repay him for his kindness.

The party was a lively affair, and Alice did remember this from the first war. Even back in the States, when people celebrated, they seemed to go over the top - like they were scared this was their last chance to have fun. She felt awfully old watching the young things dance while she sat it out on the sidelines. She was only forty-eight, but sometimes she felt a hundred. People still told her she was beautiful, but without the aid of stage make-up, all Alice saw was a woman with a pinched face, hair that was starting to go grey and a body that was far too bony. The bob of old had long since grown out, and now covered her collarbone in a conscious attempt to look young. She could still sing and dance if she put her mind to it. But her last two Hollywood films had been dramas, and soon she would be returning to New York to start a year long run in *The Co-Habitant*, a psychological drama about a disturbed young girl who lodges with a lonely middle-aged woman. She guessed the time would soon come when she was only known for being Alana Horowitz's mother. Her daughter was already gaining a reputation as a beautiful movie siren, and Louie Wallis reckoned she was on her way to becoming a big star.

Alice was just about to make her excuses and leave, when she was tapped on the shoulder by Serge, the hotel manager. For a moment she panicked, convinced the bombing had started and Max had been hurt. She then calmed herself down by remembering that everyone would be evacuated if that had happened.

‘You’ve a visitor in reception Miss Bloom,’ he whispered.

‘A visitor? Who is it?’

‘A Mr Tanner.’

Alice’s blood ran cold. James wouldn’t come to see her unless he really had to. He would have had to drive all the way up from his house in Epsom, and she doubted if he would put himself out for her. Alice really was convinced Max had done something. He’d been on his own for four hours – an eighteen year old boy could get up to all sorts in that time.

‘Thank you,’ she said to Serge. ‘Could you take me there?’

‘Of course.’

Without saying goodbye, Alice followed Serge out of the ballroom, and into the hotel reception area. James stood by the counter, arms behind his back, a stern expression his still handsome face. Alice could see by the look in his eyes that he still held her in total contempt and she wondered why the hell he’d put himself out to see her.

‘Alice,’ he said as she joined him. He then looked at Serge and thanked him. James took Alice’s arm and led her over to a settee that was placed near to the door. They sat down and Alice gasped in shock when her ex-husband actually took her hands. His palms were clammy and she could feel him shaking a little.

‘What is it James?’ she asked.

‘It’s David,’ he replied. ‘He was shot down over Dover last night. His plane landed in the sea. He survived. But his injuries are...’

He stopped talking and wiped away a tear. Alice tried to take in what he was saying, but it was impossible. She couldn’t even entertain the thought that her son was dying.

‘His injuries are so bad, he isn’t going to make it.’

‘No!’ she cried, retracting her hands. ‘No you’re lying.’

‘I’m so sorry Al,’ he said. ‘He’s in an army hospital in Sandwich and he wants to see you.’

‘So he can speak? He can’t be that bad if he can speak.’

‘He’s calling for his mother. Nesta’s with him, but he’s still calling for his mother. So she phoned me and asked if I would come and get you.’

Alice burst out crying, uncontrollable sobs that made everyone in the hotel lobby stop and look at her. James gathered her to him and held her tightly.

‘Not my baby,’ she cried. ‘Not my baby.’

‘Come on,’ he said softly, rubbing her back. ‘Let’s get to him before it’s too late.’

‘We must get Max,’ she said. ‘He must say goodbye to his brother.’

They left the hotel and drove along to the Villiers to pick up Max. The conversation as they drove down to Kent was bizarre, as Alice sat slumped in the back, crying, and Max sat in the front while his father explained everything to him. He’d no idea that his cousin David was actually his half brother, and as Alice listened to James telling it all, it sounded like a fantastical story. How two women from different walks of life had been brought together in the most extraordinary circumstances; and the one who seemingly had it all had stolen the poorer one’s most treasured possession. It read like the script of some Hollywood film and seemed somehow impossible that it was her own life her ex-husband was recounting.

Max didn’t ask many questions. He was sensitive enough to realise his mother was too distressed to speak, and so he left her alone to her misery. The story was reaching its final chapter and she just had to be left alone to play her part.

They arrived at the Queen Anne Hospital at half past two in the morning. It was a traditional cottage hospital that had been given over to the armed forces, due to its proximity to the coastline. They were met by a young nurse who asked them to be quiet as the men were asleep. As they followed her down the dimly lit, highly polished corridors, Alice had to hold herself back from pushing the girl out of the way and running to her son.

David was in the intensive care ward - a large room filled with beds, divided by nothing more than curtains. The moans and cries of badly injured young men filled the air, and the smell of iodine and disinfectant permeated everywhere.

‘This is horrible,’ Max said, suddenly retreating. ‘Horrible. I want to go.’

‘Okay,’ James said softly. ‘Why don’t we go and wait outside for a little while?’

Max turned and practically ran off, his father following behind him. The nurse led Alice over to a bed in the corner and pulled back the curtain. The sight that met her made her cry out in pain. In the bed lay what was once her beautiful son. Half of his face was bloodied and scarred, thick bandages were wrapped around his head, covering one of his eyes. His arm lay on the outside of the covers and she could see where once was his hand was now a bandaged, bloodied

stump. The other hand was held tightly by Nesta, who sat beside him, looking haggard and exhausted. Her greying fair hair tied back in a pony tail, her face ruddy from crying.

‘I’ll leave you to it,’ the nurse said.

Alice came closer to the bed and laid her hand upon Nesta’s shoulder. Without saying a word, Nesta reached up and gripped it, and for the first time ever, a sense of understanding passed between the two women. David’s right eye opened and he moved his head, frowning as he tried to focus. He looked at Alice, and she saw a tear fall down his cheek.

‘M-Mama,’ he whispered, through his swollen, bloodied lips. ‘M-Mama.’

‘Mama’s here,’ she said softly, sitting upon the bed and taking his hand from Nesta. She raised it and brought it to her lips kissing his fingers. ‘I’ll never leave you my darling.’

Alice saw Nesta’s shoulders hunch and she began to weep. She couldn’t feel any of the hatred for Nesta that had consumed her for so long. She was as much David’s mother as Alice was, and his death was going to devastate her. Alice took hold of Nesta’s hand and laid it upon their own, so they were both holding onto David’s hand. He tried to smile, looking up at the ceiling and focusing on something in his mind.

‘I did it,’ he whispered. ‘I did it. I flew so high.’

He stopped speaking and his eye became fixed, Alice felt a change in his hand, and she realised he had gone.

‘No,’ Nesta uttered, seeing what had happened. ‘No, it isn’t true. It isn’t true.’ She looked around. ‘Nurse!’ she screamed. ‘Nurse!’

‘It’s too late,’ Alice said blankly, too numb to feel anything.

The nurse rushed in, but stopped when she saw what had happened. She put her fingers to David’s neck and waited. With a shake of her head, she told the two women that it was true. Their son was dead.

‘He was my first born,’ Alice lamented. ‘When I gave birth to him, I felt hope for the first time in my life. Everything had always been such a struggle and if something was going to go wrong, it would go wrong for me. But suddenly I had this beautiful baby boy. I had actually produced something wonderful. Alice Higgins got it right.’

She couldn’t say any more, it was too painful. It felt like yesterday, being that young girl trapped in that poky cabin on the Titanic, frightened and alone and not knowing what to do. That girl never envisaged she would live to see her child die.

Alice stood up and bent over, kissing David's forehead through the bandages, and then closed his exposed eyelid.

'Goodbye my darling Bobby,' she said, and she turned and ran out. She ran along the squeaky corridors, pushing past bemused and tired nurses, blindly finding her way out onto the grounds. At last she let go, yelling out in agony, falling to her knees and gripping her stomach as the enormity of what had happened hit her. It was a pain no mother should experience – watching their child die. There was no comfort in the fact that she'd been at the start of his life, and there at the end. It wasn't right. She should have died first. David was only twenty-eight; he'd never married or had children or built a home. His life was ahead of him, and now there was nothing.

She heard heavy footsteps on the gravel and felt someone grip her shoulders and pull her up. She had no idea who it was until she heard James' voice whisper.

'Oh my poor Alice, my poor poor Alice.'

'It's not fair,' she cried, clinging onto him. 'It's not fair. First Allen, now my son. Why does war take everyone I love?'

'War is cruel and brutal and doesn't care who it takes. David died doing what he wanted to do. That's the only comfort you can take.'

James eased her down onto a bench, and sat with her, hugging her while she sobbed into his chest. Nothing had prepared her for feeling this way. The pain was even worse than when Allen died; and up until that point, that had been the most devastating thing to happen to her. David was part of her and now he was dead, and she felt as though part of her had died too.

There was another voice.

'Mama.'

She looked up. Max was standing there, a bemused look on his young, handsome face. Alice held her hand out to him, desperate to hold one of her children. He sat beside her and she pulled him to her, stroking his soft, dark blonde hair and kissing his forehead.

'David's dead,' she whispered. 'Your brother's dead.'

'Where's Aunt Nesta?' Max asked.

'I'm here.'

They all looked up. Nesta stood on the drive, her appearance that of one who was defeated by everything in life. She had just paid the ultimate price for her sins, and Alice felt so sorry for

her. No one but Nesta understood how she felt. She got up and ran to her, throwing her arms around her, and the two women held each other tightly while they wept for their son.

‘I’m so sorry,’ Nesta cried. ‘I’m so sorry I took him from you.’

‘It’s too late now,’ Alice replied. ‘It doesn’t matter. We’ve lost him. We’ve both lost him.’

They stayed at the hospital for just a few minutes more, before the night doctor recommended both women went home as it was becoming distressing for them. Both Nesta and Alice protested, feeling they wanted to spend as much time with their son before they had to say goodbye forever; but with a bit of badgering from James, they eventually left. He offered to drive Nesta all the way back to Abingdon, but she refused, not wanting the two little children she was fostering, to see her in this state; so instead they all headed back to Epsom. Max and James sat in the front of the car; whilst Nesta and Alice remained in the back, in silence, their fingers interlocked, as if scared to let go of each other. The bond that held them together was dead, and as long as they acknowledged each other, it was as if he was still there somehow.

It was getting light by the time they reached James’ large villa near to Epsom Downs. Max was exhausted and emotional and took himself off to his bedroom. Alice got the feeling her son wanted to cry but was too embarrassed to show his feelings in front of his father and aunt, and so chose to be alone. She longed to comfort him, but realised he was a big boy now – nearly a man, and he had to make his own decisions. James made them all a cup of tea and they sat down in the kitchen to drink it, but within moments, Nesta started to hyperventilate and cough, and James made her go up to bed and said he would call in the local doctor as soon as the surgery opened at eight o’clock.

He came back downstairs and sat opposite Alice. Topping up her cup and reaching out and grasping her hand.

‘Do you want to see the doctor too?’ he asked.

She shook her head.

‘I don’t need a doctor. Not unless he can perform miracles.’

‘I just thank God Nesta’s got Annie and Kenny. They’re such delightful children, at least she won’t feel so alone.’

‘She’s destined to always look after other people’s children isn’t she?’ Alice said quietly. ‘Never one of her own.’

‘It doesn’t mean she didn’t love David like her own child.’

‘I know that. But she didn’t feel him grow inside her for nine months.’ She gave a wan laugh. ‘I always remember one night we – The Howard Sisters, were supposed to be performing at The Palladium. I’d suddenly started to sprout and couldn’t fit into my costume and I ended up having to wear my manager’s jacket. That was when David became real. I’d like awake and stroke my tummy, and talk to him and make him promise not to become like his grandfather. My father was a horrible man, and it frightened me to think my child might take after him. David fidgeted much more than Alana or Max. He was always in a hurry.’

‘He was like it as a little child,’ James said with a sigh. ‘When he was a toddler he was always covered in bruises because he insisted on running instead of walking.’

‘I’d give anything to be able to go back in time and be with him for the first ten years of his life. Just to know what he was like.’

‘That first day you met him, when he was ten, it was as though you’d known each other all your lives. Like the bond between you had been set when he was born, and it could never be severed.’

‘And it never will,’ she said, a stray tear falling down her cheek. ‘I will always consider myself to have three children. He was my little boy, and nothing will ever change that.’

Alice finished her tea and James showed her up to the small spare room at the top of the house. Once upon a time the maid would have slept in it, but these days James had a housekeeper who lived in the village and came in every day to cook and clean for him. The days of maids and cooks and butlers was slowly coming to an end. People were working in munitions factories and young girls who’d once been domestic staff were learning to drive buses and ambulances. After doing something like that, they’d never be content with fetching and carrying for the upper classes again.

It was hard to sleep, but eventually Alice drifted off. She napped for an hour or so and for a moment, when she awoke, she forgot why she was in this strange bedroom, and then it all came back to her. Her son was dead. Her precious child had been killed whilst fighting someone else’s war - just like her beloved husband had been. It was hard to feel patriotic or proud or accept that every life sacrificed was for the greater good; when the lives she’d lost had meant so much to her. She hoped and prayed Max wouldn’t want to enlist so he could exact some sort of boyish fantasy of revenge for his brother’s death. As far as she was concerned, after David’s funeral, they would return to America, for good. Alice was sure if she lost another child, it would finish her off completely.

She got up and had to dress in her fancy gown from the night before and felt foolish wearing such a thing at seven in the morning. She went downstairs and was surprised to find James at the kitchen table; before him were spread photograph albums and loose pictures.

‘Haven’t you slept?’ Alice asked, sitting beside him.

‘I can’t,’ he replied. ‘I know I’ll have nightmares. David’s death has brought it all back to me. I used to have nightmares every night until I met you.’

‘I’m sorry,’ she whispered.

‘It doesn’t matter now. You helped me put it to the back of my mind. But now, losing my...what I thought was my flesh and blood, has just thrown me. So I’m doing this for you instead.’

‘What is it?’

‘Photographs that were taken of David when he was a little boy. There aren’t a great deal, but there are a few. Every birthday Nesta would take him to Selfridges and have his picture taken, to chart him changing. She’d give copies to me and I’d put them in my album. Well, you can have them now. Just so you can have memories of your little boy.’

Alice could see the tears filling James’ eyes and as she squeezed his arm, letting him know she was there, he broke down. Alice stood up and pulled his head to her chest, comforting him as he sobbed. It felt so right to be with James once again. She could never tell him how much she’d missed him in America. She hadn’t been out with another man since they divorced – she wasn’t interested. She still loved him, and knew she always would.

‘You broke my heart,’ he cried. ‘I loved you so much and you broke my heart.’

‘I’m sorry,’ she wept, kissing his thick, greying hair. ‘I never wanted to hurt you James. You’ll never believe me, but I didn’t just marry you to get to David. I married you because I loved you.’

‘I never loved anyone like I loved you. I haven’t looked at another woman since you left. How could anyone compete with you?’

Alice eased him away and wiped away his tears, kissing his forehead.

‘Don’t you think I’ve paid the highest price for my lies?’ she asked. ‘My son is dead. I’ll never see him again. Whatever time I stole to be with him, it’s gone.’

‘I know. I’m so sorry Alice. Please, let’s be friends. I can’t bear not having you in my life.’



‘It’s what David would have wanted,’ she smiled. ‘He hated arguments, and if he’s looking down, he’d want to see his family at peace.’

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Ten days later, David's funeral was held at St John the Baptist's Chapel in Abingdon. It was a dignified affair, with him receiving full military honours; his coffin draped with the flag of the RAF. His squadron leader got up to speak about a brave young man who died defending his country. One of his fellow airmen spoke about a great friend who was funny, daring and a hit with the ladies. Alice and Nesta sat at the front, close together, both weeping. David's death had brought them together in a way they'd never imagined. While Alice could never forget the fact that Nesta had robbed her of the first ten years of David's life, she felt she had paid the ultimate price. Alice had two other beautiful children of her own; poor Nesta had no one, except her two little wards.

After the cremation they went back to Elliott House and Alice met Annie and Kenny Brady for the first time. She had to do a double take when being confronted with Annie. It was like meeting herself as a six year old. Annie was precocious and dramatic and even looked like Alice as a child. Nesta had told her that the children came from Battersea, and Alice couldn't help but wonder if one of her older sisters had married someone called Brady, or indeed, they were the grandchildren of an older siblings. It was hard to stay gloomy with Annie singing and dancing around, and Kenny maturely helping Nesta serve the guests with refreshments, or doing tricks with Monty, his mongrel dog.

James asked Alice if she'd like to go for a walk around the grounds of the house, and they went outside and headed round the side of the house, towards the area that was called The Secret Garden - a separate, landscaped garden with exotic plants and a fountain in the middle. James and Alice sat upon a bench that had a canopy of bougainvillea flowers, and as Alice looked up at the clear blue sky, and felt the hot sun burning down on her, she wondered how things could stay so beautiful and normal, when her heart was broken.

‘You know they reckon the Germans are going to start bombing us any moment now?’ James said, lighting a cigarette. ‘When I fought in the First War it was supposed to be so this sort of thing would never happen again. I never thought that those men had sacrificed their lives, and just twenty odd years later, innocent civilians would be facing annihilation.’

‘I know,’ Alice sighed. ‘Selfishly I want to say leave Hitler to it, why should our soldiers die? But I know he has to be stopped. If he's left alone, he'll end up invading us.’

‘I want to get out of England Alice,’ he said. ‘I reckon once the bombing starts, it’ll be really hard to leave, so I’m going now. Besides, I can’t bear the thought of waiting years to see Max again.’

‘Are you coming to America?’ Alice gasped.

He looked at her and smiled.

‘I know Nesta will be safe here with Michael and the children. I want to be with my family. I’ve no idea who will eventually take over Villiers now there’s no natural heir,’ he laughed wanly. ‘Then I guess there never was. But for now it’s my responsibility and I want to run it from the New York office.’

‘That’s wonderful,’ Alice uttered, trying not to cry.

James took her hand and squeezed it. ‘I don’t care if you’re Alice Higgins or Fairfax or whatever. I fell in love with Alice Horowitz and that’s all that matters. We belong together Al. Do you think we could give it another try?’

‘Yes!’ she gasped, wiping a tear away. ‘I love you so much James. I never wanted to hurt you.’

He pulled her to him and kissed her passionately. It felt wonderful to be in his arms again. He eased her away, stroking her hair.

‘Marry me again Alice,’ he said.

‘I will,’ she gasped. ‘Let’s get married when we get to New York.’

‘Sounds good to me. England holds too many bad memories, we can start a new life in America. Do you think Mother would be up to organising a wedding?’

Alice laughed.

‘When I last spoke to Betsey she was complaining about feeling old, so this’ll make her feel needed again.’

‘And I know she was really upset about missing David’s funeral, so it will be nice to give her something to celebrate.’

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Alice, James and Max could only get a sailing back to America on a boat called the Majestic, that was sailing from Liverpool. So, early on the morning of August the thirty first,

they took a taxi up from Epsom to Euston Station to get the boat train. Alice couldn't wait to get back to New York. Alana was coming across from Los Angeles and they planned to all spend some time together as a family. She looked forward to introducing Gilda and Wilhelm to Max and James; and hoped everyone would get involved in the wedding. They'd decided not to tell Betsey the truth about David – it would have broken her heart to discover he wasn't her real grandson.

In her handbag she carried the photo album James had put together for her. It was filled with pictures of David as child, and Alice was determined she would never let it out of her sight. If she could carry her son around with her, it was as though he wasn't entirely gone.

As they walked behind the porter to the platform, through the crowds of soldiers, young women, and people making their way to work, Alice was sure she spotted Nesta standing by the train. They'd said their goodbyes a couple of days ago when the Tanners had left Abingdon and returned to Surrey to prepare for their trip. So she had no idea why she had come here today.

'What's Nesta doing here?' James asked.

'Perhaps she wants to come with us,' Max laughed.

Soon they were at the platform, and the porter set about loading the cases onto the train. Nesta turned and smiled at them.

'Hello you lot,' she said. 'All ready for the off?'

'Yes,' James replied hesitantly. 'Where's Michael, Nessie?' Alice could tell he was afraid his sister was having some sort of breakdown.

'Outside in the car. I wanted to speak to Alice.'

'Oh okay.' He leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek. 'I'll phone you as soon as we get to New York.'

'Make sure you do,' she sniffed, and Alice could tell she'd been crying. She then hugged and kissed Max and told him to look after his mother. The two men then got into the First Class compartment, leaving Alice and Nesta alone.

'I wanted to give you something,' Nesta said, opening her bag. From it she took a small pewter urn and passed it to Alice.

'You should have him back. I had him without right, for all those years. He should be back with his mother.'

Alice let out a sob, and clutched the urn to her.

‘Thank you,’ she cried. ‘But what about you?’

‘He'll always be in my heart,’ Nesta smiled sadly. ‘I don't know what my life would have been without David. I will always be so grateful to him.’

With her free hand, Alice pulled Nesta into an embrace, and kissed her on the cheek.

‘Thank you for looking after him,’ she whispered. ‘He was in good hands.’

The two women parted and Alice climbed onto the train, clutching her precious cargo. She glanced back at Nesta, and wondered if she would ever see her again. She was looking old and defeated and Alice knew the coming war was going to be treacherous. She feared David may only be the first casualty in her family.

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It was early morning when The Majestic sailed into the waters of Newfoundland. James and Max were fast asleep in their beds and didn't notice when Alice got up, wrapped her coat around herself and left the cabin. She took the steps up to the top deck and gasped at the beautiful sight of the sun beginning to rise in the distance, casting dapples of orange light onto the deceptively calm waters. Ice still surrounded them, but due to lessons learned on the Titanic, ships now sailed safely through this passage. It was bitterly cold and Alice wondered what it must have been like for people like Nesta, sat in lifeboats for hours, wondering if they were ever going to be rescued. She looked down at the sea, and knew that somewhere below was that ship that held so many memories. So many moments frozen in time for people. The meagre belongings she'd been taking with her were down there; along with Robert...Edmund, whoever he was.

From her pocket Alice took out the urn containing David's ashes. It had been sweet of Nesta to give them to her. But Alice didn't need these to always feel her little boy with her. Unlike Nesta, she could still recall every kick; every time she felt him move, and the wonder she'd feel at something growing within her stomach. They were the things that kept his memory alive, and the time had come to reunite him with his father. She opened the urn and held it to her for one more time.

‘Goodbye my darling,’ she said. ‘It's time for you to go back from where you came.’

Before she could stop herself, she tipped the urn over the side of the boat and the ashes fell out, their grey dust scattering everywhere. Alice watched as gradually gravity got the better of them and they fell downwards towards the water.

‘I'll always love you Bobby,’ she whispered. ‘Wait for me. Mama will come back for you one day.’

The End

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The Exciting Life – the sequel to Never Forget is out now!

## **About the Author**

Karen Mason was born in 1971, and has been writing since childhood. In 2008 she published her first novel – Summerset, and since then has gone on to publish Mad About the Boy, Two Become One, Winner Takes it All, Mrs Osbourne Regrets, The True Tale of Jezebel Cole and The Line of Passion Trilogy. Karen is currently writing her Autumn 2012 release 'Paradise Lost' and is also working on a detective story.

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Summerset

Mad About the Boy

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The True Tale of Jezebel Cole

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