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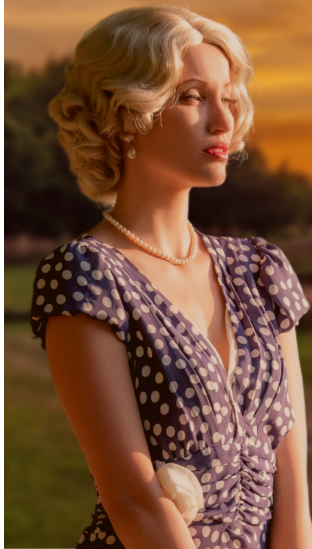
The Westcott Girls - Book Two

The

Hours

Before

Dawn



A painful secret,
a terrible risk and
the power of hope

The Westcott Girls – Book Two

THE HOURS BEFORE DAWN

Madeline's story - part two

By
Gayle Wyatt

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my family, who have patiently helped and supported me through the writing, editing and marketing of the Westcott Girls series. And especially to my lovely Mum. It was she who set me on the road to writing. She would weave magical bedtime stories every night for me and my sister, relying purely on her imagination.

The habit of storytelling has grown from that.

1

MADLINE BROOKS LOOKED round the crowded lunch table, studying the keen, intense faces engaged in heated debate, and she shivered suddenly. Nazi idealism in Germany and Fascism in Spain and Italy! Was it part of a political trend that would spread to the whole of Europe? Had Hitler identified an effective route out of the financial chaos of the last ten years? If fascism took hold here, how would Britain fare without the stabilising/inhibiting influence of a democratically elected parliament?

But the students were rapidly abandoning the debating process and lapsing into a heated argument about current affairs. Their society's chairman, Eric Finchley, nodded his agreement. "When you see how ruthless and fanatical the Nazis are, the backlash is likely to be vicious. Then heaven help us because we're nowhere near ready to oppose them effectively."

"But a nation with that mentality *has* to be curbed," another voice butted in quickly. "We should have crushed them when they marched into the Rhineland last year."

"How, and with what?" came an exasperated voice. "By the time we've modernised our military capacity sufficiently it will be too late. All we're capable of doing is arguing our point. *If*, of course, our politicians *will* argue the point!"

Madeline's concentration slipped for a moment as she considered

the looming prospect of war. It would affect all their lives. Each one of her friends could soon be fighting in a foreign land.

Eric was tapping the table now and glancing purposefully at his watch. "We've come a long way from the original hypothesis of the wisdom of democratic government versus dictatorship. It's almost two o'clock. I think we'll have to call it a day. Let's meet here again tomorrow to finish the debate."

Madeline took a deep breath and mentally shook herself. It would take some while for the implications of this discussion to fade, and she had a lecture on the harmonies of Bach this afternoon! That was going to be a mental leap! She only hoped the walk back to the Royal Academy of Music with Lucy would help her make the intellectual transition.

She reached into her purse to pay for lunch, but a hand touched her shoulder and her flatmate, Josie Rogers, peered at her short sightedly. A smile was transforming her gentle pretty face. "Don't wait up for me tonight Maddy. Arny's invited me out to the theatre. We're going to see Noel Coward."

Madeline laughed and patted her friend's hand. "What delicious decadence. Have a nice time, the two of you, and tell me if it's worth seeing when you get in."

"Are you doing anything tonight? Why don't you come with us? You could bring Eric. We'd have an excellent evening."

"No." She smiled gently but firmly. "I don't want to play gooseberry and besides, I promised to go to the pictures with Emily and the crowd to celebrate her birthday."

"Then could I borrow your blue evening dress again Maddy? Would you mind?"

"Of course not. Just go and have fun."

Josie looked at the pile of coins growing on the table. "Do you want a hand with counting it? It's going to be a desperate rush."

"Thanks." The two of them had been close friends since childhood, and it was second nature for them to share everything, from their lodgings with Mrs Cork and the clothes they wore, to their responsibilities for the debating society. The only thing they did not have in common was that whilst Josie was eager to go out in the evenings with her boyfriend, Madeline was determined to avoid a personal relationship. It was something that concerned Josie, for it

seemed unnatural that someone as lively, intelligent and attractive should reject the idea of romance. Yet Maddy did it with single minded determination.

For Madeline it was a matter of survival, and it was something she had never been able to confide in anyone, not even her closest friend. They began to count briskly through the money and checked it against the bill, then Madeline collected it up and rose to her feet. "I'll be back in a moment." And she went to find the busy waitress.

She wove her way among the tightly packed tables and caught an angrily indignant stare from a smart middle-aged lady and her young son. She smiled charmingly, aware that their debates must sound radical, perhaps even revolutionary, to such staid members of polite society. Then Eric called after her. "Madeline. One moment please."

She stiffened. He was the only young man of those who had approached her during the last three years, who would not take 'no' for an answer, and his persistence was irritating. She turned to find him striding towards her and she said with calm finality, "Eric! We've talked about this before. You're wasting your breath."

"Nevertheless, my dear," he gathered her hands up in his, "I'll ask. It means a great deal to me." He took her arm gently and led her slowly between the busy tables, lowering his voice discreetly. "I've acquired some tickets to a concert next weekend."

He reached into his inner jacket pocket, extracted a small envelope and took out the tickets. "Rachmaninov himself is coming to play at the Royal Albert Hall..."

"Eric!" all aloofness left Madeline, eclipsed by a passionate love of music. "The Henry Wood birthday celebration. I've been trying for weeks to get tickets, they're like gold dust! It should be a glorious occasion...!"

Then her enthusiasm died as she saw through the invitation and realised what he was doing. "It isn't really your taste in music, is it?"

"Not entirely, but you wrong me. I'd thoroughly enjoy hearing the great man himself. He will be performing the Second Piano Concerto."

She nodded with aching longing. "But how on earth did you know I've been hoping to go to that particular concert?"

"Intuition, and a little inside information. But listen. I've invited Josie and Arny to accompany us. A party of friends will make a beautiful evening out, and I've booked a table at Simpson's for a meal

after the concert. It won't be expensive, but it will be really special."

"You're going to bankrupt yourself, Eric. Those tickets must have cost a fortune. You know, you would be better spending the money on your books and study."

"On the contrary. I want to treat you to a unique evening, something you will look back on for the rest of your life." He touched her cheek softly and frowned with the intensity of his emotions. "You're a very special young woman, so vital and spirited and yet something separates you, removes you from the rest of us."

Shaken to the core by this familiarity, Madeline turned away from him to pay the bill and recover her ruffled composure.

She handed the money and bill to the waitress. It was idiotic to feel like this so many years after it had all happened, but the reaction was rooted deep in her, and it hurt.

Once the business was completed, she turned back to him. "I'm flattered that you should ask me Eric, but I have far too many commitments this month..."

"No. I won't accept *any* answer just yet," he said firmly. "Think about it. We would all enjoy the occasion tremendously. And it would take our minds off current affairs."

Madeline opened her mouth to reply, but it was too late. The rest of the students crowded around them, and they were swept out of the restaurant. Lucy scooped her arm up eagerly. "Come on, we've only got ten minutes before the lecture starts. We're going to have to run."

Madeline looked around for Eric, but he had wisely slipped away. Then she caught sight of Josie, and her lips tightened. That young lady had a great deal to answer for, putting her in such a difficult position.

"Go on without me, Lucy. I'll follow as quickly as I can. I have something to say to a certain young friend." Then she reached out for Josie's arm and drew her to one side, away from the departing throng.

"You've been scheming again, haven't you? I hear you've been telling Eric how much I want to see Rachmaninov."

"Don't tell me you've refused him! He's gone to the trouble of getting tickets, and I *know* you're dying to go to the concert. Surely it wouldn't hurt for you to go together."

Madeline could have screamed in sheer exasperation. "Match making! Surely you know me better than that, Josie."

“Oh, I know you!” Josie was equally vehement. “Do relent Maddy. Eric’s trying extremely hard to please you. I wish such an attractive young man was making that degree of effort to attract me.”

“You’re quite happy with Arny aren’t you?” Madeline asked in sudden deep concern.

“Yes,” Josie smiled tenderly. “Arny’s sweet and kind, and just my type. I couldn’t cope with Eric. But you could. You need someone like that.”

Madeline shook her head and laughed suddenly. “I most certainly do not! I’m much too busy, and I have next month’s recital to prepare for. I don’t have time for anything else.”

“Rubbish. You’ve enough time for *one* evening out.” Josie shook her head. “And surely, to hear the great man himself will be an enormous inspiration.”

Maddy laughed. “Listen Josie, I like good company and fun, but I don’t want anything more. I’m perfectly happy as I am.”

“Oh Madeline, you don’t know what you’re missing!”

A small jag of vivid memory invaded Madeline’s mind. She knew, and the memory terrified her.

Josie touched her arm and murmured softly, “Well I think you should give it a try Maddy. You need a break, particularly just before your recital. Do you know, there are times when I worry about you? It’s unhealthy to work all the time without taking a break.”



Late that evening, Madeline closed her books, turned the table light off and sat in the darkness to think.

Music was her life. It always had been. And she could imagine no future for herself other than as a pianist.

In the darkness she could almost feel the cool ivory of the piano keys under her fingers. She let her thoughts wander, let her memory roam through the music she had learned, trying to recapture the way it had once been. She remembered the magic of her father playing to her during her childhood, the sheer wonder of listening to him and learning. A burning passion for music had filled her soul, just as it had filled his.

It was a life more vital and vivid than any other she knew. And

she ached to have it back with a longing that felt like a knife wound in her heart.

She could play, but not as she once had. The magic was gone, locked away and inaccessible, trapped and frozen within her.

Then she dared to recall how she had been able to connect with it, channel it through her heart and mind so that it flowed through her fingers and the notes had resonated with depth and meaning.

Tears filled her eyes suddenly. Josie had been out with Arny tonight and was now peacefully sleeping in the bedroom that the two young women shared. She had returned several hours ago, as relaxed and unworried as the schoolgirl she had once been. Arny was a quiet nice chap, well suited to Josie's organised, gentle temperament, and he was the latest in a string of boyfriends that would have surprised the Reverend Rogers had he but known what his daughter was doing.

Madeline ran her fingers through her curly golden hair. If only she could relax and trust like that!

She knew what was trapping her music and causing this excruciating pain. It was the horror and self-loathing that Belaugh had inflicted on her. He had stunted and damaged her ability to feel so that she did not dare to look inside that locked door.

She had to pluck up the courage, unlock that door and face down the demons. Only then could she reach her full potential as a human being and as a musician.

Until she had the courage for that, her music would remain dead.

She shivered suddenly in dread. Could she possibly trust herself for an evening out with Eric? She liked him, she enjoyed the fun, pleasure and stimulation of intelligent company. But the thought of an intimate male relationship screwed her up.

If any man took a step too close, then the most appalling reaction set in. It was agony to experience, and she could not control it.

Surely if she was with Josie and Arny, then she would be alright. And it would be marvellous to relax like an ordinary woman, away from the stimulation of the Academy.

It was very tempting. And Josie was right. She would feel much better for an evening of relaxation. Dear Josie, always the analytical one. A mathematician through and through.

Oh, what the hell. It was about time she risked trying her luck at

The Hours Before Dawn

living it up a bit. She ought to take that first step.



2

CHARLES BRAITHWAITE WAS ensconced in his favourite chair in the good old *In and Out*. A club for naval and military officers, it was his home from home whenever he visited the capital. He signed another of the beautifully printed invitations with an elegant confident flourish and sat back to survey his progress.

After so many years assessing the growing military capability of the nation's enemies, he was finding it a relief to be occupied with something purely positive and forward looking, and he was taking tremendous pleasure in writing and addressing the invitations himself. His granddaughter Madeline was about to give her debut recital for the Royal Academy of Music and he was intensely proud of her, just as he was of young Matthew.

Having finally retired from a long and distinguished military career, he had not expected to find a completely new life unfolding before him. But his two grandchildren were keeping him active and alive as nothing else on earth could have.

He and Phyllis Belaugh, the highly capable but infinitely kind woman who had brought Madeline up, had hired Queen's Hall and arranged the tickets. He was now inviting a list of illustrious people whose names had been given to him by Madeline's professor, Sir Ronald Ashwood.

Once the last envelope was sealed, he leaned forward and gazed

thoughtfully into the distance. The bustle of London was passing in the street below, trams rumbled by the window periodically, and he could hear the calls of the newspaper vendors on the corner of the street. It was a comforting busy hubbub, as familiar and soothing as the smell of wood smoke and furniture polish that pervaded the club.

He picked up one of the letters idly and glanced at the address. He had invited his wife Mathilda and his daughter. He was not convinced of the wisdom of doing that, but he felt obliged to offer them the opportunity to respond positively to Madeline and acknowledge her achievements. He slipped the letter into his inner jacket pocket then gathered up the rest of the letters and handed them to the head porter at the desk for posting.

He ran down the steps and out into the teeming thoroughfare of Piccadilly. It was good to stretch his legs in a brisk walk, and a quick turn through Green Park would help set his thoughts in order.

Half an hour later, Charles Braithwaite reached his daughter Jessica's house in Cavendish Square. He came quietly into the drawing room to find his wife and daughter in deep conversation over their tea tray. Their gossiping voices made a gentle hum that filled the room with a sense of normality and female comfort, something that he had lived without for the majority of his life.

For a moment he stood watching them, then he caught sight of his grandson Jeremy at home again, and the moment of enchantment turned to one of irritation. The boy was sixteen years old now and listening intently but discreetly to the adults. It was most unnatural. He should be at school or out playing, not absorbing the gossip and bias of these two distinctly spiteful women.

He came into the room, his footsteps echoing firmly on the marble floor.

Jessica looked up. "Father! What a wonderful surprise. It's marvellous to see you." Sophisticated and good looking at the age of thirty-eight, she rose quickly and crossed the room to take his hands in welcome. "But why did you not let us know you were coming? I'm inspecting the local council school at eleven and I can't cancel at such short notice."

"I quite understand my dear," he patted her hand. "This is only a flying visit." Then he glanced across the room at his wife's frail thin figure. "I called by to find out how you were. I had heard that the

influenza had struck the house.”

Mathilda Braithwaite looked as though she had been unwell. She was wrapped in a blanket and appeared to have lost much of her customary energy and zest for life.

“Mother has been very poorly, as you can see. But she’s recovering now, and Jeremy is here to keep her company.”

“I’m glad to hear you’re recovering, Mathilda,” he nodded towards the older woman, “although I would rather see the boy settled in a good school. But that’s beside the point. I have come to extend an invitation to you.” He came into the room, took the envelope from his pocket and handed it to his wife.

She peered short-sightedly at it, then looked sharply up into his face, and her voice filled with bitter suspicion. “What are you inviting us to Charles, and why?”

“To hear your granddaughter play. Madeline is giving a recital at the end of next month. It’s her formal debut, and I’d like you to accompany me to hear her.”

Jessica’s eyes were fixed on her father’s face, and they widened suddenly. “It may interest you to know that Jeremy and I saw Madeline last week.”

He could not fail to see the haughty condemnation in her expression, and a trace of grimness crept into his voice. “Did you now?”

“Yes, and she surprised me.”

Charles raised his eyebrows.

A slight blush of anger stained her cheeks. “She’s fallen in with a set of disreputable young ruffians. If they have their way, the whole fabric of this country will crumble.”

Charles relaxed a little and then chuckled. “It’s a debating group, Jessica. I did exactly the same when I was at university. And if this young whelp of yours ever amounts to much, he will do the same.”

“Jeremy would never discuss such preposterous concepts. How could you even suggest it? That group of young anarchists were proposing the abolition of Parliament...”

“Rubbish. It was merely a debate. One has to examine these matters from all angles in order to form a valid opinion.”

Mathilda Braithwaite turned towards her daughter and

prompted gently, "Are you watching the time my dear? You're going to be late."

"Oh, good heavens," Jessica exclaimed, and hurried towards the door. "I must go Father. Perhaps we will see you again soon." And within moments she was gone.

The old woman turned back to her splendid husband, and demanded icily, "Now tell me exactly why I should take the trouble to come to this recital with you, Charles."

"Madeline is your granddaughter, my dear. She's intelligent, polite and personable. She works extremely hard, and I think if you gave her a chance, you would like her."

"Perhaps."

"Why don't you attend the concert with me. She would appreciate it, and so would I."

The old lady studied his face thoughtfully.

Gradually her expression softened. "Perhaps you're right Charles. I haven't seen her since she was fourteen, and I'd like to. I agree with you, it is wrong to judge her on her parents' actions. Yes. I'll give her a chance. I'll attend the recital with you."



Madeline relaxed back in her chair, infinitely glad that she had taken her courage in both hands and come to hear Rachmaninov with Eric, Josie and Arny. After such a stimulating musical experience, the pleasure she felt in their company over a good meal made her smile.

It was very late, though, and the restaurant was closing discreetly around them. They were the last diners left in the establishment, but none of them really wanted to break up the evening. Across the table Josie was cautiously sipping the last of her wine, whilst on her right, Eric was telling them a story, and on her left, Arny was watching him intently.

"I must have been utterly disorientated," Eric murmured. "I swear I hadn't been drinking, but I sat down beside him and asked after his health and that of his family."

Josie choked suddenly with laughter. "You didn't! I'd have died of embarrassment."

Eric nodded. "For a few moments, I couldn't think why he gave me

such a strange look and stuttered a garbled reply."

Madeline laughed. "When did you realise just who he was?"

"It rather gave the game away when he referred to his wife as Her Majesty! I felt a complete idiot, but luckily he had a sense of humour, and we parted on good terms. Since then, I've looked with caution at all the unfamiliar faces that appear at the rowing club."

"How on earth did you come to mistake him for someone else? I would have thought his face was one of the few that everyone in the country knew," Army murmured.

Eric shrugged. "Yes, we see portraits and newsreels, but his mannerisms and expressions reminded me vividly of an old friend from school days. It was uncanny." He smiled to himself as he remembered his discomfiture, then glanced around at the deserted restaurant and reluctantly murmured, "I think we ought to allow these good people to close up. It must be nearly two in the morning." He beckoned the waiter to him. "The bill and the ladies' coats please."

Madeline rose slowly from her chair and allowed Eric to help her into her coat. She glanced one last time at the subdued lighting and the peaceful establishment. It had been truly memorable evening.

Fifteen minutes later their taxi deposited them outside Madeline and Josie's lodgings. She opened her purse to retrieve her front door key, but when she turned back to thank Eric for the marvellous evening she froze. A surge of sheer trepidation swept through her.

How could Josie have done this to her?

Josie and Army had slipped away, leaving her alone with Eric. He was so close that she could feel the heat of his body, and before she could stop it a barrage of long suppressed memories flooded through her.

"No Eric!" she said with fierce determination, battling to hold those horrors at bay. But he had taken her gently by the elbows and was drawing her towards him. She could not bear to be touched. There was a raw masculine strength and power about him that turned her to ice.

Then it was too late. The events of her past rolled back in full graphic detail: the agonising pain, the devastation of herself, the helplessness and the utter self-loathing. It was overwhelming and she was very nearly sick.

"This has been a lovely evening Madeline," he was saying, his

voice resonant with warmth. But Madeline was fighting to force the memories back into the closed box where she had trapped them, where she could cope with them. This was *not* Belaugh. This was Eric. A friend.

"Everything that I had ever hoped it would be," he was continuing, and tried to draw her back into his arms, leaning down closer to her face.

"Eric, stop it!" she cried and turned her head to one side. Panic nearly overwhelmed her once more, and she had to clench her teeth to stop them chattering illogically. It was all she could do to hold herself back from hitting him. Every impulse urged her to scratch, bite and hurt this animal who was trying to possess and dominate her.

He turned her chin up authoritatively. "Madeline, relax. Won't you just..."

"No! And I mean it!" she said fiercely, grasping his wrist with her powerful pianist's fingers. Those fingers were strong, honed by years of dedicated practice and she heard him cry out in sudden pain. Then he let her go and took a step back.

Quickly, she turned away to unlock the front door. Her hands were shaking badly, and she struggled fiercely to suppress her reactions and regain her self-control.

All those long years of performing in public came at last to her aid, giving her the strength to rise above the fear and behave with a poise and confidence that she did not feel.

She turned back to face him. The shield she had painstakingly erected around herself once more slotted into place. She held her hands out to ensure he remained at a safe distance, and she forced herself to sound grateful and warm. "Thank you so much Eric. It's been a glorious evening. I haven't enjoyed myself so much in years."

He was as still as a statue for several moments and made no reply. He hesitated slightly then took the hands she offered and said softly. "You are one of the loveliest ladies I have ever known, and one of the most enigmatic. I don't know if you mean to drive me mad, but you do."

"I'm flattered," she forced herself to reply with a laugh.

"No, I mean it. You're at one time both fire and ice. Why?"

She was silent. He would never understand. None of her friends would. She harboured a terrible hollow at the core of her being, an

agonising hurt that she had to shield and protect. If she did not, then instinct would take over, and she would crumble. Huskily she murmured, "You're right, it's an enigma. It's just the way I am."

"Will you come out for a drink with me one evening?"

"I think that would be pointless, not to mention painful." She squeezed his hands gently, trying to be the sister rather than the lover that he so badly wanted. "I seriously don't have the time, Eric."

"Christ! You're doing it again!" he laughed suddenly and ran his fingers distractedly through his hair. "Look, I've enjoyed this evening immensely, and I'd like your company another evening. We all need to relax a little. You do too."

Madeline tried to see his face in the dim light. She wished she could read his motives.

The horror had subsided somewhat now, and she sighed.

It was true. They all needed a little light relief from the stresses of their study, and the evening had been very relaxing and enjoyable, until the last few minutes.

There might be a way.

She plucked up all her courage and determination. "Thank you, I would enjoy that. But only on one condition. You must accept that we will meet as friends, and there must be nothing more intimate."

He nodded slowly, reluctantly.

"Good. I'll see you tomorrow then. Goodnight."

She heard him murmur goodnight and she turned away and entered the house.

She hurried up to their apartment and switched the lights on, bathing the entire lounge with light so that the plush papered walls harboured no shadows or surprises. Then she stood in the centre of the room and hugged her arms, breathing in deeply. She had survived her first date. She had even survived the burning pain of horror, and now she knew she could suppress it.

Slowly the shadows and ghosts that he had resurrected began to fade, and the peculiar internal turmoil died down.

She *had* survived, and she would continue to survive. Damn it. She *had* to make it work. Who knows, if she tried hard enough, then in time perhaps she could conquer this foolish panic. Only then could she be a complete person again. She squeezed her eyes closed and said a small

prayer for courage and luck.

Then, a precious memory came flooding back, and she heard her mother saying to her: 'Find your happiness, for there is nothing more precious in all the world.'

Madeline held on to that memory for a moment. Her mother had sacrificed everything to be with her father, had known the bliss of being very deeply in love and loved. Now her daughter was struggling simply to find peace from her fears.

Behind her, the door opened and she heard Josie come in. She straightened her shoulders, thrusting her emotions into the background, and turned with a smile.



3

THE MONTH LEADING up to the recital passed very quickly. Although Madeline had already performed in London with some of the best orchestras, this was her official debut, the occasion that mattered. So, around the solid structure of Academy routine, she managed to cram in an intensive schedule of practice.

Then one evening, jaded by the looming pressure, she caved in and accepted Eric's invitation out. And from that moment she began to discover the congenial company of a man who respected her request that they meet purely as friends.

Several times they met for a drink and a chat, and as her confidence in his company grew, they decided to go to the theatre. Then to her utter delight she discovered that he enjoyed dancing, and their next date was to the Hammersmith Palais, where they let their hair down and danced the evening through.

Quite abruptly, Madeline discovered the rich vein of frivolity that spiced the social life of the capital and relieved the tensions of an increasingly threatening political situation. The more she enjoyed herself as the concert approached, the more it seemed that a miracle might be taking place in her music making.

Madeline eventually arrived at Queen's Hall more refreshed and at peace with herself than she had been for years.

In the privacy of her dressing room, she changed into the elegant

evening gown that she had chosen for the event. She glanced into the mirror and performed a thoughtful twirl. The material of the skirt flared outwards with silken fluidity, giving her the poised grace that she usually associated with that wonderful dancer, Ginger Rogers.

Then the stage bell summoned her.

The moment had arrived at last. She raised her chin, took a deep breath and stepped out onto the stage. The empty tiered orchestra platform encircled the open piano rather like an oyster shell cupping a precious pearl. As she moved into the bright halo of light, a polite hum of clapping rose to greet her. To her right stretched the oval shaped floor of the auditorium, with two curved balconies rising sinuously above it. Although she could see nothing through the brilliance of the stage lighting, she could sense that every level held a significant number of well-dressed people.

She settled herself at the piano and closed her eyes for a moment, aware that the clapping was quietening in expectation. She concentrated inwardly. A small thrill ran through her. Tiny and warm within her was a glimpse of the passionate, wild, tender emotion that had for so long been lost. It was coming back!

She breathed in deeply and knew that the magic was there on the edges of her awareness. She responded to her audience and played as she had not been able to for years.

The programme she had chosen was long and difficult, Schumann, Chopin, Mendelssohn and Schubert. And as the last notes faded away her audience rose to their feet in a clamour of applause. Then an enormous roar of approval went up as a bouquet of flowers was carried up onto the stage and presented to her. She left the hall in a daze, handed the flowers to Phyllis who was awaiting her backstage, and she swept back to the piano to take another bow.

Queen's Hall was filled with people, newspaper and magazine critics, musicians and conductors, and of course her own supporters, family and friends. Now, as the house lights came on, their faces and outlines were becoming visible beyond the stage lighting.

She bowed deeply, then made her way off stage for the last time.

Phyllis gave her an ecstatic hug. "Well done, Madeline. That was *so* beautiful. You've really done it!"

Madeline returned the embrace and suddenly felt humbled and immensely grateful. She knew that without the constant love and

support of this incredibly strong woman, none of this would have been possible.

"I could not have managed this without you, Phyllis," she whispered fiercely, and pressed her cheek tenderly to the older woman's. "Thank you *so* much for being there and believing in me, picking me up and helping me through. You've been the loveliest person alive. I'm myself again and it's all thanks to *you*."

"Hardly," Phyllis laughed fondly. "I would say it's largely down to your determination, my dear. You must never underestimate how incredibly strong you have been. But how does it feel now you can hear the audience's response?"

"Wonderful. It's almost like old times. Oh, just listen to that!" Madeline returned the embrace once again, and then glanced at the flowers she had been given. Impulsively she took them in her arms and lifted them to her nose to inhale the perfume. "I only hope the critics will be as enthusiastic. Reviewers are notorious for their cruelty."

The applause was dying down now, and they could hear the movement of people rising to leave. Phyllis squeezed her hand quickly. "Come on. We'd better hurry."

The two women made their way upstairs to the Small Hall where several of the maids from Harborough Hall were loading trays with glasses of wine and making last minute adjustments to delicately made sandwiches and petits fours.

Madeline smiled as she recognised the well-oiled organisation.

This was the sort of occasion that Phyllis excelled at. There was no inappropriate ostentation, and yet excellent service and catering.

Parstow the butler came forward to meet them at the door, while behind him the servants began picking up trays and moving to prearranged stations around the room.

He shook Madeline's hand. "Congratulations, Miss Madeline. It was a lovely concert." Then he glanced quickly at Phyllis. "Everything is prepared ma'am."

Phyllis nodded, then she and Madeline took up their positions by the door, and within moments the first of their invited guests began to arrive.

Madeline stepped forward to greet Sir Ronald Ashwood. "What did you think of it, sir? I could feel the audience, as though I was

communicating directly with them.”

He smiled and grasped her hands with enthusiasm. “Yes, and it showed. We’ll go through it later, stage by stage, but suffice it to say I think you’ve passed a great landmark today.”

“Thank you, sir.” He moved on and she turned to her next guest, buoyed up by such praise from her mentor.

Visitors were coming thick and fast now. Eric and Josie both kissed her cheek and hugged her, and there were countless introductions to critics and music lovers. Then at last her young brother was standing before her, and she was able to relax her guard a little.

Her eyebrows rose in surprise. They wrote to each other frequently, but nothing in his letters could have prepared her for just how much he had changed. He had physically grown up. Six months ago, he had been a tall skinny boy. Now, his shoulders had broadened, his hands were powerful and masculine, his face had matured, and he looked extremely attractive in an impeccable suit and bow tie.

She smiled and took both his hands warmly in her own. “Matt, it’s so good to see you. Grandpa obviously managed to negotiate an exeat from school for you.”

“Yes. They were very good about it,” he smiled, his voice curiously deep. Then he looked enquiringly at her. “So, you’re finally launched.”

She had to laugh, completely unused to looking up at a good-looking young man who, although still four years her junior, now towered over her and had a resonant bass voice. “The HMS Madeline is now commissioned and in full sail.”

“Don’t tell me you’d like champagne across the bows!” he teased and gave her a quick hug.

She returned the embrace. “Might be fun. But this is an important stride for me Matt.”

“I can see that.” He glanced around at the mingling throng, then turned back to her with a mischievous smile that made him look boyish once more. “Do you know, until now you’ve just been my big sister. I suppose, I’ll have to refer to you my famous sister.”

“Good heavens no! Don’t you dare,” she laughed. “I have a long way to go before I could claim to be that.”

Matthew moved on now and was served with a glass of wine, and

Madeline looked up to find her grandfather smiling down at her. She relaxed even more, and warmth and gratitude filled her. She was so lucky that he had come into her life and given her so much love and support. He looked splendid in his military uniform, dignified and gentlemanly.

She took the hand he was offering to her. "Thank you, Grandpa. Thank you for everything you've done. As you can see, the event has gone very well."

He carried her hand gallantly to his lips. "It was my pleasure, my dear. You gave an excellent performance. Very well done. I can't tell you how proud I am."

"It helped a great deal to know that you and Matt were in the audience."

"Good." The warmth in his eyes was unmistakable, but he paused, hesitating slightly. Then he turned and gestured to the elderly lady standing to one side. "I would like you to meet the other members of your family, my dear. You've already met your grandmother."

Struggling to keep the surprise from her face, Madeline reached out to clasp the old woman's hand. "Yes indeed. Thank you for attending today, Grandmother. I hope you enjoyed the concert."

The old lady had aged. Her hand was thin, almost claw-like. And while she carried a polite smile on her face, Madeline could sense an ominous aloofness, as though a simmering rage still burned beneath the surface.

A shiver tingled up Madeline's spine and she had to discipline herself to shake off the disquiet.

Then he nodded towards a fashionably dressed middle-aged woman and a young man of about Matthew's age. "This is your aunt Jessica, and your cousin Jeremy."

Madeline turned and took Jessica's hand warmly. "Aunt Jessica?" she enquired, examining the heavily made-up, pretty face, half expecting to see shades of her mother in her. Then she raised her eyebrows in surprise. "Have we met before?"

"Good gracious no," Jessica took her hand with polite dignity. "It's highly unlikely that we walk in the same social circles. However, we have been present at the same restaurant. You were discussing revolutionary politics I believe."

“Oh yes, I remember now,” Madeline’s eyes warmed with amusement at the memory of the shocked lady who had overheard some of their discussions. “We were discussing the role of Parliament. It was one of the liveliest debates we’ve had this year. It had spread over from the previous evening to the following lunch time.” She turned then to her cousin and held her hand out to him. “Hello Jeremy. It’s nice to meet you. I grew through my childhood wishing that I had cousins. Perhaps you did too? Have you met my brother Matthew yet? He must be about your age.”

The boy held himself rigidly still. His mouselike face was pinched with icy dignity, and Madeline slowly let her hand fall back to her side. He obviously had no desire to be here. “I’m sorry you feel like that.”

“*Jeremy!*” Grandfather Braithwaite, Grandmother, and Aunt Jessica murmured almost simultaneously.

Jeremy grudgingly extended his hand to her. “I’ve never met Matthew, but I’ve heard about him, and about you.”

Madeline glanced quickly at the ring of faces surrounding her, and it dawned on her that perhaps her grandfather had invited them, hoping beyond hope that he could heal the rift in his family and bring them together once more. Her heart bled for him. She had a feeling he would be sorely disappointed by their reactions.

Perhaps all was not lost, though. She looked back at the young boy. “Yes, I expect you have heard about us. Our parents had a tremendous disagreement, but that was a long while ago, and nothing to do with us. We can be friends, can’t we? Come with me, I’ll introduce you to Matthew.”

She whisked him off quickly before anyone could object, and finally tracked Matt down. He was chatting with Josie and Eric, and she made the necessary introductions.

Then she found Phyllis approaching her with a bevy of reporters in tow, notepads and pencils at the ready.

This was one of her primary duties this evening. She nodded and left her friends to chat while she took the media into a separate room and answered their questions.

Several times during the evening, she glanced anxiously round the room to observe her grandmother. The old woman had not changed. She was tolerating the occasion grudgingly. It was a great pity for

Grandpa. But there was one hopeful sign. Matt and Jeremy were together for most of the evening deep in conversation.

When her grandfather was free a little later, she approached him and tucked her arm through his. "I'm sorry it's not working Grandpa. It would have been nice to have the family together again."

His shoulders were straight and proud as he looked across the room towards his wife. "I'm nothing more than an old fool. I must have had a lapse of memory. Just look at her!" He stood still for a moment, observing his wife's disdainful countenance as one of the guests spoke to her. He shook his head. "We were married for almost fifty years. It's only during the last eight, since I've lived in England, that I've recognised her for what she is. It's time that I accept I'm far more comfortable on my own."

Madeline smiled in relief and squeezed his hand.

He turned his attention back to her. "Now, my dear, I'd like to meet this young man of yours, this Eric Finchley."

"Who told you about Eric?" she asked in astonishment.

"You've mentioned him several times in your letters, it's not hard to read between the lines."

"Come on then. I was meaning to introduce you this evening." She guided him across the room and introduced the two men to each other, staying with them for a few minutes as they appraised one another, and then she left them to get better acquainted.

Half an hour later, the hall was thinning out as people gradually left, and Madeline caught sight of her grandfather still in conversation with Eric.

Her grandmother was waiting at the door, surrounded by the younger members of her family. They did not wait for the old man, but left together in a swirl of impatience, not even approaching Phyllis or Madeline to bid goodbye.



4

THE AUTUMN TERM progressed in a swirl of activity and work, and Madeline found herself increasingly relaxing in Eric's company. Being an articulate young man who dealt capably with everything he undertook, he was both refreshing and stimulating and took her completely out of the music world. She quickly discovered that he was deeply enthusiastic about rowing. As a member of the Leander Club, he regularly went crewing with his friends even during the coldest months of the winter. There was always something going on at the club, and she attended several functions with him. He in turn took an interest in her world and proved to be a thoughtful and dignified escort.

Christmas was approaching rapidly now, and they took one Saturday off in late November to join a group of friends shopping for presents and to see a film. Towards the end of the afternoon the group gathered on the corner of Oxford Street to bid farewell and go their separate ways.

Lucy, Madeline's fellow music student, came to her side. "The vicar wants us at the Church early tomorrow, doesn't he? I just hope I don't oversleep."

"Me too. I'll call round for you on my way in," she promised with a smile.

"Thanks, that should help. Why don't you come a little early and

we'll make some sandwiches? We're going to be rehearsing all afternoon as well, and then we've got Tanya's party in the evening."

"Great idea. We're going to need something to keep us going through all that. I'll be with you at around seven thirty, that should give us plenty of time."

Madeline waved and tucked her arm through Eric's, and they made their way slowly towards Duke Street. Her thoughts had been wandering to Christmas all afternoon, trying to decide what presents she could get for her family and for Phyllis. She still had not made up her mind. She sighed and murmured, "I love the bustle of this time of year. There's a carol service tomorrow morning, we're rehearsing Messiah all afternoon, and then a party in the evening."

"You do too much!" he commented with a tease in his voice. "You'll run out of steam before you reach thirty, mark my words."

"No, never! I'm sure being busy will keep me young. Would you like to come carol singing with us in a few days' time?"

He laughed out loud at that. "Your musical friends would cringe. You've never heard my voice, it's like a corncrake in full croak. Besides, I still have a backlog of work to catch up on."

"Even now?" she looked anxiously up at his face. "That worries me. Do you have a great deal to do, Eric?"

"Mmmm. Quite a bit," he smiled affectionately. "Too much wining and dining with you my dear. But I'll soon catch up."

"Look. Is there anything I can do to help?" she frowned. "You have less than six months until your finals."

He shook his head. "I'll do some work on my thesis at home over Christmas. Now, just look at this window display! Doesn't it look inviting?"

They stopped and peered in through the Selfridges window where a tempting display of children's toys had been artistically arranged to attract wealthy browsers. The lights and decorations of the bustling shopper-filled Oxford Street were reflected back at them as a hazy aura of reds and greens, mellowed by the smog.

An enormous Christmas tree, smothered in twinkling lights and glass baubles, stood in the next window. And around its foot, the window dresser had artfully stacked an array of colourfully wrapped and beribboned parcels.

The great celebration was just four weeks away, and Harborough Hall would once again be filled with laughing voices and fun. There would be a huge Christmas tree, family, friends, games and good food.

Madeline smiled in anticipation, but then the image changed in her mind and she vividly pictured the happy Christmases with her parents, and how that happiness had been shattered.

She took a sharp inward breath. That particular memory was so precious.

"What is it Madeline?" Eric asked her softly and turned her round so that he could study her face. His warm, fond smile became serious, and then his eyes filled with concern. She knew that the grief she felt must be visible on her face. "What's wrong?"

She shook her head slowly, struggling to bring herself back to the present. "What a fool I am," she whispered. "It's all so long ago."

"Come with me." He took her hand and guided her through the crowds into a small busy cafe. Without a word he found them both a seat and went to purchase a cup of coffee and slice of cake. He put them in front of her. "Here. Tuck into these and you'll feel a little more like yourself."

She forced the memories from her mind, composed her face and smiled wryly at him. "Thanks, I must have been hungry."

"Was it the Christmas decorations or was it the film?" he asked gently. "You've been very withdrawn all afternoon."

She looked at the determination on his face and knew she could not keep her past hidden from him much longer. "No, nothing as simple as that. This time of year always brings back memories that hurt." She lifted the steaming coffee cup, cradled it between her hands, and sipped the thick warming beverage. The loud volume of chatter around her was reassuringly normal and helped settle her thoughts. "It began when we listened to that enormous Wurlitzer during the interval. When I hear that magnificent sound and see all the Christmas decorations and presents in the shops..." her voice choked off huskily and she had to look away again.

He frowned in perplexity. "I enjoy listening to the music too, but..."

Madeline sighed. "It goes a long way back to when my parents were alive. My father studied here at the Royal Academy, just as I'm doing. He used to play in the local cinemas to earn some money. And

when the chance arose, he would play one of those majestic Wurlitzers. We would all go and listen, Matt, Mummy and I. Although I was only small, I can remember it very clearly, and the glitter and fun of Christmas. Then something catastrophic happened and we left London. That's when life began to get hard." She paused for a moment. "It's been haunting me for some time now. I want to know what happened. Yet in spite of our troubles, we were always a happy family. This time of year, I can't help but remember them, and wish that they were still here."

His hand covered hers. "I understand."

"Do you?" she looked sharply at him.

He nodded. "It's a little bubble of memory, it seems so perfect, untarnished and happy. I do understand. But we can't bring the past back. Perhaps I can find out what happened to your father if it would help settle your mind. I've got relatives in the newspapers, and one that works for one of the cinema chains."

Her eyes widened for a moment. "No, I'd rather you didn't," she said quickly, and then realised she had spoken far more sharply than she intended.

His lips had hardened grimly. "There, you're blocking me out again."

"I'm sorry Eric. I don't mean to do that. But it's a very private matter."

"I know that, but bottling it in is hurting you. I wish I could touch it and relieve that tension. Would it help if you were to talk about it?"

"I can't Eric," she gripped his fingers emphatically. "Listen, it's just too hurtful. That's why I try to live in the present, not in the past." She was silent for a long while, and let her thoughts wander through the recent events until she came to the concert. Then her eyes warmed in a smile. "Do you realise, you've made a deep impression on my grandfather? He was expecting you to be a musician, most of my friends are."

"Was he? That would explain some of his initial comments," he laughed. "He was quite surprised to find that I was studying engineering. We talked for ages. He's a splendid old chap, and very well informed for someone who retired from the military years ago. He's promised me an introduction to Hawkers, and that's more than I'd ever have dreamed of."

Madeline smiled and nodded. "It doesn't surprise me in the least. He's desperately worried about the current political situation and wants to see good quality engineers and thinkers moving into the industry. He must think highly of you to make a recommendation to Hawkers. He's not really cut off from the military, though. He currently holds some sort of defence advisory position and has been spending more and more time in London, lately."

"Ah, that would explain it. The things he knows about aircraft design are frightening for one not in research..."

"Maddy!" a voice called loudly across the crowded room, and Madeline turned to find a graceful, powerful figure striding towards her with his hands held out. "I'd recognise your glorious hair from any direction, my dear."

"Patrick!" she rose to her feet and ran to hug him. "It's been so long, nearly a year. How are you?"

"Fine!" he kissed her cheek with familiarity, then held her away and examined her closely, his dark eyes moving from her hair to her booted feet. "And you look tremendous." His quick observant eyes flickered to the figure behind her. "Who's the lucky chap you're with?"

"Eric," she took Eric by the arm, and drew him forward. "Come and meet Patrick Anderson. He's been almost a brother to me for the last five years. We grew up together at Harborough Hall. He's with Ballet Rambert now."

Eric drew himself up to his full impressive height and held his hand out to the newcomer. There was a smile on his face, but the warmth did not extend to his eyes which were watchful and suspicious. "Glad to meet you Patrick."

Patrick smiled wryly and turned to draw forward a young lady who had been trying to catch up with him. It was obvious to see that she was a dancer too; the taut, perfectly controlled carriage, the slim almost waif-like appearance. "And this is Abigail Green. We're just snatching a break in rehearsals. It's bloody difficult you know. We've got performances each night until Christmas, matinées at weekends and Wednesdays, and we haven't done any of our shopping yet."

Eric beckoned them to take a seat at the table. "Come and join us before we lose our seats, I'll get you both a drink."

"Thanks, but I'll get it." Patrick guided Abigail to a seat, then leaned over her. "Cup of coffee darling?"

“Mmmm, black please.”

“Excuse me one moment,” then he disappeared into the crowds to fetch the drinks.

The young woman looked at Madeline a little shyly. “I’m glad to meet you. Pat talks a great deal about you. He’s brilliant, isn’t he? What a dancer! You’re so lucky to have grown up with him.”

Madeline couldn’t help but smile at such blatant hero worship. Patrick had been difficult to live with, more competitive and aggravating than her real brother. “Yes, I suppose I am,” she chuckled. “I don’t remember a great deal about his dancing, but he was an excellent tree climber when we were little.”

It was dark by the time their unexpected meeting ended, and Eric saw her home. The shoppers had deserted the city now, and the evening revellers had not yet arrived. It was a strange time of night, a moment of flux, like living in limbo. The sulphur smell of coal smoke was a constant presence that hung across the capital, but today the smog was particularly bad and burned at the throat. Neither of them spoke.

Madeline unlocked the front door and then turned, but Eric had stepped back a few paces, and was standing in darkness. She frowned and went anxiously to him. “What is it?”

As though from a distance he murmured, “Madeline, would you like to go to the ballet this evening. We could see your friend Patrick dance.”

She looked up into his rugged face and felt his hands gently on her elbows. She said, “Yes I would like that, but another night. I’ve promised to go to Tanya’s party, and I’m tired after the shopping and all those memories. Whenever I look back like that it hurts, and it takes a while to recover.”

“I’m sorry my sweet. I’m a fool not to have realised that.” He touched her hair gently, a glinting halo that shimmered around her like living gold. “Do you know, I think I’ve fallen very deeply in love with you, and I wish I could heal whatever has hurt you. But I very much fear that I can’t. I couldn’t help but notice how you came alive when you saw that young dancer. Is he the one you want?”

“Good heavens no!” Madeline’s heart was pounding curiously, and she felt stifled. She reached up and touched his cheek gently, her fingers were like five fine exquisitely sensitive points of touch,

exploring the strong lines of his face, moving and caressing. He had been a good friend, more than that. She knew she was playing with fire and yet part of her ached to know what it was like to be kissed and adored.

Her breathing had stopped completely now, and she lay her other hand on his chest. Beneath her fingers, his heart was pounding like a great steam engine racing out of control.

“Madeline,” he groaned and drew her gently into his arms, and she was aware of his face coming towards her. She could just pick out his eyes for a moment.

Then surprise.

His lips were soft, moist and gentle. They touched hers for a brief moment, then were gone.

Slowly she took a breath. She was not afraid. She stretched her chin up and their lips met again. The freshness was still there, the subtle texture and movement of his lips against hers seemed to electrify her, bring her curiously alive. She could taste coffee, smell the familiar presence of a good friend.

Her eyes closed as she relaxed and relished this tremendous discovery. It was good.

The feel of his arms around her was good.

When his tongue stroked her lips exotically, she shivered and relaxed the tense anxious barrier of her jaws slightly.

It was a long breathless exploration, fraction by fraction he coaxed her to respond, drawing the pain and fear from her, until at last she could feel the movement of his tongue against hers, the deep intimate exploration of one mouth by another. And it was good.

It filled her with a tremendous longing to remain here, discovering the magic of him, surrounded by the warmth and mystery of his arms. Tension was growing gloriously inside her, a dark swirling ache that built up, tingling and burning in the pit of her stomach.

Then Madeline’s world shattered around her as she felt the full enormity of his erection pressing against the soft flesh of her stomach.

She was going to be sick.

This was no longer Eric, but Belaugh. That pampered lustful fat face was swirling around her, his sweaty hands pawing at her, and the agony that always followed. She thrust him away from her with

all the strength she possessed.

The movement took him completely by surprise and she was free. "It's no good. Don't touch me again," she hissed. "Please. I can't bear it."

He wiped his hand across his mouth. "Madeline what is it? Christ Almighty you can't kiss me like that and then suddenly turn to ice. You were so responsive, so alive. You could love me if you tried. My dearest, just..."

Shaking unbearably, she scabbled in her bag for her key. "Stop! I'm sorry. It's my fault I... Look, I just can't that's all. You went too quickly. And I don't want..." she opened the door of the house and went in, then glanced back quickly at him. He looked utterly devastated. He was running his fingers in distraction through his hair, and the sight humbled her, filled her with shame. "Eric... you'd be better off if you forgot about me. I'm not worth it. I don't think I'll ever be able to love you back."

"It's him isn't it?"

"No. It's me. Look! Give yourself a break and catch up on your work. It's better if we don't see each other again until after Christmas."

"Madeline..." he called but she closed the door with finality.

The barrier was sealed again between them and all the strength went out of her. She leaned back against the door, shaking now with shock and distress. What had she done to him, and to herself? Slowly, she covered her face in her hands and wept.

It was hopeless. He had shown her the happiness she was missing. But he had also resurrected the mindless overwhelming agony of her stupid fear.



5

SIR RONALD ASHWOOD walked through the long empty corridors of the Academy with his hands clasped behind his back. His face was expressionless, and his thoughts looked inward. As he approached, he could hear young Madeline Brooks playing, and he could sense the horrible disconnect between her and her musicality. It was such a shame after that splendid concert at Queen's Hall.

He entered quietly and watched her until at long last the music stopped. She drew the music onto her knee and flicked back through the pages, looking for a particular section that needed more attention.

"Good afternoon, Madeline. I'm surprised you're still here. Everyone else has packed up and gone home."

She looked up quickly, and a slight frown appeared between her brows. "I have a little more work to do before I go home. There won't be much opportunity for practice over the Christmas period, and the Birmingham festival is only shortly after."

He pulled up a chair, perched beside her and looked at his hands, spreading them out and studying them thoughtfully. "Madeline, we have made tremendous strides in the two years you've been here."

She stiffened suddenly and their eyes met. He had always known that this would be a difficult discussion, but it had to be faced.

"We've achieved a great deal in that time, and I feel that I've done everything I possibly can to help you. But I don't think I can do any

more.”



Madeline’s heart contracted with sudden anguish and her throat tightened so that it was really difficult to breathe. “I’m not sure I understand, Sir Ronald. Are you trying to tell me that there’s no hope for me?”

“No. On the contrary, there’s a great deal of hope,” he continued calmly. “During the last few months, that vital spark has slowly been surfacing through the music. It was fully there at Queen’s Hall, but for some reason it’s vanished again, and the emptiness resonates beneath the sounds.”

“But we’ve tried so hard!” she said in despair.

“Perhaps too hard. And that’s what I want to talk with you about. I’m beginning to believe that we’ve been chasing it away with such an intensive effort. We’ve found ways of papering over the disconnection you feel, but that is not going to be enough.”

She met his eyes and saw him shrug his shoulders helplessly. “I know you *can* do it, Madeline. You have the determination and dedication required, and there is an intense vein of musicality in you, but it’s being held back by something, and I don’t have the key to unlock it. Until you can liberate the musicality and set it free, you won’t achieve your full potential. The thing is, I don’t believe any amount of hard work will do it.”

She turned away from him and ran her fingers up and down the ivory keys, loving the feel of them beneath her fingers and aching to express the music that was bottled and crushed within her. Then she straightened her back and ran her fingers through her thick golden curls, rubbing the fingertips across the scalp.

“I tried to unlock that door myself, several days ago,” she said slowly and softly. “It’s agonisingly painful... when it goes wrong. And now, I’m terrified of what it might do to me if I try again. Every failed attempt just seems to raise the barrier higher.”

She let her hands fall into her lap.

She knew that if she did not pluck up every scrap of her courage and determination and try again, then she would be abandoning all the gifts her father had given her. She could not do that. She could not leave a single stone unturned. Softly, tenderly, she continued, “But I

shall try. I'm not going to give up now."

"You mustn't give up," he said gently. "Now I have a proposition for you. I want to try a new tack."

Her eyes rose to his, suddenly curious.

"Go home and leave your studies behind," he said. "Enjoy Christmas, have fun and let your hair down. I have a hunch we may find the key in a different way. I suspect that if we can't let your music out, perhaps we can find a way to let others in. I'm going to talk this over with my staff and we will design a new regime for you."

She nodded slowly. It might just possibly work. And it was certainly worth trying. Then she took a deep breath. "Very well. We'll try a new approach. I'll put all of this to one side for a few weeks."

He nodded and watched her gather up her music. If success was the reward of hard work, then she deserved success. She worked herself remorselessly.



Madeline telephoned Harborough Hall before she boarded the train, and by the time she reached Flitwick, she had left her studies behind and bridged the great gulf between ambitions and simple pleasure. She was longing to see everyone again.

Harborough Hall hardly seemed to change as the years passed. Phyllis had become slimmer, and more determined. All due, Madeline supposed, to the constant battles with her husband. He had not been easy with her. He had attempted to evict her and their three protégées, to disown responsibility for them and to divorce her. But she had fought him and won. She had no intention of letting him slide out of his responsibilities until all three young people were firmly established. His weakness was that he could not afford adverse publicity.

Madeline watched the leafless wind-swept countryside pass by, obscured at times by clouds of smoke from the labouring engine.

As the train slowed into the station, she threw the door open and jumped down onto the platform.

Running feet clattered towards her, and she found herself being fiercely hugged by her old friend Tina. She returned the embrace then looked closely at her friend, finding it difficult to recognise her as the

girl she remembered from their orphanage days. "My, you are a sight for sore eyes, Tina. You look every inch the professional secretary."

"I have to be," the young woman's speech was flawlessly articulate now, having lost any trace of a west country accent. "I'm organising an exhibition for the company next November in London. That means making all the arrangements, coordinating the workforce and suppliers, and of course dealing with customers."

Behind them, Briggs the chauffeur reached up into the carriage and lifted her suitcase down. "Is this all, Miss Madeline?"

"Yes, thank you Briggs. Hasn't Phyllis come with you?"

"No," Tina took her arm and guided her out towards the car. "She asked me to come in her stead. She has a visitor at the moment."

Madeline looked sharply at her. She could see by the expression on Tina's face that something was wrong, and disquiet suddenly flared through her. "I don't suppose that would be Belaugh, by any chance?"

Tina nodded. "How did you guess?"

"It wasn't difficult. It's typical of him to visit Phyllis at Christmas and try to spoil the celebrations for her." She turned to the chauffeur. "We'll hurry straight home Briggs. I'd rather be there with Phyllis."

"I think she wanted privacy, Maddy," Tina warned.

"Hmm!" Madeline's lips compressed into a hard line. "I expect that's what she told you, but I'm not leaving her to face him alone."

They arrived back at the house after a long detour. Briggs had driven the entire distance at a determinedly sedate pace and nothing she had said, promised or threatened could induce him to drive more speedily or disobey the orders Phyllis had given him.

As they eventually turned into the long tree lined drive to Harborough Hall, a black Bentley swept past them at high speed and swerved out onto the road, and Madeline caught sight of an abhorred figure sitting in the back.

She found Phyllis placidly sitting at her writing desk, making notes in her diary. The older woman's face was calm and serene in its comfortable determination, and she was humming softly to herself.

Madeline paused in the doorway and looked at her in surprise. Once the shock had worn off, curiosity took its place. She stepped forward into the room.

Phyllis glanced up from her writing. She placed her pen down

carefully and rose to her feet, holding her arms out in the universal gesture of welcome. "Ah Madeline, my dearest. Welcome home."

"Are you alright, Phyllis?" Madeline came to give her a hug, then examined her face closely and laughed. "How can you be so cheerful if you've had a visit from *him*?"

"Oh, very easily, I assure you. He brought me a great deal of good news, although I fancy it did not please him very much." Phyllis smiled and touched Madeline's concerned cheek. "There is nothing to be anxious about, it was purely a financial matter. I've been dabbling in the stock market over the past year or so. Not with a great deal of money, just what I inherited from my father. But I've done very well out of it, thanks to some sound advice from a good friend of mine. Last month, I had the audacity to buy a block of shares in Bernard's company."

Madeline laughed in sheer delight. "Oh, I'm so relieved. I thought he was here to make trouble for you."

"Oh, he tried to, but my investments make an independent woman of me now. He will need to continue maintaining the house, but we can ignore his petty financial restrictions. He was furious to lose the last scrap of power over us!" She smiled in satisfaction. "I really enjoyed informing him of the situation. However, I'm sorry I couldn't be there to meet you."

"That's not a problem. I would love to have been a fly on the wall and watched his response, though."

The two women exchanged an understanding smile, then Madeline remembered that Tina had followed her in, and turned to explain. "You probably think we're idiotic, but Belaugh can be a deeply unpleasant bully, and his visits often leave a terrible cloud over the house."

"I remember how he's upset you both in the past," Tina nodded. "It's appalling that men are able to rule our lives. My boss is paid ten times my salary, and yet he sits back and dictates his needs then leaves me to do the work, make the decisions and follow them through."

"Hmm!" Madeline said tartly. "He should at least recognise what you're doing Tina."

"He does, but grudgingly. I'm merely the flunky in charge."

"Ah Tina," Phyllis sighed sadly. "I'm afraid it's always been like

that, unless you are prepared to fight tooth and nail to be recognised." Phyllis took them both by the arm with a cosy smile. "Perhaps one day it will change. Now, are you two hungry?"



They had been gossiping for ages after everyone else had retired to bed. Madeline was sleepily watching Tina brush her hair and could not help but exclaim enviously, "I wish my hair would behave as well as yours. I have such difficulty persuading it to remain straight."

Tina simply laughed and their eyes met in the mirror. "You have beautiful hair Maddy, a mass of curls. It's like a golden halo. I think you should not even try to straighten it."

"Perhaps you're right," she smiled. "But tell me all about your work and this thoughtless boss of yours. Are you really enjoying what you do?"

"Yes, I am." Tina met her eyes in the mirror and smiled teasingly. "It gives me the chance to meet a great many wealthy young men. I've even been dined at the Savoy recently. Who would have imagined that an orphanage girl could climb so high? My director needed a hostess for the occasion and chose me."

"And he brought you to London simply to impress and entertain clients? He must think very highly of you. It will have cost the business a small fortune."

"We were in the city office hunting anyway. I was going to keep it a secret, but I'm moving to London after Christmas, and I shall be bringing the best of my office girls with me. It would be impossible to co-ordinate the final details for the exhibition from Bristol. And of course, all our suppliers and clients need a representative to talk to."

"We'll be able to get together more often when you come," Madeline smiled slightly. "You've done very well since you left Pitman's. But it must have been hard."

Tina unhooked her silk stockings and began to unroll them carefully, then shook them out and lay them on the chair. She changed slowly into her nightdress, a beautiful fine silk creation that hugged her slim figure seductively. "Yes, it was a challenge. But every time I faced a new barrier, I thought of Phyllis. She's been a great inspiration; she's so calm and capable, and she manages this place completely by herself."

The young girl shuddered suddenly. "But imagine being married to that fat thing! It's something I could never do, no matter how great the reward. But I suppose she found the personal sacrifice worth it."

"I think you have the wrong idea about Phyllis, Tina," Madeline said slowly, shocked at her friend's low opinion of Phyllis. "She respected him a great deal during the early years, before she discovered the truth about his less attractive traits. When she did, she threw him out. But tell me, what's this director of yours really like? I'm finding it hard to imagine him."

Tina looked sharply at Madeline then turned away, and her voice sounded casual. "He's about thirty-five, ambitious and determined. He snores in his sleep. I think his wife won't let him near her, poor man. Now it's your turn to tell me what this gorgeous Eric is like."

Madeline smiled slightly. "He's our age, intelligent, kind and handsome in a rugged sort of way. He's studying aeronautical engineering at Imperial."

"Wow. He'll have quite a future then! I think you should marry him, Maddy." Tina leaned her chin on her hands, and her bubbling, teasing eyes smiled. "He'll be in a reserved occupation, so he won't be called up to fight. They'll need him to develop planes for the RAF. Just a small word of advice though," and those eyes suddenly became serious. "Make sure he's good in bed before you commit yourself. Some men can be utterly boring. The imaginative ones will hook you for life."

"How cynical you sound," Madeline shook her head in wonder. "Marriage isn't for me, Tina. I shan't be seeing Eric again."

"Heavens above then, what are you going to do? Maddy, you can't dwindle into an old maid!"

"I shan't dwindle!" Madeline laughed, and determination flamed through her. "I have a completely different aim in life. You must come to one of my concerts or recitals when you're in London, then you will see what I really want to do."

"Oh, I'd love to," Tina's eyes grew far away. "Perhaps I'll invite a few of our clients to hear you play. That should impress them as well as Phillip."

"Your director?"

"Mmmm." But an odd flicker of pain passed across Tina's mobile face, and she looked away again hastily.

Madeline impulsively lay her hand over Tina's. "What's wrong Tina? You've fallen in love with him, haven't you?"

"Yes. But he's married already, to a silly pretty creature. They have two daughters, and he won't leave them."

"If he has any intelligence," Madeline said slowly, "he will know exactly how special you are, and how wrong he is to do this to you."

Then she leaned back slowly and studied Tina's tense face, and began to wonder whether Phillip was worth Tina's regard. What sort of man was he to have an affair with his secretary and then go home every night to his family as though nothing had happened? "Have you talked it over with him?"

"Many times," she grimaced. "But it's like treading on broken glass. We don't want to hurt each other, and he won't abandon his family. So, I've tried to make the break from him. I've been out with other men, but it's no use. He's the one I want to be with."

Madeline looked at the distress in her friend's face, and fury flamed through her. She knew in her heart that Tina was being used and badly treated. But she could not say that in so many words, so she murmured, "Tell me, do you enjoy your life and your work?"

"Yes. But I don't want to remain a secretary for ever. I want a home and a family of my own. I want to be wanted!"

"Don't despair Tina. You must give yourself time. You'll find someone."

"But I'm twenty-one now!" she cried in anguish.

"That's hardly any age," Madeline laughed gently and leaned forward to take Tina's hands in her own. "A solution will come to you when you're least expecting it."

"I wish I had the confidence and certainty that you have. You've always known what you want to do with your life, and you've been working towards it for so long you're almost there."

Madeline shook her head slowly, thinking of the empty hollow at the centre of her life. "I still have a huge mountain of my own to climb, Tina, and I don't know if I'll ever surmount it. But you are *only* twenty-one, and you still have plenty of time. You've succeeded in a very hard world. Don't ever belittle yourself."

"Do you really think so?" she asked, studying Madeline's face avidly.

“I know so.”

Then Tina smiled. “Oh, it’s so good to talk to you. There’s nobody else I can confide in. The office girls are much younger than me, and I could never discuss the private life of their boss with them. It makes life so difficult. It’s horrible to have such a problem all alone.”

“Well, you won’t be alone soon. We’ll be in London together.”



Madeline left her friend to sleep in the early hours of the morning and walked slowly through the cold echoing corridors of the house. She did not go straight to bed, but made a solitary round of the house, so that she could think and reacquaint herself with home. It was very peaceful with only the soft whisper of her slippers on the polished marble floor to keep her company.

She pushed open the door of the drawing room, and her first thought was that the fire had flared up and she ought to damp it down. A welcoming red glow had spread throughout the room, and it struck hot after the chill of the corridors. She took a stride towards the fire and then froze.

Their voices were hushed, little more than a sensuous whisper.

Patrick and Abigail had made a warm soft nest on the floor in front of the roaring fire. Surrounded by cushions and furs they were making love fervently, their clothes scattered wildly in all directions.

Their two bodies were vigorous, well-muscled and beautiful, firelight played across their skin making it glow like burnished gold, and they gloried in the intimate touch of each other. He was working into her in a graceful powerful motion that was driving her relentlessly to moaning distraction.

The sight was barbaric and yet tender and riveting, and it caught Madeline’s breath in her throat as though a hand had taken her by the neck and was holding her in suspension.

Abigail’s face was utterly enrapt in pleasure and eagerness. Her slender feminine hands were touching and exploring the hardness of his powerful figure. Gradually the shaky gasp and murmur of her pleasure turned to eager cries of ecstasy.

Madeline took a silent step back, and then another. The sounds and vision swirled around her.

Once beyond the door, she turned and fled. She was trembling in every limb, and it took a long while for the shock to wear off. And when it did, she felt a surge of utter despair.

The young couple downstairs were only doing what was natural. Yet in her wildest dreams she could never imagine overcoming the disgust that lay inside herself enough to allow that to happen.

But she *had* to if she was to live a normal life. If she did not unlock that terrible barrier of horror, then she would never have her music back, and she would be condemned to the loneliness and bitterness of a single existence. She was not like that, she wanted to live!

Madeline dragged her fingers through her golden hair, sweeping it back from her face. Then she stood up slowly and looked at herself in the mirror. The face looking back was delicate and beautiful too. She was young. Her figure was slim and attractive, and built to be loved.

She ached to be loved.

Slowly, hesitantly, she slipped her night gown off. There was no difference between her and the two dancers downstairs. Riding had honed her body so that she was strong and lithe.

She thought of Eric, of the way he had kissed her, and the powerful feelings it had roused in her. She ran the tip of her finger slowly down the contours of her figure and dared to imagine.

She had wanted to touch and explore him, just as Abigail and Patrick were doing.

But then pure horror flooded through her at the thought of him using her body. She felt physically sick.

She remembered the swirling brutal lust with which Belaugh had ravished her, the complete degradation of spirit and soul that he had inflicted on her. She very much doubted that she would ever be able to tolerate the idea of any man possessing her and using her to gratify that physical compulsion. No one had the right to do that to her again.



6

MADLINE RETURNED FROM her Christmas holiday, refreshed and reinvigorated by the relaxed family atmosphere, and determined not to allow anything or anyone to jeopardise the new approach her tutors were devising to help unlock her musicality. That is where her future lay.

January was a cold bleak month in contrast to the warmth of Christmas, and the students hurried quickly between their lodgings and colleges, muffled up against the biting wind and driving rain.

The debating group met one frosty evening to plan the term's activities, and as secretary and treasurer of the group, Madeline attended the meeting. The room struck hot and stuffy after the freezing briskness of the air outside, and her cheeks stung like fire. She unwound her scarf, stripped off her gloves amid a hail of greetings and turned to reply in fashion.

Eric was already here, and she took a deep determined breath. He was watching her, his eyes uncertain and insecure as she had never seen them before.

It was painful to see such a strong and confident character suddenly the victim of self-doubt.

She smiled in a friendly fashion and calmly took her place at the table opposite him, opening her notebook to take the minutes.

The moment he looked away, she examined him more closely. He

appeared both tired and troubled, as though something was weighing on his mind. And she knew that what she intended to say would not leave him feeling any better. But it was her only option.

Eric did not allow his inner misgivings to affect his handling of the society, though, and he chaired the meeting with his customary outgoing charm and capability. When the meeting broke up a couple of hours later, Madeline pulled on her coat, hat and gloves, and purposefully crossed the room to him.

He was engrossed in conversation, but when he saw her approach a smile touched his eyes. He bade goodbye to his companions and looked down into her face with growing confidence. "May I walk you home, my dear?"

"Thank you," she nodded and stepped out into the cold night. The dry icy air took her breath away momentarily, and she was glad of his warmth beside her as he drew her arm through his. "Eric, you look exhausted. Have you been working all Christmas?"

"More or less," he laughed. "Is it that clear to see? I've caught up completely on my work and put in some revision."

The old feeling of familiarity settled between them again. It was a comfortable friendship, but she knew it could not last. He wanted too much from her, and that was likely to damage her yet again.

"I'm glad your studies are back on course. That's the most important thing." She stopped walking, and turned to face him, hesitating for just a moment. "We really must talk privately. About us. You're a good friend, Eric, but we're not doing each other any good."

"Don't say that." He touched her lips hastily, and the fingers explored her face sensuously. "I've had a feeling all through Christmas that you'd want to break off our friendship, and I don't want that. It's not logical. We have so much together."

"And yet so little! This is going nowhere Eric," she said calmly.

It was too dark on that late January night to see him clearly, but she found her face gently cupped up, and the soft tender sweetness of his lips touching hers, coaxing and enquiring.

It was entralling, and Madeline felt a responding eagerness swell through her. It was as though she was completely alone, floating over a dark abyss, anchored only by the contact with his lips. Around her swirled the dark warmth of unexplored sensations and emotions.

She wanted so much to be able to trust and try but she knew that if the horror returned, the outcome was just too high a price to pay. The tears of her longing sprang fiercely in her eyes, and against her will, her hands crept up to his shoulders to grasp them and hold them.

She felt the enclosing circle of his embrace, the growing confidence and intimacy of the kiss, and the growing passion of his need for her. It was a hunger that came over him gradually. It changed the nature of his kiss. It became raw, masculine, powerful and utterly physical. She could feel the strength of his arms as he crushed her tighter against him, and she knew with utter certainty that if she did not stop this now, she would be reduced to a devastated wreck again. She had to protect herself.

She turned her head to one side and gasped hoarsely, "Eric, we must talk."

"Talking is such a waste of time," his insistent fingers turned her chin up.

"No!" she cried fiercely and turned the other way. "Listen to me. This won't work. Can't you see that? It's pointless to continue with a relationship that will only hurt us both."

"What is this thing with you Madeline? Something's eating you up isn't it, and you're taking it out on me," he demanded angrily.

"No, I'm not. I just don't have the time or the desire for this Eric. I've got a lot of work to do, and if I don't concentrate with all my mind on that, I shall fail. The same applies to you. You have to devote yourself to your studies now and work hard."

"I see," he said coldly. "I suppose your career..."

"Don't," she pressed her fingers fiercely across his lips. "This is utterly pointless. My life is bound up with music and performing, that's all there is to it."

He turned on his heel and disappeared into the darkness, leaving her standing alone, chilled to the bone and feeling very guilty that she had hurt him.



Madeline concentrated with all her mind on the new regime that had been created for her at the Academy. She was drawn into the rehearsals and classes of many other students, hearing and absorbing

their music. She attended concerts and recitals, and prepared her own music for the festival at Birmingham.

Then when the day arrived, she and Sir Ronald travelled to Birmingham by train. Being February, it was cold and inhospitable, so they booked into the hotel immediately and spent the late afternoon very quietly talking by the comfort of the lounge fire. It always helped her to talk about completely different matters, wipe her mind free before performing.

There were four young people, each playing a different instrument, each of outstanding ability. Madeline was due to play last, and throughout the concert, she stood quietly in the shadows just offstage, listening to each of her contemporaries in turn.

Their music was excellent, but it was not until the violinist put his bow to the strings, that the evening came alive. She stood enthralled.

He was a tall young man with wide set shoulders, yet a flexible, expressive figure and face, that moved and wove a lyrical web of tremendous beauty and character. His blue eyes were open but sightless, caught up in the inner act of creation, his fiery red hair seemed to burn with the energy of his ability.

The music he made was hauntingly sensitive, and yet was capable of expanding to powerful splendour.

She was entranced, just as the audience was.

It was painful when the recital finally came to an end, and the sounds died away and were gone. She took a deep breath and glanced down at her programme. Joshua Hanson. She had never heard his name before, but without a doubt she would hear it again. He had a tremendous future.

He was taking his bow gracefully, violin and bow tucked under his arm, and his youthful personality was surfacing. There was delight on his face, pure pleasure at the response of his audience.

After a few minutes he turned and made his way offstage, passing close to Madeline as she stood concealed in the darkness. An elderly lady gave him an enormous hug and took his instrument, then he returned to take another bow.

Madeline sighed and slipped away to her dressing room. It was her turn to get ready. The fire of his music seemed to have stirred a tremendous riot of feelings within her that were hard to contain, and she paced restlessly around the room. This was idiotic. She was due to

perform in a few minutes.

When the knock came on her door, she composed herself and made her way to the stage. She had only a few seconds to wait whilst the introduction was made, then it was her turn.

She raised her chin and stepped out into the bright light. As always, the exhilaration of live performance thrilled through her.

She sat at the piano and made herself completely comfortable, then concentrated inwardly.

A thrill like pure fire ran through her veins. She was alive. The magic was back inside her, wild and turbulent, inspired and liberated by the music of the young violinist.

She stretched her fingers out to the cool ivory keys and played.

She played well. She could feel it running through her and through the audience. And when she finished, their applause lifted her to her feet as though she was floating on a cloud.

Sir Ronald was waiting at the stage door, and he gripped her two hands, genuine delight wreathing his face. "You've done it Madeline. It was all there. This was the breakthrough we've been waiting for."

The applause was continuing expectantly behind her, and as she returned to the stage to acknowledge her audience, she found the tall red-haired violinist standing in the gloom just where she had been earlier. Their eyes met for a moment. Shock surged through Madeline at the strength of their musical connection.

When she returned minutes later, he was gone.



The city of Birmingham had laid on a formal reception with refreshments for the young people participating in the event, providing a valuable opportunity for them to meet each other, as well as a selection of the local dignitaries, prominent musicians and music critics. The mayor spoke to each of them in turn, thanking them for their contribution, and once those formalities were over, Madeline glanced quickly around the room. She wanted to meet the young violinist.

Joshua Hanson was not there, and that surprised her.

Surely, he would not have left without attending the reception. Not only was ill-mannered, but he would miss a unique opportunity

to meet some of the musicians and conductors who could do the career of a young soloist a great deal of good.

Madeline moved around the room with Sir Ronald at her side, exchanging conversations with the people who were introduced to her, and gradually it became obvious that Joshua Hanson was not going to appear.

She touched Sir Ronald's arm. "I'm just slipping out to get a little fresh air."

"Are you feeling alright Madeline?"

"A little hot and stifled. I'll be back in a minute. Please make my apologies if I'm missed."

"I'll come with you..."

"No. I think one of us should remain here. I will only be a few minutes. Please."

He nodded and smiled, and moments later Madeline stepped out into the cold corridor.

She went to the dressing rooms first, peering into each, but they were deserted. She ran down the steps to the stage door where the cars were parked, but there was no sign of him, just the halos of street lighting and an empty, icy pavement.

It was beginning to sleet, the darting white pellets of snow swirling in air. As a last resort she returned quickly to the stage, but the lights were out. The vast hall was growing cold, and there was no one there.

He must simply have packed up his instrument and left.

She returned to the reception, but though she had been gone only a few minutes, several of the participants were preparing to leave and came to bid her farewell. She found Sir Ronald in deep conversation with a distinguished looking gentleman, and when he spotted her he beckoned her over. "Ah Madeline, come and meet Mr Philip Godlee from the Halle."

She held her hand out. "I'm pleased to meet you, sir."

The gentleman shook her hand. "Congratulations on a very impressive recital Miss Brooks. We were just discussing the possibility that you could play with the Halle next year. We're putting together a choral programme with Dr Sargent conducting, including the Beethoven Choral Fantasia, Bach Magnificat, and three of

Rachmaninov's *Morceaux de Fantaisie* for piano. I know you've performed the Rachmaninov before, but I gather you haven't tackled the Beethoven yet?"

Madeline shook her head. "No, but I'd be delighted to do so."

"That's excellent. Treat this as a firm appointment. I'll write to you in due course to confirm the details. But I heard you play the *Prelude*, *Polichinelle* and *Serenade* several years ago, and I'd particularly like to hear what you make of them now."

"That was a long while ago," she smiled, remembering her youthful enthusiasm for those ferociously difficult works. "My interpretation has evolved considerably since then."

"Good." He shook her hand again. "Well, it has been a pleasure to meet you. I will be in contact soon."

"Thank you. Goodbye."

Madeline watched the retreating figure for a few moments, then glanced at her professor. Sir Ronald was smiling slightly. "That was fortuitous. Very."

Madeline nodded. "It amazes me how many people remember the concert I gave all those years ago."

"It was good training and, as you can see," Sir Ronald nodded towards the retreating figure, "it's given you a head start in the race to be noticed. It's a great honour to be invited to play with the Halle."

She glanced up at that moment and caught sight of the tall figure of Joshua Hanson. He was besieged on all sides by people wanting to speak to him, and he was shaking hands as he went, smiling and sociable. But she could see he was far from well. His face was unnaturally pale, his features pinched and drawn.

He was having great difficulty in breathing, and the sight of his lonely struggle tore Madeline to the heart, reminding her of her mother's terrible illness.

How could the people accosting him not see that he was having difficulties? They were expecting him to pander to their every request!

He ignored the crowd for a moment, and his frowning eyes searched the room. Then his attention was dragged back unwillingly to the horde clamouring for his attention.

So, this was why he had not been at the reception earlier.

He looked up again, searching the room hastily. Their eyes met,

and his frown turned to a look of sheer relief. With a brief word of apology, he abandoned those surrounding him and crossed the room towards her.

She hurried to meet him. The effort of speaking was visibly draining him. He took her two hands in his and looked down at them, spreading her slender fingers out over his own, then he gasped hoarsely, "Must say this quickly... You play so beautifully..."

She gripped his sensitive hands gently, deeply moved by his need to speak to her. It was a poignant echo of her own desire to see him earlier. But he looked utterly haggard now. "I'm surprised you've come back. You should be resting."

"I shouldn't have come," he admitted, his voice husky and breathless.

"What is it? Are you very ill?"

"Asthma. But I had to see you. We must play together. I'm coming to London soon. Where can I find you?"

She searched quickly in her handbag for something to write on, her heart pounding. She found an old envelope and pencil and noted her address down. "Here, this is my apartment. If I'm not there, you'll find me at the Royal Academy of Music. Now go and rest. And please... take care of yourself."

His face relaxed at last, and he placed the note safely in the inside pocket of his jacket. "I will see you soon. But... I dare not stay..."

"I understand, just go." She watched him turn away, and the anxious elderly lady glanced once in her direction, then she guided him out through the door.



7

MADLINE FOUND SLEEP elusive for many hours that night as she lay in the privacy of her hotel room. The chambermaid had just been in to damp down the fire and the air was stinging her cheeks as it grew cold, but the drop in temperature did not even register in her mind.

It always took a long while for the exhilaration and stimulation of performance to ebb away enough for her to feel sleepy, and this evening she had Sir Philip Godlee's proposal to consider. Then as she began to relax enough to feel sleepy, she closed her eyes and the beauty of Joshua Hanson's music filled her soul. His feelings and interpretations were so closely akin to her own that it hurt. And the pain was achieving something miraculous. It was liberating the sensitivity and expressiveness that had been lying dormant for so long. Even now, the emotion that surged through her was overwhelming, and needed an outlet.

She ached to play but there was no piano here. So she mentally went through a great many of the compositions that she had been learning, seeing them in a completely new light: with a subtlety, spontaneity and a freshness that thrilled her. Could this be possible? Could his playing really be prizing open the closed doors to her powers of expression?



* * *

Madeline travelled home without speaking much. She was extremely tired after such a broken night. She bade farewell to Sir Ronald at Paddington and made her way home on the underground, finally turning into Duke Street not far from her apartment.

As she walked the last few yards, she noticed a dry bitterness of smoke in the afternoon air, a damp stale smell utterly in tune with the drizzling rain. The wind gusted suddenly at her coat, pulling the buttons open and she put her case down for a moment to pull it back together. Then she went on her way again, head bent against the driving wetness.

She groped in her bag for her key then raised it to the lock and stopped. The door was open, the smell of smoke was coming from within.

She pushed on the door and it swung inwards, revealing a blackened dripping husk.

"Oh my God! Josie!" she cried out in horror. Her friend had been alone here over the last few days. Hastily she stepped in and then leapt back as the floorboards sagged under her weight. The floor had burnt right through in places, and she could see the bare ground beneath, littered with blackened debris that had once been furniture and wooden beams. Her eyes moved upwards to the floors above where Josie and she had shared rooms, and she could feel the rain on her face, see the broken cindered remnants of rafters and ceilings.

There was nothing left.

Unable to accept what she saw, she turned and looked out at the street. It was quiet and perfectly normal. She shivered as she thought of the devastating flames that must have done this. Whatever had happened to Josie and Mrs Cork?

Numbly she bent to pick up her case. Someone in one of the surrounding houses should surely know where they were. She looked up and down the street and caught sight of a pair of eyes watching from behind a grimy curtain opposite. The curtain fluttered and the face was gone as though afraid to be found watching.

Madeline crossed the road and knocked loudly at the front door, and within moments it was opened by an elderly lady with gaunt face and coloured hair.

"I'm sorry to bother you," Madeline began. "But I was a lodger in

the house over there. What happened?"

The old woman looked critically at Madeline's face and then her suitcase. "You can see what happened young miss. There was a fire."

"When did it happen?"

"Late last night. Now if you don't mind..."

"Was anyone hurt?" she persisted, putting her foot in the door to keep it open.

"Look, I don't know, and frankly I don't care."

"Please, I shared rooms there with a college friend. Do you know what happened to her?"

"If you're one of those young tramps that bring young men back at all hours of the night, then you've only got what you deserved. You students are all the same."

Madeline's cheeks surged red with anger. "Why thank you for your generous and Christian concern! You have been *so* very helpful." She turned on her heel, swept her case up and marched away. The bitter old woman deserved a similar fate.

A short distance on, she became aware that a voice was calling. "Young lady... dearie... just a minute."

She turned to find a middle-aged woman leaning out of an upstairs window, beckoning her over urgently.

Madeline looked up at the plump comfortable face, beneath curlers and scarf. "Yes?"

"Take no notice of the old biddy. You're one of Ruth Cork's students, aren't you?"

Madeline nodded.

"Come on up. I'll make you a cup of tea, I would imagine you must need it, or perhaps something stronger."

A short while later, Madeline was sitting comfortably in the kitchen sipping a hot cup of tea. The warmth and sweetness were making her feel slightly less shaken. "So, most of them were safely out when it happened?"

"Yes. They'd gone out for the evening. I was watching the firemen at work most of the night. Well, nothing much happens here does it? And I saw them come back together, and spend ages watching. Don't know if your friend was among them, or where they went after that. Ruth Cork got out alright, but they had to take her to hospital. That

would be Barts I expect. You'd best check there first for your friend."

"Thanks so much for your help, and for the tea." Madeline glanced quickly at her watch and rose briskly to her feet. It was nearly five in the afternoon. "I must be on my way and make some enquiries now."

She went first of all to St Bartholomew's hospital and visited Mrs Cork, but Josie had not been brought in, and the elderly lady had no idea what had happened to her. After that, she tried several of Josie's friends, but they had heard nothing about the fire.

As the evening progressed, she was becoming increasingly worried for her friend's safety. The offices at Imperial were closed, being Sunday, and finally in desperation she travelled across London to Arny's lodgings. It was ten thirty in the evening by the time she knocked on his door, and she was cold, soaked to the skin and deeply upset.

She heard movements inside, then the door opened and Arny peered out at her without any sign of recognition. The hallway was very dark, and she could see a dim wash of distant light behind him, making him appear thin and gaunt. As she peered closer at him, she could see he was unshaven and more than a little bleary eyed.

She swallowed hard. "Arny, have you heard any news about Josie?"

"Josie?" his voice hardened with suspicion. "Why do you want to know?"

"I've tried the hospitals and the college. I've been to see Tanya and Audrey..."

"Oh, it's you Madeline!" He rubbed his face wearily and sighed. "Come in. I was just catching a nap on the sofa. Didn't sleep at all last night." He stepped back to let her into the house and then guided her up the stairs.

His rooms were dark and quiet, and an ominous feeling of dread filled Madeline. Arny looked shattered and dispirited. "For heaven's sake, Arny, was she trapped in the fire?" she demanded urgently. "Is she alright?"

"Sh. Not so loud. Come and see." He put his hand on her shoulder and guided her quietly into his bedroom. The curtains were pulled making the room even gloomier than the lounge.

There was a figure curled up under the bed clothes, and when he eased the eiderdown back slightly, she saw Josie's rich dark brown

curls.

“Oh, thank God!” Madeline relaxed at long last, and tears of relief filled her eyes. She touched her friend’s hair then looked up at Army. “She is alright, isn’t she? You both look absolutely shattered.”

“It’s not surprising. We spent last night and most of today at the police station. They found the materials that set fire to the house hidden in your rooms.”

“But that’s crazy!” Her eyes moved to Josie’s gentle face. “She’d never do anything like that. She wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

Josie stirred restlessly at the sound of their voices. Madeline rose quickly to her feet and beckoned Army out of the room so that their conversation would not wake her.

Army followed and rubbed his unshaven face clumsily. “They gave her a rough time. I don’t know how she kept her calm, but she was amazing. They even tried to suggest she was a blackshirt and making explosives...”

“Well, I sincerely hope they’ve cleared her from suspicion. She’s the last person on earth who’d do a thing like that. Oh heavens! Does that mean they suspect me too? I suppose I’d better pay them a visit.”

He smiled tiredly. “Don’t do it until the morning. If they treat you the way they treated Josie, you’ll need a good night’s sleep behind you, and prepare yourself for an unpleasant interrogation. Have you got anywhere to stay tonight? Will Eric put you up?”

“No,” she shook her head. “Eric and I have decided to go our separate ways.”

He looked quickly back at the occupied bedroom. “Well you could share the bed with Josie if you like. I’ll be using the sofa anyway.”



The police held Madeline for eight hours, asking her repeated questions. They wanted to know about her friends and acquaintances, her movements and actions, and asked her some searching questions about her political ideas, probing deeply into the background of the debating group as though it was some sort of subversive society. In the end she was so tired that she hardly had the mental capacity to consider what she was saying, and anger and frustration took over.

Eventually she was released from custody, and she and Josie

began to consider how they could rebuild their lives.

They spent several days hunting for new accommodation and buying the simple necessities of life: clothes, underwear and toiletries. Then once they had moved into new rooms and began to get down to their studies again, the reality of the situation struck home. They had both lost a great deal of their work and many reference books. It would be impossible to replace everything that had been destroyed.



Mathilda Braithwaite climbed the stairs to her grandson's room and her face was grim. She did not knock, but walked straight in, and stood looking down at the young man.

He looked up quickly and pushed a book under his pillow. "Don't you know it's polite to knock Grandmother?"

She looked coldly down at him. "You must learn a better standard of manners young man."

His face reddened grudgingly, and he murmured, "I'm sorry."

"I should hope so." She came into his room, and her presence seemed to fill it. She sat on the edge of the bed and regarded him with a steady gaze.

He began to look a little anxious. "I'll do my best Grandmother."

She nodded and bent over to slide a large box out from under his bed.

"What are you doing?" he whispered indignantly. "That's mine."

She said nothing, but opened the dusty, finger smeared lid, and with great precision, extracted a scrap book.

She glanced at his pale frozen face, then opened the book. There was a picture of Matthew and Madeline Brooks standing with their grandfather. Comments were scrawled in spidery writing alongside it.

She traced her fingers to the next page, a press cutting of Madeline's success. Another page, a letter from Grandfather Braithwaite, praising Matthew's achievements at rugby and shooting. The pages turned slowly, cataloguing the family's progress. Then the most recent was a picture of the burnt out flat. She opened the page wide and looked back questioningly at the young boy.

His face had frozen, and he was staring at his grandmother.

She sniffed. "That was not a very clever way of doing it Jeremy."



8

THE GREEN FRESHNESS of spring spread its mantle across London. The trees burst forth with exuberant leaf, decking Regent's Park behind the Academy with the brightest of new life. All through that time, Madeline continued to hope that she would hear word from the young violinist, but no news came. She was caught tantalisingly close to playing as she had always wanted to. Yet even now, the full power of her music was being held back within her.

One afternoon in April, she was climbing the steps into the Academy from the Marylebone Road, and chatting with three of her friends. "So, you'd like me to accompany you at Sandiman's bar tonight."

"Mmmm. I'd be grateful if you could. The whole thing is going to sound really thin unless I can find a stand-in for my usual pianist." Jennifer murmured. "I've performed there several times in the past, and the proprietor pays handsomely. He's quite a dish too."

Madeline laughed. "You know them all don't you?"

Jenny smiled. "Well, I pride myself on having a discerning taste. But seriously, I find the extra money helps me pay my way. They usually dance until midnight and have a formal dress code, so you'll need to wear evening dress."

"Well, it sounds like fun," she agreed. It would be quite refreshing to play popular dance music for a change. "I'll come." Then she

stopped in mid stride, and her eyes widened.

Waiting just across the spacious entrance hall was a slim redhaired figure muffled up in a dark grey winter coat, with a white lamb's wool scarf around his neck. He had come at last!

She turned and thrust her books into Jenny's arms. "Would you mind taking these to class for me? I'll be there shortly... I expect."

Then without waiting for a reply she crossed the draughty space by the main entrance and held her hands out in a friendly fashion. "Mr Hanson, it's marvellous to see you again. I've been hoping to hear something for months."

"I did write to you, three times in fact." He gripped her fingers and looked searchingly into her eyes. "When you didn't reply, I almost decided not to come."

"Three times? Oh, no! I'm *so* sorry. There was a fire at our lodgings a few months ago and we've had tremendous problems trying to get our post redirected to our new address. I suspect quite a few letters have gone astray."

"Ah, so that was it!" A slow smile warmed his eyes, crinkling the skin attractively. "I was sure there had to be a genuine reason."

"Come in out of the cold, you're half frozen. I know a quiet room where we could talk." She looked around quickly for signs of his instrument, and disappointment filled her. "Have you not brought your violin with you?"

"My violin? No, not today. But," he laughed, "aren't you supposed to be attending a lecture now?"

Madeline smiled. "Yes. But it doesn't matter. It's only composition, I can catch up later."

"No. I'll come with you. I wouldn't dream of taking you from your studies. Besides, it will give me a taste of what's to come. I've decided to make the break and come to London. It's the only way to forward my career. I shall begin studying here next month." Then he cocked his head slightly onto one side, his eyes warming with an internal fire of appreciation as he absorbed the sounds around him. "What an atmosphere this place has. Just listen to that."

Madeline became aware of the familiar distant cacophony of sounds, small snippets of music on all sorts of instruments coming from the many practice rooms around and above them. She smiled. "It's like that all the time. You get used to it after a while."

"I seriously doubt that I shall," he laughed suddenly. "I think these sounds will remain with me all my life."

So, they attended a lecture on composition together, and once the lecture was over, the two of them spent a long while discussing what they had heard. Then they moved on to the thorny question of whether they should interpret music as they felt it, or in the style of its composer and the fashion of his day, or in the mode currently being popularised by today's virtuosi. All versions should have validity, surely.

As the educational day drew to a close, Joshua glanced quickly at his watch. He was tired now. His face was pale, and his breath was wheezing audibly. "I shall have to keep an eye on the time. There's a train at six forty-five, and it's the last one of the day."

Her eyes widened in surprise. "You're going home again tonight!"

"Yes, I only had one day free." He spread his fingers out and looked down at them. "But I had to see you again, Madeline. This may sound strange but... when I heard you play in January, I heard something that I'd never heard before. Something intensely personal... a sort of communication. It was most extraordinary."

"I felt it too," she murmured softly, then searched his sensitive, expressive face. Their eyes met and both of them looked away again nervously. "I wish you'd been able to bring your violin with you. But there's no reason why you have to dash off tonight. I could help you find lodgings for the night. I know some very reasonable places."

"I wish I could." He smiled warmly but shook his head. "Unfortunately, I'm a working man. I'm performing tomorrow night and teaching all through the week."

She reached out and touched his fingers gently. "I'm honoured that you came all this way to see me, and I'm extremely glad you did. But you must be starved now." She picked up her books and files briskly. "Let's go and eat. Let me treat you."

When six forty-five came, Madeline stood on the platform and watched him climb onto the train. She could still feel contact with the passion and sensitivity that had been in his music.

Suddenly the whistle blew.

"You will be back soon?" she asked anxiously.

He nodded. "Within the month, and I'll have my violin with me."

She stepped back as the train pulled forward with a sudden jerk. He waved, then the carriages rattled out of sight.

Madeline was alone again, and a tremendous sense of emptiness filled her soul. It hurt like grief, and suddenly she longed for the closeness of his company.



Josie was working on her studies when Madeline finally returned to their newly acquired lodgings to change for the evening performance at Sandiman's. It was going to be a desperate rush.

Her friend had a fine pair of spectacles balanced on her delicate nose, and the way she looked up over the thin rim at Madeline, reminded her of the Reverend Rogers.

Josie was smiling teasingly. "So who's the mystery man I've been hearing so much about? You've kept him very quiet Maddy, and he sounds madly romantic."

"News travels fast!" she laughed and hung her coat up and came in. "But there's nothing mysterious or romantic about it."

"Really? When you didn't come back for dinner tonight, I went round to see Jenny. She was full of tantalising and inconclusive gossip. Tell me all about him."

Madeline sat down at the table and glanced at the reams of papers stacked in neat piles, all filled with incomprehensible equations and formulae. There was something utterly organised, tidy and restrained about Josie. Although she joined in with the usual student fun, she would never allow any loose ends or unresolved questions to remain in her life. "Do you remember I told you about Joshua Hanson the violinist? It was him."

"Maddy that *is* romantic!" Josie put the cap on her pen and placed it down beside her half-finished work. Then the fun left her eyes and curiosity replaced it. "How do you manage to inspire so many the gorgeous men? In spite of all your efforts, Eric's still very much in love with you. And he's been badgering me to speak to you for weeks. So, I'm going to relay his message to you now. He would like to meet you and talk."

"Poor Eric, I *was* rather hard on him," Madeline smiled wryly. "Perhaps I owe him a conversation. But he must accept that our relationship is over. All we have left is friendship."

“Well, that’s better than nothing I suppose. It’s just a shame it ended so abruptly. You were happier than I have seen you in a long while. What on earth happened between you?”

Madeline could feel Josie’s inquisitive teasing eyes on her face, but without warning the terrible hollow tension inside herself yawned wide open once more, sending a surge of fear through her. Shocked and shaken, she stumbled over her words as she attempted to cover her vulnerability. “He didn’t do anything, Josie. I... he...”

Josie’s eyes widened in concern, and she rushed to hug her. “It’s alright. You don’t need to say anything if it’s that painful.”

Madeline returned the embrace, deeply grateful for Josie’s tact and unquestioning support.

Josie was her most trusted friend and had always been there for her. They had shared all their secrets, hopes and fears as children. But she could not share this.

Then a small voice in her heart whispered that she should try. Oh, but it would be such a terrible risk! What if it destroyed their friendship and Josie despised her for it?

“This has been inside me for so many years, and it’s done so much damage,” she whispered. “It’s all but destroyed my music. All I want to do now is put it behind me.”

“You know, it *does* help to talk. Particularly if it’s that painful.” Josie took Madeline’s hands and squeezed them. “We’ve been friends all our lives and I’d do anything to help you.”

“It hurts, Josie!” She looked emphatically into her friend’s face, “and I still feel bad about it.” But Josie was studying her with unquestioning affection and concern. She took a deep breath and gathered all her courage. “Look, Eric didn’t do anything. He just reminded me of something that happened years ago, and whenever he...” her throat was closing up with emotion. She swallowed hard and looked away, unable to meet her friend’s eyes as she confessed. “That horrible creature Belaugh used to come to my bedroom at night... God! The things he did! I used to hate myself even more than I hated him.” Little shocks of tension were shooting through her as, for the first time in her life she laid her hurts bare.

She did not have the courage to look at Josie for her reaction.

The silence was long and agonising. She could hear her friend breathing haltingly beside her.

Then Josie groaned, "Maddy, I knew something bad had happened at Harborough Hall, but never something so terrible. No wonder! It all fits into place now."

Eventually Madeline had the courage to meet Josie's eyes. There was no rejection, no condemnation, no blame. Her friend's face was a picture of shock, horror, anger and deep empathy. The relief was tremendous. She suddenly felt a great weight lifted from her spirit.

"I can forget it most of the time, but if... Eric only had to touch me to bring back all that disgust and anger. I can't help it Josie. It floods through me like a fire that rages out of control. It's mindless and agonising. Poor Eric. He was so thoughtful and kind."

"Did you tell him what the trouble was?"

"I could never do that!" she shook her head. "He kept asking, but I've never told anyone except the police. And they thrashed me for telling lies."

Josie hugged her once again. "It would make me hate men I think." She shivered. "Yes. I'd hate every one of them."

"I don't hate them, that's the awful thing about it. I want very much to be a normal person, but whenever I try, all I see is Belough and mindless panic and disgust ruin it all. That's why I've finished with Eric."

"Do you love him?"

Madeline was silent for a while as she considered that question. Then slowly she answered, "No, not romantically, but I'm very fond of him. He is a good friend. And would be a good husband." Then she smiled, a little secret fond smile. "And he knows just how to kiss."

Josie smiled, then continued, "If you've felt that for him, then surely you have already conquered a great many of your fears. Why don't you see if you can find a way to overcome it completely?"

"No," Madeline said firmly, her face tensing. "I don't think you realise how deeply it affects me, Josie. To feel like that is... degrading and agonising. I believe it's why my music has been stifled all these years. And now that it's returning, I can't risk jeopardising it again." She looked at her friend's anxious face and managed to smile. "I *will* talk to Eric, though. I had a letter from Grandpa this morning. He thinks Eric has a bright future and would take good care of me. He has no idea why I've rejected him."

"He's only questioning it because he loves you."

"I know. But I really don't want to be looked after like a tame pet. If I ever marry, it will be to a man who realises that my career is my life. He must understand and encourage my playing, not stifle it."

"Good heavens. That's a big commitment to ask. Most men want a wife who'll feed and clothe them and care for the family... even Army."

"I could do that in addition to performing," she said quietly and rose to her feet with finality. "Which reminds me. I'm accompanying Jenny tonight at Sandiman's. I had better get dressed."



9

MADLINE AGREED TO dine out with Eric at the end of that week. They met at a small restaurant, and as she was shown to the table, she noticed that he had already consumed half a bottle of wine and was gazing absently into his glass.

He looked up as she approached, and his attractive brown eyes warmed perceptibly. He rose to his feet and held the chair for her and pressed his lips to her elegantly exposed shoulder. Then he handed her a single red rose. "For the most beautiful woman in the world."

She frowned and watched him return unsteadily his seat. "Josie did give you my message, didn't she? We're just meeting to talk."

"That's what the lady said," he nodded. "Allow me to fill up your glass."

"Thank you." She observed him cautiously for a few moments, then picked up the menu and glanced down it. She already knew what she wanted. This was one of her favourite establishments and their Coq Au Vin was excellent. She looked up and smiled. "I'll have my usual I think."

He beckoned the waitress over, gave the order and sat back in the chair to watch her broodingly.

She looked back across the candlelit table for a few minutes then smiled. "You've drunk too much already Eric."

"I know. I'll tell you about that later. I was just thinking how

beautiful you are," he murmured very quietly. "It's not in your skin or your features, it's a radiance deep within you that shines out. It will be there all your life, you know. I've never told you that have I? What a fool I've been. There's no one to compare with you. God knows, I've been looking for long enough. There's never been anyone else... never will be."

"Quietly Eric. We can't discuss such things here." Madeline glanced anxiously at the neighbouring tables, but they were continuing with their conversations, unaware of what was taking place here.

"I shan't make a scene my dear." He raised the glass to his lips. "But what did I do Madeline? Tell me that."

She pursed her lips. "Not here Eric."

His eyes moved away from her and travelled around the discreetly decorated establishment.

She sipped her wine and then glanced back at him, determined to make the evening a little less stressful. "I've been invited to play with the Halle next year. It's an enormous opportunity and it will be a lovely prelude to my graduation. If I'm lucky and the critics report favourably, then I shall be established..."

"Established? I hope so! You've worked hard enough for it." He leaned forward and looked intently at her face. "What will your life be like if you do break through like that?"

"It will mean a great deal of hard work, practising, expanding my repertoire, playing where I'm invited. If I'm really lucky, it could mean tours abroad. Alternatively, I may spend part of my time teaching. There are any number of permutations Eric. It depends how the next few months go."

"I see." He leaned back into his seat and watched her face for a while. "It sounds a very lonely life for a woman. Have you no place in your plans for a husband and family? There has to be a root in everyone's life, surely."

"I have no plans in that direction at all. I don't know what I want. All I know is that it will have to fit in with my career."

He nodded slightly. The tension finally seemed to relax out of him and he gazed into his wine glass. "Do you remember your grandfather gave me an introduction to Hawkers?"

"Mmmm," she nodded.

“Well, it’s borne fruit. I’ve been offered a job in their development section, once I get my masters.”

“That’s tremendous. Congratulations Eric.”

“Thank you. I received the letter this morning and have been celebrating ever since. Hence the wine I’ve drunk. Why don’t we make this a special occasion and order some champagne?”

“What a good idea.” She raised her glass. “Here’s to your success, Eric.”

They ate a splendid meal and relaxed more and more over their champagne, talking once again with all the ease they had previously known.

Later, they walked slowly back through Regent’s Park, wandering along its many dark pathways. Eventually, Eric grew silent. Then he stopped and turned her towards him. “We came here to talk Madeline. I’ve thought a great deal since that night before Christmas. What did I do wrong?”

She shrugged in the darkness. “Don’t delve too deeply into that. It’s not important anymore.”

“But it is. Something’s hurt you, and it prevents you being happy. That’s why you’re so set on your career isn’t it?”

“No. There are a number of reasons why playing is my life Eric, and that’s only a minor one.”

“Good, I’m glad to hear that.” He rubbed his forehead briefly, then took her hands in his. “Then listen to me and think. I have a career mapped out that offers security. I love you very much, and I’d support you with your music. I just can’t imagine being without you. Would you marry me, Madeline Brooks?”

Madeline found it suddenly difficult to breathe. The champagne was warm and tingling in her veins and made her a little lightheaded.

He took her by the shoulders and drew her slowly towards him into the warm shelter of his chest, and a peculiar tingle ran through her as he murmured softly into her hair. “You’re all I want. These last few months have proved that to me. I wouldn’t want you differently either, your music, your sense of fun and learning, that burning need to play. It’s all part of the person I love. Marry me Madeline.”

With great difficulty she tried to concentrate on the logical situation and shook her head. “I’m not sober, and I should be to talk

about this. Marriage is not for me, Eric. I came here tonight to explain that to you. I'd like us to remain friends. I value your friendship and I miss your company a great deal, but I don't want a more permanent relationship."

He leaned his cheek on her hair. "Can you make do with a temporary one then?"

She was feeling most odd.

Her fingers clutched fiercely at his shirt. She was so warm here in his arms, secure and protected. The swirling feeling of attraction to him was a physical response that confused her beyond bearing, because she wished she could trust it. If only it remained like this and did not dissolve into fear.

His hand cupped her chin up, and then his fingertips moved slowly down her neck inside her coat to her bare shoulders, and on down in soft swirls to her breasts.

A surge of heat flared through her that made her gasp sharply.

"Oh God! This is the wine. It's so silly to..."

"It's not silly." His lips were touching hers as he spoke, and the contact made her hunger for his kiss. "It's how we feel about each other. Trust it Madeline. Let the feeling grow..."

She shook her head in distraction. "I'm frightened to."

"I know that my love." His lips kissed hers aching then moved to her chin and on to her neck. Another tremendous explosion of warmth flared through her and she all but purred.

"There you see? You're so sensitive, so responsive. Trust yourself." He took her face between his hands. "I love you. I'd never hurt you. Don't you know that?"

She nodded, overwhelmed by her need for him. "I wish I could, but it would be a mistake. I'm certain."

"No! It's wrong to deny how you feel," he insisted sternly. "And you can't run away for ever. You've got to make a stand sometime."

She closed her eyes tightly for a moment. The warmth in her was like honeyed wine flowing through her veins, sending little sparks of sensation in all directions, and at last her resistance melted. She could not deny her attraction to him, nor that she longed to be free of this murderous yoke of fear.

With a choke in her voice, she whispered, "Love me Eric. It's the

only way to destroy the fear. If you can do that, I'll marry you."

He gathered her up in his arms and his mouth descended to hers in a deep passionate kiss, and she was swept away on a wave of sensation. Her body responded eagerly to the touch of his hands as he caressed and explored her. Freed by the wine she had drunk, her passionate nature broke loose. His response to her was electric. Pleasure seemed to leap from one to the other as though magnified by each other.

The desire that flamed through them both was devastating, and a few moments later he buried his face in her hair and gasped, "God! Madeline. Don't do this to me if you don't mean it. You're sure about this?"

Madeline was seething with aching surges of desire and pleasure that seemed to be building up within her to a point of desperation.

She knew she would never feel like this in her life again.

She hung there for a moment of indecision, hardly breathing. It was an agonising moment. Her choice now could either bring back all the horror and fear, or free her to build a normal life with Eric and liberate her playing completely.

Shakily she gathered her coat together and put her hand in his. "Yes."

"Come on then."

They hurried through the well-lit streets, and after a short while he opened the door of his lodgings and escorted her up to his room.

It was small and stark, and shock attacked her. Whatever was she doing here? What an idiot she was being!

The main light went off quickly, leaving the room illuminated by a friendly bedside lamp.

Eric came to her and took her hands in his and she stiffened, recoiling a little.

He unbuttoned her coat and his reassuring face smiled at her. "Slip this off my love. Good heavens, you're tense suddenly."

She frowned and then shook her head. "No. This isn't right. I must go Eric."

His eyes darkened anxiously, and he touched her cheek. "There's nothing to fear."

"I shouldn't be here like this. It's wrong."

"I agree. But what choice have we got? I want you for the rest of my life. I've never felt that before and it frightens me. I don't want to lose you."

She reached up to touch his cheek, fascinated by him. Her fingers explored the full curve of his lips.

It was curious that he could affect her like this. It was happening again, the surging of warmth and anticipation within her, fired by the expression on his face, the closeness of his tall figure.

A tingle of anticipation ran through her at the feel of his warm hands on her shoulders and back as he eased the gown gently from her shoulders. His fingers ran softly down the outline of her body, lingering over the curves of her breasts and hips and he whispered hoarsely, "You are beautiful my darling."

He tore his shirt open and drew her hands onto his chest eagerly. She could smell the faint familiar perfume of his body, feel the rough texture of the hairs that matted his chest as she combed her fingers deliciously through them.

He took her in his arms, and desire exploded through her. It was very nearly impossible to contain, and she groaned at the raw and unexpected power of it. Wherever he touched her, the flames of pleasure leapt to life.

He made a little game of removing their clothes, and the contact of his bare flesh against hers maddened her. She ached now, deep within the pit of her stomach, a hot moist desperate hunger that hurt.

It was a relief to be eased back onto the supporting firmness of the mattress.

Then she felt his hard demanding presence against her leg, a brutal invader that terrified her.

She gasped. She did not want that! Her eyes flared open. His face was fierce with desire, passion and pain. It shocked and stirred her profoundly, and the barrier of her fear began to crumble. She closed her eyes the better to relish the swirling growing sensations that were mounting intensely within her.

She moved her legs to accommodate him and cradled him close to that cruel and mortal ache.

His mouth covered hers in a deep kiss.

She held her breath for a tense moment as he leaned down

powerfully into her. The pressure built up gloriously, entering, expanding reaching and satisfying that ache.

Relief filled her. There was no pain, no horror.

She heard him groan helplessly, and he cried out in joy. "Christ Almighty. That's so good my darling."

Her head spun. Belaugh had said that to her. Black oblivion swirled up around her, and she clasped her hands across her face.

"No!" she howled. "*Oh no!*"

Reality disappeared, and the man in her arms became Belaugh, demanding, hurting and grunting, muttering obscenely under his breath at his pleasure.

She whimpered and cried out in horror. She twisted and turned. "Stop. Oh, stop, please stop."

He could not. He had passed the point of self-control. Gasping for breath he thrust into her, with all the vigour and passion of his youth and strength, and at last reached the peak of his pleasure and erupted to fierce ecstasy. It seemed to tear him apart, deprive him of breath and strength and will.

She was weeping in great shudders, trying to hold within herself the enormity of her anguish. She did not know where to hide from the reality of that overwhelming reaction, and from the knowledge of what she had done to him.

Through no fault of his own, he had raped her too.

She looked at her naked pale body, and the smears of semen on her legs. She felt sick with the memory of Belaugh, and utter disgust at herself.

Fiercely, she gathered together the shards of her dignity.

"Madeline," he whispered, his face white with shock, and he reached out to touch her bare shoulder.

"Don't!" she cried. Her flesh cringed at the contact, and she recoiled from him. Making her voice work was difficult, but she whispered stiffly, "I'm sorry... I just can't... I'm not ...Don't blame yourself. I have to go."

She pulled her coat on, gathered up her clothes in a single sweep of her hand and fled from the room. He called after her, and his cry seemed to leach all the strength out of her, but she kept on going.



* * *

Madeline reached home several hours later. She had wandered for a long while without noticing where she was going, and by the time she had calmed herself enough to face Josie, the inevitable reaction had set in. She was exhausted, and nearer to personal despair than she had been for years.

She let herself in through the front door and hurried up to their rooms, hiding her evening dress under her arm. She put her hand on the door handle and hesitated for a moment, then entered.

Josie was working hard at her studies again, and murmured enquiringly over her shoulder, "How did it go Maddy?"

"Fine," she replied. But even in her own ears, her voice sounded miserable and defeated. "We've agreed not to meet again."

She went straight to the bedroom and turned the light on. The reflections looking back at her from the triple mirrored dressing table were those of a wreck and bore no resemblance to the well dressed, self-possessed young woman who had left here earlier this evening. She turned her back on the reflection.

She had to pull herself together. She had survived much worse than this in the past.

She placed her fingers to her aching forehead for a moment. This was self-pity, and it was pathetic.

She should never have allowed it to happen and hurt him like that. The outcome had been inevitable. He must feel absolutely terrible.

As for herself, she could just go on as she had been doing.

She covered her face with her hands. Life was going to be a long and lonely affair. She would become a wrinkled bitter old maid. She was not worth loving.

"Maddy, whatever's happened?" Josie was standing in the doorway, neat spectacles perched on her nose, every inch of her tidy and precise.

Madeline clasped her coat tightly around her naked body and sat slowly on the end of her bed. She folded her hands together in her lap. "It's finished Josie."

"What's he done to you?" her friend demanded fiercely, studying her dishevelled appearance over the rims of her spectacles. Slowly she

came in and knelt down in front of Madeline and inspected her face, then she touched her hands. "Heavens, you're half frozen, and... Oh my God! Maddy!"

"No Josie!" Madeline clasped the coat tighter at her chest to hide her condition. "You mustn't think..."

Josie shot to her feet, her hands clenching passionately at her sides. "I'll kill him... the filthy beast. Why are men such swine?"

"He's no swine," tears sprang in her eyes. "He was kind and patient... and I've been the most terrible bitch to him."

"Rubbish. Look what he's done to you! How can he be anything but...?"

"No! He's not!" she cried fiercely.

Pink spots of anger had appeared on Josie's pretty face, but gradually she nodded her head and calmed herself. "Alright, if you say so. But whatever happened?"

Madeline shrugged her shoulders. "It was my fault. He makes me feel so... so intensely. I don't think anyone else will ever move me like that. I went back to his lodgings with him..."

"Maddy!" Josie's face had pinkened in shock, and she clasped her fingers to her cheeks.

"Well, you've spent the night at Arny's. You know..."

"Maddy! Arny and I would never behave improperly outside of marriage. I'd never forgive him if he mauled me like this."

Madeline looked in surprise at her friend's face and realised suddenly just how truly a vicar's daughter Josie was. She took a deep breath. "Have you never ached all through when he kisses you?"

"No," Josie murmured quietly.

Madeline looked down at her hands and whispered huskily, "He begged me to marry him tonight. That's why I did it. I had to know if I could be normal for him. You see, I couldn't condemn him to marriage if... if... I couldn't control the fear."

Josie sat down suddenly at her side and clasped her icy hands. "I'm sorry, I didn't know... I didn't mean to... it's just that he's so bloody good looking and casual. He's been out with hundreds of girls, and they all make carpets of themselves." She bit her tongue crossly. "I didn't mean it like that. He's been loyal to you, hasn't he?"

She nodded. "It didn't work Josie. I couldn't control the fear. God

only knows what I've done to him, and he was so loving and..." her voice shrank to a whisper. "I wanted it to work so much."

Josie shuddered. "I wish I had the courage that you have. My poor friend." She rose to her feet decisively and began to take action, sweeping the eiderdown off her bed and wrapping it around Madeline. "Come and sit by the fire. I'll pop down to Mrs Robinson and fetch you a cup of tea."

The words brought a smile to Madeline's lips and she murmured fondly, "Do you know I can just hear your mother in those words. She knew exactly how to comfort someone who was distressed."

"Come on then. Bustle about and do as you're told!"

Madeline was scooped up, ushered through to the lounge and placed in front of the fire, in their great comfortable man-eating sofa that seemed to wrap warmly around her. Gradually, ever so gradually, she began to feel a little better.



10

THE DUKE'S HALL was a large baronial concert hall and an essential part of the Royal Academy of Music, but it was filled most uncharacteristically for a mid-morning on a working day. The rumour had gone around that a new student was going to rehearse here, and that he was unusual. As a result, many of the students and professors took seats to listen.

Joshua Hanson responded surprisingly to this highly knowledgeable and possibly critical audience. As he began to play, a buzz of interest and excitement swelled through the hall, and it hit Madeline as she entered and heard the notes soaring lyrically.

She remained at the back of the hall, quietly absorbing the sounds and the atmosphere, and her heart ached. She had hardly played a note in the last month. Everything within her was dry and dead. And to fill its place she had thrown herself desperately into hedonistic pleasure seeking. It had not worked; it had merely exhausted and depressed her even further.

So, she simply stood listening and watching, not wanting to be seen by him or any of the audience. His playing was exquisite and brought tears to her eyes. There was something intensely personal about his interpretation that reached out and touched her pains one after the other. Eventually she could bear it no longer. Her unhappiness was too great.

She slipped out and made her way to the music library, and hunted along the shelves, running her fingers across the spines of the enormous scores. She needed something very orderly and methodical. Eventually she chose Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier and took the weighty tome to her usual practice room. It was deserted. She flicked through the pages, chose a long prelude and fugue and began to play, involving her mind in the winding phrases and infinite variations. It was intensely relaxing and gradually she began to forget.

As she finished the last chord, she realised Sir Ronald was standing by her side. She glanced up at him and he raised his eyebrows. "I'm surprised you're not in the hall listening to the young Hanson lad. But it's good to hear you playing again. What has happened Madeline?"

She shook her head. "I'm fine. I'm sorry the essay wasn't finished in time, but it's almost done now. I could bring it to you tonight."

"That's not what I mean," he said severely. "I have no right to pry, but you've done no work for several weeks. I've never seen you like this. Jenny tells me you've been out every evening enjoying yourself."

"Yes. The work was getting too much."

"It's not that, is it? You can't pull the wool over my eyes, my dear. If you're that unhappy, I'd suggest you visit the chaplain. Have a word with him. He's a wise old bird, and far more liberal than most of his breed."

She smiled and shook her head. "He wouldn't have an answer."

She was silent for a long while, frowning and gazing into the distance. Then she placed both hands on the lid of the piano. "I'd like to go away for a few days. I'll finish my essay tonight and take a long weekend. There are a few things that I ought to do, that I've been ignoring for far too long."

He looked searchingly at her face, and she smiled miserably. "My parents died when I was just twelve, and I've not been back to their graves for many years. I've got to address that before I can do anything else."

He nodded, and his thin intelligent face relaxed a little. He touched her shoulder. "Go and speak to them my dear."



The churchyard in late spring was a bright living place. Vivid green shoots were unfurling in the hedges and trees, the grass pathways were bobbing placidly with daffodils. St Barnabas Church, Westcott, was bathed in sunlight and set against a graceful backdrop of huge beech trees and oaks.

Madeline walked slowly and uncertainly along the gravel path. She still felt lost and miserable and had no idea what it was she hoped to find. She opened the tall carved wooden door and entered the echoing vastness of her old church.

She had come home! It hit her with blinding clarity. No matter how much she loved Phyllis and the comfortable familiarity of Harborough Hall, or her grandfather and his beautifully cosy home, her roots were here in Westcott. The fabric upon which her person had been constructed and nurtured was here.

Light streamed in through the stained-glass windows, and there was a cheerful chattering of ladies as they cleaned and polished, or arranged flowers at the alter and along the nave.

Madeline stood there for a long while, stunned by the obviousness of it all. She had never connected these separate parts of her life. She breathed in eagerly, and absorbed the sights sounds and smells into the person she was now. Little had changed in the six years she had been away and everything around her evoked powerful memories of her past.

She sighed deeply; it was good to feel the familiarity of her roots. As she looked through the streams of sunlight and heard the women talking, she could visualise her father in his robes walking down the aisle to play the organ.

Slowly she followed in his footsteps, until she was standing between the facing pews of the choir stalls. She could see the place where she and Josie had used to sit and sing. She lay her hand on the worn music rail. It was a comfortable memory, and as it began to fit back into her awareness, she felt a growing sense of wholeness.

Then she turned slowly. That was the archway behind which the organ console sat. Oh, the glorious sounds that instrument had made in her father's hands. It still seemed to feel of him, calm, quiet and humorous, and very gentle.

She felt in her pocket. The Reverend Rogers had given her the key so that she could play if she wished, but she had no desire to. It was a

memory of her father, and she was no organist.

"Excuse me, can I help you dear?" An elderly lady came purposefully up to her. "If you want the vicar, I can take you to him."

She glanced at the round, pleasant face and shook her head. "Thank you, I've just come from the vicarage. I was remembering how this used to be when I was little. It doesn't seem to have changed much."

"Little never changes here, thank goodness, not like the rest of the world. You must be the young lady staying with the vicar. If you want to see anything in particular just let me know. I hope you enjoy your visit." The woman patted her arm gently and left her to her thoughts.

Madeline took a deep breath, then ventured back out into the sunshine with a growing sense of purpose and discovery.

She turned right along the third grass path and walked slowly along the rows of graves.

Their grave was beautifully kept, and she probably had the Reverend and Mrs Rogers to thank for that. She read the inscription on the stone with surprise. Was it really so long ago?

She knelt slowly in the dew-heavy grass and arranged her spray of flowers in the vase already there, then leaned back on her heels and ran her fingers across their names on the headstone.

"I'm sorry it's taken me so long to come and visit you. But I'll come again soon... often. I miss you a great deal, you know. The Academy was just like you said it would be, Daddy. You'd love to see it again. Oh, I wish you could be there with me."

They were *here*, though.

They were at peace, side by side together, as part of the soil they had loved.

She found herself talking to them, telling them many little things. They were not gone, as she had believed for so long. They were still with her, in her heart.



"Well my dear, did you see what you wanted?" The Reverend Rogers looked up over the rim of his spectacles as Madeline returned.

"Yes. And I wish I'd done this earlier."

He watched her and was surprised at the change. Her face was relaxed, fresh and beautiful, and she walked with the graceful assurance of a soul that was at one with itself at last. The contrast between this and the hurt, haunted young woman who had left the house two hours earlier was remarkable.

She knelt in front of the fire and spread her fingers out to the warming glow, and he could see that she was at peace. It radiated from her and warmed him. Softly she murmured, "I feel as though I have a vital piece of myself back again. I've been going in circles all year, blindly. I never really knew why."

He got up from his desk and came to sit in his favourite fireside chair near her. "It always helps to stop for a moment and take stock. But life is never simple and straight forward Maddy," he touched her shining golden curls gently. "If it seems so now, it's an illusion. Don't let yourself be disappointed again. There will always be a conflict of interests. Always a struggle."

"Oh yes, I'm aware of that." She looked up at him and smiled. "But I've got my bearings now. I have my parents back. And I think... I think I've got over some of the hurts."

He nodded slowly. He had no idea what those hurts had been, but he had observed their effects on her and had been helpless to intervene. She had been too far away. "Good. You look better already. We'll go and see Mrs Pritchard after the ten o'clock service tomorrow. She says she's willing to sell you the piano whenever you can afford it."

She looked up quickly at his face. "That will be the first thing I shall save up for. It might take a while though."

"She'll look after it for you. Your father is still remembered with a great deal of affection here."

She nodded and looked absently at her hands. He followed her gaze and recognised the same hands that had belonged to his friend Angus Brooks, the same strength and sensitivity, and his mind wandered back to the good times of their friendship. He realised she had said something, and acknowledged he was getting old. He was withdrawing into his memories more and more these days. "I beg your pardon my dear?"

She seemed a little embarrassed, and looked quickly up at his face, and he was struck by the determination in her vivid blue eyes. "You

knew my father very well. What was it that forced them to leave London? It's been bothering me recently, haunting me. I remember that we had to leave very suddenly. What happened?"

The Vicar cleared his throat uncomfortably. "It was a long time ago my dear. I don't remember the details very clearly."

Her vivid blue eyes rose to his face shrewdly, and slowly she pursed her lips then glanced down at her hands once more. "I was only four, and they never spoke about it in front of me. But it's been plaguing me for a year now. I have a friend who's offered to look into it, but I thought it would save a lot of time and effort if I just asked you."

"I think you should leave the past alone Madeline," he said with gentle finality. "Now would you like a cup of tea my dear?"

"Not just yet, thank you. The thing is, I can't leave it alone." She looked back up at him, and her intelligent gaze did something very strange to his breathing. "They were my parents, and whatever forced them to move ruined their lives."

He sighed. "You should remember them as you knew them, my dear, and leave it at that."

"I see. So what happened in London is something that will change my view of them. I'd rather hear the truth honestly from you, than from newspaper cuttings collected by someone who did not know and love them."

"You're putting me in a very difficult position," he said grimly.

Her blue eyes continued to watch him and made him uncomfortable. Finally, he nodded. "Your father was working at the Granada Cinema when the box office takings went missing. The police made an extensive search, and the money was recovered."

Her face paled suddenly, and shock widened her eyes.

He touched her shoulder gently. "You wanted to know the truth. It was found in your flat. They returned it to the cinema, and your father served a short prison sentence. After that, employment in London was impossible. Employment was impossible anywhere where they delved back into the records."

"I don't believe it! Daddy would never have stolen anything."

"I know that. Someone set him up. But we had no way of finding out who or why, so his name was never cleared."

She looked down at her long strong fingers and spread them out across her knees. "Poor Daddy. He was so honest. Which of the cinemas did you say it was?"

He touched her hair gently, and murmured, "You won't find anything that he and I missed my dear. It's far too long ago now, and besides, no one remembers it anymore."

"You helped him to make some investigations?"

He nodded slowly. "He and I were old friends, rather like you and Josie. I knew him better than he knew himself. I can tell you categorically he did not do it. But we were never able to prove it."

"Thank you," she touched his knee. "Will you tell me what you found?"

"I can do more than that, I can show you. I kept all my notes. Come with me."

He took her to his study and hunted along the shelves. Finally, he took out a large box file, handed it to her and looked at her over the rims of his spectacles. "It'll make interesting bedtime reading, but don't get too involved in it. You have your own life to lead now."



11

MADLINE RETURNED TO London, refreshed and at peace with herself. She was laden with dozens of small things for Josie, and plenty of news about her brothers and their families. Like all close siblings, they shared their problems, and everyone was concerned at the moment for the health of the littlest Rogers, Josie's seven-month-old nephew. Madeline had seen him during her visit and had been deeply moved by his helplessness. He still was not sitting or making many sounds. Yet his cry, when he was hungry, was shrill and demanding like the squall of a cat.

The two friends talked for hours into the night. Although Madeline had only been away for a few days, they had a great deal to catch up on.

Between them, they decided that they would take a look at the case against Madeline's father and see if they could find out what had really happened on that fateful night.

As a starting point, they had the Reverend Rogers' research, which included detailed records of her parents' activities throughout the period, and accounts given by the cinema staff on duty that night. Together they closely examined Josie's father notes and were moved to read that her mother Maisy had taken Madeline to see the doctor because of a cough, leaving the house unoccupied. That must have been the moment when the thief had sneaked in and planted the stolen

money.

Madeline had been hoping that she and Josie might be able to approach the problem from a different angle, and perhaps turn up some previously undiscovered information that would set the record straight for her father. She had even dreamed that, if they were lucky, they might identify the real thief. But once they had examined the Reverend Rogers' notes carefully, she was forced to admit that he had been right. It was far too late. They would never be able to track down the people involved let alone reopen the case.



By the following morning, much of the serenity that had enwrapped Madeline after her visit to Westcott had evaporated, and she arrived at the Academy filled with a sense of nervous urgency. Joshua Hanson had been in London for a month now and she had deliberately avoided contact with him. She just had not been able to face it.

She only prayed that her unwelcoming behaviour had not destroyed all possibility of exploring the musical rapport that existed between them. They had been so achingly close, as though a wide-open conduit of expression linked their souls. But she had lectures to attend all through the morning, so she forced herself to listen patiently through them, trying to contain her anxiety.

Finally, she was free for an hour before her afternoon piano class and she gathered up all the courage, determination and calmness, consulted the timetables on the notice board, and made her way to the room where he was scheduled to rehearse.

All around her the building was alive with music, and suddenly she remembered the wonder and joy on his face when he had heard that magical sound for the first time. He had been so open and enthusiastic. "Oh God!" she thought, appalled at the idea of losing contact with that honesty and integrity. "I only hope he'll be able to forgive me."

She took a deep shaky breath, knowing she had an enormous mountain to climb over the next few minutes if she was to repair the damage she had done.

She could hear him playing from some distance, and the lyrical beauty of it touched her to the heart. He was working intensely with his tutor, though, so she waited discreetly in the corridor until he was

finally alone.

She found him wrapping his violin carefully before placing it in its case, and he looked up quickly as he heard footsteps. But then his face emptied of its openness when he recognised her.

“Ah, the elusive Miss Brooks!”

She gathered up all her courage and held her hands out to him. “Hello, Mr Hanson. I’ve been hearing some really positive comments about you since I got back to the Academy this morning.”

“Really?” He straightened his tall figure with an aloof dignity that was like a slap in the face. He pointedly refrained from accepting her warm gesture. “And why should that be of interest to you after all this time?”

She dropped her hands to her sides and the last of her newly acquired serenity evaporated.

That comment hurt deeply. But it was her own fault, and she deserved the rebuke. She had deliberately avoided him. No, that was not quite true. She had been avoiding everyone.

“I’m so sorry I haven’t managed to see you over the last few weeks,” she said with difficulty. “I... I hope you’re settling in alright?”

“Yes, very well. Thank you for your concern.” He turned away from her to place his violin securely in its case. The icy silence between them stretched out until she could have wept.

He had shut himself away behind an utterly impersonal façade and there was nothing left of the intimate enthusiasm and musicality that had drawn them together.

He closed the violin case with a snap and looked around at her. “Were you listening just now?”

“Yes. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Not in the least, why should I mind? I’m glad you’ve chosen to renew our acquaintance, but it’s a little late. After all, I have been here nearly a month.”

Much to Madeline’s shame, she felt tears sting her eyes and she looked away quickly to hide her weakness from him. “Look, I am sorry it has taken me so long to see you. I wasn’t intentionally trying to avoid you, but I had something very personal and private to deal with. It’s been painful,” she said, rubbing her arms to bring a little warmth back. “It was even stifling my playing, and I simply couldn’t

face *anyone* until I'd sorted it out. I've spent the last weekend in the country..."

"So, I gather," he interrupted dismissively.

"I am sorry you feel like that Josh," she murmured with quiet dignity. "But I completely understand. I won't take up any more of your time."

She turned and went towards the door.

There was silence in the room behind her. Then, "Oh God! This is ridiculous!"

"I'm sorry Josh," she said with difficulty. "I shouldn't have come."

"No, I didn't mean that. I didn't mean to hurt you, Madeline. Will you forgive me?"

She turned and met his gaze, hardy daring to hope that she had heard him correctly

He smiled wryly, but his voice this time was light and gentle. "What a proud and selfish fool I am. I hope you have managed to resolve the problem. It must have been very serious if it was affecting your music."

"It was." She met his eyes questioningly. He looked genuinely anxious and concerned, and suddenly she could feel that wide-open conduit running deeply between them once more. The empathy it gave them was powerful, but their relationship still hung precariously in the balance. If she wanted it to grow and thrive then she had to be utterly honest and open with him now. He would sense it if she prevaricated or held him at a distance and that would be the end of it.

"I believe I have resolved it," and she smiled with difficulty. "My parents died when I was twelve, and I think I must have been shutting out my memories of them. It was hard to go back and relive it all, but I should have done it a long time ago. I feel so much more complete now." Then she held her hands out to him again in warm welcome. "I am really glad to see you, Josh. I've been looking forward to this for so many months, I'm just *so* sorry about the last few weeks. Will you forgive *me*?"

His face had lost all trace of aloofness, and in its place came the dynamic enthusiasm that was so very personal to her, and he looked her full in the eyes. "Do you know what I've been looking forward to since the moment I met you? That we should play together. After that

concert in Birmingham, I went straight home and sorted out the music, and I've kept it with me ever since."

"Have you got it with you now?" her face lit up with enthusiasm. "That would be great fun."

"It's back at my lodgings. Let's go and get it, and we can try something together."

She froze. Eric had invited her back to his lodgings, and she had ruined their relationship. She could not allow that to happen again. She glanced quickly at her watch. "I don't think we'll have time. I have a lesson in half an hour."

"Never mind. I've got another idea. What are you studying at the moment?"

"Rachmaninov," she touched the bag at her side.

"Why don't we try that? I can accompany you, try and pick out the melodies. It'll be good sight-reading practice."

She took the book of music from her bag, chose one of the pieces and handed it to him. "Good luck. It'll be fiendishly difficult."

"I can peer over your shoulder if you need the music."

"No, that's alright. I learnt it years ago." She settled herself at the piano, then looked up to see him arranging the music on his music stand. "I've been asked to play this with the Halle later this year, so any help you can give me with it will be gratefully appreciated."

His eyebrows rose and he whistled appreciatively. "That's some appointment. Let's go from the beginning, and I'll join in."

She closed her eyes for a moment and spread her fingers out, feeling the cold touch of the keys.

Perhaps it was his enthusiasm, perhaps something about the way he created the sounds, but from the grand opening chords, she was able to feel the beauty of the music flowing through her. It was a sensation she had known and loved as a child, the ability to create and form the most delicate images and intonations. It was not there completely. It was elusive and not yet her own, but when the violin joined in, she knew the rapport between them was no illusion.

They played through to the end of the piece, laughing when it all went wrong, but nonetheless enjoying every moment of it.

She turned to him afterwards. "That was marvellous. We *must* play properly together and do it soon." She glanced at her watch. "Oh

goodness, look at the time. I've got to rush. Can you bring the music in tomorrow?"

"Yes. I'll meet you by the door first thing in the morning." He closed the music quickly and handed it back to her. "Good luck with this."

"Thanks, I'll see you tomorrow."

It was nearly three o'clock, and she was going to be late. She rushed down the corridor, clutching the music tightly.

At the end of an hour lesson, Sir Ronald Ashwood leaned back in his seat, and watched her face curiously as she made a few pencil notes in the music. Whatever she had done at the weekend, had worked a miracle.



Josie was finding it difficult to avoid Eric Finchley. She did not want to meet him. She was still too angry at the distress he had caused her friend. Despite what Madeline said, she believed he had behaved extremely badly, and she had a terrible desire to hit him. The difficulty was that they attended the same college, and so kept bumping into each other. Several times, she had been forced to refuse to talk to him when they were in the refectory, even moving her meal away from him on one occasion.

Now, she could no longer avoid him. They were completely alone, and he had grasped her arm. She had never believed she could feel so small and frightened. The fury in his eyes was terrifying, and his grip was like a vice.

"Will you please let me go, Eric Finchley," her voice shook with vehemence.

"Only when you've had the grace to speak to me."

"I have nothing to say..."

"Be quiet." he roared. "How is Madeline?"

"What does it matter to you?"

"A great deal, you little fool."

"She doesn't want to see you again, not after what you did to her."

His lips tightened and formed a hard white line. "You're very judgmental over a subject you know nothing about."

Josie did not reply. She knew the judgement was her own and not

Madeline's.

He nodded slowly, and some of the anger faded from his face. "Now, how is she?"

"She's recovering at last, so please don't spoil it for her again."

He laughed cynically. "Me spoil it for her? The real harm was done years ago, you know that don't you?"

Josie nodded dumbly, both fascinated and frightened by the anguish on his face.

"What I want to know is who did that to her, and I'll hang him up from the nearest lamp post."

"No!" she cried sharply. "She wouldn't want you to do that." Then she shut her mouth quickly, afraid she might give too much away. The least he knew the better.

"So, you know all about it, do you?"

She gasped as his fingers bit into her arm. "She and I have been friends all our lives. There is nothing you can do to make me betray her trust, Eric."

He let her go at last and rubbed his forehead. "I'm sorry Josie. But it doesn't take a great deal of intuition to understand what happened to her. I worked that out some while ago. All I want to know is which bastard it was, and I will break his bloody neck."

Josie was rubbing her bruised arm gingerly, and she looked quickly at his face. She had never been able to see people in distress without longing to help them, and now she felt the stirrings of sympathy for him. He obviously thought the world of Madeline. "Please don't do anything irrational Eric. She would never forgive me if you got into trouble."

"I'll find a way..."

"No, you must leave it. He's an extremely powerful man. If you laid a finger on him, he would destroy you."

His eyes flashed to hers quickly and she could almost see him weighing up the significance of her words, and hastily she tried to distract him. "He would destroy her too. If the truth ever became public it would shatter her, ruin her career, and that's her life. You do understand that, don't you? Please don't do anything to cause her further hurt. Just let it be."

He was not looking at her any longer. He was concentrating hard

and murmuring to himself. "It couldn't have been her grandfather; I don't believe that for one instant." Then gradually his eyes began to gleam, and he relaxed. "It was her guardian wasn't it, that great lump of a man? Christ! How could they have allowed it to happen?"

Josie was trembling now. "Don't you dare do or say anything! Phyllis has been a wonderful support to her and has tried all ways to make up for it, and..."

"Make up for it?" he said in utter disbelief. "Nothing can do that. She's so full of fun and life. But he's destroyed her ability to trust and enjoy. She just relives what he did to her. Every time..." his face was white with the memory of what had happened. "Even with me." He turned away quickly, to hide it from her.

Josie could not bear it. She touched his arm gently. "Eric. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I judged you unfairly. But... revenging her on Belaugh will not heal anything. She'd be deeply distressed if you were hurt in any way, you know that don't you? She cares about you a great deal."

He nodded slowly, then turned back to her. "Thanks Josie. I won't do anything silly. However, he has to be made to pay for what he did. That is something I *can* do for her. I can make him squirm and suffer, as she and I have. But I'll do it carefully, I promise."

Josie shivered and whispered, "It's wrong to continue the cycle of anger Eric. You mustn't..."

"He cannot be allowed to get away with it. He must pay."



12

THE DAYS FLEW past for Madeline. Josie and Army became engaged to be married and threw an enormous party to celebrate, and Tina arrived in London to open the new offices, giving the three girls a marvellous excuse to spend an entire evening together with no male interference, and they gossiped and giggled until early the next morning. It was as though they were girls once again, spending their summer holiday at Westcott with the Rogers' family.

There was only one aspect of life that held a challenge for Madeline, and after a break of nearly a month she decided to take the last step forward and return to the debating group. Eric was there as usual, and the sight of him brought echoes of the horror back. But she greeted him with the same calmness she did all her friends.

It was a solemn meeting. The main debate was rushed through with indecent haste, and the students returned to the current political events.

Josie, usually so quiet at these meetings, exclaimed, "I just don't understand it. Where will it end?"

"Well that much is obvious," one voice murmured. "War."

Josie glanced apprehensively towards Army and then shrugged her shoulders. "But why should Britain involve itself in Europe's problems? Austria has chosen to align itself with Germany and has therefore taken a national decision. They've got a right to decide their

own fate. And I don't believe we should take our own country to war over it and interfere."

"I don't suppose our government will go to war, Josie," Madeline said. "But doesn't it seem to you as though the whole of this expansionism has been carefully orchestrated by the Nazis?"

"Oh yes," another voice continued. "And they've been going that way for years. The thinking class in Germany has been deliberately suppressed, and all opposition crushed. Hitler has turned his country into a race of mental slaves. Remember the burning of the books? That was the moment when the ordinary people were deprived of the capacity for free-thinking. All they hear now is party propaganda, enforced by the SS."

Madeline shivered. "It's a terrifying thought. If you read the papers, they're doing terrible things to the Jewish population of Austria. It seems their ethos has to do with national pride, and a hatred of those who are not German."

"I have an interesting thought for you," Paul Dawson interposed. "In the past, great acts of violence and intolerance have often been inspired by religion. Think of the inquisitions, the crusades, even the destruction of the great library in Alexandria. Should we therefore think of Nazi Fascism as a fanatical religion?"

"You may try," Eric laughed, but then became more serious. "Perhaps you're right, Paul. Faith has often been the shield and justification for terrible human atrocities. My concern is that the Nazis will continue with this programme of national expansion, not only marching into the countries that welcome them, like Austria, but also into those that reject their philosophies..."

The discussions went on late into the night touching on all sorts of outcomes. Should the process of negotiation and appeasement be continued, or should Europe turn round and slap down this demanding child of a nation before it was too late? Whatever happened it seemed quite probable that all the young men present would soon be conscripted to the armed forces and would one day have to defend their country from aggression.

The group split up late that night, and Madeline was aware that Eric was waiting behind for her. She took Josie's arm and murmured quietly to her, "Look, I have to go and speak to him."

"Maddy! That's going to be hard," her friend's eyes filled with

concern.

"I know. Wish me luck won't you, and I shan't be long. Have a cup of tea waiting for me."

Josie kissed her cheek suddenly. "I'll see if I can dig up something stronger than tea. I think I'm going to need it too. All this talk of war frightens me to death."

"That sounds good. Off you go now, I'll see you in a few minutes." She watched Josie go, then she took a deep breath, and tried to bolster her nerve. She had to face up to this and clear the air between them. But she was far more nervous than she would ever have admitted to Josie.

She gathered up all her courage and crossed the room to stretch her hands out to him. He took them warmly. "Madeline," he began. "I just wanted to..."

"No." She shook her head quickly, her flesh recoiling at the memory of what had happened between them. "There's no way back for either of us."

"I was afraid of that." His voice was very low. "Are you alright now?"

She nodded. "I'm fine."

"Are you certain? There's not...? You're not pregnant?"

"No, I'm not. But... I've been very worried about you, Eric, and what I may have done to you. What happened that night wasn't your fault. I have only myself to blame. I should never have allowed us to..."

His cheeks were colouring with emotion. "It most certainly wasn't your fault, Madeline. Christ Almighty, that bloody swine has deeply hurt you. And that act has tarnished the whole of your life..."

"That's all in the past!" she stated fiercely. "I don't want to rake any of it up, do you understand that? I am just going to have to learn to live with it because... I don't think there's any way I shall be able to change. Look Eric, can we remain friends? I'd value that a great deal."

He nodded.



The focus of Madeline's life had returned at last to her music, and the disaster of that night with Eric gradually faded into the background and became unimportant. Freed at last from any romantic

aspirations, the idea of sacrificing time and effort to men and marriage became utterly unthinkable.

And it was a good thing.

She worked extremely well with Joshua Hanson. The musical rapport that they had both sensed at that first meeting in Birmingham, deepened, strengthened and became utterly essential to their musical health. The way they played and talked together was an inspiration to them both and raised their playing to a completely new level.

Sir Ronald grew excited as he observed the resurgence of Madeline's innate musicality. He had always known it was there, but he was now witnessing moments of pure poetry and magic that astounded him.

At first, those moments were delicate and transient, but they rapidly developed in authority and stature, and he began to perceive the grandeur that was to come.

Then finally he discovered the trigger that was unlocking his young student's powers of creativity and expression.

He came upon Madeline and Josh exploring the nuances of a Beethoven violin sonata together during what should have been a free period. And he instantly sensed the power of the musical partnership that existed between them.

He listened for a long while at the door, then quietly left them to it.

There were long intense discussions at the staff meetings that followed. The piano and strings departments discreetly observed the two students and assessed their potential. A week later, Madeline and Josh were invited to perform together at the next of the Academy's monthly concerts.

Unaware of the stir they were causing among their tutors, they put together a varied programme of the music that they had recently been exploring. Then they stepped out together onto the Duke's Hall stage in front of a discerning audience comprising of music students and professors.

It was exactly the stimulation they needed.

The excitement and genius of their creativity blossomed to its full potential, and from the very first notes a ripple of energy radiated outwards.

The audience became a part of it, feeding back the emotion so that the music took flight, filling the hall with an electricity, a vibrance.

Afterwards, the rising tide of applause and cheering told them how much their fellow musicians had enjoyed their performance.

Hand in hand they bowed deeply, and for the first time in many years Madeline had full command over to all the sensitivity in her soul, and she gloried in the power it gave her.

The following morning, she and Josh were summoned to the principal's office.

They went nervously, imagining that they were to be reprimanded for some misdemeanour, but on the contrary, a startling proposition was laid before them.

The Academy judged that the time was right to promote a full concert for them at London's most prestigious venue, Queen's Hall.

Already, the principal and various members of staff were harnessing their well-honed concert management skills and beginning to plan a promotion campaign. All Madeline and Josh had to do was agree a date and then work with their tutors on the programme. The Academy would take care of the rest.

They emerged from the interview in a state of shocked excitement, and found that the news had already travelled ahead of them and was spreading like wildfire.

Within hours no one at The Academy could talk about anything else.



When Madeline returned to her lodgings later that afternoon she was still in a state of euphoria. This was nothing less than an official recognition of the strong musical bond that was growing between her and Josh. And the proposed recital could be the steppingstone they needed towards an exciting and fulfilling career together.

Josie, methodical as ever, was sitting at the dining table in their small lounge, busily organising and reading the notes from her last lecture, and there were tidy piles of papers and diagrams all over the table. Several sheets of paper swirled from the tops of their piles as Madeline swept in. Josie caught the vagrants. "Shut the door Maddy, quickly. You're blowing all my notes away."

“Sorry.” She shut the door quickly. “Better?”

Josie looked up, and her eyebrows rose. “Oh my goodness. What’s happened? You look as though you’re bursting with news.”

“I am!” Madeline could hardly contain her joy. “I still can’t quite believe it. They believe in us, Josie. They truly believe in us!”

Josie took her glasses off and smiled in calm amusement. “Who, and what, and why?”

“The Academy!” Madeline’s voice was resonant with excitement. “They’re arranging a concert for Josh and me at Queen’s Hall. They’re paying the expenses, making all the arrangements and are inviting a host of influential people. And yet they only heard us play together yesterday! They must think something special of us.”

“Yes! Good heavens, they must.” Josie jumped up enthusiastically and gave Madeline an enormous hug. “That is the most wonderful news. When’s the concert going to be?”

“In two months.” She met Josie’s gaze, and the sheer passion of her vocation flared through her like liquid gold. “We now have a great deal of hard work ahead of us, but it is *such* a wonderful endorsement.”

“Well, I don’t think you’re going to find the work a chore, somehow,” Josie laughed gently. “Do you realise you’ve hardly spoken about anything over these last few weeks except the music you and Josh have been exploring together.”

“Oh dear,” Madeline laughed and pulled a wry face. “I’m so sorry about that, I must have been very boring company.”

“Don’t be silly,” Josie smiled. “It’s been wonderful to see you so happy and fulfilled at last.”

Madeline took a deep steadying breath and nodded slowly. Josie was the only one of her friends who knew what she had been through over the last six years, and the toll it had taken on her physically, spiritually and emotionally.

“I think these last few weeks have been nothing short of a miracle,” she said simply, and looked down at her fingers, tenderly spreading them out in front of her. “My father gave me a tremendous gift, the ability to express deep sensitivity and emotion through music, but when Belagh...”

“Don’t bring those pains to the surface again, Maddy,” Josie

grasped her hands gently and squeezed them. "I understand. And I'm so glad for you."

Madeline looked into her friend's eyes. "That man destroyed my ability to reach the music in my soul. It was as though part of me had been locked away, buried in a black pit, surrounded by impassable spaces that were too terrifying to cross. After that evening with Eric, I sincerely believed I'd never play properly again, never find my real self." She took another deep breath. "But since Josh arrived, it's hard to explain but the way he plays...! We seem to see and feel music in the same way, and that rapport has opened up those closed doors."

Josie smiled gently and touched her friend's cheek. "I think you and Josh are something special anyway. I can see it in you both when you're together. You were built for each other."

Madeline stiffened suddenly. The disaster with Eric was still too close to allow her to entertain any such thoughts. "Match making again Josie? Please don't. I'm not going to be caught in that trap again. I know it's impossible for me," she said firmly. "What Josh and I have is purely to do with the making of music. It's very precious but completely professional."

"Very well." Josie nodded reluctantly.

"Good. Now, I have a favour to ask of you and Arny. Josh and I want to go out tonight and celebrate properly. He's collecting me at seven, and we're meeting Grandpa for dinner at the Carlton at 8.00. Would the two of you like to join us?"

"Oh yes, we'd love to. Are you sure we wouldn't be intruding?"

"Of course not," she laughed. "You're part of the family. And I think Grandpa rather enjoys taking the young crowd out and treating them."

Josie blushed slightly with pleasure. "Then I'll go and see Arny straight away and arrange it. We were going to do some work tonight, but that can wait. Let's celebrate!"



Neither of the young women could work anymore that afternoon. Once the arrangements were made, they gossiped contentedly and slowly prepared themselves for what they hoped would be a very enjoyable evening.

When seven o'clock arrived, they heard Mrs Robinson answer the door. There was the subdued murmur of men's voices echoing up from the hall, then a door closed on them downstairs. A few minutes later, their landlady climbed the stairs and tapped on their door. "Girls, your young gentlemen have arrived to take you out. They both look... well! I don't often have the pleasure of welcoming such magnificent gentlemen into my home."

"Thank you, Mrs Robinson." Madeline called, and a little thrill of anticipation ran through her. Josh was always an elegant and impressive figure, even in casual everyday clothes. She could imagine how he would appear to Mrs Robinson, dressed for an evening out. "We'll be down shortly."

She caught Josie's eyes in the dressing table mirror and smiled appreciatively. Her friend was beautifully dressed in a long moss green evening gown that looked remarkably dramatic for such a calm and gentle character. Madeline reached out for her clutch bag and looked one last time at her reflection in the big triple mirror. She had chosen a deeply scooped backless gown in a shade of vivid blue that matched the intense colour of her eyes.

The gown was a dream to walk in. With square padded shoulders and gradually flaring skirts, it elegantly accentuated her slim figure. But doubt suddenly assailed her. "I do love this gown," she murmured, and frowned. "You don't think it's too risqué for the Carlton, do you? It's a very staid establishment and all Grandpa's old regimental cronies are likely to be there."

"You look splendid, and there's nothing inappropriate about it," Josie laughed, drawing a cloak around her shoulders and gathering up her bag. "He will be extremely proud of you. But I wonder if you need a corsage or brooch. Just there." She pointed to the shoulder.

Madeline looked a little more closely at her reflection and nodded. "You're right, and I have just the thing. Grandpa recently gave me an exquisite jet brooch that belonged to his mother. It would go perfectly, and it will please him no end to see me wearing it."

She turned and reached for the small jewellery drawer in the top of the dressing table, but it would not open. She tried again. Still it would not slide free. Irritated, she pressed her knee against the lower drawers and gave it a more determined tug.

There was a small crack that she did not even notice for a moment.

Then the three large mirrors on top of the dressing table shivered and lurched strangely. Instinctively she stepped back a pace. There was a second loud crack, that sounded like a gunshot.

The huge mirrors crashed down like an axe blade on top of the dressing table where her fingers had been just moments before, splintering the wood into jagged slivers and shattering the thick glass. Then the solid slab of wood veered off, straight at Madeline.

Josie grabbed her, pulling her desperately out of the way. The floor shook under their feet with the impact, and then there was silence.

They hung there for a moment in stunned shock.

"Maddy!" Josie whispered, then wailed. "God! It almost landed on your hands!"

Madeline pressed her fingers to her lips, appalled at what had so very nearly happened. Her hands could have been crushed. It would have been the end of everything! Her heart was pounding painfully in her chest now. The world around her seemed suddenly insubstantial and was retreating dizzily.

She was vaguely aware of footsteps on the stairs, of Mrs Robinson's angry voice, and Josie explaining and then sobbing in distress. But she had no idea what was being said. Her mind was too shocked to be able to think clearly.

Arny's voice cried, "Christ, what a mess. Josie, my darling, are you alright? Oh my God, sweetheart..."

Then she felt strong hands turning her round firmly, and Josh's voice, husky and urgent but utterly calm and determined. "Madeline? Are you alright?" He turned her face up gently and examined her features closely. "Dear God! You're so pale. Have you been hurt? Please talk to me!"

She was recovering at last from the overwhelming shock, and her surroundings were slowly coming back into focus. A wave of relief went through her, warming her like the touch of the sun on a summer's day. Her hands were safe. She closed her eyes in gratitude, then opened them again. Everything was going to be alright.

"Madeine!" he said urgently. "Are you hurt?"

She looked up into his face and his presence anchored her more firmly in reality. His care and concern were almost painful to see. "No. I'm alright Josh. Truly I am, but Josie..."

"Oh, thank God!" He gathered her hands in his and gave a wry little smile. "If that mass of wood had hit you, I dread to think of the injuries it would have caused."

Her hands were still shaking, but a completely different fear was filling her now. "Oh God, Josh, is Josie alright? She pulled me away from the mirror. Did it hit her?"

They both glanced anxiously at Josie. She was still in a deep state of shock and agitation and was clinging to Arny as he tried to comfort and reassure her. She was unharmed.

Josh squeezed Madeline's hands reassuringly. "I think it's just shock, nothing more." Then he took a deep decisive breath and turned quickly to Mrs Robinson. "Could you make us a strong hot drink? It will revive the young ladies after the trauma they've been through."

"Yes... yes, of course sir." Mrs Robinson nodded and hurried away.

"Good. Now, come away from this mess, all of you." Josh ushered them all gently away from the scattered shards of glass and wood, guiding them through to the familiar comfort and safety of their small lounge.

Josie was still shaking uncontrollably, but her sobs were subsiding at last as they left the chaos and destruction behind. But at the door, Josh touched Arny's arm.

Their eyes met across Josie's chestnut curls. "Arny, I think we ought to take a close look at that mirror. It should never have fallen like that."

Arny's face hardened and he nodded over Josie's head, relinquishing her into Madeline's arms. "I agree. We'll do it now."

Madeline looked up quickly, and gripped Josh's arm before he could return to the chaos. "Please don't grub around in the filth in those clothes. You'll ruin them."

He looked down at his immaculate suit and made a dismissive gesture. "Clothes are not important. They can be replaced. I want to find out why that mirror fell. It should not have. Those units are built to last." He encouraged her and Josie towards their comfortable, welcoming sofa. "Now just wait here for a moment and get over the shock. I'll be back when I have an answer. I know I shan't rest until I get to the bottom or it."

Madeline and Josie sank thankfully into the embrace of their huge sofa, and quite abruptly they felt safe and secure. Madeline hugged her

friend a little tighter. Had it not been for Josie's quick reactions she would have been badly injured tonight. It did not bear thinking about.

Softly, she whispered into Josie's dark brown curls. "It is a miracle that neither of us were hurt. And I have you to thank for saving me, Josie. Without your quick thinking that monstrosity would have hit me."

"It was pure instinct, Maddy!" Josie said huskily. "I just dragged you back. Oh God! It so nearly crushed your hands! What a horrifying end the day!"

"Sh, don't even think about it. It didn't happen." Madeline paused, and a small spark of rebellion flared in her mind. Slowly, she tried to follow that thought through. "This is not the end of the day, Josie. And I don't believe that we should allow it to end on such a negative note."

She looked closely at Josie's pale face. Her own golden hair was mixing with her friend's dark brown curls, just as it done when they were children, and had been sharing their thoughts and secrets.

"I just feel that if we allow that to happen then in some strange way we are simply giving in and accepting defeat. I don't want to do that. Josh and I have so much to look forward to. We have to rise above this... overcome it."

If the four of them could psychologically manage that, then surely she and Josh would have the strength to soar with their career.

Josie was looking at her with incredulity. "Just what are you planning, Maddy? I know that expression."

Madeline glanced through the open bedroom door to where their two young gentlemen were kneeling in the dirt, dismantling the dressing table. By the time she turned slowly back, she had made up her mind.

"You say this as a disaster, Josie. It's not. We have both been incredibly lucky to escape unharmed. So, this is in fact a triumph!"

Josie was calming now, and suddenly she laughed. "You still want to go out to dinner, don't you? I might have known!"

Madeline smiled and nodded. "I think it's the only thing to do. Let's go and celebrate a double triumph."

Josie was looking a far better colour now and much of the trembling had ceased. Now she smiled in fond admiration. "Nothing keeps you down, does it Maddy Brooks?"

Madeline glanced at the clock and rose slowly to her feet. "Grandpa will be waiting for us at the Carlton shortly with the champagne on ice."

Suddenly Josie's eyes widened. "Oh Maddy, your gown!"

Madeline looked down quickly to find a long, jagged tear in the hem and her heart finally sank.

"Never mind." Josie became the more confident one, now. "I can mend it. Just pass me the needlework box and come here."

Madeline did as she was instructed and watched her friend's skilled fingers mend the tear with the tiniest, neatest of stitches. A few minutes later Josie snipped the cotton off and looked at her handiwork. "There. As good as new. Just go over there and twirl around."

Madeline did as she was told and watched Josie's face anxiously. The smile she saw in her friend's eyes told her all she needed to know. "Josie, you are an angel." And hugged her gratefully.

Josie smiled slowly and nodded her head. "Do you know, the more I think about it, the more I think you're right Maddy. Let's go and dance in the face of disaster and show the world what we're made of."

"We'll have to hurry." Madeline looked over her shoulder and frowned. "Those men are taking their time aren't they. I wonder what's keeping them."

They went to peer into the bedroom. Josh and Arny had pulled the broken dressing table away from the wall, removed all the drawers and were sitting on the bed talking.

"Have you found something Josh?" she called.

"Yes," he frowned, and his blue eyes were troubled. "We thought it might have been woodworm. That's why we've pulled the entire thing out, but there's no trace of worm holes anywhere in the wood. What were you doing when it broke?"

"Trying to open the shallow top drawer. We keep our jewellery in there."

"So, it was jammed before the accident then?" Arny asked softly.

"Yes, it was. Why?"

"It took all Arny's strength to pull that little drawer out and we found it had been jammed with a sliver of wood. It slides in and out with no trouble now. And come and look at this."

Madeline stepped her way carefully amongst the broken glass and

looked at the split wooden battens that had once supported the mirrors. She reached out quickly and touched one with her finger. "It's been cut!"

"Yes." He placed his arm around her shoulders. "It was deliberate."

She glanced nervously around the room and a cold dash of fear washed over her. "But who...? God! I hope nothing else here has been tampered with."

"Arny and I will check it all for you in a moment."

"No, don't do it now." She took a deep decisive breath and looked up into his sensitive, expressive face. "Grandpa's waiting for us. We ought to be going."

"We can postpone the celebrations. He would understand, and I think you'd take more pleasure in it another evening."

"We can't do that, Josh. Any other evening would be inappropriate. This is a celebration of today's tremendous news. It's our future. And Josie and I can also celebrate our lucky escape."

He smiled and then laughed gently. "We had better make a move then, or your grandfather will give us up for lost."



The evening turned out to be a great celebration over which Grandfather Braithwaite presided with fond pride. Then afterwards, the two young men thoroughly examined their lodgings before leaving them for the night.

Madeline shut the door after them, and she and Josie retired to their beds exhausted. But in spite of her weariness, she lay for hours before sleep came. It was terrifying to think that someone had deliberately tampered with furniture in this room. Were there any other traps that could harm them? Surely not, after the enormous pains Josh and Arny had taken to examine every fixture and fitting and make sure they were safe.

Then as her mind turned to Josh, she began to consider the future that lay ahead of them. She longed for success with a hunger that was almost shocking. Part of it was a desire to create and express through the medium of music, but another significant element was to achieve the success her father should have had. Angus Brooks had been set to

perform with the world's great orchestras, until an unknown hand had framed him for theft. It had been a bitter and effective attack and had destroyed his career. He had been such an honest and kind man and deserved the best. Then she smiled. She had a feeling that he would have liked Josh a great deal.

Her mother had always been a pillar of support to her father, in much the same way that she and Josh strengthened and encouraged each other. Josh's gentle, calm personality suited her livelier one perfectly. And the musicality that sprang between them was valuable beyond price.

Then with a perverse pang, she recalled Eric.

Part of her still ached to be loved. But she did not dare contemplate such an intimate relationship now. It would simply bring back that terrible overwhelming horror and she could not risk that happening again and jeopardising her music. Life as a solitary individual, though, was likely to be very cold and lonely. Without warning, tears filled her eyes and suddenly she wept.

She wondered whether Tina cried herself to sleep in the privacy of her single room. Perhaps the best thing would be to visit Tina soon, and the two of them could have a long and honest talk. It might help. It always had done in the past.

Josie had always been her most beloved friend, but she and Tina were far more alike.



13

MADLINE CLIMBED THE smart marble steps to the offices of *Grove and Sons*. So this was Tina's new London office. Very smart! She could feel the anticipation building. It would be good to see her friend at last, and the arrival of the printed tickets for the Queen's Hall concert provided Madeline with an excellent excuse to track her down at work.

She opened the door marked reception and the clatter of busy typewriter keys assaulted her sense.

One of the young typists looked up and rose swiftly to her feet, approaching the front desk with an efficient and welcoming smile. "Good morning. Can I help you?"

"Yes, I've called to see Miss Wilson."

"I'm afraid she's taking notes for Mr Groves. Would you care to take a seat in the waiting area? I'll pass her a message when she emerges. If you could just give me your name?" she held pen and shorthand pad at the ready.

"Madeline Brooks."

"Oh!" The young girl's dark brown eyes widened and flashed to her face in awe, and she lowered the pad. "You're Miss Wilson's pianist friend, aren't you?"

"Yes, that's right," Madeline smiled.

"Then please come and make yourself comfortable over here."

There was friendliness and deference in the voice now. "I don't think they will be much longer. Would you like a cup of tea and some biscuits, while you wait?"

"Thank you. That would be very welcome."

There was no audible decrease in the typing rate as Madeline followed the young receptionist across the room. But she was aware that the whole bevy of girls were observing her closely. Their curiosity was almost palpable.

She sipped the tea slowly as she waited, and after a short while an internal door opened and a man emerged. To Madeline's critical eye, this had to be Tina's boss, Phillip Grove, the man who was exploiting her. There was an aura of power and influence surrounding him. He had light sandy hair that blended inconspicuously with the colour of his face so that his blue eyes, topped by startlingly dark eyebrows, were a dynamic force to be reckoned with.

He was bidding goodbye to clients, and when Tina emerged behind him, she could see that they were a well-matched pair. Her lively sensitive features were firm with confidence and authority. She only had to glance at one of the girls, and they came to take the typing notes and listen to a detailed set of instructions. A small conversation ensued, then Tina glanced quickly across the room at Madeline. A smile touched her eyes and she nodded briefly.

A few minutes later, the boss retired once again to his office and Tina came across the room, holding her hands out in greeting. "Madeline, it's marvellous to see you. Come into my office and we can talk."

They retired into a small room that had enough space for a desk and filing cabinet and an enormous typewriter. And once the door had shut Tina laughed humorously. "I call it my office. It's no more than a cupboard really, but I can't say that in front of the girls. Do have a seat."

"You look very well Tina," she said. "How are you finding London?"

"Hectic, but fun. We've been entertaining practically every night. Look, I'm sorry I couldn't make it to your celebrations at the Carlton. I would love to have joined you, but I was committed to representing the company at a sequence of evening functions and I couldn't get away."

"That's alright, I understand." Madeline touched her hand. "I don't know how you cope with the constant pressure."

"I have to admit, it's exhausting. But I was so pleased to hear your news. I told you at Christmas that you were almost there, and I was right. You deserve it." Her voice grew a little wistful. "I'm very happy for Josie and Army too, of course. They make a good couple." Then her eyes sparkled. She glanced quickly at Madeline and chuckled wickedly. "He's a darling, utterly harmless and sweet. But the person I'm really looking forward to meeting is this young violinist of yours. Josie's made him sound dreamily romantic."

"Josie is *such* a romantic!" Madeline laughed. "But it's nothing like that really. Josh and I have a professional relationship, and we're good friends. I've brought you the tickets you asked for."

"Do you realise I've never heard you play in public yet?" Tina took the tickets and put them safely in the drawer of her desk, then glanced quickly at her watch and considered the time carefully. "Do you fancy a bite to eat? I could take my lunch break a few minutes early."

"Mmmm. I'd like that."

"Good. Phillip's wife is coming to meet him, and I'd rather not be here. I'll tell you all about it in a minute. It's very difficult."

Later, the two young women were comfortably seated at a nearby restaurant with a meal before them. They had chosen a table well away from the nearest customers, and eventually Tina had come to the point where she wanted to tell Madeline what was troubling her, and her lively face grew tense with anger. "I was wrong about him. He's a thoughtless, callous bastard. He'll never change his lifestyle for me or for anyone else. He was just using me. And like a fool I fell for it."

"You're no fool Tina. Far from it. Whatever happened to make you see him in this light?"

"I met his wife a few weeks ago at a party. She wasn't the silly creature he'd led me to believe. She was wealthy, sophisticated and intelligent, and knew exactly what her husband was up to. You see, he could never afford to abandon her. If he did, then his business would fall apart. She wins many of the contracts for him. And what's even more obnoxious is that I liked her. We had a long, long talk."

"Good God. That must have been difficult."

"It wasn't actually, not after we'd got over the first awkwardness. She knew exactly how he had been behaving and was far too

intelligent to be jealous. You see, I'm not his first indiscretion." She looked directly into Madeline's eyes, and there was fury in her own. "He's an utterly spineless bastard. And he doesn't deserve to have her... or me."

Madeline winced at the raw hurt that was at the root of her friend's reaction. "What are you going to do now, you can hardly go on working with him, can you?"

"Hmmm!" She looked down at her plate. "I shall see this exhibition through to its conclusion. I must admit, I've enjoyed planning it and I'd like to see it succeed. He wouldn't have a clue if I left now, and I'd hate all my hard work to have been for nothing."

Madeline smiled suddenly. That was so like Tina, generous and clear sighted in spite of the way she had been hurt. She reached across the table and gently took her friend's tense hands. "We all take terrible risks with our emotions, don't we? But if we didn't, we would never find happiness."

"Well, I've learned my lesson. I don't think such happiness exists."

Madeline sighed. "Perhaps you're right. I certainly haven't found it." And they were silent for a while.

Life was full of hard lessons.

Then she looked at her friend's face again. "In spite of all that's happened, I still have my career in music, but what are you going to do once this exhibition's over?"

Tina smiled, and her lively eyes sparkled. "I'm going to leave business completely. They're calling for women to join the Wrens. I've been for an interview and shall have a medical soon. It sounds tremendous fun, we'll be living together in dormitories, just like we did at the orphanage. And the men will have to treat us with respect. Then at least when this war comes, I know shall be doing something of value."

Madeline frowned. "That's a very laudable aim, but is that what you want for your entire life?"

Tina gurgled with laughter suddenly. "Don't look so anxious Maddy. No. I don't want to spend my life in the armed forces, but I think I might meet the right person in that sort of environment. Besides, I want to be doing something exciting. Have you read the papers in the last few days? We've got to stop that madman. He's hungry for conquest, and he won't hesitate to trample over everything

in his path.”

“Well, we’ve left it a bit late for that, I’m afraid. But you’re right. All he’s ever done is bite the hand that’s patted him. The more we humour his demands, the more demands he’ll make. The only thing is, I don’t think Chamberlain sees it that way.”

“Well, I for one am ready to stand up to him! And I will damn well show those men in the Navy what I am capable of.”

Madeline laughed. “Go for it, Tina. I think you’ll love it.”

“But the first thing I intend to do is come to your concert. I had planned to bring Philip and several of our clients, but I’m not going to waste my time on them now. I might invite my office girls instead. They deserve a night out for all their hard work.”

“Do you think you will be able to have the evening off?”

“Never doubt it. The company can go take a jump. I’m not going to miss this.”



Madeline and Josh played to a packed audience the following month in Queen’s Hall and Tina did indeed come, bringing all her office girls. As a direct result of their performance that night, they were commissioned to give a series of concerts and recitals across England through the summer and autumn months. So instead of going home for their summer break, they went on tour together, developing and performing a rapidly expanding repertoire of glorious music.

Each morning over their hotel breakfast, they scanned the papers for reviews and read them to each other. But their pleasure was tempered by the news emerging from Europe.

Hitler was demanding large parts of Czechoslovakia. And as his demands became more and more strident, the papers began reporting that he was amassing his forces for invasion

Then signs of war preparation began to appear at home. Madeline and Josh came across trenches being dug in London and Manchester, public places being converted into air raid shelters, and gas masks being issued to the public.

By the time they returned to the Academy in September, Chamberlain had declared a national emergency and mobilised the Navy for action. Then in a last desperate attempt to maintain the

peace, he flew to Munich to negotiate with Hitler himself.



With the security of Europe still hanging in the balance, Madeline collected the mail that had been accumulating for them at The Academy over the summer. As always, the fume laden air of the capital was exacerbating Josh's asthma, which had been far less troublesome on tour, particularly in towns with cleaner air. Having ensured that he use his trusty inhaler, she had left him to recover quietly in the café across the road.

She extracted a large array of letters from their individual pigeonholes, but one stood out from the others: a large handwritten envelope addressed to them jointly and closed with an old-fashioned wax seal. She turned it over and her breath caught in her throat. "Oh my goodness!"

It was post marked Wien. That had to be Vienna!

She dashed across the road to the café, to find Josh sitting at the table with two cups of tea in front of him, and looking a much healthier colour.

She placed the letter on the table. "We have a lot of post, but what do you make of this, Josh?"

He looked closely at it, and his eyebrows rose in astonishment as he recognised the Austrian postmark. "Curious. I think you had better open it, my dear."

She sat down at his side, broke the seal and spread a beautifully written letter out for them both to see. Her heart leapt and their eyes met.

"It's an invitation to perform in Vienna next year!" she said incredulously. "What an incredible opportunity. But... how can we possibly accept? Look at the situation in Europe! The world is lurching towards war, and they are inviting us into the heart of the German Reich."

His breathing was considerably easier now, but his voice was still a little hoarse and strained as he replied slowly. "This whole crisis may simply blow over. While Chamberlain is talking there's always hope. He is a powerful bringer of peace."

"You have more faith in him than I have," she said tartly. She had

grave doubts about his policy of appeasement. "If he does bring us peace right now, I wonder what price we will end up having to pay? I have a nasty feeling it will merely be postponing the inevitable."

"Perhaps. But war is a terrible thing, Madeline." He took a few moments to recover his breath and eased himself back in the chair, rubbing his chest. His normally calm enthusiastic expression had become intense. "None of us have forgotten the sufferings of the Great War. It took my father ten years to die of mustard gas poisoning. It was appalling. I would hate to think of that happening again. If it does, we and our friends at the Academy will be in the front firing line."

She bit her lip and lay her hand impulsively over his. "I'm really sorry Josh. I didn't know. I would not wish that on anyone."

"I know." He smiled, turned his hand over and squeezed her fingers. "What I'm trying to say is, this tour may be possible. Indeed, it might ultimately be important." His eyes fired with passion and purpose. "I really believe music can bring peace and understanding between people. Until the worst happens, we have to work for the best."

She studied his fast-moving features, the elegant profile and energetic dynamic eyes, and she could not help but smile in response. "You're right, you usually are. I will write to accept the offer. Let's see if we can spread a little peace and understanding."

Together, they sifted through the remaining letters and found another enquiry from Paris and one from Italy.

"I've been thinking," Josh said as he placed his hand over the European invitations, "perhaps this is the right time to put our affairs into the hands of a good agent. There will be an enormous amount paperwork and planning required for a tour on this scale. And we really need to concentrate on our music, not administration."

She nodded. "The summer tour was difficult enough. I have a list of good agents. Why don't we whittle them down and make enquiries?"

He nodded. "I'm free tomorrow morning."

"Alright. We'll meet in the entrance at nine then."

Two days later Chamberlain returned from Germany flourishing the papers of peace in his hand. The terrible tension evaporated into festive joy, then life began to settle down once more to something approaching normality.

The Hours Before Dawn



14

THE AUTUMN SPED past. Christmas came and went. With their career safely in the capable hands of Ibbs and Tillet, they played again and again across the country. Those long dark evenings, travelling, talking, rehearsing and playing, brought them very close. It was a fulfilling time in both their lives, for they deeply inspired each other, always finding extra resources of energy to play, and meaning and depth in the music. In concert the intimate experience seemed to flower and spread out to envelope the audience. Wherever they went, they were adored, and their reputation began to go before them.

The seasons changed around them with a vivid intensity that shocked Madeline. The excitement and stimulation of music-making was diametrically opposite to the pessimism sweeping the country once more. The euphoria of last September when Chamberlain had negotiated peace, evaporated as the political situation deteriorated again and again, and now the population was gripped by a sense of deep depression and dread.

Every young man of their acquaintance was expecting his call up papers, and each one was making plans accordingly. Josie and Arny were bringing their wedding forward to July in an attempt to snatch a little time together. She and Josh ought to be planning their future too. It was agonising to consider that he would be called up to join the fighting. It would be the end of the musical life she adored.



The final and most prestigious concert of their season arrived. The occasion went well, and as the evening drew to a close, they stood hand in hand on stage and bowed deeply to the huge audience. The applause was deafening. She glanced at his face. There was a tremendous fire in his eyes, an energy and zest for creating music that ran deeply through the fabric of their lives.

They carried their bouquets off stage then returned again and again to acknowledge the applause.

Afterwards, as they were preparing to leave, Madeline watched Josh carefully and lovingly pack his violin away, and knew she had to speak.

It was terrifying to think how much this tall, supple, red-headed man, so expressive, elegant and sensitive, had come to mean to her. He had unlocked the closed doors in her heart and liberated her soul from its torment. That in itself was no mean achievement. But they complemented and stimulated each other so that the music they made was unique.

She could not imagine life without him. Then, she made an astonishing discovery that shocked her.

Over the last year she had grown to love him deeply. He touched a part of her heart that no other person had ever reached. It would be appalling if he went to join the fighting unaware of how much he meant to her.

She swallowed hard, desperately afraid that such an admission would end in disaster as it had with Eric. It would ruin their relationship and crush her music once more.

She approached him slowly, hesitantly, not knowing how to bridge this gap safely. "That was the most wonderful experience Josh. I'd never have thought this possible last year."

"Nor I," the enthusiasm was resonant in his voice. "I've often asked myself what it is, and I still don't know. But it is tremendous."

Gently, she took his hands and carried them to her cheeks. "I think we're extremely lucky. We have so much together."

He looked questioningly into her eyes and squeezed her hands, but his voice was strangely cautious. "Indeed, it is the closest of all

musical links.”

She nodded. “I think... I suspect that what we have goes a great deal deeper than merely musical expression, Josh.”

He had been watching the play of expressions across her face, but abruptly his face became serious and he withdrew his hands.

“What is it, Josh?” she asked, puzzled. “Is something troubling you?”

“No. It’s nothing!” he said quietly and turned away to continue packing his violin.

She almost did not push the point, too relieved that he had not tried to touch her. But then something in his demeanour changed her mind. What they had together was far deeper and more important. “I think we do need to talk about this, Josh, about the coming conflict. About the likelihood that you will be called up.” She touched his arm, but he stiffened as though she repelled him.

With difficulty she tried to articulate her thoughts and feelings. “We’re so close in our music-making, so close to each other as human beings, and I’ve grown to love you a great deal for all of the things you are. And it feels absolutely right that I should do so.”

Wearily he turned back to her. “I wouldn’t hurt you for the world, Madeline. But you mustn’t try to bring me any closer.”

“That wasn’t actually my intention, but why should I not?” she asked in confusion.

“It’s hard to explain. The creativity we have is unique and precious. A more personal relationship would literally destroy it.”

“That’s ridiculous. I don’t see how.”

“No, I don’t suppose you do. But believe me, it would.”

She frowned. “But this is all part of the people we are, Josh. And the better we’ve known each other, the stronger that link has become. Imagine what it could grow into if we allowed it to flourish.”

“Intimacy would kill it, and I...” he took a deep breath, and his sensitive face was torn by uncharacteristic anguish. “I couldn’t live if I lost what I have with you. I love you. But it’s purely a spiritual thing. Look. Let me show you.” He lifted her chin up and drew her gently towards him.

She could feel that every muscle, every sinew in him was unbearably tense.

She rested her hands on his chest and looked searchingly into his eyes. He stiffened even more at her touch, and she could see he was longing to shrink away from her.

Oh God! Did he find her repulsive? Was he one of these men who were attracted to other males and found the female form abhorrent? That was an unbearable thought! She closed her eyes to conceal the pain and doubt that filled her.

But no. It was not that.

She could sense something else.

He was hiding something, clenching it back fiercely so that she was only just aware of it, a darkness like a shadow on the edges of her perception. She could feel a tremendous pain and despair in his soul. And it was something that resonated very deeply with her own experiences.

She let her pent-up breath out slowly and studied his sensitive features once more. "Whatever can have hurt you so deeply, Josh?"

His eyes widened and he murmured huskily, "I swore I would never do this, never become really close to anyone."

"It's not a matter of conscious choice," she said. "We were close from the moment we met."

He took a deep breath and stepped away from her. "Yes. And it's dangerous. It should be purely professional."

"If it were," she whispered, "then it would never have given us so much power to express and create. It's far deeper than that."

His face had hardened in determination. "It's not right for several sound reasons. I don't think a professional musician should drag a family around with him." Then he made a gesture that seemed more of futility than firmness. "And my health is poor, you know that. When the smog is thick I can hardly breathe. I wouldn't inflict that on anyone, least of all you. It's bound to get worse as I get older."

"We could live in the country, in the fresh air," she replied softly and tenderly. "And the music is not just in you. It's in us both, it's our lives. It's not that is it? It's deeper and more personal."

He was trembling now, his face deathly pale, and he whispered painfully, "Madeline, I cannot!"

"You're... Oh heavens!" She pressed her fingers to her cheeks, and the words caught in her throat. She could not go on. The revelation

was like a blinding light that came to her and devastated her. He had the same hurts and fears as herself. It was one of the reasons why they had such a deep understanding of how the other was feeling and thinking. It was why she had never felt any revulsion at his closeness. She whispered, "I know what you feel."

He spun round and stared at her. "What do you mean? How can you know? How can you possibly understand?"

His eyes raked her face relentlessly, seeing deeply into her in a way no one else had ever been able to do. Then he closed his eyes and groaned. "You too? Good God! How could anyone do that to you?" Then he murmured earnestly, "Look. I could never be a real husband to any woman. No matter how much I love you, I can't... I've never been able to since... you could never expect..."

She pressed her fingers to his lips. "After what happened to me, I can't help but cringe from that. But I love you Josh, more than anything on earth. I just want to be with you."

He took a deep hesitant breath, then turned her face up gently. "Do you mean that?"

She nodded and touched his sensitive lips softly with her fingers. "We must trust in each other."

He gathered her gently, cautiously, into his arms. They just hung there for a moment, tense and anxious at taking such a risk, feeling the warmth and closeness of each other, but aware of the crippling fear latent in both their lives.

It did no harm. There was no horror or fear between them, just warmth and trust that filled them with joy. Slowly, his breath eased out and the tension began to melt from his clenched muscles. She could feel it, in the way his arms relaxed and began to treasure her. Instead of being two rigid unbending figures standing uncomfortably against each other, they slowly leaned towards one another. They belonged here like this.

She felt tears gather in her eyes and whispered, "Do you know Josh, I've always dreamed of being able to do this without fear, of loving someone so intensely that I could forget what had happened and trust."

"Sh. You were right." She felt his lips touch her cheek. "You're closer to me than all the memories."

She looked up into his face, and still there was no disgust. Slowly

he touched his lips to hers, and that simple gesture overwhelmed her with the strength of his love and tenderness. And by the flood of emotion that it liberated within her, she knew it was right.

Two days later, they made the announcement of their engagement, and it came as no surprise to any of their friends.



15

'SHATTERED THIS MORNING, never been so fit and healthy in my life. We ran five miles yesterday across the moors on some hare-brained training scheme which included a mud bath, courtesy of Fox Tor Mire. I don't think they'll try it again on us ladies. Complexions glowing but otherwise browned off, we were picked up and returned to Plymouth in time to smarten up and represent the Navy at a formal Ball.'

Josie smiled and looked up short sightedly over the tops of her glasses and put her pen down. "Will she be able to get the time off to come to my wedding, do you think?"

"Yes. She says she'll be entitled to some leave by then. How are you getting on with your invitations?" Madeline enquired, surveying the tidy piles of envelopes stacked on the table at her friend's elbow.

"Writers' cramp!" Josie flexed her fingers. "I'll be heartily glad when it's all done."

"You shouldn't have so many relatives." Madeline teased. "I thank God Josh and I have small families."

"Mmmm. Have you written to your Aunt Jessica yet?"

"Yes," Madeline frowned and glanced at a sealed envelope sitting by the clock on the mantelpiece. She had been putting off delivering it for weeks, using the excuse that she was too busy practising for her concert with the Halle. She was busy, but she did not want to stir up

old animosity or shatter an illusion.

She harboured a secret hope, a deep-seated longing that her aunt would turn out to be like her mother, warm and approving. But she had an ominous feeling that she was going to be deeply disappointed. Particularly when she remembered the proud disdain on the woman's face when they had first met.

Josie followed her gaze and sighed. "Why don't you just post it?"

Madeline picked up the envelope and fingered it absently. "I've never met her properly, and she's my mother's sister! No. Josh and I will pay her a visit. There must be something in her that will like me."

"You mustn't hope for too much," Josie warned in concern.

"I know, but I can't help hoping. It's just... I keep wishing I still had my Mum. She would have adored Josh and would have loved to help me plan our wedding."



Madeline and Josh went to visit Jessica Durrant the following afternoon after lectures. Madeline looked around with curiosity as she was admitted through a large front door into an impressive house. She knew very little about her aunt and family, other than that Claud Durrant worked in the city. He must be doing very well to afford a home like this.

The butler conducted them into the drawing room, announced them and retired.

Jessica Durrant was not the only person awaiting her. The room was filled with relatives and her heart sank. They were about to go out. Grandmother Braithwaite was impressively attired in full evening gown, and her fierce face, painted and decorated, could easily have belonged on the shoulders of Lucretia Borgia.

Jeremy was smart and quiet, and her aunt and uncle dressed impeccably. Claud Durrant, her uncle, was a slim and extremely fit man. His head was completely bald, and yet his face was thin, sharply featured and expressive, so that it was difficult to place his age. He could have been anything from mid-thirties to late fifties. She found him appraising her with quick calculating eyes.

She came forward and held her hands out to her aunt. "It's good of you to received us Aunt Jessica, particularly as I see you're just going

out.”

“You must thank your grandmother,” Jessica smiled graciously. “It was at her request. Our taxi will be here in a few minutes. What can I do for you Madeline?”

“My, my,” Claud Durrant came forward and took Madeline’s hands, raising them to his lips. “So you’re Madeline. I’ve heard a great deal about you, but nothing that could prepare me for such a lovely young lady.”

Madeline extracted her hands efficiently from his grasp and smiled. “Thank you, Uncle Claud, you’re too kind. I’ve come to introduce my fiancé to the family. This is Joshua Hanson,” she smiled at Josh, then turned to her grandmother and began the introductions.

The old lady looked Josh up and down and smiled. “A very pretty young man. You have good taste child. And what do you do Mr Hanson?”

“I play the violin, ma’am.”

The old lady’s face hardened with disapproval, and she turned to Madeline. “I had a feeling you’d choose a musician. You’ll end your life a pauper, just as your mother did.”

Madeline felt her cheeks colour with anger. “My parents were marvellous people, Grandmother, and I wouldn’t have had them any other way.” She placed an invitation in the old woman’s hands without speaking another word.

Josh shook her grandmother’s hand. “I’m glad to see that you feel such concern for Madeline, Mrs Braithwaite. However, it’s not something you need to be concerned about. Madeline and I could live quite comfortably without performing. But what would be the point if making music gives us pleasure?”

“Well spoken, Josh,” she smiled and linked her arm through his, drawing him along to the next members of her family. “This is my Aunt Jessica and Uncle Claud.”

She was pleased to see her aunt and uncle shake his hand politely and exchange a few words. She extended a small, neat envelope to them. “We would be delighted if you would come to our wedding in September.”

“Why... that is very sweet of you.” Jessica looked a little surprised and took the envelope, then an understanding smile touched her eyes. “Ours is rather a small family, isn’t it? We will consult our diaries my

dear.”

Five minutes later they left the house and Josh shook his head. “Your aunt and uncle were kind enough, but the old woman... that was a cruel comment to have made about your parents.”

She nodded slightly. “She’s never pretended to want anything to do with Matthew and me. And I suppose she must blame us for the fact Grandpa banished her from the house. He’s well rid of her, I think.”

“Poor old chap,” he grinned suddenly. “I like him a great deal, and he doesn’t deserve to be chained to that iceberg.”

“Well, at least we’ve delivered the two difficult invitations. The next are going to be far more pleasant. I’m really looking forward to a few days in the country with Phyllis and Grandpa.”



16

CHARLES BRAITHWAITE CONTRACTED bronchitis every year, but Madeline was shocked to see him so severely weakened on this occasion. He had been propped up in his favourite chair in front of the fire, with a warm blanket tucked around his knees. The newspaper lying on the blanket showed none of the creased bulkiness of a paper that had been read, and that omission frightened her. He usually read his Telegraph from front to back.

The room was lit only by the firelight, so that the old oak beams of the low ceiling and walls seemed to cocoon him in snug warmth. He opened his eyes as they entered, but the normally fit and active frame was too feeble to rise and greet them, and his seventy-three years showed.

Madeline went to kiss his cheek then knelt and tucked the blanket in tenderly. "Grandpa. It's good to see you. Look who I've brought with me."

The old man smiled and held his hand out to Josh. "Nice to see you my boy. So, you're going to see to my girl's happiness, are you?"

Josh smiled. "I'll do my best sir."

"See that you do. She's a strong-minded little madam, but she'll still need you to be strong for her, particularly after I've gone."

"Grandpa! That's no way to talk," Madeline said firmly. "You're going to be better in no time and dashing back to London for all those

mysterious meetings.”

“I don’t feel like it at the moment.” He coughed, and it was several minutes before he was able to continue. “I get this damned condition every year,” there was a rasp of frustration in his voice. “and the bloody useless doctors can’t do a thing about it! February is always the worst month.”

“And now you’re just being grumpy,” she teased gently.

He chuckled suddenly. “I’ll be at your concert next month my treasure, never fear.”

“I know you will. Now I’ll make a pot of tea and bring you some of your favourite Huntley and Palmers.” She stood up and studied his haggard face. “I’m glad we decided to come now and not next month. Josh and I will fetch our bags from Harborough Hall and stay here tonight to keep you company.”

His eyebrows twitched, and he said irritably, “Don’t be silly girl. Nurse Bailey does a sterling job.”

“But she goes home after dinner.” Madeline touched his hand coaxingly. “We can spend some time together this evening, listen to the wireless and perhaps play a hand of cards. We haven’t done that in years.”

“And what about your practice? What about Phyllis?”

“A little rest from practice won’t hurt me. I want to be here and be sure you’re alright.”

Josh nodded. “Madeline’s right, sir. You could need something in the night, and it would be foolish to attempt to get up.”

The old man grunted. “Must admit, I’d be glad of your company my dear. I’ve missed you.” He gripped her hand warmly. “I’m surprised you want to come anywhere near such a grumpy old bear. Sickness always turns me into an intolerant old fool.”



Madeline and Josh returned to Harborough Hall to collect their bags and speak to Phyllis, but they found her pacing up and down restlessly in the drawing room. She spun round suddenly as they entered, and her face was tense with apprehension.

“Oh my goodness. What’s happened?” Madeline asked and hurried to her side.

"You haven't seen the papers then? I'm glad about that my dear, it would have been a terrible shock. We have a lot to discuss. But first tell me, how is your grandfather?"

"Very poorly. We thought we'd stay with him tonight. He's all alone. Now tell me what's wrong, Phyllis."

Phyllis glanced uncertainly at Josh, as though she wished he were not about to witness their discussions. Then she shrugged slightly and turned to Madeline, handing her the newspaper. "Read that and be strong. It's front-page headlines!"

Madeline took the paper quickly, aware of Josh peering over her shoulder. She felt him draw his breath inwards sharply, then the story leapt out at her and she froze.

There was a double column width picture of Belaugh, fat, defeated and handcuffed, being led away by police officers from a smart looking London residence. The headline above it screamed:

Businessman Caught Investing in Child Prostitution

Madeline suddenly felt faint, as though someone had punched her in the stomach.

Horrified, she read through the article, taking in the shocking truth of what had happened. A reporter had discovered the illegal activities and had called in the police, making sure that he was present to cover the story in full. They had caught Belaugh red handed. Many of the details were unfit for publication in the paper, but it was easy to read between the lines, just as people around the country would be doing right now. And they would be wondering whether similar activities had been taking place here, behind the closed doors of Harborough Hall.

She felt physically nauseous at the thought of such public exposure of all the things that had hurt her.

Josh turned her gently towards him. His own face was very pale, but his hand was steady and reassuring as he brushed her golden hair back and examined her face. "So, this is what happened to you?"

She nodded numbly. "And with this story plastered across all the newspapers, it won't be long before before the whole world realises it too."

"That will only happen if we allow it," he said softly and firmly,

his eyes firing with energy. "If we are careful, and provide a strong united front, we ought to be able to refute the suggestion. Men like that are known to keep such sordid peculiarities away from their homes and families."

"That may be so, but it will require a titanic effort from every one of us, to make them believe it. And it's going to be deeply hurtful!" Madeline shivered. But Josh smiled gently at her and touched her cheek, and her courage began to surface once more.

With it came the realisation that this would impact Phyllis, Patrick and Janet just as severely. She nodded, took Josh's hand and turned to face the older woman. "They will come straight here for your story Phyllis. That could be very unpleasant."

"Oh, I can handle them, never fear. I've had years of experience in public life. There are a few things that worry me far more. But never mind that." Phyllis glanced restlessly at the clock. Then she turned to Josh and examined his face searchingly. "You will stay by her, won't you? Believe in her. What happened here in the past doesn't make her any different, and I assure you..."

He stiffened. "What do you think I am Phyllis?"

She continued to study him closely, then her expression finally relented. "I'm sorry, Josh. I needed to make sure... for Madeline's sake. Most men wouldn't understand. How could they?"

"I am not most men. I understand only too well." But as he spoke the frost left his face and he sighed. "There's no need to be anxious, Phyllis. I'll be with her all the time."

The door opened, and an elderly man entered the room as though he knew the way well and was always assured of a welcome. He too looked purposeful and anxious, and he carried a leather briefcase under his arm.

The relief that came onto Phyllis's face was overwhelming. "Ah Michael, come in. You must meet Madeline and Josh. This is Michael Warner, the friend who's been helping me arrange my finances."

The elderly gentleman shook hands with Josh and Madeline and spoke in curiously gentle and warm tones. "I'm glad to meet you. Phyllis talks a great deal about you. I see you're reading the article. Shocking isn't it?"

Josh nodded and glanced quickly from the newcomer to Phyllis. "The press will come straight here, questioning everyone until they

dig up something they can publish. It's critical that we have a strong and cohesive story to tell them."

"I can weather press questions Josh. I might even give them a little titbit of gossip. What concerns me more is how Madeline, Patrick and Janet will manage if their financial support is withdrawn. They'll be penniless and exposed to all this trauma. I have to salvage something for them." Phyllis caught Michael's eye anxiously. "Is there anything we can do? I've invested half my money in Belaugh's, and the business is bound to crash."

"Shares will plummet as soon as the Stock Exchange opens on Monday." He placed his briefcase on the table and extracted a wad of papers. "You've got three choices. Either you instruct your dealer to sell immediately and sustain a tremendous loss, or you hang on to what you've got and hope the company survives, *or* you sell your good stock, and buy up all that you can of Belaugh's shares at bargain prices, again hoping that the company survives. But if it were to have you at the helm, it may well."

"We haven't got long to make the decision, have we?" she asked hollowly.

"No. Let's go through the options in detail."

"Just a moment Michael," Phyllis touched his arm then came and took Madeline's hands in her own. "Spend the day with Josh and your grandfather. Cut yourself off for a while. You'll be safe from interference there, and I'll be in touch as soon as I've sorted out the financial worries. What about your young friend Josie? They'll target her as well. We ought to warn her."

"I'll do it this afternoon Phyllis. And I'll speak to Patrick and Janet."

Phyllis nodded. "I'd be grateful if you would. It will allow me to focus on the financial aspects."

Madeline was aware that Josh was becoming restless at her side, and she knew he was right. Their first task must be to create a united front that Patrick, Janet and Josie could follow. She grasped the older woman's hands firmly. "Come over and join us for dinner tonight, or earlier if you can. We *must* work out our story before they start asking questions."

Phyllis nodded and smiled a little miserably. "I'm sorry, I'm not really thinking straight. You'll need to let the others know, won't you?"

I'll join you as soon as I can. He never ceases to plague us, does he? There's always something more disgusting to hurt us."

Maddy kissed her cheek encouragingly. "I think on this occasion he must be a great deal more distressed than we are. He'll have to witness all that he's built-up crumbling around him."

A grim smile appeared on Phyllis's face. "We can't allow him to drag us down with him."

Later that afternoon, Madeline and Josh went for a long walk. He did not ride, so they left Grandfather Braithwaite's horses stabled, and rambled arm in arm along the empty bridledways, and Madeline quietly and concisely told him all that had happened between her and her hated guardian. It was easy to tell Josh, and for the first time in her life she felt no guilt at what had happened.

He thrust his hands deep into the pockets of his warm winter coat and walked along with shoulders hunched. "What happened in your life is much worse than my experience. But I can imagine how you felt. I know how I've felt about myself ever since. I was never able to tell anyone, not even my mother." Disgust transformed his face with an expression she had never imagined he could possess. "They were drunk I think, and they caught us scrumping apples. They recognised me because of my red hair. The others ran away, but they caught me. I'd never been touched like that before. They were like vicious spiteful cats. I was their mouse, and they played with me. God! They played!"

She reached out tenderly and touched his chest. "Who were they?"

"Three girls, about eighteen or nineteen. They have all been in trouble since then. I was fourteen, just growing up."

"Oh Josh," she whispered. She looked into his eyes and could see a great well of revulsion like a bitter sickness inside that was directed both at himself and at women in general.

"We're not all like that," she said faintly. "And you mustn't hate yourself for letting it happen."

"I know. At least, I know that now." He stopped walking and drew her against his chest then rested his cheek on her hair.

She closed her eyes and hugged him tight, and several minutes later he shrugged and murmured, "They made my body do things I didn't want it to do, never knew... never felt before. It was good and yet it appalled me. The way they did it, the looks on their faces, the cruelty, the ridicule, the spite. Since then, I've not been able to..."

without remembering them.”

She looked up into his sensitive, pain filled face. “And do you see them when you look at me?”

“You?” He gazed down at her golden shimmering hair as it framed her face, and the change in his expression told her far more than words could have. She had come closer to him than all the pain. “No. You... you’re...”

“Sh!” She touched his lips gently with her fingers to silence him.

It was a magic moment, warm intimate and filled with the unknown. His arms were around her, and there was a growing awareness in his eyes, as though he was passing through that barrier of disgust into a new world.

She touched his cheek tenderly and hung there, hardly daring to breathe, afraid that any hasty or rash movement might extinguish this fragile awakening of sensation. Then she saw surprise enter his eyes and his lips slowly came down touch hers. He gathered her against him, and they kissed.



“WHAT WAS YOUR first reaction when you heard the news, Miss Brooks?”

Madeline and Josh had been discussing their concert season as they emerged onto the steps of the Academy, and abruptly a crowd of photographers and reporters surrounded them, blocking their way, firing inquisitive questions from all angles, clicking away with their cameras and scribbling notes furiously.

Taken unawares, Madeline instinctively withdrew into herself, trying to shield from prying eyes the hurt that lay at the core of her life and had done her so much damage.

She had not expected an attack on this scale.

A goading face came right up to her, and the front row of reporters pressed forward, demanding that she answer. Josh stepped quickly between them, a tall, elegant and quietly strong figure that commanded instant respect. “Stand back a pace and allow Miss Brooks space in which to breathe.”

Almost instantly the jostling crowd ceased to press in on her, and she had a moment to recover her composure and courage. Then she smiled and turned to the reporter who had shouted the first question and began her well-rehearsed reply. “I was deeply shocked. I still find it hard to believe that my guardian could be involved in such activities. He was always a well-respected and honourable member of

the business world."

"Miss Brooks," another voice was heard above the throng, and she looked in his direction. "What sort of guardian was Belaugh to you?"

"He was a busy man. We rarely saw him. He lived in London throughout the week, and on the few occasions when he did come to Harborough Hall, he was strict but kind, and took an interest in our progress. I can remember we were a little in awe of him," she smiled. "A businessman can seem very fierce to children."

"Did he ever touch any of you?"

"Good heavens no," she laughed. "I just can't imagine him doing the things you claim."

"It's not our claim, ma'am. It's up to the courts to decide whether he did it. Why then did Belaugh never return to Harborough after 'thirty-two'?"

She frowned. "We used to think it was simply the pressure of work. He worked extremely hard, and the prosperity of his business has always reflected that."

They were pressing closer and closer around her again, and Josh said sharply, "Step back again please, gentlemen. Miss Brooks cannot speak if you crowd her."

There was some shuffling back, and Madeline continued. "As we grew older, we realised it was a private matter between our guardians. There had often been a tension between them, but we didn't know why."

There was a crowd of students pressing on them from behind, trying to squeeze around them and leave the building. Josh smiled grimly. "I think that's enough for one day." He had a gentle but curiously commanding voice, and suddenly the cameras started clicking once more.

"Mr Hanson? Have you set a date for your marriage?"

He did not answer immediately but put his arm around Madeline's shoulders and together they forced their way through the throng. "Miss Brooks is tired after the trauma of the last few days. If you would kindly make way for her."

"Tomorrow morning then!" The clicking of cameras followed them demandingly as they forged a path down the congested steps to freedom.



The newspaper reporters flocked around Madeline for several days, photographing her and interrogating her whenever an opportunity arose. With calm determination she discounted all suggestions that any of Belaugh's activities had been carried out on the children at Harborough Hall and she continued practising all the hours she was able for her concert with the Halle.

As predicted, Belaugh's company crashed like a lead weight. Shares that had been worth two pounds on Friday, fetched only five shillings by Monday evening. Advertising and contracts for clothes were halted, and the erring businessman watched bleakly from his prison cell, helpless to save his company. As the days passed the shares continued to slide and all looked lost.

Then on Friday evening, Madeline and Josie were working quietly at their studies when they had a surprise visit from Phyllis, accompanied by Michael Warner. Once greetings had been exchanged, the elderly gentleman smiled beamingly at the two young women. "Come on now, put your coats on. I've come to take you all out to dinner. We have an occasion to celebrate."

Phyllis was a little flushed and her strong-featured comfortable face showed unaccustomed excitement. "I've taken the plunge. I'm now the majority shareholder in Belaughs."

"Phyllis!" Madeline cried in surprise.

"It's a terrible risk, I know!" Phyllis touched her flushed cheeks with her fingertips. "I still can't quite believe I've done it."

"We've just come from the board meeting," Michael Warner continued calmly. "We are going to restructure the company, give it a new name, image and direction. All we need is a managing director with the vigour and understanding that Bernard had."

Madeline gave Phyllis a tremendous hug. "Well, I think that's a job you could do wonderfully, if you'd give it a try. You already know the business inside out and used to help Bernard run it. Heavens above, you were the driving force that created a good part of it!"

"That's what I keep trying to tell her!" Warner nodded, and there was a touch of asperity in his voice.

"Do you *really* think so?" Phyllis seemed considerably struck and looked from one face to the other in utter surprise. "I thought you were

simply being gallant Michael.”

“Foolish woman!” he murmured sternly. “Now come out to dinner before I change my mind and go home in disgust. But promise me you’ll think about it.”



18

SPRING CAME. CROCUSES and daffodils sprouted in the gardens and churchyards and the air assumed an enlivening freshness and warmth that set the birds singing frantically and scurrying around building nests. Madeline's concert with the Halle was fast approaching, and her preparations were becoming more and more intensive. Josh was away quite often giving recitals and concerts of his own, and she had to repel newspaper reporters several times without his quiet support. Then the week of the concert arrived, and she travelled to Manchester for final rehearsals with orchestra and choir.

Josh went with her and listened quietly from the back of the city's splendid Free Trade Hall. A strange mix of emotions played through him as he watched her graceful figure with its gleaming crown of golden hair approach the piano. She began the powerful solo introduction to the Beethoven, and the sounds of the piano filled the hall with gentleness and grandeur, strength and tenderness. She was getting just the same response from the choir and orchestra that she usually received from a full audience, and it spurred her to put everything into the performance. Tremendous pride filled him, and he sat back, closing his eyes, the better to listen to the rendition. The orchestra joined her immaculately, blending in and expanding the music. Then there was a ragged scraping, as one by one the choir members surfaced from the spell she had cast over them and rose to

their feet to sing.

Madeline's part in the rehearsal finished more than an hour later, and she spoke for a short while with the conductor, then went to join Josh at the back of the hall. They dined well and walked slowly alongside one of the canals together. Madeline was still filled with the magic of performance, and Josh put his arm around her shoulder. "You haven't given the performance yet my love. You mustn't go over the peak and lose that edge."

"I know, but it's hard. I'll visit the Bingham's this evening and put in a few hours of practice. That should keep me on form."

"Good idea. Then you can build up momentum towards the actual performance. After all, this is a special occasion in many ways. It will be the first time my mother has heard you play something of this nature."

She smiled and hugged him. "Bring your violin along tonight, and we'll have a little fun too. You and that instrument are inseparable, aren't you?"

"Mmmm. And do you know why?" he asked softly.

"No."

"It was given to me nearly five years ago by an old gentleman who fled from Russia during the revolution. He was a tremendous musician. I met him when he was eaten up by arthritis and couldn't play any longer. It's not a Strad, but it has a quality that just sings aloud. His family treasured it, and now I do. It means to me what your father's piano means to you."

She nodded slowly. "I understand that. And I shall be able to pay Mrs Pritchard for it once I've been paid for this concert. Then we can move it to Grandpa's house, and I can play it again." She flexed her fingers restlessly. "Come on. I think we ought to go to the Bingham's now. I've got to prepare for tomorrow."

"Good!" He nodded in satisfaction.



Several days later, Madeline sat in the library at college surrounded by newspapers and was busy cutting out the reviews. She had hardly had the courage to read them this morning, and it was Josie who had scanned them first, commented on each one and then handed them to

her. They were a mixed bunch, and she was just beginning to recover from the shock. After the thrill and triumph of the performance it had been a sobering return to reality to read the critics' opinions. Some of them were openly complimentary, others were pedestrian, but one had reduced her to tears with his scathing criticism.

She knew critics were often brutal, and it was important that she should learn to accept criticism in all its forms and respond professionally.

Sir Ronald read through the cuttings with her, and after a few tart comments about that particular critic, put the whole thing into perspective for her and made her laugh. Of far greater significance, he informed her, were the comments of Sir Adrian Boult, and the letter that had arrived this morning from her agents saying the London Philharmonic Orchestra wanted her to perform the Liszt Second Piano Concerto the following spring.

Madeline Brooks' career had begun, and she immediately began work on learning that ferociously difficult music.



After trying for several weeks, Josie finally managed to corner Eric Finchley in private. She glanced around to be sure they could not be overheard, and her gentle face pinkened with the power of her wrath. "Eric Finchley," she spoke to him as she would never would have believed she could. "It was you wasn't it?"

"Me?" he chuckled. "Sweet Josie, what have I done to made you so angry?"

Her blush deepened. "You know full well. You were responsible for plastering that obscene story about Bernard Belaugh all over the papers, weren't you? It could so easily have destroyed Madeline, to have her life exposed to the world like that."

The smile left his eyes and a hard gleam replaced it. "I sincerely hope it hasn't hurt her, Josie. But the reporters did not need my assistance with their stories."

She nodded, and murmured softly, "You have a relative on the staff of the Daily Mirror. It was he who shopped Belaugh to the police, wasn't it?"

"Ah."

She nodded fiercely and her fingers itched to hit him. “Well let me tell you: Madeline, Josh and I have been through hell. We’ve had reporters firing questions at us and hanging on our every word for weeks. They’re like vultures, do you know that? After what Belaugh did to her, how do you imagine their questions made her feel? It could easily have destroyed her.”

“Rubbish. She’s much stronger than that. But it *has* destroyed him. And it had to be done.” His face was utterly uncompromising. “Madeline wasn’t the only individual harmed by his behaviour. Those poor kids he employed were living a terrible type of hell. But I don’t suppose you’d considered them, had you? Would you have forced them to continue suffering, in order to protect yourself and your friend?”

Josie was quiet for a moment, then shook her head abruptly. “No, but I would never have plastered it across the papers in that fashion. It was unnecessary and cruel.”

“You’re too tender hearted. He deserved every bit of it.”

“I only hope for your sake that he never discovers it was you. He’ll be ruthless.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “But he’ll have no power to do me any harm.”



19

MADLINE SAT ALONE in the carriage watching the bushes and trees flashing past. The train had climbed gradually out of Leatherhead before cutting through the tunnel and emerging on the North Downs. She rose to her feet, stepped out into the corridor and pulled the window down, squinting into the wind, her mind wandering to her meeting in Westcott, now just a short distance away. She had been back often since the day she had broken up with Eric, and she always felt a sense of anticipation when she reached this part of her journey. She was coming home.

Gradually the wooded slope ended, and she pulled the window shut. The train was slowing, the brakes squealing in protest as it pulled into Dorking. People were moving, someone squeezed past her and loud voices erupted into the corridor as a carriage door opened nearby.

She went back into the compartment to collect her small case and bouquet of flowers, then climbed down onto the platform and began the two mile walk that would take her through Westcott to St Barnabas church, her first port of call.

The lychgate creaked as she pushed it open, and the chirruping birds fell silent for a moment. There was a placid air of timelessness here that gave the impression nothing could ever change. The grass was full of daisies, just as it had been on the day her father had died.

Unconsciously she lifted the flowers to her cheek, the memory so piercingly sharp that it brought tears to her eyes. She made her way to their grave and knelt to arrange the flowers in the vase, then she touched the soft mound of grass and sighed.

"I wish you could meet him. I'll bring him here soon. You'll like him. He's very like you in some ways, thoughtful and quiet, and yet... yet he's a pillar of strength. He makes me feel human and alive." She paused and looked around at the trees in their mantle of heavy summer green. "We were happy here, weren't we?"

Then she shivered. The world her parents had known was balanced on the brink of war. Even life here in this timeless place was under threat. The Germans had invaded and annexed the rest of Czechoslovakia, having promised just six months ago that they would not. Nothing they said or did could be believed.

The progress of aggression felt inexorable. The sense of doom was accentuated by the newspaper reports, and the preparations being made in London to sandbag the buildings, tape up the windows, distribute gasmasks and protect the population from attack. She was beginning to think that the God who had taken her parents away, might after all have been doing them a kindness. They had been spared the bleakness of a future at war.

Later that morning, she kept her appointment with Mrs Pritchard. The lady lived in the end cottage of a terrace in the lower part of town and welcomed her into a beautifully kept front room. "Here it is my dear." She reached out fondly to touch the flaking wood veneer of the old piano. "I'll be glad to know it's going to such a good home. It makes such a lovely sound. The children all used to play it. They still do when they come home, but I'll be glad of the space now."

Madeline smiled, immediately surrounded by the happy memories that much-loved instrument evoked. "You've taken good care of it; I can see that."

"Sit down and play if you like. I'll make a nice cup of tea for us both."

"Thank you." Madeline sat down on the stool, lifted the lid and ran her fingers across the keys. She could feel her father, feel his warmth and passionate love of music. It was as though he was urging her to play, calling to her until finally she obeyed his summons. She could remember how he had used to sit behind her, teaching in such a

way that she could not help but play beautifully.

She played some of the music that he had loved and could sense him close to her, listening.

Presently she was aware that Mrs Pritchard had returned to the front room carrying a tray, and she glance at her.

The woman smiled a little diffidently. "Well I never! It sounds so grand when played like that. The children only ever learned to play little tunes. But you're at music college aren't you dear?"

"Yes, I'm just finishing the last weeks now. And then in the summer, I'm going on tour to France. We've been invited to Vienna and Italy too."

The woman shivered slightly. "It's not a good time to go abroad. Be careful, won't you? Those foreigners! Do you take milk and sugar?"

"Yes please." Madeline took the cup that was held out to her and chose a biscuit, and her eyes returned to the piano.

"You've kept it beautifully in tune Mrs Pritchard."

"Oh, it makes me want to scream if it doesn't sound right. The Vicar was telling me all about your work the other day. Surely with all the performances you give, you ought to have a real grand."

"Yes," Madeline laughed gently. "I suppose I should, but this piano is part of my family. It's very special. I can still see and feel my parents when I play it. I'd like my own children to be able to share that one day."



Later that day, Madeline arranged for the instrument to be collected and transported to her grandfather's house and then returned to London the following morning, carrying news and presents to Josie from her family. Her friend was still at college when she arrived back, but there was a large brown envelope waiting for her on the table. She glanced curiously at it as she took her coat off and settled herself down to a cup of tea. She tore the seal open and took the contents out.

Dear Maddy.

Great mystery!

Josh called last night. He sounded thrilled but wouldn't tell me what it was about. I suppose he thinks I can't keep a secret. Perhaps he's right.

Could you meet him in Oxford tonight? He's going to reserve a room for you at the Randolph Hotel (doesn't that sound grand!) and treat you to dinner. He says to meet him in the hotel dining room at eight.

Have a good time. I hope it's something wonderful. Do you think he may have found you somewhere idyllic to live??????

Love, Josie.

PS. Have ironed your washing so you'll have something fresh to wear. It's hanging in the wardrobe. Good luck xxx

Madeline looked quickly at her watch and leapt to her feet. She was never going to catch the train and meet him by eight. She drank the tea down quickly and threw open the lid of her suitcase. Everything was still there from her trip to Westcott. It would just have to do her a few extra days. She threw in a clean set of underwear, hurriedly folded in an evening dress, then closed the lid and scribbled a short note for Josie. She had to run the entire distance to the station, and only relaxed when she finally set foot on the train.

Oxford was completely new to her, but the hotel turned out to be an exclusive and rather starchy establishment in the centre of the city. Her small bag, which to her eyes looked deeply inappropriate to the grandeur of the surroundings, was carried to the room by an aloof porter. By the time she was alone in the palatial room, it was twenty to eight.

She put the case on the bed and opened the lid, hanging up her evening dress then studying herself in the mirror.

She felt tired, hot and travel worn, and the reflection looking back at her gave the impression of hurry and harassment. She could not meet him looking like this. He must have some wonderful news and it deserved proper appreciation. She gathered up her dressing gown and vanity bag and hurried to the bathroom.

Within minutes she was lying back in the luxury of piping hot water. She could feel it revitalising her, and in the relative peace she began to wonder just what he wanted to share with her. Perhaps he had found them a lovely place to live, or perhaps he had been offered a post at the University. The possibilities were endless.

Certainly, the Oxford air would suit him far better than the choking smogs of London. And what she had seen of this dreamy city

so far, with its ancient colleges, courtyards, spires and parks, was very attractive. *And* Oxford had excellent rail connections to the capital, so they could easily commute directly into the heart of musical excellence.

All in all, this would be a wonderful place to establish their home.

She was still busily speculating on his news when she returned to her bedroom. But shock wiped all such thoughts from her mind. "Eric! What are you doing here?"

He had his back to her, but she would recognise his athletic figure anywhere. He turned at the sound of her voice and came towards her, his face warming with appreciation.

She stepped back, uncomfortably aware of her loosely tied dressing gown and bare feet, and anger flamed through her. "Just what do you think you're doing here?"

"I received your message." He took her hands in his and drew her irresistibly towards him. "I just couldn't wait any longer. You've no idea how glad I am that it hasn't worked out between the two of you. He was never right for you, you know. You're built for passion and delight, and I love you."

"This joke is in extremely bad taste, Eric!" she said repressively, trying to snatch her hands away. "Now will you please get out."

"Sh." His arms circled her gently. "Relax my darling, you mustn't be afraid. I'll make it work this time I promise you."

Her eyes widened in disbelief, and she held him away from her with all the strength she possessed. "You actually mean it, don't you?"

"Mmmm. More than anything in my life." He drew her scantily clad figure against him so that the strongly muscled contours of his body were impressed against hers and she gasped, stifled and shocked out of her composure by the raw masculine feel of him.

His mouth was seeking hers, soft, tender and warm with passion, and she had to struggle to fend him off and suppress her utter revulsion as he separated the front of her dressing gown and caressed her eagerly.

His passion was fierce and deep, yet he seemed to be holding it back, restraining his desire for her with powerful determination, and as a result, the disgust did not come.

She did not want to experience such horror again. She loved Josh

with all her soul, and this was for him alone. She wrenched her mouth away from his. "Eric, no! Stop!"

"Sh."

"I don't want this!"

His mouth covered hers, silencing her, and she struggled against the imprisoning arms, against the growing enforcement of her body to his wishes.

She could not move. She could not break free. The fierce erotic passion in him was gaining the upper hand and soon it would be out of control.

A surge of real fear drove her to the very edge of endurance. He was going to subdue her like a worthless animal. It was happening all over again.

Dear God, no! She managed to wrench her face away from him, and overwhelming fury galvanised her. She was fighting now for her sanity and integrity. For a brief moment, her hand was free, and she slapped him with all the strength of her desperation.

Suddenly she was free, and he roared, "What did you do that for?"

She was shuddering, and surges of sick disgust and fury were rising through her. "How dare you come in here?" she panted and raised herself up tall, drawing her dressing gown close around her. Her voice shook with the intensity of her anger. "How dare you treat me like this?"

"Christ Almighty, what sort of game are you playing Madeline?" He grasped her arms in a grip that hurt, and his face and broad muscular shoulders loomed over her, determined and powerful. "Why did you invite me here if you didn't want me? You know how much I adore you."

"You're mad!" She shivered, aware of the pure physical strength he could use against her again if she was not careful. "I did not bring you here. I'm engaged to be married, or had you forgotten that?"

"That's not what you said on the telephone. And just look at you now!" He tore angrily at the dressing gown. "Why are you like this if you weren't waiting for me?"

"Perhaps," a soft voice spoke from the doorway, "because she was waiting for me."

Madeline spun round and clasped her fingers to her burning

cheeks. "Josh, oh thank God you're here!" Relief came over her in a great surge of weakness, and she ran to him.

Josh was standing in the doorway, his sensitive face pale, and his hands clenched into fists at his sides, but he was breathing with great difficulty, struggling with the beginnings of an asthma attack and he could hardly speak. "Now, kindly do... as the lady has asked... and get out, Finchley. Your behaviour is... obviously offensive to her."

"Whatever is it?" Madeline caught her breath at the raw rasping pain of his struggle to articulate. She took his hands anxiously in hers. "Where are your medicines? Quickly! I'll..."

But he brushed her hands aside. "Later... when he's gone."

"But you'll make yourself really ill and..."

"Be quiet, Madeline!" he commanded, glancing just once in her direction. His eyes moved up and down her figure, taking in her state of undress, and his breathing became even more laboured. "I think I must... have been very naive. We have a great deal... to talk about... with honesty."

Eric's face was hardening with growing bitterness. "I see what it is," he said with calm finality. "You don't want me, do you Madeline? You are simply going to use me to get rid of him."

"That's more than enough Eric," she spun round quickly. "Can't you see you're making him ill? How can you suggest anything so utterly foolish?"

"I'm no fool, far from it. And I can see right through you, at last." Eric turned to Josh, and the antagonism that existed between the two men flared to new heights. "I think you'd better face reality. She doesn't want you anymore. She's a passionate creature, built for life and fun, and you're not man enough..."

"Will you stop discussing me as though I'm someone's property?" she yelled and ran her fingers quickly through her long golden hair. "I didn't invite anyone here..."

Neither of them noticed her words. Josh laughed out loud at Eric. "And you think... you are what she wants? What conceit...! Judging by... the struggle I saw..."

"No, but you didn't feel her tremble in response as I did. If you hadn't come in..."

Madeline stared in disbelief from one affronted male to another,

and her indignation finally erupted into fury, overcoming all rationality and calm. In a low voice she growled, "How dare you both! What proud, insufferable creatures you men are. You are *all* the same!" She turned to Josh, her voice sinking to a whisper. "I thought you understood... after everything we've shared. You have to trust me. If you don't then there's no future for us. It's up to you entirely now." She watched his face for several long moments, but he made no gesture of reconciliation. Slowly she lifted her chin high. "I see. I... I think I need some fresh air... to think." And she marched past him and out through the door.

She desperately hoped he would call after her, follow her, show her that he cared, but he raised his voice furiously, "What the hell have... you been up to Finchley? What have you... done to her?"

"Something that you haven't got the balls to do," the voice replied. "I've loved her..."

"Just what do you mean by that...?"



20

“MEN!” MADELINE GASPED, and ran down the stairs and out into the street. How dare they! She tied the belt of her dressing gown tightly around her, as though she could shut the male world out for ever. She never wanted to see either of them again.

She wandered blindly past the shops and historic colleges, and finally found her way into the University Parks where she wandered along the riverbank for some way, trying desperately to calm her simmering fury so that she could think logically.

She did not need anyone. She certainly did not need a man who had not the perception to see how horrified and unwilling she had been. He knew what she had been through. How could he doubt her?

The punters were idling along with rhythmic grace, and their movements gradually soothed her. It was peaceful here, and suddenly she wished Josh were with her to share the sight.

She found a deserted spot and sat down on the riverbank.

The sun was completing its arch across the sky, and sat close to the horizon, casting long hazy shadows through the birches and willows that leaned out over the Cherwell. A cloud of midges hovered, humming in the humid air.

She could easily live here.

As her anger calmed, she began to see that such a life would be impossible now. All those beautiful, slowly surfacing dreams of a

home, and perhaps a family one day, to follow on the tremendous talent of their parents, had been shattered, destroyed by Eric's crude designs and insinuations. It was all the more bitter, because she was just beginning to hope that with Josh she could conquer her fears. But she could not blame him for distrusting her after what he had just witnessed.

There was a small cluster of reporters approaching, but she was unaware of them taking pictures of her. She was unaware of the curious glances of the passers-by.

She should have stayed at the hotel and sorted this out, she thought achingly, not given way to anger. She should have had the common sense and courage. It was too late now; the damage had been done. God only knows what they were saying to each other.

She hugged her knees to her chest, and slowly lowered her forehead onto her knees.

Presently, the peace was shattered by the scrunch of running footsteps pounding along the gravel footpath, then the noise stopped as the running figure came onto the grass.

The weight of a warm jacket enfolded her shoulders. It smelt of Josh, a faint beloved aroma that evoked all the magic that lay at the core of her life, and she pressed her cheek to its rough surface tenderly, afraid to look around and be disappointed. She wanted him so much that it hurt.

It was him.

He knelt behind her and gathered her up, turning her so that she had to look at him. His face was pale and drawn, his breathing less laboured now, but his eyes were fierce with vehemence.

"Thank God I've found you. There are reporters everywhere. Come back quickly my darling, before any more harm is done."

"Reporters? What...?" she looked at him in confusion.

"Leave them to me. I'll handle them. Just come." He raised her gently to her feet and shielded her from the clicking of the cameras, placing his tall expressive figure between them and her.

They were everywhere, the same vultures who had photographed her the month Belaugh had been imprisoned. With a shock she recognised their faces and their boldness as they stepped into her path. "Good evening Miss Brooks, Mr Hanson. Have you any comments to make about your affair with Mr Finchley? Is your

engagement off?"

She clutched Josh's warm jacket around her shoulders, still utterly confused. "I'm having no affair. I don't know where you've got that idea."

"Miss Brooks and I are here on business." Josh asserted calmly and gently, and his arm tightened around her shoulders, a gesture of togetherness that said far more than words. "The rumours are completely erroneous."

Madeline relaxed at last, reassured by his composure. She smiled into the cameras. "Yes. Our visit here is purely practical. We're looking to find a home, somewhere away from the smoky air of the city, with a room large enough to convert into a music studio. We begin touring later this summer, and we'd like to be settled before we go."

"Then Mr Finchley's presence here, and your hurried arrival are not connected sir?"

"Of course they're connected," he said in pure irritation. "We had planned to arrive at eight and dine together at nine. Now if you'll excuse us, we have to change for dinner."

"And the lady's appearance...?"

"What about the room they're sharing...?"

The questions came echoing after them, but they linked arms and pushed past, ignoring the barrage of questions. They ran up the steps into the hotel, into the relative peace and privacy of the lobby where Josh picked up the key awaiting him at the desk. Minutes later, he opened the door to a completely new room.

Madeline went in and stood there, hugging her arms, her thoughts racing in utter confusion. "These reporters were from the national papers not the local rags. What is going on?"

He shut the door and came to take her hands and he examined them carefully, as though they were precious objects. "Someone is trying to harm you. Whoever it is, they don't know about your hurts and fears. Thank God they don't, or they'd have succeeded. It was a bitter trap. I was so jealous I could have killed him... and you."

"I would never have behaved like that..."

"I know. I'm sorry I doubted you. I should have known better. Will you forgive me?"

Tears gathered in her eyes. "Oh Josh, I love you so much."

Relief spread across his face, but he gripped her hands tighter. "Listen carefully. Did you send a note to Eric and ask him to meet you here?"

"Good God *no!*"

"It's as I thought. Someone intends to hurt you."

Madeline shivered.

Josh folded his arms around her protectively. "The sooner we're away from here and on tour, the happier I shall feel."

A chill of vulnerability made Madeline clutch at him anxiously. "Remember the mirror that nearly fell on my hands? The wood had been cut through, hadn't it? And there was the fire at my lodging before you came to London. Josh! That could have been aimed at me, too. It started directly under my room. Someone wants to hurt me enough to risk killing a lot of other people."

"I shan't let anyone hurt you." He turned her face up. "Marry me now. Madeline. We could go away immediately on a glorious honeymoon and combine it with our tour. It would work. I'm sure Josie and Arny will understand, as long as we return for a few days for their wedding."

He had a way of making her believe in him, a quiet insistence that no one could deny, and she hugged herself against him, glad of his strength.

He turned her face up once more and comforted her in the only way he knew how. He kissed her, softly and tenderly. Slowly her arms crept around his neck. He was so trusted, so much loved that none of the horror that threatened her with Eric ever appeared.

She could feel the growing sensuality in the way they loved each other, the way their mouths explored and caressed, in the way he held her against him. They had stepped through the horror together and were poised at the edge of life. The strength of his need for her was a physical desire that he was fiercely suppressing lest it frighten or repel her.

When finally their lips parted, she looked into his face and saw the aching hunger there in his eyes. She touched his face, his lips, and saw the expression deepen painfully with longing.

"I'll marry you first thing in the morning if it's possible. I've been dreaming so much recently," she hesitated for a moment, a little afraid of making the admission, "...that we might have a family of our own

one day." She caressed his chest lovingly. "I'd like that... soon. I'm not afraid anymore, I love you too much for that."

His fine nostrils flared suddenly, and he took a deep breath. He gathered her up in his arms as though she was the most precious of treasures. "I never thought I could love anyone like this my darling. I want you so much it hurts."

Their mouths met this time, and she took the full onslaught of his desire for her, a glory that at last he could begin to admit. It warmed her through, and she responded to him in a very maternal fashion.

They ate dinner that evening with Eric Finchley. It was a difficult occasion, but all three of them forced an air of familiarity so that the snooping eyes of the press could satisfy their curiosity.

They parted the following morning with stiff formality and nothing further was said.



Madeline and Josh were married a week later at St Peter's church near Harborough Hall, and the Reverend Rogers performed the service for them.

Everyone had rallied round and between them, Josie, Phyllis and her grandfather had arranged the ceremony, reception and honeymoon. Madeline's future mother-in-law, a gentle and kindly lady who was very much like her son Josh, came to stay with Phyllis, helping, making and supporting as though she had always known them and was no stranger. With great speed and skill, she made a beautiful gown for Madeline, and when the important morning came, she helped Madeline dress and then looked long into the young woman's eyes. "Take care of my son for me. He's a dear boy, so sensitive and kind, so loyal. It's difficult when he's not well. It can be terrifying when he can't breathe. You know what to do for him, don't you?"

Madeline nodded. "I've done it for him already. I have all the medicines packed."

The older woman nodded in slow satisfaction, then stepped back, and smiled tenderly. "Good luck today."

The day was one that Madeline would remember for the rest of her life. She had never before felt so happy and confident, and even afterwards when they stood together in the oak beamed bedroom, like

two children, completely new to what they were about to do, that sense of confidence and joy was with them.

They did not speak. They had no memories remaining of the traumas of their past, they were just fresh and unadorned people alone together for the first time. Though it was a warm summer's night, a fire was alight in the grate, the logs flaring and flickering, giving them the light they needed to see each other by.

He turned her round so that he could unfasten the small buttons and bows that secured the gown. Madeline looked at her reflection for just a second in the mirror and nervousness filled her. Then her eyes flickered to him and she watched his expressive, sensitive face.

When he had finished at her back, his eyes rose in the mirror to look into hers.

He was nervous too, and that somehow reassured her. She smiled and turned slowly. It was silly to be shy. She could see the warm hooded expression of desire growing in his eyes, and she eased the gown off her shoulders. It was a heavy garment, containing countless yards of material, lace and beads, and it fell to the floor with a rustling finality that seemed to announce the ending of her former life.

He gathered her in his arms and she closed her eyes slowly, the better to feel the closeness of the man that she adored. She wanted this more than anything on earth, and with a tremendous sense of strength and release, she responded to his passion, guiding and encouraging him.

Finally, he entered her and she felt a flare of responding pleasure that brought tears of relief to her eyes. It did not match the fierce pleasure that made him groan, but the happiness she felt far surpassed any surprise and disappointment. With open eyes she watched his face, enjoyed the expressions that flickered there, and finally the excruciating relief of his ecstasy.

He held her in his arms for a long while afterwards, not wanting to close his eyes and sleep, lest this fragile blissful joy should evaporate. What had happened for them both seemed a god given miracle. And as he watched her, that little secret smile of happiness on her face, the sleepiness, and finally the complete intimate closeness of her sleeping here against him, he promised he would care for and cherish her for the rest of his life.

A little cloud of anxiety touched his eyes for a moment. He could

not bear the idea that someone was trying to harm her.



Venice was a city of magic. Madeline and Josh travelled there elegantly in the first-class luxury of the Orient Express and stayed for five romantic days in the Gritti Palace Hotel, overlooking the Grand Canal. Then they returned via Paris, and explored the bustling streets and markets, and enjoyed each other with a growing sense of devotion. It was a city for love. The vibrant colour and life around them responded to their passion for each other, deepening it so that to be apart for just a few moments was agony.



The newspapers printed the announcement of their marriage, and several of the papers carried a picture of the happy couple, linked with the story of their dubious escapade in Oxford.

Jeremy Durrant was coldly furious as he cut out the articles for his scrap book. His thin cunning face was white with anger, and he pasted the pictures and reports one after another onto the pages. Did she lead some sort of charmed life? She was out of the country now, but at least there was the other one, the Matthew boy. He would not fall into the trap of being too distant with that one. He would see to it himself.



21

MATTHEW BROOKS LAY absolutely still in the long grass, squinting along the barrel of his gun. He breathed slowly and deeply, then held his breath and gently squeezed the trigger.

The explosion sent the rifle recoiling hard against his shoulder. He changed his aim with quick calm proficiency, then fired the second barrel. A profound and utter silence followed, deeper than the chirruping tranquillity of before. The insects, birds and animals had frozen to stillness for a moment. Then the gentle hum of life started up again and Matthew looked round.

Grandfather Braithwaite was lying in the grass beside him looking through his binoculars at the little clearing. Softly he murmured, "Reload Matt. If this were tiger country or enemy territory, you couldn't afford to be unarmed."

Matthew nodded and quickly reloaded his weapon. "How did I do?"

Grandfather had stiffened slightly, then, "Quick. Put the poor thing out of its misery. You must have just winged it."

The young man rose to his feet, put the rifle to his shoulder and pulled the trigger.

"Calmly Matt," Grandfather whispered sternly. "Just take that extra moment to be sure."

Matthew closed his eyes for a second, then opened them and this

time his aim was true. The struggling rabbit ceased to move. He had bagged both animals.

The older man climbed stiffly to his feet and stretched his long thin back and chuckled ruefully. "I'm getting old, my boy. Too stiff and elderly to be of any use when the fighting starts."

Matthew looked at the old man, at the energetic fire that still burnt in his eyes, and he laughed affectionately. "Rubbish. People like you will always be in demand, Grandpa. With all the contacts and knowledge you have, they'll put you to work, I guarantee it."

Charles Braithwaite put his hand on the young man's shoulder and they walked slowly towards the two small carcasses. At the age of sixteen, Matthew had become a very tall athletic young man. He enjoyed the time he spent with his grandfather and had picked up a great many of the skills that had made the older man a good soldier. He had also learned to live his life with the same enthusiasm and energy. He bent over and picked the animals up by the ears. "You must show me how to skin and prepare them tonight."

"Very well." Charles looked up at the clear blue sky. "The weather's good. We'll build a fire and do the whole thing properly in the open. I haven't bivouacked like that in years. It'll bring back a few memories."

Later that night they sat round the fire. The dogs, who had been shut in during the hunting trip, were prowling around or sitting, keeping the two men company as they talked and watched over the bubbling stew pot. The smell of wood smoke and cooking meat stoked the appetite, the fresh air and cool evening sharpened it, and when the meal was ready they tucked in with relish.

The old man sat back to enjoy a rare smoke on his pipe, and watched his grandson shoulder his gun and take the dogs off for a walk. The boy reminded him of himself at that age, full of energy and enthusiasm. He always felt ten years younger when Matthew was home on holiday.

He stretched his feet out towards the fire and looked up at the stars. He had taken part in innumerable campaigns in his lifetime. The world had changed, people were different, and he had lived through and experienced every moment of that change. Cars and aeroplanes had been the stuff of fiction when he had been Matthew's age, but they had happened and had revolutionised the world. The cavalry no

longer rode horses, they drove tanks and armoured vehicles. Aeroplanes had become a powerful tool for mass destruction, and military research taking place now was opening up completely new frontiers.

He gazed up idly at the stars and wondered whether all the strides mankind had taken during his lifetime were in fact part of a continual climb upwards towards those celestial entities. The only thing that would never change, was mankind's desire to better himself.

He heard a shot ring out, then another and he smiled to himself. The boy was a natural hunter.

His thoughts meandered on, and then suddenly he became aware that the dogs were baying. It was an eerie sound in the night. He rose to his feet and automatically reached for his rifle. They were quite close. They were agitated and distressed. He could hear it in the tone of their call. Anxious now, he applied every scrap of concentration to what he was doing.

He followed the sound as quickly and quietly as he could manage. His stiff limbs and back were an irritating hindrance, and he knew that he would suffer for this unaccustomed exercise in the morning. But the closer he got to that ominous sound, the more concerned he became. Then he began to discern the hounds. They appeared as vague dark shapes pacing about in agitation, but his eyesight was poor at the best of times and highly unreliable in the moonlight.

They were fawning against his legs now, and he knelt down to see what it was that had upset them. His fingers touched the rough material of a man's jacket.

"Christ almighty!" It was Matthew. He strained to make sense of what he could feel, cursing his stupid eyes as his hands clumsily searched the crumpled figure. There was no movement and suddenly he froze. His hands were wet with the characteristic stickiness of blood. He could smell it, a familiar iron-tanged aroma.

The young man had shot himself. How the hell had he done that?

He worked quickly, years of professional training coming to his aid. The wound was high and deep in the muscular thickness of the thigh, and it was bleeding profusely.

He unbuckled and drew his belt from the trousers, quickly fashioning a rough tourniquet. He hauled it tight with all his strength

until the flow of blood became a sluggish trickle, then he began to count.

The hounds were nuzzling against his back. They were calming now that he was there, and he was beginning to think more lucidly too. All those years of military decision-making and command began to take over. He knew that he needed help.

With the voice of authority that the dogs would recognise, he pointed and commanded. "Jarvis. Fetch Jarvis."

They milled around him questioningly and he repeated the same order again, striving to keep the edge of anxiety out of his voice. Then suddenly one or two of them dashed off into the gloom, and presently others followed.

In the darkness, half blinded by poor eyesight, his back and hands stiffened and aching, the old man diligently followed the routine of using the tourniquet, praying that he had found Matthew in time and that the dogs would manage to summon Jarvis.

The ground below his grandson's body was soaked in blood. He could not leave him, and he could not carry him.



That night was one of the worst in Charles Braithwaite's long and eventful life.

He and Jarvis managed to carry the young man back to the house, and the doctor was summoned. The old man stayed with his grandson as the physician examined him, and then he descended the stairs to Jarvis who was waiting anxiously with the dogs. "How is he sir?"

In the bright electric light Charles looked exhausted, but there was fire sparking from his eyes. "Go back to where it happened Jarvis and take the dogs. I want that spot guarded until the police arrive. If they scent anything, send them after it. I want the bastard caught."

"Sir?"

"The boy was shot. He's got a bullet lodged in his back still."

"Poachers!"

"Perhaps. But he was shot in the back, for God's sake! He had no chance to defend himself. I'm calling the police, and I'm getting Ralf Greer and Malcolm Trent in to assist you. I don't want any more

injuries, and I want the cowardly swine caught.”

He walked stiffly into the study and made a number of telephone calls then looked up quickly as the doctor knocked and entered.

“How is he, Martin?” he asked, anxiously studying the doctor’s face.

“The bleeding’s stopped and he’s comfortable. More than that...” he shrugged expressively. “We can only make certain by operating and removing the bullet in his back. The only surgeons with the expertise to operate that close to the spinal cord are at The National in London. It’ll be expensive.”

“Damn the expense,” Braithwaite exploded and crashed his fist down on the desk in furious frustration. “It’s that boy’s future. What are his chances of coming out of this whole, do you think?”

The doctor smiled sadly. “I sincerely don’t know, Charles. I will make the necessary arrangements first thing in the morning and have an ambulance sent for him. The sooner it’s done the better. But whatever happens, he *will* live. You saved his life tonight.”

The old man nodded slowly, and weariness pulled his face down. He only hoped the boy would not hate him for doing that. Such an energetic and active young man would find life unbearable if he could never walk again.



22

MADLINE WAS WAITING in the wings as Josh stepped from the stage amid tremendous applause. She gave him a quick hug. "That was marvellous. And just listen to that! You deserve every bit of it!"

"And so do you. Come back with me." He hugged her close, then they returned to the stage together to take another bow. As they passed among the orchestra, the musicians began to turn and clap too.

The young couple had come a long way since their marriage just two months ago. And this final concert of their tour was a fitting climax to a long and blissful honeymoon. The acclaim had been tremendous and now, just as Madeline had hoped, their names were becoming established across Europe as major new talents.

Political instability on the continent, however, had been deteriorating inexorably and very obviously around them. They had already witnessed massive troop movements in France. Where before there had been relative tranquillity, men were being mobilised, planes were regularly flying overhead on reconnaissance missions, and tanks were on the move towards the borders with Belgium and Germany.

Meanwhile, Grandfather Braithwaite had written to urge them to return home now. War was inevitable, he said, and Europe was not a safe place to be.

His message had been ominously reinforced by a letter summoning Josh to an army medical. He was to be called up to active

service. Their honeymoon was at an end and Madeline, like so many other women, was going to have to face the prospect of being parted from the man she loved.

The England they returned to was tense. Across the southern counties, a plague of barbed wire, concrete and steel structures had blossomed amongst the meadows and woods. In towns and cities, the windows and doors had been protected by barricades of sandbags and crisscross strips of tape, and as they looked out from the train window, they could see they were entering a bleak new reality.

They found temporary lodgings quite easily in a city that was considering evacuation procedures, and two days after their return Josh attended the medical examination. Madeline waited the day through, not knowing whether he would be returning that night, or whether she would simply receive a letter saying he had been drafted somewhere.

When the door opened that evening, she threw down the book she had been reading and jumped to her feet. He was back. He looked tired and drawn, and within seconds she realised something was seriously wrong. His face was tense, and he was breathing with difficulty.

“What is it Josh?” she cried and ran to him.

He held his arms out and swept her up to him. His wheezing, struggling breath was difficult for her to bear, but the London air always did that to him. Then at last he managed to murmur into her hair, “They won’t have me! None of the forces will... I can’t join the medical units... or even the ARP... I’m useless even... to help here at home!”

“No, you’re not!” she cried, and gripped his tense shoulders, her fingers strong with vehemence.

“It’s the asthma... One breath of plaster... dust or smoke, and I’d... be the one needing the doctor.”

She frowned. “They’re just fools. When I think how good you are with people!” Then she bit her lip. This was something they should tackle later. Right now, he was struggling to breathe. “Come and sit down, Josh. We’ll go to stay with Phyllis for a few days and then we can decide what to do.”

He tried to smile as she disappeared into the bathroom for his inhaler. “Are you thinking of... our idyllic cottage at Oxford?”

“Perhaps,” she bustled around preparing the prescribed dose of

ephedrine for him and thanking God for that miracle cure. Nothing else was as effective at normalising his breathing. "But whatever happens, our trips to Vienna and Italy won't be possible now."

"God!" he exclaimed in utter frustration. "They're condemning me to playing... my fiddle in my own back garden... while the whole of Europe burns. It's obscene."

Madeline glanced quickly at his face as he raised the inhaler to his lips and breathed in deeply. He looked so demoralised that it cut her to the heart. "There must be plenty of things you could do. You're so good at organising and encouraging people." She came and knelt in front of him and took his hands in hers, looking up into his eyes with calm certainty. "We'll see Grandpa whilst we're there. He will know who to contact and what to do."

"Perhaps," he murmured, waiting for the restricting bands of tightness in his chest to begin to ease a little. "But I doubt whether even he... has the power to change their minds. Ah yes," he reached suddenly into his pocket and took out several letters. "Speaking of your grandfather... I called in at the Post Office and there were several letters waiting for us. They're rather old now... They've been out to Paris and back trying to track us down."

She took them from him and leaned back on her heels and opened them. Her eyes scanned down the first page, and gradually her face paled. "Oh no!"

She tore the next letter open quickly. It was only short. Her brother was due to undergo a third major operation, and his ability to walk would depend upon it. She climbed quickly to her feet, took one look at Josh's white face and laboured breathing, and touched his shoulder. Then she reached for her coat. "I've got to go out Josh, I'm so sorry to leave you at the moment, but I can't..."

"What's happened?" he struggled up anxiously. "Is it your grandfather?"

"No, no," she turned to him, and lay her hands tenderly on his chest. His breathing was calming slightly now, but he really needed to rest and recover. "He's fine, Josh, but Matt...!" Slowly the reality was beginning to dawn on her, and with it came a wave of anguish. It filled her until the tears trickled down her face. She handed the letters to him. "It's Matt. There's been a shooting accident, and he's desperately ill. It happened three weeks ago, and the letters have only just caught

up with us!"

"Matt? My God!" He glanced quickly at the first shakily written letter, then hugged her and pressed his lips to her hair. "We must go to him straight away... Where is he?"

"He's here. They brought him to the National Hospital, Queen Square, to see the best neurosurgeons. Grandpa hasn't said much. You can see by his writing he's too shaken and upset. A neurosurgeon, Josh!" Her own hands were unsteady as she buttoned her coat. "I don't dare think what that means. They've operated twice already."

"Come on then. We'd better get there quickly. No wait!" He stilled her anxious hands and smiled tenderly at her. "Will you be alright? I could go for you and find out."

"Thanks Josh, but I must go. I've got to see him."



Matthew Brooks had a private room and nursing care all to himself. His inanimate form was lying absolutely motionless on the white sheeted bed. He was desperately pale. His eyes were closed, and he did not look as though there was any life left in him. There were fluid drips hanging around him, connected to his body by cold tubes.

Madeline crept forward and knelt by his side. She could not see any bandages on his head, and that confused her. But surely that was a good thing. She touched his hand and jumped slightly as his eyes opened. Then he saw her and smiled in recognition.

"Hello Matt," she whispered. "How do you feel?"

"Awful," he croaked. "I mustn't move. Can't anyway."

"You're going down to the theatre again soon?"

"Yes. Any minute," his eyes closed sleepily, but he dragged them open and his gaze was very intense. "I thought you weren't going to get here in time. Don't leave me Maddy."

"I won't," she squeezed his fingers tenderly. "I'm so sorry we weren't here earlier. Grandpa's letters went out to Paris and back before they found us. We only received them this evening."

"We're here now Matt," Josh was standing close behind Madeline, pale and still breathing with some difficulty. But he touched the young man's shoulder. "We'll be waiting for you when you get back from theatre. Everything will be fine now."

Matthew seemed to relax at last, and his eyes closed peacefully. They remained with him until the orderlies arrived, then Josh helped Madeline to her feet, and they stood back while the bed and all the drips were wheeled away to the operating theatre.

“God!” she whispered as she watched him go. “He looks so frail.”

The young nurse who had been sitting with Matt when they arrived, came back to them. “Mr and Mrs Hanson? Sister would like to see you now. She’ll be able to tell you anything you need to know.”

Matthew was in theatre for four hours and kept in recovery for a further six. When the bed was finally returned to his room Madeline had fallen asleep with her head on her husband’s shoulder. She woke a long while later, stiff with cramp and her mind churning.

The first thing she saw was her brother. He looked terrible. She had to remind herself forcibly that she must expect to see no change yet. It would take a few days before they could tell whether this last delicate attempt at surgery had saved his mobility. If the surgeon had failed, he would be a cripple for the rest of his life.

Josh squeezed her shoulder and whispered, “He’ll be glad to see you when he wakes up. If you stay here with him, I’ll go and contact your grandfather and let him know that he’s back safely.”

“Thanks.” Madeline drew a chair up to the bed and lay her hand over Matt’s. They had put him on his side this time and she watched his face. It was curiously bloodless and transparent, the colour of his lips almost as white as the rest of his skin. The nurse sitting on the other side of the bed was monitoring him carefully. Frequently she checked the drips and measured his pulse, then noted the readings on his charts.

Madeline stroked his fair hair back tenderly. How could anyone have shot at him like that? He had been such an athletic, healthy young man. Thank God he had been, or he would never have survived all this interference with his body. Other than grandfather, he was the only surviving member of her family.

Then a chilling thought struck her. What if this had been a cold-blooded attempt to murder him? What if it was linked with the fire at her lodgings, the accident with the mirror, and the attempt to ruin her relationship with Josh! She shook her head. Was she just being paranoid or did she and Matt have a serious enemy? No matter how she tried, she could not shake off the thought.

When Josh returned, she rose to her feet and beckoned him away from the bed where they could speak in private and discuss the matter.



Three days later, the two of them were welcomed with open arms by Grandpa Braithwaite. He hugged Madeline fiercely, then looked her over critically. "I can't tell you how relieved I am to have you back safely, my dear. Europe's not a good place to be just now, and Matt has needed you. And so have I."

He shook Josh by the hand. "Come on in both of you and tell me how you left the lad. There's been some improvement hasn't there?"

"Yes," Josh smiled. "He has movement in his limbs. They think he might make a good recovery, but it will take a few months."

"Thank God. These last few weeks have been an absolute nightmare." The old man turned and led them into the house. He was bent and frail and walking with some difficulty. But he gave them both a glass of sherry and eased himself down into his favourite chair.

Madeline frowned anxiously. "Have you seen Dr Markland yourself, Grandpa? There must be something he can give you to ease the movement."

"Oh yes. I'm taking so many pills I rattle! It's nothing to worry about, though, and I am improving slowly. All I need is rest. I did too much the night Matthew was shot."

"It must have been terrible," she rose and went to the oak encased window and gazed out on the flower filled garden. It was so peaceful and beautiful here. She and Josh had spent their first married night in the guest room upstairs. But the idea that someone had come here and attempted to kill her brother made her shudder. "Have they caught the man who did it?"

"No. The dogs caught scent of him but lost the trail. Whoever did it knew the surrounding countryside very well."

She turned to look sharply at him. "Are you certain about that?"

"Positive. He knew the lie of the land well enough to confound the dogs. But believe me, if the swine comes this way again, I wouldn't rate his chances. The dogs will remember him. They'll go for him."

She thought of her brother lying helpless in hospital, and

murmured venomously, "I hope they get the chance to savage him. Do you think it might have been a local then?"

"No, I don't think so. The police interviewed everyone locally, and I've taken the dogs repeatedly around the area. It wasn't anyone who's living here now." There was a long silence. Then he murmured, "I wish I knew why! It was so pointless, so vindictive."

Madeline looked over her shoulder at her grandfather and opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again. It was pointless to distress him further with her thoughts. It would just cause him to worry about her safety too. She simply said, "The dogs will guard him when he comes home, won't they?"

"Oh yes!" his fierce eyes flamed. "I shall give them the run of the house and gardens. And I hope the bastard does come back."

Josh rose to his feet and refilled her grandfather's empty glass. "They're going to keep Matt in hospital for at least another month, but once the wounds have healed sufficiently, he'll be allowed to come home. It should do him good to be in his own environment again. But caring for him is going to be a great deal of hard work."

"I've already planned for that, my boy. I want him to be able to come home as quickly as possible, so I've hired two nurses to live in and care for him." He glanced across the room at Madeline and smiled. "They'll be here day and night, so there's no need to worry. He'll receive the very best care."

She came across the room and kissed his cheek. "And when he does come home, I'd like to be here to help you care for him."

He nodded and touched her cheek affectionately. "He'd like that. Now," he said briskly. "You haven't told me anything about your honeymoon yet. I read all the reviews you sent me. Tell me everything from beginning to end."

He listened to their long story as they told it between them, and when it came to the last few days his shrewd blue eyes watched his young grandson-in-law's face closely. He indicated that they should refill their glasses, then continued sternly. "It's wrong Josh. You have a talent that could do a great deal to improve morale, I've seen you do it! Leave it with me. I know several influential people. One of them is setting up an organisation sending entertainers on tour around the Armed Forces' bases. It has some long and complicated name but it's called ENSA for short."

Madeline glanced at Josh with a triumphant smile. "There, I told you Grandpa would know the right people to contact."

The old man chuckled. "I'm glad I still have my uses. I know they're recruiting at the moment and are looking for a wide variety of acts, musicians and artists."



23

MADLINE AND JOSH stayed for a while at Harborough Hall dividing their time between Phyllis, Grandfather Braithwaite and travelling to London to visit Matt in hospital. All through that tense and difficult period, when Matt was forced to lie perfectly still allowing the wound to heal and praying that the nerves were still fully intact, the newspapers, newsreels and wireless reports focused on the ruthless invasion and indiscriminate slaughter of the people of Poland. Outrage in the Houses of Parliament finally culminated in an ultimatum to Hitler and, when he did not comply, to war.

The day war was declared, life seemed to lurch curiously, as though it had slipped out of joint for a while. Everyone expected the wrath of the Germans to fall on them from the skies, just as it had when Hitler unleashed his blitzkrieg on the Poles. But the attack never came, and gradually life began to return to something approaching normality.

There was a great exodus of soldiers and airmen to France where they formed part of the defensive shield that guarded the rest of Europe from invasion.

Josie said a brave farewell to Arny, waving him off as he became one of many thousands of uniformed men who boarded the trains at Waterloo and set off into the unknown.

Determined not to be miserable and alone, Josie then decided that

she would offer her mathematical skills to the War Office. With almost obscene haste, they summoned her to an interview and then set her a range of challenging mental tests. Just a few weeks later she had left London and was absorbed into the national war effort, and although she continued to write frequently, her letters were reduced to mere gossip and devoid of anything that could betray her work.

Closer to home, Madeline faced the fact she and Josh could not remain at Harborough Hall any longer. The whole country was mobilising to defend itself and Phyllis, like anyone with a manufacturing company, was extremely busy transforming it for war.

Each of the clothing factories was being reconfigured, some to manufacture uniforms and equipment and another to produce silk parachutes instead of exclusive silk gowns. A large portion of her skilled workforce had already been called up for military service, so she was completely engrossed in finding skilled women to replace them. And when the skills were not immediately available, organising a programme of training for local women.

So Madeline and Josh turned their attention to hunting for lodgings that would be close to Grandpa Braithwaite and Matt. In many ways it was an exciting step. They would be setting up their first home together even though it may only be for a short while as they waited to hear from Grandpa's contacts in ENSA.

There was little else they could do. All concerts and shows in the capital and the UK's other major cities had been cancelled.



The cottage they found was only small, but it was warm and dry and just a mile from Grandpa Braithwaite's house, so they were able to visit Matt frequently. The day they moved in, Madeline threw all the doors and windows open, letting the fresh air blow through. Then, although they may not be staying for long, she set about cleaning, tidying and making it into something that felt more like home.

She was still hard at work when Grandpa walked over to view her progress and bring her a gift. It was something he hoped would safeguard her from the sort of harm that had been visited on Matt: one of the dogs.

Basher was one of his more intelligent hounds, one he would have

trusted with his own life, and the animal had developed a deep affection for Madeline. So much so that whenever she visited, the hound would spend the day following her around, his tail wagging in faithful adoration.

While Madeline was making an enormous fuss of the dog and settling him in with a blanket in the corner of the parlour, Josh grasped the old man's hand discreetly. "Thank you, sir. I shall sleep more soundly knowing Basher will be watching over her. We are rather isolated out here."

Charles nodded. Basher would leap instantly to her defence if he caught scent of that cowardly attacker. "He's an excellent guard dog, Josh, and very loyal. But if I were you, I'd make sure you have a shotgun or some other weapon to hand in case the bastard does return, and he's armed. I can bring you a shotgun next time I come over, if you wish."

Josh was watching Madeline play affectionately with Basher. He was not a military man and knew nothing about guns, but he needed to protect her effectively. So, he replied very softly, "I'd appreciate it. And I would be glad of some lessons in handling it too."

Charles gripped his shoulder firmly and nodded. "It would be a pleasure, by boy."



Shortly after that, Matt was declared fit enough to leave the confines of his grandfather's house. To celebrate this milestone, he badgered his nurses into bringing him on an excursion to visit his sister at the cottage.

Delighted at the prospect, Madeline baked scones, lit the fire and made the place as comfortable and welcoming as she could. Then she sat back on her heels and patted Basher encouragingly. "Yes, you'll enjoy seeing him again, won't you, old boy? You've been missing him."

She felt the dog's enthusiastic tail thumping against her back and looked over her shoulder as Josh came in with several large logs and dumped them on the woodpile by the fire.

"That should be enough to see us through today." He straightened his tall form and smiled down at her. "It's going to do him the world of good to escape the confines of the house. He must have been feeling trapped after all these months as an invalid."

"I can't wait to see him feel more himself. Have we got everything ready?"

"I think so," he nodded. "The important thing is that we make him fully aware of what's going on. He won't be safe unless he is."

She nodded and bit her lip anxiously. "I want him to relax and have a little fun before we get to that point though."

When the doorbell rang some while later, excitement thrilled through her. She heard Josh get to his feet and ran to join him at the door.

The two nurses smiled up at her. "Here is your brother, as promised, Mrs Hanson," one said. "But I feel I ought to warn you that he's talked *nonstop* all the way here. We've learned a great deal about the hunting and fishing to be enjoyed hereabouts."

Madeline laughed. "Well, that's a very promising sign!" She looked eagerly at Matt as he sat there in his wheelchair. Where he had been pale and listless for many months now, his cheeks were a healthy pink, his hair romantically ruffled by the wind and his eyes were sparkling with enthusiasm. He had always been an outdoor boy, and she could see this excursion had already done him a great deal of good.

"Come inside, Matt, and we'll show you around." Josh held on to Basher's collar to stop him loping off down the road while Madeline took the handles of the wheelchair and smiled gratefully at the nurses. "Thank you so much for bringing him. I hope you enjoy your walk to the village."

She manoeuvred the chair up the steps and into the parlour, steering around Basher who was joyfully licking Matt's hand in an enthusiastic greeting. "Here we are at last Matt," she said softly. "What do you think of our cottage?"

He looked around slowly and his vivid blue eyes warmed with appreciation. "It's really cosy. You always could make a good home Maddy. Do you know," he grinned suddenly, and it seemed to her that he had become truly himself again. "It feels just like our flat used to when we were little. It's like coming home. You must be very happy, big sis." He twisted round awkwardly to peer up at her over his shoulder.

She nodded and came round to kneel in front of him. "Yes, very. Now, would you like a cup of tea and some of your favourite scones and jam?"

"That would be wonderful," he rubbed his hands together. "But not too many. I don't want to put on any more weight. It's going to be hard enough to get rid of it when I am up and about again."

She laughed. "Just a few then."

Later, once they had tucked into their refreshments and had a good gossip, Madeline put their teacups on the tray and turned back to her brother. "I'm glad your two nurses agreed to leave us in peace for a while, Matt. We've been wanting to talk privately with you, and we didn't want to mention this in front of them or Grandpa." She knelt down in front of him and automatically lifted his legs from the footrests and began to massage the calf muscles.

"What is it Maddy?" he frowned and turned her face up. "Is everything alright?"

"Yes, but this accident concerns me a great deal, Matt. I'm not imagining things. I believe someone has deliberately tried to kill you."

"I'm sure you're reading too much into it," he touched her cheek and smiled gently. "It was merely some poacher caught in the act."

"Did you see him then?" she demanded.

"No," he frowned again. "It's hard to remember precisely, but I don't think I knew anything about it till I woke in hospital."

"You were shot in the back Matt!" she gripped his knees vehemently. "That's not the behaviour of someone who was surprised in the act of poaching. It was deliberate and cold blooded."

"Do you realise what you're saying?"

She nodded, and glanced up at Josh, glad to feel his hand touch her shoulder encouragingly. "And there's more," she said softly. "Two years ago, my rooms in London were burnt down. Last year someone tampered with my dressing table mirror and it narrowly missed crushing my hands."

"And then earlier this year," Josh continued quietly, "someone lured us both to Oxford and set a bitter trap for us, trying to separate us and destroy our relationship."

Madeline nodded. "But I think this has been going on for much longer. Daddy was deliberately and intricately framed for a theft he didn't commit. Someone broke into our London flat and planted stolen money there. He was imprisoned for it, Matt, and it destroyed him. I think someone's trying to destroy me, too. And now *you're* the one

who's been attacked."

"But who would want to do that?" he demanded, aghast. "Daddy never had an enemy in his life! And I'm pretty sure we don't either."

She shrugged. "I don't know, but they're cunning. Josh and I were very cleverly set up. Someone went to a great deal of effort to separate us and hurt us."

"If this was no accident, then..."

"Then you must be extremely careful. The police haven't been able to track down the person who did it." She looked around her cosy home, and when she saw Basher's wagging tail move out from behind the chair and felt his nose nuzzle up against her, she smiled and patted him. "That's why I asked Grandpa to let me have one of the dogs." She looked up at her brother's face earnestly. "We haven't told him about these other attacks, it would worry him too much. Just keep the dogs near you, Matt. They caught the scent when you were shot, and they'll act as a warning system. Grandpa was an excellent soldier, but he's getting stiff now. He couldn't move quickly to defend himself or you. So, you must take precautions. Do it for both of you."

"God, Maddy. I couldn't move out of this bloody chair, even if I had to!" He looked down at his weakened legs and grimaced at the effort it took to lift them back onto the footrest.

"There, you *can* do it!" she cried jubilantly, and leapt up to hug him. "Oh Matt. You'll be up and about soon, you'll see. Just take great care of yourself."



October and November passed, and Matt's health continued to improve. His nurses relentlessly bullied him to exercise and keep the muscles of his legs flexible. They had been given detailed instructions by the surgeon, and they kept rigidly to his regime. Through a combination of their dedicated efforts and Matt's bloody-minded determination, he regained the movement in his legs. He found it hard work. They witnessed many traumatic moments of anger and frustration, but the end result was worth the effort, when he finally rose from the wheelchair and stepped out by himself.

Madeline half hoped that Matt's attacker would indeed come to the cottage. She knew Basher would set up a fearful noise if he did. In addition to the shotgun Grandpa had given Josh, they had secretly

hidden several other weapons about the place. But the house remained peaceful, and Basher quite content.

Then unexpectedly, Josh received a letter from ENSA advising him to expect a visit from Leslie Henson.

The man arrived within days of the letter and extended his hand to them both in greeting. "Glad to meet you. Brigadier Braithwaite has told me a great deal about you. I'd like to make use of your talents if you would agree to it."

Josh nodded. "What sort of work do you have in mind?"

"My organisation arranges entertainments for the Forces wherever they're based. It's vital for morale. What I'd like to do is send you to France. The British Expeditionary Force is standing idle, and the men need entertainment to keep their spirits up and reactions sharp."

"And you think my music could lift morale?" Josh smiled. "I'd be more than glad to do it; in fact, I'd be delighted."

"I'd like you both to come." He glanced at Madeline. "To see you together will do the men a tremendous amount of good. We have several ladies touring the bases, individually and as part of a show. In fact, we're hoping Gracie Fields will be joining us soon. The concerts are properly staged. You'll be performing to thousands on some of the larger bases, just a handful on others. There will be food and accommodation, and military transport from place to place."

"How soon would you like us to be ready?" Madeline asked.

"Immediately, if possible. The men are trained and ready to kill. Your job will be to relieve a little of their tension without eroding their fighting skill."

Madeline turned to Josh with a sense of excitement. "This is something we *can* do Josh. Matt's almost walking properly again now, and he would hate it if we stayed behind for him."

His eyes crinkled into a smile and he turned to Leslie Henson. "We're available to leave whenever you're ready."

"Excellent. I'll have the papers prepared, and I'll send you an itinerary and confirmation. Transport should be here within the week. It's a great pleasure to have you on board."



24

IT WAS A CHILLY winter's day when the two of them set sail for France. They crossed the channel and were met by army personnel who drove them through the flat depressing fields of Artois.

From that moment on they were on constant tour. They were never at a single place for more than three days, and as they travelled, they developed their repertoire, quickly learning to turn their hands to playing dance music, all sorts of popular songs and melodies as well as the classical music they loved. They met other musicians, singers, comedians, all touring on a similar basis.

A small bedroom and suitcase, and on some occasions even a damp canvas tent, became their home and the only privacy they knew. They gave performances during the day and evening, and most of their waking hours were filled with social commitments to the officers and men. They ate in the mess and Madeline found herself the focus of constant attention. Very few English women were seen from one month to another. So wherever she went, she was bombarded with attention and very quickly learned to field jokes and advances and keep her audience in order.

They lived, ate, worked and breathed together and it brought them very close. Josh had a tremendous creative energy that surrounded him like an aura. It filled her with a passionate enthusiasm and love of life. And they were able to communicate this

to any audience, no matter how weary they were, nor how difficult Josh was finding it to breathe. The year progressed rapidly with hardly a free moment, yet they were happy.

The only difficulty was that the gasoline fumes from the aircraft aggravated Josh's asthma, exhausting him and causing Madeline moments of intense anxiety. But he refused to give in, relying instead on a copious dose of ephedrine from his inhaler.

By the time spring arrived Madeline was beginning to feel very weary, which was not surprising considering the strain they were under with the constant socialising and performing. Perhaps they both needed a break. It would be wonderful to have just a little privacy and some time to themselves.

She really did not fancy eating much at the moment either, in fact the smell of cooking was beginning to make her quite queasy. Then, as the sense of weariness increased, she wondered if this could be something more serious than just overwork.

Concerned, she looked at the entries in her diary and worked the days back to the beginning of the trouble. Then, as she looked at the calendar it all began to slot into place and a thrilling possibility dawned on her. She had missed a second period now. Could she be expecting a baby? Josh would be absolutely thrilled.

Secretly, she glanced at her reflection in the mirror. It seemed wicked that such a momentous occasion could have gone unnoticed for so long. A precious new life could already have begun.

It was early April now, the trees were decked in full spring growth, and she made an appointment to visit the station medical officer for a long overdue check-up. It was a query that he did not normally encounter in his male oriented world. But he examined her and was very quickly able to confirm Madeline's suspicions.

She was bursting with the news and longing to tell him, but she kept it to herself all through their afternoon and evening performances, waiting until they had finally retired to the limited privacy of their bedroom. Madeline undressed slowly, relishing the knowledge she was about to share with him. He was sitting at the table writing a few finishing touches to a letter. She rested her hands on his shoulders and smiled inwardly.

"Won't be a moment," he murmured.

"That's alright," she began to massage his shoulders gently, and

watched him sign his name with a flourish. Then he turned round and drew her towards him, resting his cheek on her stomach. She hugged him to her and smiled with a growing sense of anticipation and joy. "Do you remember when we first married?" she asked quietly. "We talked of raising a family, we thought we would have enough children to form a string quartet?"

He surged to his feet, and carried her two hands to his lips, his eyes flaring with the dawning of excitement. "Madeline! Are you... tell me!"

She flung her arms around him and pressed her cheek to his shoulder. "How many would you like us to have, my love? I'm expecting our first baby!"

He ran his fingers into her curling golden hair and turned her face up so that he could examine every feature. "Are you absolutely certain about this?"

She nodded. "I went to see the MO today. He confirmed it."

"And how are you feeling? Are you alright?"

She smiled, her happiness radiating from her eyes. "I'm fine, a bit queasy and tired, that's all. And to think I had been imagining it was overwork!"

"Good heavens! When I think of all the travelling and work we've been doing over the last few months!" he murmured softly. But then his mobile expressive features slowly grew serious. "There will be no more of that now. I'm going to make sure you rest."

She laughed. "I'm perfectly alright, Josh, I'm not ill. But I think you may be right..." She looked around at the spartan room they occupied and bit her lip. "I think we ought to go back to England now. It's safer there, and I *would* like to find somewhere of our own, a place to bring our baby to."

"I'll go and see the CO tomorrow and make the arrangements. We'll just have to fulfil these last few commitments though. We can't leave them in the lurch. Ah Madeline, what wonderful news." He lifted her up in his arms and carried her to the bed. He lay her down gently and rested his hand thoughtfully over her flat abdomen. Then he looked deeply into her eyes, leaning slowly closer over her, his eyes warming with long abiding passion. "Our little cottage in Oxford sounds deeply attractive doesn't it?"

"Yes, it does," she wound her arms around his neck, glorying in

the sheer fire and passion of his soul.

Later that night, as she lay awake, dreaming of the future, her hand crept down to touch and explore her abdomen. There was no sign of it yet, but soon she would be growing heavy, feeling the child move as it took on its own life and being.

She sighed contentedly and curled up against his long supple body.



25

THE DAYS THAT followed were much the same as those of the previous six months, except that Madeline found herself slowing down and feeling increasingly sick and fragile. Then one morning, after several days filled with rumour about German activity along the eastern front, Josh woke Madeline early in the morning. She could feel his hand gently shaking her shoulder, and the shaking became more insistent as she struggled to surface from the depths of sleep. "No, not yet Josh, it can't be morning already!"

"Poor old thing," he chuckled gently. "Don't bite my head off, it's only seven thirty, but I want you to wake up. Come on sleepy head."

She prized her eyes open gingerly and rubbed her forehead, trying to surface from the cloying sleep. "I never bite your head off! What an unfair accusation. What is it? What's all that noise?"

"Something's happening out there," he nodded to the thin prefabricated wall that separated them from the noise and bustle of the army base outside. "I'm just going to find out what's going on. They've been making that row for the last three hours. Can you get up slowly?"

She grimaced and then laughed suddenly at herself. "What an idiot I must look. I'll be up in a few minutes. You go and find out what's going on."

She patted his hand placidly and took a deep breath. If she moved

quickly in the mornings, she was intensely sick. On the other hand, if she moved slowly and could weather those first few hours of wakefulness, then the rest of the day was fine.

She saw him smile his understanding. "Don't worry. I'll be back as soon as possible."

Madeline knew how to cope with the way her body was reacting. She lay quietly until her mind had woken completely, growing increasingly concerned by the chaotic noises intruding through the door of their room. It sounded like a disturbed ant's nest. He was right. There was some sort of drill or manoeuvre in progress. She could hear the tramp of marching feet and vehicles moving in all directions.

She pushed back the blankets and sat up, and a swell of sickness immediately washed over her. She had moved too quickly. She swore at her own foolishness as she clung to the metal of the bedstead and hoped for the best.

Then she heard it; an ominous low thrum in the air that grew louder, becoming a mind-numbing roar. Then it passed low overhead and dwindled away in the distance. Aircraft! Many of them.

Josh did not return until well into the latter part of the morning. She had washed and dressed at a steady pace, and was just beginning to fold their clothes and pack them into the suitcase when the door was flung open and he hurried in. He took one look at what she was doing and nodded. "Good. We've got to get out quickly. It's taken me all this time to get in to see the Commanding Officer. The Germans attacked three days ago, and it's beginning to look like the big push. Our men are moving forward to the front line."

"Three days ago?" she shrieked. "Why on earth didn't somebody tell us? We could have been on our way home by now!"

"We're so close to the end of our tour that the commander assumed we already knew about the attack. He's providing us with transport to one of the RAF bases near Reims. From there, we should be able to get a train back to Paris or military transport to Calais."

"Do you think we're in any real danger Josh?" Madeline looked anxiously at his face.

"No, not at the moment. We're too far from the front line here. But this lot are moving out today. So we have no time to lose." He frowned and rubbed his forehead, and his anxiety became obvious. "I have to say I am concerned about what may happen over next few weeks.

There are rumours that the Dutch are beginning to fold under the pressure, and the Belgians are falling back too! It doesn't sound very encouraging."

She nodded. "I'll have everything ready in just a few minutes, then we can get moving." She turned away to concentrate on finishing the packing, but her hands were trembling now with anxiety.

She felt his hands on her shoulders. He turned her round gently and gathered her into his arms. "I'd give anything to have you safe in England right now. I love you very much, Madeline Hanson."

"I know." She looked up into his face and touched his lips tenderly with her fingertips. "And that is the single most wonderful thing that has ever happened to me in my life, and I wouldn't be anywhere else but here with you. We'll come through this, Josh, and we'll do it together."

She relaxed deliciously as his lips came down to touch hers, and she opened her mouth in a deep kiss.

Then as they finally separated, she realised that there was something hard and alien in the pocket of his jacket and it had been pressing uncomfortably into her chest. She frowned and touched that awkward shape. "What's that?"

"The CO gave it to me." He slowly drew an army issue Enfield revolver from his pocket. He split it open experimentally and looked at the filled chambers, then closed it with a click. Their eyes met and there was an element of fear in them. "I've never used a gun in my life," he said quietly. "The nearest I've come to it is learning how to fire your grandfather's shotgun. But there's a first time for everything."

She nodded and hugged him tight once more. He was a man of peace, she knew that. But he would kill if it ever became necessary.



The transport arrived for them later that afternoon, and they were driven along roads that were swarming with unaccustomed military and civilian traffic. A tide of army transport was heading inexorably towards the fighting. And struggling in the opposite direction, against that orderly flow, was a relentlessly increasing exodus of ordinary folk, trudging away from the conflict, carrying what belongings they could. The sight shocked them both to the core. Somewhere beyond the horizon, homes and livelihoods were being destroyed by the

fighting armies. Their faces bleak with despair these good people were fleeing for their lives.

It was dark by the time they reached the security of the airfield, and they found a room had been put aside for them for the night. They slept little, and what rest they managed to snatch was broken by the noise of heavy vehicles moving out and aircraft taking off.

The morning found another bustle of well-planned activity. None of the officers they spoke to were able to inform them with any great clarity what the situation was. Each man was focused purely on his duty and was not prepared to share unfounded conjecture or rumour.

Several times they heard the roar of bombers taking off in the distance, and by lunch time they managed to get a lift into Reims.

Their driver was a small plump man with a happy round face. He gossiped cheerfully all through the ride, but as they neared the city centre his expression grew wary and he murmured, "Don't like the look of this at all."

"It doesn't look good does it?" Josh agreed reluctantly in a hushed voice.

There were women clustered in doorways nervously gossiping. Their menfolk were not at work as they should have been but loitering around, idle and confused.

The driver pulled over on the wheel. The truck cornered into the forecourt of the station and he jumped quickly down from the cab. "I'll help you in with your bags, and make sure you get a seat."

The station was in turmoil, choked by a chaotic seething mass of people.

Madeline left the two men guarding their luggage near the door and fought her way through to the station master where, in her limited French, she managed to understand that the line to Paris had been bombed at first light this morning. There were no more trains and no alternative links to the capital.

She hurried back and explained it all to Josh. "So, we're stuck here in France."

The driver shook his head. "Best come back with me. I reckon the CO will find a way home for you."

The drive back to the airfield was silent. Only now, Madeline was filled with the same fear and anxiety that she had seen on the faces of

the city's inhabitants on their way in.

Then their driver slewed across the road without warning and ran the truck under the shelter of a few trees. He flung the door open and pushed them unceremoniously out, away from the vehicle. "Get out. Move. Quick."

Shaken, Madeline did as she was told, aware only of the urgency in the driver's voice. She and Josh sank down into a ditch and the driver joined them some moments later, gesturing for them to stay completely still.

"What is it?" Josh hissed.

"Stukas. They're coming this way."

They froze to stillness, looking up through the leaves of the overhanging trees to see a swarm of warplanes flying high overhead. Then abruptly the orderly formation broke apart and the planes plummeted from the sky, screaming eerily as they dived straight towards the earth. It was utterly terrifying, and Madeline covered her ears to block out the evil sound. Then she heard the driver yell over it all. "They're targeting the aerodrome. Christ! It's going to take a pasting."

Then there came the rumbling thud of explosions shaking the earth, blasting the air around them until Madeline felt utterly numbed.

It only lasted a few short minutes, then the noise of destruction died away leaving an unnatural silence over the landscape.

When they finally clambered back in the truck and reached the airfield, the sight that greeted them was like something from hell. The grass runway was pitted with craters, stationary aircraft had been shot through and were burning fiercely, tents and huts had been blown apart and a pall of smoke hung above it all, unmoving in the still air.

There was utter chaos bordering on panic. Like ants swarming around a disturbed nest, the survivors were busy rummaging through the debris, rescuing what they could of their equipment and desperately attempting to repair some of the damage. Others were tending horrific rows of injured.

Madeline and Josh left their bags in a pile and offered what help they could to the medical team and soon found themselves stanching bleeding wounds, applying dressings, and eventually helping gather

and fetch instruments for an emergency operating theatre.

Whilst they were working, two of the airfield's surviving planes came back safely and wove their way amongst the craters and wrecks. The ground crews ran out to refuel and rearm them with what stocks remained intact, and they immediately turned round and took off again.

By the end of the day, the less severely injured had been settled comfortably and those in need of urgent care had been dispatched to a better equipped field hospital. Teams of men were still labouring to repair what they could of the airfield, and it was beginning to take shape and function once again, the potholes filled with compacted rubble, and makeshift communications equipment cobbled together to re-establish essential contact.

As the sun began to set, the CO made a personal tour of the station, encouraging his men and congratulating them on their hard work.

He looked surprised when he came across Madeline and Josh. "I thought you'd be well on your way home, my friends."

"The line to Paris was bombed this morning," Josh replied slowly. "There are not likely to be any more trains for a long while. Madeline and I are going to have to find an alternative route home."

"I don't know that I can do anything to help you now." The man glanced around at the chaos, and his face looked suddenly grim. "We need every available vehicle for the wounded."

Madeline's face tensed and she met Josh's eyes. He looked remarkably calm, but then he always did when faced with a problem.

His reply was equally stoical. "We will work something out, sir. You have more than enough to deal with here."

The commander looked quickly from Madeline to Josh and then smiled. "I'll see what I can do in the morning. If you can help tend the injured, I may be able to squeeze you into one of the ambulances and send you home with them. I'll do my best."



Madeline hardly slept that night. She and Josh were up at first light, ready and waiting, praying there would be enough room for them. If not, then they would have to make their way back to Reims and see

what options there were for travelling to Paris or one of the coastal ports. But looking out over an airfield which only yesterday had supported an entire squadron of crack fighters and transport planes, there were just two functional aircraft remaining on the runway, and one of those was undergoing urgent repairs. It did not look promising.

As they watched, the injured were being carried out and their stretchers stacked into the waiting field ambulances, then the medical officer was beckoning them over. Josh put his arm around Madeline's shoulders. "Come on love, it looks as though we might be in luck. I'll fetch the bags..." But a running figure was waving furiously and shouting Madeline's name.

She turned, and moments later an unshaven young pilot reached her. "Mrs Hanson," he gasped. "Come quickly. I'm taking the last Lysander out. Ordered back to England. Quickly, before the bombers get here. I'm afraid I've only room for one. I'm loaded to the hilt already."

"I can't go without my husband."

"Yes, you can," Josh's face had lightened with sheer relief.

She turned to him and said firmly. "I'm not leaving you. What happens if you're not well?"

"You must," he took her gently by the shoulders. "I'll be alright if I know you're safe."

The pilot squinted anxiously up at the open blue sky. "Whatever you decide, those Stukas are lethal and the Lysander's no match for them. I'm leaving in five minutes."

"She'll be there." Josh ran into the small room they had shared overnight and came back carrying his violin. He gave her an encouraging smile and hugged her to him. "We have the baby to think of now. You can't jolt around in the back of an ambulance or trek across country. Come on."

He ushered her towards the plane where the pilot was waiting impatiently beneath the rear cockpit. "I hate leaving you," she gripped Josh's hands urgently. "Take care of yourself. I love you so much."

"I will. I'll be home in no time, you'll see."

Then she was being urged up the side of the plane. Her feet were guided into small footholds on its smooth side, and she scrambled over the coping and slid into the seat. Josh climbed up and passed her his violin. "Will you take this to safety for me? There won't be room in

the ambulance and I would hate to lose it.”

She nodded. Moments later, the pilot had taken his place and quickly fastened the harness around her, tightening the straps so that they held her firmly. Then he snapped the canopy closed over her head. Moments later, she saw him clamber into the front cockpit and strap himself in.

Madeline’s heart was pounding unbearably. She could hardly see Josh from this high elevation, but she knew he was standing there watching their departure.

Through the struts that separated her from the pilot, she saw the man go through the instrument check then he pressed the starter and after a few tries the engine fired. He gestured quickly to the ground crew then called over his shoulder. “Ever flown before Mrs Hanson?”

“No.”

“Then hold on tight. It’ll be a bumpy take off on this runway.”

He eased the throttle forward and began to taxi out to the pockmarked grass runway. The engine suddenly roared to full power. She was aware of a tremendous drag that forced her back in the seat, then they were lurching and bumping around the craters, gaining speed madly. Finally, the rattling trauma stopped, and they were in the air. The noise changed to a smooth powerful roar as the plane climbed high above the ground and made for the coast.

Madeline squeezed her eyes closed, hugged the violin to her heart and prayed that Josh would be safe.



26

HARBOROUGH HALL WAS in the midst of a tremendous transformation. Its beautiful wood and marble floors had been covered with makeshift linoleum, and row upon row of beds lined each of the magnificent reception rooms and guest bedrooms. Very soon now it would be ready to receive the first casualties from France. Oddly enough, the chandeliers and precious gilt-edged mirrors had been left in place creating a bizarre juxtaposition of historic wealth and modern clinical practicality.

Phyllis had brought in a team of helpers from the village to clean the house and turn the upper floor rooms into dormitories. It was going to be a close-run thing. The first batch of nurses and orderlies were due to arrive today.

A great many changes had taken place in the nine months since war had begun. Only a small contingent of staff remained to run the house. The majority had either been drafted into the services, joined the land army, or taken jobs in the nation's factories, to manufacture weapons, planes and equipment.

Even the capable Parstow had been assigned to a different role, and was overseeing production at the Belaugh factories. As a result, it was Phyllis herself who had undertaken the cleaning and organising, and she was exhausted.

She trod down the long staircase and saw a slender young woman

standing silhouetted in the doorway looking around in some confusion. This must be the first of the new nursing staff. Phyllis approached her briskly, then the figure turned and she recognised the face and golden hair.

"Madeline!" she cried out joyfully and ran to hug her with overwhelming relief. "Thank God you're safe! I've been frantic with worry. How are you my dearest? How is Josh?"

The embrace was returned passionately, but Madeline just shook her head.

Phyllis stiffened slightly as she saw the violin case sitting forlornly on the floor by the door. She held Madeline away from her and examined her face closely. The distress that shone out through those vivid blue eyes made her heart sink. "Come with me to the kitchen, my dear. You can tell me all about it a little later."

"What's happening here?" Madeline asked. "This looks exactly like a hospital. An empty one."

"We're now officially a nursing home. With so many casualties coming back from France, the hospitals initiate treatment and then send the patients out to establishments like this to be nursed back to health."

"So, the injured *are* making it back safely?" Madeline demanded sharply.

Phyllis put her arm around the young girl's shoulder. Hesitantly she asked, "Has he been hurt?"

Madeline's face turned very white, and her expression tensed. "I don't know Phyllis. One of the pilots brought me out by plane. Josh was going to come out with the ambulances."

Phyllis squeezed her shoulder. "Well, they *are* getting through Maddy. That's all I know. We're apparently sending all the boats we can muster to bring men back, even the little fishing boats and Thames barges are going."

"Yes. I heard it on the wireless."

"Come down to the kitchen. We'll have a cup of tea, then we'll get your room ready. I haven't moved anything since you went away."

Madeline stilled the older woman's workworn hands and looked closely at them. "Don't make a great deal of fuss over me Phyllis. I'll get the room ready and I'll give you a hand with your work. You must be

rushed off your feet if you're turning this into a hospital."

"That can wait..."

"Please let me help, Phyllis. I need something to do to take my mind off the waiting, or I think I shall go mad. Now, just take a break for a moment and let *me* make that cup of tea."

Phyllis found herself encouraged to sit down in the kitchen while Madeine filled the kettle with water and placed it on the enormous gas ring. When the young woman finally turned back to her, it was with a weary and dispirited smile that almost broke her heart.

"It's good to be home at last, Phyllis. I'm looking forward to sleeping in a proper bed again."

That night, they sat at the enormous oak table in the kitchen eating an evening meal. It had taken Phyllis a while to coax the whole story out of Madeline. She had done it gently and carefully whilst they worked, but now that she knew, there was no comfort or help she could give to ease the worry. All she could do was hope and pray for the best.

During the day the house had progressively filled with activity. Nurses were settling into the dormitories she and Madeline had just finished preparing. The kitchen had been taken over by uniformed staff, and a huge programme of cooking was being planned.

Madeline glanced at her watch several times then, finally got to her feet and went to switch the wireless on for the nine o'clock news.

The situation was deteriorating rapidly.

Tension filled the vast kitchen as staff fell silent and listened to the grim tidings. All of them knew someone involved in the battle for France. The plight of the British Forces systematically being destroyed at Dunkirk was desperate.

Madeline listened in silence. Fear knotted into a tight fist in her stomach as she visualised Josh there on those terrible beaches.



Over the following few days Madeline worked hard alongside Phyllis, preparing the house to receive the injured. Medical staff organised their supplies and began sterilising equipment and working surfaces. An efficient matron was appointed, and finally the doctors arrived. From that moment onwards the hospital began operating with

military precision.

Still no news came. Every day, she said a small prayer asking that he would be alright and returned to her. Every day she collected the letters, sorted through them hopefully, but in vain. If he had managed to escape to England with the rest of the men, then she would eventually be informed.

The days passed and the evacuation came to an end, and there was still no news.

Madeline was passing through the hall carrying a bucket of dirty water when the first ambulance load of injured arrived at the entrance and were carried or helped up the steps and taken to their wards.

She halted where she was and watched the bandaged, mutilated figures being brought in. Reality hit her with a blow that took her breath away. Her hand crept down to her belly, to the slowly growing presence of the precious baby within her, and the world began to spin.

Josh! He would have been in the place where these horrors had happened.

Finally, she admitted the truth to herself. Something had happened to him. He could have been captured and was perhaps lying a prisoner somewhere. He could have been injured like these poor souls, or he could be dead. But surely the Germans would not have attacked and destroyed an ambulance filled with injured men?

She must not faint. It was utterly ridiculous. She felt sick and the world shimmered queasily then faded out.

She and the bucket of water hit the ground with a crash that brought several of the staff running.



Madeline returned to awareness feeling awful beyond words. The authoritative face of Dr Edwards, the medical officer in charge, was looking down at her and he grinned wryly. "I'm sorry you witnessed that, young lady, but I would advise against waiting in the hall in the future. The results of war are not pleasant to behold, I'm afraid."

Madeline looked at his clean-shaven smiling face. He really had no idea what war was about. He was a young man in his mid-thirties, strong, confident and capable. But when she thought of the suffering

soldiers who had needed his help in France, an uncontrollable rage filled her.

He had not risked himself nor dirtied his hands with the muck and confusion of real war. He had been safe here.

And so had she! She had fled France and left Josh to his fate, escaping to safety while he...!

Her face grew white with pain.

"What would you know about the realities of war, Dr Edwards?" she whispered. "You've been nowhere near it. You weren't with these men when they were bombed and shot. You didn't carry them to safety or dress their wounds. Neither are you there helping the poor souls who have been left behind." She rose to her feet, determined to retire from his presence with some semblance of dignity. But her fury was turning to waves of hot sickness and utter despair.

His face darkened with anger. "Now just wait one moment young lady." He took her by the shoulder to prevent her from leaving, but to Madeline his hand felt as though it weighed a ton.

It was the last straw. She doubled up and nausea overwhelmed her.

The man cursed under his breath, and she was vaguely aware of being guided into a chair, a small enamel bowl and towel thrust into her hands. Then he stood watching her until the shivering retching began to subside.

By now, the anger had drained out of his face. "I suppose I deserved that. I'm sorry my comment sounded so insensitive."

She looked up at him sceptically, but the confident bravado had disappeared and all she could see was honesty.

"I know," he continued slowly, "that you were in France a few weeks ago. I know you're still awaiting news of your husband. You're right. I've never experienced war. That comment was a way of preparing myself for the injuries I shall soon be dealing with."

The sickness had passed at last, and Madeline felt ashamed of herself. She had said the most terrible things and he had done nothing to deserve it. "I'm sorry, Dr Edwards. I shouldn't have imposed my anguish and frustration on you. You could easily have been posted to France, couldn't you? You could have been there with them when they were shot apart and bombed."

"Yes. And in some ways, I wish I had been."

"You mustn't," she said wearily. "You're doing the task the War Office has assigned to you, and these poor men certainly need your skill now." She placed the bowl and towel on the table and smiled wryly. "Now, I believe I have some cleaning up to do. That bucket will have made a terrible mess."

He placed his hands on his hips and laughed ruefully, relieving the tension. "Meeting you, Mrs Hanson, has been quite an experience. In one breath, you've put me in my place and in the next, rebuilt my self-esteem. When you reach my professional level, you are not accustomed to being taken to task in such a forthright manner."

"I *am* sorry I spoke to you like that. It was completely unwarranted." She looked up and saw a friendly smile in his eyes, and she could not help but respond to it. She laughed too. "Then perhaps your stay here is going to be good for you, Dr Edwards."

"Chastening I would say," he chuckled, and put his hand under her elbow and helped her to rise. "Now get up slowly or you'll be flat on your back again. You should begin to feel better soon."

"I feel an absolute idiot," she confided and glanced sideways at him. "I thought I'd got over the sickness and the overwhelming emotions."

"You will continue to feel emotional, it's normal," he nodded. "Listen, if you need to talk to someone, just remember that I'm here. It does help, to be able to talk."

"Thank you." She left the medical staff to their work and spent a while clearing up the mess that her bucket of dirty water had made, then she quietly retired to her bedroom to think.

On her bedside table she kept a picture of herself and Josh, arm in arm on their wedding day. She picked it up, and a tremendous hunger for him swept through her. She raised the picture to her lips and kissed it as though somehow she could project to him all her love and encouragement, wherever he was.

Then on an impulse she turned and opened his violin case. Reverently she lifted the beautiful instrument out, tightened the bow as she had seen him do so often, and raised it to her chin. She stood up tall, closing her eyes and conjuring up the image and presence of him. The fire and passion and splendour of his music surrounded her like a tangible swirling flame of pure inspiration and poetry.

She drew the bow boldly across the strings in a broad sweep of motion, but the sound that came out scraped jarringly on her senses and she stopped, appalled at such sacrilege. Whatever he had done with this instrument had been the magic of him, and that magic was still somewhere in France.

She packed the instrument away and promised to herself that she would preserve it for him, keep it safe for his return. He had promised her that he would be back and he was a man of his word.

She could not allow herself to think otherwise.

She went next to what had originally been her music room. The piano was still there but it was surrounded by hundreds of items of furniture that had been brought here from all corners of the house and carefully stacked for storage.

She smiled suddenly. Phyllis had left a narrow pathway to the piano for her, and as she squeezed through, she realised that as she grew bigger she would have to get someone to widen the way for her.

She sat at the piano and a wonderful sense of calmness spread through her. Music was her soul, and she still had that.

She played short pieces from many of the eras in her life and then moved on to Rachmaninov, remembering the hours of fun she and Josh had had together as he had helped her practice and perfect this work. Her playing changed then, progressing through various elements of their repertoire, and she lived a different world as she did so.

Then at last she came back to herself. Her mind had settled, and she had made a decision.

It was time to take action. Josh had not been in the armed forces so there may not be any process by which notification would reach her. She ought to contact ENSA and find out if they could tell her anything. And perhaps Grandpa might have some military contacts who would know where to get information for her. She would do anything to find out where he was and to get him back.

In the meantime, she had to keep herself occupied. She would visit her mother-in-law over the next few days, and then when she returned there was plenty she could do for the hospital downstairs that would take her mind off this numbing anxiety.



MADLINE'S MOTHER-IN-LAW, Bridget, was a gentle kind woman who lived in a comfortable, well-appointed house near York. It was only the second time Madeline had been there, but she was made to feel so much at home that she did not want to leave the old lady. The two of them spent hours sharing precious memories and thoughts about the man they both loved so dearly. They spoke of things that could not have been articulated to anyone else, and managed to find a little comfort and consolation in each other.

Bridget was thrilled at the thought of a grandchild and Madeline knew without having to be told that the older woman found the prospect some consolation for the absence of her beloved son.

They spent many happy hours discussing plans and making preparations for the little one's birth. There was no doubt that the older Mrs Hanson adored her son and was going to adore her grandchild, and Madeline felt a genuine sense of sadness when she finally had to hug her farewell and leave.

The following two months passed very quickly at Harborough Hall and Madeline grew large and maternal. She would never have believed that she could enjoy being such a cumbersome size, but the baby was more precious to her than anything, and to feel it kicking and moving with healthy vigour, knowing that one day soon she would be able to hold it and love it, filled her with passionate joy.

The staff would not allow her to undertake any work now, but she was able to play the piano and sing to the injured men, and as her life slowed and became more placid she would often sit in the sun with them and talk.

In August the first wave of bombing hit England. First the airfields were targeted, and then the major cities were ripped and destroyed, and their Dunkirk patients were gradually replaced by airmen and civilians. Air raid warnings became an accustomed feature of life and on several occasions, the bombing was close enough for the explosions to rattle the glass in the windows.

Then one morning, as Madeline was sitting in the garden with one of the patients, a young nurse came up to her. "Mrs Hanson, there's an officer here to see you."

Madeline looked up questioningly, and something in the young woman's face made her tense all through. She rose quickly to her feet. "Thank you. Where is he?"

"Mrs Belaugh has shown him into the library."

Madeline nodded and slowly made her way back to the house.

She pushed the library door open and immediately saw him. He was a short man in his forties, his hair flecked with speckles of grey and he stood ramrod straight, reminding her of her grandfather. He was gazing out on the gardens, and she realised he had probably been watching her progress across the lawn.

She entered.

He turned slowly and she held her hand out to greet him. "Good afternoon. I'm Madeline Hanson."

He shook her hand with stiff precision, and his quiet grey eyes met hers. "Good afternoon Mrs Hanson. Corporal Rubens."

Everything about him spoke of long military service, right down to this stiff unease in civilian company. His gaze travelled for briefly moment to her huge stomach. He gathered himself together and said with difficulty. "I'm afraid I have some bad news for you. I wanted to come and tell you myself, I promised him that I would."

"Josh?" she whispered hoarsely.

He nodded. "I'm so very sorry, Mrs Hanson. I was there when he died."

It was worse than she could ever have imagined. Her entire

abdomen clenched as though to protect her and her baby from the loss, and it hurt.

"Come and sit down, Mrs Hanson." He hurried forward anxiously and took her arm, trying to draw her towards a chair.

"I'm alright," she gripped his hands vehemently. "Just tell me what happened to him. Please."

He nodded and patted her arm for a moment. "We got the ambulances right to the beachhead. It was hard. But we got them there," he paused, remembering. "There was terrible confusion. It happened on the second day. Stukas. I don't think he felt much pain. He asked me to see you and give you this." He took a small bundle of cloth from the pocket of his jacket and gave it to her.

Madeline took the bundle and unwrapped it with trembling hands. It was the golden Saint Christopher that she had given him last year for his birthday.

"He was a good man, Mrs Hanson. You don't know the half of it."

She looked up at the soldier's experienced well-worn face and swallowed hard. Yes, she did. It was probably he who simply did not know the half of it, of what a splendid and capable man he had been.

"He should have been an officer. He had a way of insisting, pushing us to succeed. We'd never have made it to the beach if he hadn't been with us."

She nodded, knowing exactly how Josh would have motivated and encouraged every one of them. Then she whispered, "Did he send any message?"

"He said to be strong. And he sent his love to you and the baby."

Tears filled her eyes at last, but the grief was too appalling to contemplate. Her mind shut off as though a door had slammed. Numbness spread through her and it horrified her. She could not feel anything. All she knew was a black emptiness that ached beyond bearing.

A little while later, she realised that she was no longer in the library. She was in her bedroom and Phyllis was putting her into her night dress. She was hustled into bed, and presently Dr Edwards came up from the wards and gave her a small glass of liquid. Then sleep wrapped her about.



* * *

Watching quietly from the door, Phyllis turned to Dr Edwards and her anxiety was evident on her face. "Poor child. She's so young and she loved him so deeply."

"She'll recover Phyllis," he said softly. "The call of life is vital and powerful at her age. And I know for a fact she's a very determined and level-headed young lady. She'll cope. It's you who will find it harder. You'll worry and fret and be tormented by a distress that you can do nothing to alleviate."

"You don't know the trauma she's already experienced," she glanced up into the doctor's calm self-possessed face and frowned. "She's been through hell and I seriously doubt that she can take much more. Josh was exactly right for her, quiet, loving and sensitive."

"I'm sorry, I had no idea." His eyes travelled across the room to the young woman wrapped up in bed, and he nodded. "I'll keep a careful eye on her for you."

Phyllis began to breathe a little more easily. It was reassuring to have such a friend in the house, someone who could shoulder just a little of the responsibility.

As he was speaking, he slipped the small bottle of sedative into his pocket, folded up the stethoscope and turned purposefully to her. "But no amount of worry or care on your part will ease her pain. She's got to find her own way through this. Promise me you won't worry."

"How can I not?" Tears came flooding into Phyllis's eyes and she turned away from him to hide her emotion. "She's the daughter I never had, and I can't bear to see her hurt."

His eyebrows rose for a moment, and he turned her round so that she had to look up at him. "What a ridiculous thing to say, Phyllis. You're not old enough to be her mother. You're more like her older sister."

As she looked up at him, the good humour and encouragement that she saw in his eyes somehow eased her anxiety. A little surprised at herself for making such an admission, she murmured, "That only makes it worse. She's mine to care for, and I'd give anything to make her happy."

"All you can do is to be there for her if she needs you. Look, I'm sorry my dear, but I must get back to the wards now."

Phyllis nodded. "I know. I can't thank you enough for coming to

see her. I think I'll sit with her for a little while before I turn in."

He nodded. "Good night. If you need me again, you know where I am," and he was gone.



28

MADLINE HANSON LIVED in a strange daze for several days, then gradually she began to emerge from it. The first thing she became aware of was the movements of the baby, the restless stirring of vibrant life, and she clung to that sign of tenderness and hope. It was all she had. Her eyes slowly opened to find her grandfather sitting at her bedside reading his newspaper.

Madeline reached out and lay her hand over his. His fierce blue eyes looked up quickly and he examined her face. He folded the paper and leaned forward to stroke her hair back, his voice gruff with emotion. "Would you like a cup of tea my dear?"

It was difficult to speak at first. Her voice felt as though it had seized up, but finally she managed to say, "Yes please."

He only left her for a few minutes, then he was back and drew his chair closer. "One of the young nurses is going to make it. How's my girl now and my great grandchild?"

She turned her thoughts inward and touched the enormous bump that was squirming and moving with uncomfortable vigour. The kicking took her breath away for a moment and she gasped. Trust a child of Josh's to be so vigorous. He had never ceased to amaze her with his energy and enthusiasm.

Her thoughts flinched away in horror from the concept of her loss. She looked up to see her grandfather watching her, and there was so

much understanding in his gaze that it nearly broke her. Her voice shook as she whispered, "Hold me tight Grandpa?"



October was a windy cool month that brought fierce bombing across the cities of England. The population clung together and out of the shared difficulties came a fierce national spirit. It was into this tightly knit community that little Peter Hanson was born. In a hospital accustomed to dealing with crush, burn and shrapnel injuries, a new life arrived and was a symbol of hope for them all.

Phyllis stayed with Madeline throughout labour, supporting her through an ordeal that she herself so passionately longed for but had never experienced. There were always staff on hand, calling in to enquire how the young mother-to-be was doing. They brought refreshments and food, and eventually called for Dr Edwards to deliver the baby.

When it was over and Madeline was at last at peace, she looked down at the tiny little creature cradled in her arms and gathered him close to her heart. In spite of her weariness, every part of her thrilled with joy. She took a tiny tuft of pale golden hair between her finger and thumb and examined the red sheen that glowed like fire in it. Josh would have been so proud.

She looked up as a hesitant knock came on the door, and a young woman poked her head in.

"Come in," Madeline whispered over her sleeping son's head.

The young nurse crept in and peeped at the tiny rounded sleepy little face. "Oh, he's *so* beautiful. I just had to come and see him. I hope you don't mind me disturbing you like this, you must be extremely tired."

"No, I don't mind," Madeline murmured, her eyes still fixed on her son. "You've all been so good to me."

"Well, it's as though he's our family. He's so very precious, you know."



Charles Braithwaite was often in London, deeply and discreetly involved in military business, but he hurried home the moment he

heard news of the birth.

He came into Madeline's bedroom and kissed her cheek proudly and gave her an enormous hug. "Congratulations my dear," then he placed a beautifully wrapped parcel in her lap. "A little something for you."

"A present," she smiled and squeezed his hand. "Grandpa, thank you."

"Unwrap it. I think you deserve a special treat."

Curious now, she tore off the wrapping paper, and found an illicit box of chocolates. Her eyes flew to his thin stern face. "How on earth did you manage to get these, they're like gold dust."

"I have my ways," he smiled and looked round as Basher came loping up to nuzzle his hand. "And how are you getting on with the new baby then, boy?"

"He's fine," she smiled. "In fact I could swear that he's adopted Peter as his own. He stands guard over the cot like an avenging angel. Grandmother!" she exclaimed and tried to keep the surprise out of her voice.

Grandmother Braithwaite had reached the bedroom at last, leaning heavily on the arm of her grandson Jeremy, and Madeline could see that the old woman had aged. Her tall thin body had bent and withered, and now she needed the aid of a pair of sticks. But nonetheless, her eyes remained fierce and forceful.

The old woman hobbled across the floor and looked down at Madeline, then touched her shoulder with a cold gnarled hand. "I had to come and see you, young lady, and see my first great grandchild. You look tired. I was sorry to hear what happened to your husband. It's going to be hard, bringing up a child on your own. I know." She glanced scathingly at her husband. "It happened to me."

Madeline's eyes widened and the pain came flooding back with a shock that was like the blow of a fist.

"Mathilda!" Grandfather said with stern authority.

"Oh hush Charles, don't be so squeamish. You can't skirt around the facts of life. She'll need help and understanding. Is this the little one?"

Madeline threw the bed clothes to one side and scrambled out of bed. For some strange reason she did not want this cold-hearted

creature to go anywhere near her baby. She leaned over the cot and gathered him up protectively in her arms, gently pushing the sheet away from his beautiful little face. "Yes, I've decided to call him Peter."

"Hmmm. Beautiful little thing isn't he, but not much of the Braithwaite about him," the old lady murmured. "I hope he has better health and good fortune than his poor father."

Madeline's cheeks were growing increasingly pale, and she whispered fiercely, "I sincerely hope he has his father's sweetness of character. I think you'd better leave now Grandmother. You've said more than enough."

"Poor child." The old lady patted her arm firmly. "I didn't intend to upset you, but you must learn to be strong. Little Peter will need that. Charles, I'll be waiting downstairs with Jeremy."

Madeline slowly became aware that Basher had stiffened alarmingly and was growling, his lips had drawn back aggressively, and he was baring his fangs. She sighed and murmured, "It's alright Basher. They are going now. They won't hurt him."

Then suddenly she froze, and an appalling thought came to her. There was only one possible reason Basher would make such a fuss: if he had caught scent of the person who had shot her brother. Could it be that one of her own family had attempted to kill Matthew?

Charles Braithwaite was staring after the closing door, and his posture had become oddly rigid. The expression that was dawning on his face was one of shocked foreboding.

She grasped his arm urgently. "Grandpa. Basher recognises Matthew's attacker, I know it!"

He looked at her quickly, at her pallor and the strain of weakness. "I'm sorry my dear, they've tired you out. Perhaps Basher was just responding to that."

"No!" she shook her head vehemently, but she could feel the trembling of exhaustion getting into her limbs. She was still so weak. "We owe it to Matt. We must use the dogs. Grandpa, we *have to*. If it's them, we can't allow them to get away with it. What if they make another attempt? What if they hurt Peter?"

He breathed out slowly. "Yes, you're right. I'm going to leave you for a moment. Get back into bed and leave me to deal with this."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to make a telephone call to Jarvis and another to the police. I'll be back as soon as I can. Trust me."

Madeline nodded and gladly returned to her bed. Her legs were shaking now, and in spite of the trauma of the last few minutes almost the moment she rested her head on the pillow she fell asleep.



Charles Braithwaite spoke briefly to Phyllis to explain what had happened then contacted the police station and spoke for a few minutes to Chief Constable Petty. Following that, he contacted Jarvis and gave him a precise set of instructions, then returned to his granddaughter. She was deeply asleep by the time he got there, and he spent a little while watching her resting face, then he patted Basher playfully. "Watch over her old boy, you've done a good job today. If you're right, then I shall be able to rest more securely again."

He left a small note by Madeline's bed saying he would be back again later in the day, then he straightened his shoulders and made his way down to the two waiting members of his family.

He was silent as he drove them the short distance to his peaceful thatched house. There was no sign that anyone was there, and he wondered whether he had given them enough time to prepare.

He climbed wearily out of the vehicle and went to open the car door for his wife. "Here we are at last. The back door is unlocked. Jeremy, would you help your grandmother into the house? I'm going to put the car in the garage."

He lifted the suitcases out of the boot, and watched his young grandson take the older woman's arm solicitously and help her along the uneven garden path. His face tightened grimly. If the dogs were right, the boy had become a monster, another Caligula, and *she* was not much better.

It was out of his hands now. He climbed back into the car and left them to their fate.



Madeline heard details about the events of that day when her grandfather visited her the next morning. For a long, stunned moment she was unable to believe what she had heard. Her cousin Jeremy had

been the gunman who had shot Matthew.

The dogs had gone for him, and it had been Jarvis who had prevented them from tearing him to pieces.

In the days that followed, the police tracked Jeremy's movements the day of the shooting and built up enough evidence to charge him with attempted murder.

When she thought back to her brother's long convalescence, to his pain and suffering, she was glad to think the dogs had wrought some retribution on the culprit.

What added the final insult was that Matt, now fit and well again, was being called up to the army whilst Jeremy would remain safely in prison, taking no part in the war and doing precious little to help anyone. He did not deserve such protection. He deserved to be in the front firing line.



29

THE FOLLOWING SPRING brought fresh buds to the trees, and life burgeoned restlessly. Madeline was coming back to life too. Twice, she sat down at her piano and touched the keys lovingly. She longed to play, Schubert, Chopin, Beethoven, Rachmaninov, to feel the joy of expression and creativity flow through her. But the moment the first notes sounded and the channel to her senses was opened, the terrible despair of her loss returned, reaving her, tearing her heart until she could bear it no longer. Josh had been the spirit of music, passion and love, and he was gone. After the second attempt, she realised that it was simply too soon. Music was too intimately woven into her memories of him.

The spring had, however, revived the determination and spirit that was at the core of her personality. Life went on and she had to conquer this aching loneliness. She would never be complete without him, but she had to make the best of the marvellous things she had.

There was so much suffering around her, countless others losing loved ones, and uncomplainingly getting on with life. A sense of purpose returned to her. Though she could not yet play concert music, she could do something to help bring a little laughter and joy back into people's lives.

Even in the torn and bleeding capital, shattered by the Blitz, the parks came to life and a canopy of leaves softened the lines of the anti-

aircraft guns and the rubble of bombed out buildings. She pushed the pram slowly along the pavement and glanced at the gaunt faces around her, thanking God that she had not had to spend the winter here in London. It must have been hell.

She was beginning to feel the stirrings of anticipation. She had not seen Rudy Crawshaw and Larry Jenkins for several years, and yet they had welcomed her offer with open arms. Working with them had always been tremendous fun.

She reached the church hall at last and pushed the double doors open and entered. It was a large echoing space with a stage at the far end and hundreds of wooden chairs set out in rows in between.

"...enter from the right please Andy, and *don't* quicken your pace. You look as though you're running for the bus!" Rudy was directing the players on stage from a position in the wings, and his voice carried through the hall.

In a seat at the very front, there was a plump, vividly dressed figure that she recognised instantly as photographer and designer, Larry Jenkins.

The door behind her banged shut and he turned in his seat, but his expression of condemnation quickly changed to one of delight.

Madeline smiled, and her spirits rose. It was like old times and she knew she was doing the right thing. Her fingers itched to play for them once more.

"Madeline my dear! Come in, come in." Larry called from his place in the front row, and all activity on stage ceased as heads turned to stare at her.

Rudy emerged from the wings and came to the front of the stage, peering down into the auditorium and drawing slowly on a long cigarette in an ebony holder. When he saw her and the pram a smile of pleasure lit his face. "Ah, at last. Welcome back Madeline darling. We need you *desperately*. Can you begin right away?"

"Slave driving as ever, I see," she laughed. "Yes, of course I can."

"The music's all there on the piano. We're rehearsing the fifth number." Then he turned and peered into the wings. "Who's not on for a while? Dora! Go down into the auditorium would you dear? You can have first play with the baby. We'll all have to take turns."

There was movement all around Madeline as she took her seat at the piano and sorted out the music. It was good to be back amongst

show people.

She glanced anxiously over her shoulder, to make sure that Peter was being well cared for. Her only real anxiety was that he should be safe and happy. But Dora turned out to be a confident and motherly young woman who was obviously desperate to play with the baby.

Reassured she turned back to the piano, flexed her fingers in a business-like fashion, then looked up for directions from Rudy. It all slipped back into place as though she had never been away.

“When you’re ready my dear. Andy, take it from the beginning.”

THE END

Dear reader,

Thank you for reading my book. I hope you've enjoyed it. If you have, I'd really appreciate it if you would take a moment to leave a review at your favourite ebook retailer.

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Thanks!

Gayle Wyatt

Author

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LIKE MANY AUTHORS, I'm a compulsive writer. I started telling and scribbling bedtime stories at a really early age. By the time I was twelve years old, I had begun constructing plots for my first novel. I've been writing ever since.

It's only now, though, many years and several careers later, that I'm turning seriously to fiction writing. My plan is to bring several historical series to print over the next few years.

Life has had a habit of getting in the way of my literary aspirations, and I don't think that has been a bad thing. I have done so much and learned so much. My first career was as a Physiological Measurement Technician working in the Health Service in the UK, and then moving to Bahrain for three years where I worked at the Salmanaya Medical Centre.

The second phase of my life was as a mother bringing up two beautiful sons, but when I decided it was time to return to work, I had the most amazing stroke of pure luck. While temping for a few weeks at a publishing company, I was able to put my writing and editing skills to good use, and I was offered a job as an assistant editor.

It was a dream come true and was the first step in a satisfying career! I eventually become magazine editor, a highly stressful job working to immutable deadlines, directing the editorial content, overseeing the quality of the magazine, managing a portfolio of writers and of course writing a vast number of articles and news items.

After 20 years in that challenging role, moving from magazine to magazine, I decided to go independent, to spread my wings and perhaps de-stress a bit. I became a freelance writer and branched out to manage the marketing for my musician son. This inevitably led to marketing and web development for other budding and established musicians.

And is there time left in the day for writing? Oh yes. And I'm loving it.

MORE BY THIS AUTHOR

THE WESTCOTT GIRLS:

The Music Maker's Daughter

The Hours Before Dawn

Love Comes At A Cost

Song Of A Nightingale

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Next in series:

LOVE COMES AT A COST

A gritty tale of love and grief, hidden enemies and deadly revenge.

It's 1944. Widowed and grieving for her dead husband, pianist Madeline Hanson is touring with the Crawshaw Troop. Entertaining on air bases across East Anglia, she meets an injured RAF pilot with griefs and secrets of his own.

Deeply attracted to this peaceful music loving man, she begins to believe that life might once again hold the promise of love and musical fulfilment. It's everything she has ever dreamed of.

But love always comes at a cost, as she is about to discover.

Shadows from her past are reaching out to her. The enemy who destroyed her father and all but crippled her brother is joining forces with her embittered guardian.

As Madeline picks up the threads of her performing career, Ben returns to night raids over Germany. The trap is set.

The man she loves is the bait...

Gayle Wyatt

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