

David Marchmont glanced towards his passenger as he steered the car along the narrow lane. The snow was falling in earnest now, making the already dangerously icy road even more precarious.

‘Not far now Greta, and it looks as if we’ve made it just in time. I reckon this lane will be impassable by morning. Does anything seem familiar?’ he asked tentatively.

Greta turned towards him. Her ivory skin was still unlined, even though she was fifty-eight years old, and her huge blue eyes dominated what David had always thought of as her doll-like face. Age hadn’t dimmed the vividness of their colour, but they no longer shone with excitement or anger. The light behind them had disappeared long ago, and they remained as blank and innocent as the inanimate china facsimile she reminded him of.

‘I know I once lived here. But I can’t remember it, David. I’m sorry.’

‘Not to worry,’ he comforted her, knowing how much it distressed her. And also thinking that if he could edit out of *his* memory that first grisly, devastating sight of his childhood home after the fire – the pungent smell of

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charred wood and smoke remained with him to this day – he almost certainly would. ‘Of course, Marchmont is well on its way to being restored now.’

‘Yes, David, I know. You told me that last week when you came over to me for supper. I cooked lamb cutlets and we had a bottle of Sancerre,’ she said defensively. ‘You said we were staying in the house itself.’

‘Exactly right,’ David agreed equably, understanding that Greta always felt the need to give him exact details of recent events, even if the past before her accident was inaccessible to her. As he navigated the ice-rutted lane, the tyres struggling to maintain a grip on the slight incline, he now wondered if bringing Greta back here for Christmas was a good idea. Frankly, he’d been amazed when she’d finally accepted his invitation, after years of trying to persuade her to leave her Mayfair apartment and receiving a firm ‘no’.

At last, after three years of painstaking renovation to restore the house to some semblance of its former glory, he’d felt it was the right moment. And for some reason, out of the blue, so had she. At least he knew the house would be physically warm and comfortable. Although emotionally – for either of them, given the circumstances – he didn’t know . . .

‘It’s getting dark already,’ Greta commented blandly. ‘And it’s only just past three o’clock.’

‘Yes, but I hope the light will hold long enough so we can at least see Marchmont.’

‘Where I used to live.’

‘Yes.’

‘With Owen. My husband. Who was your uncle.’

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‘Yes.’

David knew that Greta had simply memorised the details of the past she’d forgotten. As if she were taking an exam. And it was he who had been Greta’s teacher, told by the doctors who cared for her to steer clear of any traumatic events but to mention names, dates and places that might stir something in her subconscious and provide the key to recovering her lost memory. Occasionally, when he went to visit her and they chatted, he thought he saw a flicker of recognition at something he mentioned, but he couldn’t be sure whether that was through what he had told her since or what she actually remembered. And after all these years, the doctors – who’d once been certain that Greta’s memory would slowly return, as there was nothing to indicate it wouldn’t on the numerous brain scans she’d had since the accident – now talked of ‘selective amnesia’ brought on by trauma. In their opinion, Greta did not *want* to remember.

David steered the car slowly around the treacherous bend in the lane, knowing that within a few seconds the gates that led to Marchmont would come into view. Even though he was the legal owner and had spent a fortune on the renovation of the house, he was only the caretaker. Now the restoration was almost complete, Ava, Greta’s granddaughter, and her husband, Simon, had moved from the Gate Lodge to take up residence at Marchmont Hall. And when David died, it would legally pass to Ava. The timing couldn’t be better, given the couple were expecting their first baby in a few weeks’ time. And just maybe, David thought, the past few years of a family history which had

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gone so badly wrong could be finally laid to rest with the breath of new, innocent life.

What complicated the situation further were the events that had happened *since* Greta's memory loss . . . events he'd protected her from, concerned about the effect they might have on her. After all, if she couldn't remember the start of it all, how could she possibly deal with the end?

All in all, the situation meant that he, Ava and Simon walked a tightrope during conversations with Greta, wanting to prompt her memory but constantly wary of what was discussed in front of her.

'Can you see it, Greta?' David asked as he drove the car between the gates and Marchmont came into view.

Of Elizabethan origin, the house sat low and gracefully against the skyline of undulating foothills that graduated into the majestic peaks of the Black Mountains beyond. Below it, the River Usk meandered through the wide valley, the fields on either side sparkling with the recent snowfall. The mellow red brick of the ancient walls rose into triple gables along its frontage, while the intricate panes of glass in the mullioned windows reflected the winter sun's last, rosy rays.

Even though the old timbers – bone dry as they were – had given the hungry flames of the fire a healthy supper that had resulted in the roof being destroyed, the outer shell had survived. As the fire services had told him, it was partly due to the luck of a huge downpour an hour or so after the first small ember had caught light. Only nature had saved Marchmont Hall from total destruction and there had at least been something left for him to restore.

'Oh, David, it's far more beautiful than it looked in the

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photographs you showed me,' Greta breathed. 'What with all the snow, it looks like a Christmas card.'

And indeed, as he parked the car as close to the front door as he could, David saw the warm glow of lamps already lit and the twinkling lights of a Christmas tree through a window. The picture painted was so at odds with the dark, austere atmosphere of his childhood home – indelibly imprinted on his memory – that he felt a sudden sense of euphoria at its apparent transformation. Perhaps the fire *had* burnt away the past, metaphorically as well as physically. He only wished his mother were still here to see its remarkable rehabilitation.

'It does look rather lovely, doesn't it? Right,' he said, opening the car door and causing a shower of snow to slide off the roof, 'let's make a run for it. I'll come back for the cases and presents later.'

David walked around the car to open the passenger door and Greta climbed out cautiously, her slip-on town shoes disappearing, along with her ankles, into the deep snow. As she looked up at the house and then down at her snow-submerged feet, a sudden memory stirred.

*I've been here before . . .*

Standing stock-still, in shock that this moment had finally come, she desperately tried to grasp the fragment of remembrance. But it was already gone.

'Come on, Greta, you'll catch your death standing out here,' said David, offering her his arm. And together they walked the few yards to the front door of Marchmont Hall.

After they'd been greeted by Mary, the housekeeper who had worked at Marchmont for over forty years, David

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showed Greta to her bedroom and left her to take a nap. He imagined that the stress of deciding to actually leave her home for the first time in years, coupled with the long journey from London, must have worn her out.

Then he wandered into the kitchen in search of Mary. She was rolling out pastry for mince pies at the newly fitted central island. David cast his eyes around the room, admiring the gleaming granite worktops and the sleek, integrated units that lined the walls. The kitchen and bathrooms had been David's only concession to modern design when he'd planned Marchmont's restoration. All the other rooms had been modelled on the original interior, a daunting task that had involved weeks of research and days spent poring over archive photographs in libraries, as well as dredging his own childhood memories. Armies of local craftsmen had been employed to ensure that everything from the flagstone floors to the furniture was as close as possible to the old Marchmont.

'Hello, Master David.' Mary's face broke into a smile as she looked up. 'Jack telephoned ten minutes ago to say your Tor's train was delayed because of the snow. They should be here in about an hour or so. He took the Land Rover, so they'll be fine getting back.'

'It was good of him to offer to pick her up. I know how hard it is for him to spare time away from his duties on the estate. So, how do you like the new facilities, Mary?'

'It's wonderful, *bach*. Everything is so fresh and new,' she replied in her soft Welsh accent. 'I can't believe it's the same house. It's so warm in here these days, I hardly need to light the fires.'

'And your flat is comfortable?' Mary's husband, Huw,

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had died a few years ago and she had found it isolated in the estate cottage all alone. So, whilst he was working with the architect on the new plans for the house, he had incorporated a suite of rooms in the spacious attic for Mary. After what had happened before, he felt happier having someone permanently on site if Ava and Simon had to go away.

‘Oh yes, thank you. And it has a wonderful view over the valley, too. How’s Greta? To be honest with you, I was amazed when you told me she was coming here for Christmas. Indeed to goodness, I never thought I’d see the day. What does she think?’

‘She didn’t say much,’ said David, not sure whether Mary was referring to Greta’s reaction to the renovations or her return to the house after all these years. ‘She’s resting at the moment.’

‘You saw that I put her in her old bedroom, to see if it would jog her memory. Although it looks so different now even I don’t recognise it. Do you really think she doesn’t know who I am? We went through a lot together when she lived at Marchmont.’

‘Please try not to let it upset you, Mary. I’m afraid it’s the same for all of us.’

‘Well, maybe it’s best if she *doesn’t* remember some of what happened,’ she replied grimly.

‘Yes,’ David agreed with a sigh. ‘It’s going to be a very odd Christmas, one way and another.’

‘You can say that again, *bach*. I keep looking for your mother in the house, then realise she’s no longer here.’ Mary bit back her tears. ‘It’s worse for you, of course, Master David.’

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‘Well, it’s going to take some getting used to for all of us. But at least we have Ava and Simon, with their baby on the way, to help us get through it.’ David put a comforting arm around Mary’s shoulder. ‘Now, can I try one of your delicious mince pies?’

Ava and Simon arrived back at the house twenty minutes later and joined David in the drawing room, which smelt of fresh paint, and woodsmoke from the vast stone fireplace.

‘Ava, you look wonderful. Positively burgeoning with good health.’ David smiled as he embraced her and shook hands with Simon.

‘I seem to have suddenly ballooned in the past month. I’m obviously having a rugby player, be it a boy or girl,’ Ava answered, looking up fondly at Simon.

‘Shall I ask Mary to make us a pot of tea?’ enquired David.

‘I’ll go,’ said Simon. ‘Ava, darling, you sit down with your uncle and put your feet up. She was called out in the middle of the night to a distressed cow in labour,’ he added to David with a despairing shrug as he left the room.

‘And I hope someone will be there for *me* when I’m in labour and distressed,’ Ava retorted with a chuckle, sinking into one of the newly upholstered chairs. ‘Simon’s always nagging at me to slow down, but I’m a vet. I can hardly leave my patients to die, can I? I mean, the midwife wouldn’t leave me, would she?’

‘No, Ava, but you’re due to give birth in six weeks’ time, and Simon is concerned that you’re doing too much, that’s all.’

‘When the locum arrives at the practice after Christmas



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it'll make things a lot easier. But in this weather I can't promise I'm not going to get called out to warm up sheep suffering from hypothermia. The farmers have done a good job of bringing them down from the hills before the bad weather set in, but there's always the odd one that gets left behind. Anyway, Uncle David, how are you?' Ava had always called him 'Uncle', even though they were, technically, first cousins once removed.

'I'm very well, thank you. I recorded my Christmas show in October and since then, well . . . as a matter of fact' – David reddened with sudden embarrassment – 'I've been writing my autobiography.'

'Have you now? That must make interesting reading.'

'My life does certainly, and that's the problem. There are parts of it I can't talk about, obviously.'

'No—' Ava's expression became serious. 'Speaking honestly, as you know I always do, I'm surprised you agreed to write it. I mean, you've always kept your private life scrupulously private.'

'Yes, but sadly some gutter journalist has decided he's going to pen the unauthorised version, so I decided I'd better put the record straight first. As far as I can under the circumstances, that is.'

'Right. Then I can see why you'd want to do it. Goodness,' Ava breathed, 'having had a movie star for a mother and a famous comedian as a cousin has made me loathe the thought of celebrity. You won't mention anything about . . . what happened to me, will you, Uncle David? I'd die if you did. Especially after last time, when I was splashed all over the front page of the *Daily Mail* with Cheska.'

'Of course not, Ava. I'm doing my utmost to keep the

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family out of it. The problem is, that doesn't leave much to tell. There've been no drugs, nervous breakdowns, drink problems or womanising in my life, so it makes for a very boring read.' David sighed and gave an ironic smile. 'Talking of women, Tor should be here soon.'

'I'm glad she's coming, Uncle David. I'm very fond of her. And the more of us here this Christmas, the better.'

'Well, at least we've finally managed to get your grandmother to join us.'

'Where is she?'

'Upstairs, resting.'

'And how is she?'

'The same, really. But I'm so proud of her for finding the courage to come here.' Car lights flashed beyond the window. 'That must be Tor. I'll go and help her in with her luggage.'

When David had left the drawing room Ava mused on his enduring and loyal relationship with Greta. She knew the two of them had known each other forever, but she wondered just what it was about her that appealed to him so much. Ava's great-aunt, David's mother LJ, who had died only a few months ago, had said that her son had always loved Greta. And certainly, Greta still looked very youthful, almost as if her memory loss had erased the physical signs of fifty-eight years of living, which normally manifested themselves on a face like an outer emotional map.

Ava hated to admit it, but she found her grandmother rather vacuous and childlike. On the few occasions she'd seen Greta over the years she'd felt it was like talking to a perfectly formed but hollow Fabergé egg. But then again,

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perhaps any depth and personality she'd once had had been wiped away by the accident. Greta lived like a recluse, rarely venturing out of the front door of her apartment. This was the first time Ava had ever known her to leave it for longer than a few hours.

She knew she shouldn't judge her grandmother, having never known her before the accident, but at the same time she acknowledged that she had always compared Greta to LJ, whose indomitable spirit and zest for life made Greta – even after everything that had happened to her – seem weak and colourless. *And now*, Ava thought, biting her lip, *Greta is here for Christmas, and LJ isn't.*

A lump came to Ava's throat, but she swallowed it down, knowing her great-aunt wouldn't want her to grieve.

'Best foot forward,' she'd always said when tragedy had struck.

Ava couldn't help but wish with all her heart that LJ had been here for a little longer so she could have witnessed the birth of her baby. At least she'd lived to see her marry Simon, and had known when she died that Marchmont – and Ava – were safe.

David came back into the drawing room with Tor.

'Hello, Ava. Merry Christmas, and all that. Goodness, I'm cold. What a journey!' Tor said, walking to the roaring fire and warming her hands by it.

'Well, you made it, and just in time, apparently. Jack told me they've cancelled any further trains to Abergavenny tonight,' said David.

'Yes, I must admit I didn't fancy spending Christmas in a bed and breakfast in Newport,' Tor said drily. 'And the

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house looks wonderful, Ava. You and Simon must be thrilled.'

'We are,' said Ava. 'It's so beautiful, and we're so grateful to you, Uncle David. Simon and I would never have had the resources to renovate it ourselves.'

'Well, as you know, one day it will pass to you, anyway. Ah, Simon.' David looked up as he entered the room. 'A nice fresh pot of tea. Just what we all need.'

Greta awoke from her nap feeling disoriented and unable to remember where she was. Panicking, she fumbled for a light in the pitch blackness and switched it on. The strong smell of fresh paint jogged her memory as she sat up in the comfortable bed and admired the newly decorated room.

Marchmont Hall . . . the house she'd heard so much about from David over the years. Mary, the housekeeper, had told her earlier this had once been her bedroom, and it had been in here that she'd given birth to Cheska.

Greta got out of bed and walked to the window. The snow was still falling. She tried to access the fleeting memory that had been kindled when she'd stood outside the house, and sighed in despair when her mind stubbornly refused to give up its secrets.

After freshening up in the smart en-suite bathroom, she dressed in a new cream silk blouse she'd bought a few days ago. Adding a dab of lipstick to her mouth, she stared at her reflection in the mirror, feeling anxious about leaving the sanctuary of her bedroom.

It had taken everything that was left of her to make the decision to join her family here at Marchmont for Christmas. So much so that after she'd said yes, and watched

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David's astonished expression as she did so, Greta had experienced severe panic attacks which had rendered her sleepless, sweating and shaking into the small hours. She'd visited her doctor, who had prescribed beta blockers and sedatives. With his encouragement, plus the thought of spending yet another miserable Christmas alone, she had managed to pack, climb into David's car and get here.

Perhaps the doctors would disagree with her motivation; they would argue in their usual psychobabble that maybe at last she was ready, that her subconscious finally deemed her strong enough to cope with returning. And certainly, since she'd taken the decision, she'd been dreaming vividly for the first time since the accident. None of her dreams made sense, of course, but the shock of having what the doctors would term a 'flashback' when she'd stepped out of the car and looked at Marchmont Hall a couple of hours ago gave some credence to their analysis.

She knew there was a lot still to face. 'Company', for a start, and for an extended period of time. And among those gathering here for the festive season there was one person she was particularly dreading spending time with: Tor, David's lady-friend.

Even though she had met Tor occasionally when David had brought her round for tea at Greta's Mayfair apartment, she had never spent longer than a few hours with the woman. Even though, on the surface, Tor had been sweet and polite and seemed to be interested in what she had to say – which wasn't a lot – Greta had felt patronised, as if Tor were treating her as some kind of mentally deficient, senile old lady.

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Greta looked at her reflection in the mirror. She may be many things, but she wasn't *that*.

Tor was an Oxford don. Intellectual, independent, attractive – in a practical sort of way, Greta had always thought, and then reprimanded herself for her instinctive female derision of a rival.

Put simply, Tor was everything Greta wasn't, but she made David happy and Greta knew she must be happy for that.

At least David had said that Ava would be here with her husband, Simon. Ava, her granddaughter . . .

If anything about her memory loss particularly upset her, it was Ava. Her own flesh and blood, her daughter's daughter . . . Yet though she'd seen Ava periodically over the past two decades and liked her very much indeed, Greta felt guilty that she was unable to connect with her granddaughter like a close relative should. Surely, even though she had no recollection of Ava's birth, she should instinctively feel some deeper emotional bond?

Greta thought Ava suspected – just as LJ had – that she remembered more than she did and was somehow shamming. But despite years of sessions with psychologists, hypnotists and practitioners of any other form of treatment for memory loss she'd read about, nothing stirred. Greta felt she lived in a void, as if she were merely an onlooker to the rest of humanity, all of whom found it easy to *remember*.

The closest she felt to another human being was her darling David, who'd been there when she'd finally opened her eyes after nine months in a coma and had spent the past twenty-four years caring for her in any way he could. If it hadn't been for him, given the emptiness of her exis-

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tence, she was sure she would have lost all hope many years ago.

David had told her that they met forty years ago, when she was eighteen and working in London at a theatre called the Windmill just after the war. Apparently, she'd once explained to him that her parents had died in the Blitz, but had never mentioned any other relatives. David had told her that they had been very good friends, and Greta had surmised that their relationship had been nothing more than that. David had also said that, soon after they'd met, she had married a man called Owen, his uncle, once the squire of Marchmont.

Over the years Greta had wished endlessly that the friendship David had described to her had been something more. She loved him deeply; not for what he had been to her before the accident but for all he meant to her now. Of course, she knew her feelings were not reciprocated and she had no reason to believe they ever had been. David was a very famous and successful comedian and still extremely attractive. Besides, for the past six years he'd been with Tor, who was always on his arm at charity events and awards ceremonies.

In her darkest moments Greta felt she was little more than a liability; that David was merely doing his duty, out of the kindness of his heart and because they were related by marriage. When she'd finally come out of hospital, after eighteen months, and moved back into her apartment in Mayfair, David had been her only regular visitor. Her guilt at being dependent on him had grown over the years and, although he told her that popping in to see her was no

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hardship, she'd always tried not to be a burden, so she often pretended she was busy when she wasn't.

Greta moved away from the window, knowing she must pluck up the courage to go downstairs and join her family. She opened the bedroom door, walked along the corridor and stood at the top of the magnificent dark oak staircase, its carved balustrades and elaborate acorn-shaped finials gleaming softly in the light of the chandelier overhead. Gazing down upon the large Christmas tree which stood in the hall beneath her, she smelt the fresh, delicate scent of the fir and, again, something stirred. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, as the doctors had told her to, trying to encourage the faint memory to grow.

The residents of Marchmont Hall woke up on Christmas morning to an idyllic, snowy scene outside. At lunchtime, they tucked into a goose, and vegetables grown on the estate. Afterwards, they gathered in the drawing room by the fire to open their gifts.

'Oh Granny,' said Ava as she unwrapped a soft white baby blanket, 'that will be so useful. Thank you.'

'Also, Tor and I would very much like to buy you a pram but, given that neither of us has a clue about all those new-fangled contraptions parents use these days, we've written you a cheque,' David said, handing it to Ava.

'That's more than generous, David,' Simon said, topping up his glass.

Greta was touched by Ava's gift of a framed photograph of the two of them, taken when Ava was a tiny baby and while Greta was still hospitalised.

'That's just to remind you of what's to come,' Ava said



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with a smile. 'My goodness, you'll be a great-grandmother!'

'I will, won't I?' Greta chuckled at the thought.

'And you look barely a day older than the first time I met you,' David commented gallantly.

Greta sat on the sofa, watching her family with pleasure. Perhaps it was the effect of far more wine over lunch than she was used to but, for once, she didn't feel unwanted.

After the presents had been unwrapped, Simon insisted he take Ava upstairs for a rest, and David and Tor left for a walk. David asked Greta to accompany them, but she tactfully declined. They needed time together, and three was always a crowd. Greta sat by the fire for a while, dozing contentedly. Coming to, she glanced out of the window and saw that the sun was now low but still shining, the snow glittering beneath it.

On impulse, deciding she could do with a breath of fresh air, too, she sought out Mary and asked if there were any boots and a thick coat she could borrow.

Five minutes later, dressed in a pair of wellingtons that were far too big for her and an old Barbour, Greta strode out across the virgin snow, breathing in the wonderful, clean, crisp air. She paused, wondering which way to go, hoping some inner instinct would guide her, and decided to take a stroll through the woods. As she walked, she looked upwards at the deep blue sky above and a sudden joy filled her veins at the sheer beauty of the scene. It was such an unusual and rare feeling that she almost skipped as she zigzagged her way through the trees.

Arriving in a clearing, she saw a majestic fir tree standing in the centre of it, the rich green of its bushy, snow-laden branches a contrast to the tall, bare beech trees that made

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up the rest of the wood. Walking towards it, she noticed there was a gravestone beneath it, the inscription covered by snow. Surmising that it was almost certainly the grave of a family pet – perhaps one she had known – Greta reached down and scraped away the hard, icy flakes with her gloved hand.

Slowly, the inscription began to appear.

### JONATHAN (JONNY) MARCHMONT

Beloved son of Owen and Greta

Brother of Francesca

BORN 2ND JUNE 1946

DIED 6TH JUNE 1949

May God guide his little angel up to Heaven

Greta read and reread the inscription, then fell to her knees in the snow, her heart pounding.

Jonny . . . The words on the gravestone said that this dead child was *her* son . . .

She knew Francesca – Cheska – was her daughter, but there'd never been any mention of a boy. The inscription said he'd died at just three years of age . . .

Weeping now with frustration and shock, Greta looked up again and saw that the sky was beginning to darken. She gazed around the clearing helplessly, as if the trees might speak to her and give her answers. As she knelt there, in the distance she heard the sound of a dog barking. An echo of another moment created a picture in her mind; she'd been here in this place once before and had heard a dog . . . Yes, *yes* . . .

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She turned and focused on the grave. ‘Jonny . . . my son . . . please let me remember. For God’s sake, let me remember what happened!’ she cried, half-choking on her tears.

The sound of the dog’s bark faded away and as it did so she closed her eyes and immediately saw a vivid image of a tiny baby wrapped in her arms, nestling against her chest.

‘Jonny, my darling Jonny . . . my baby . . .?’

As the sun dipped below the trees and into the valley below, heralding the arrival of night, Greta’s arms reached wide to clasp the gravestone as, finally, she began to remember . . .



*Greta*



*London, October 1945*



## 2

The cramped dressing room in the Windmill Theatre smelt of Leichner No. 5 panstick perfume and sweat. There weren't enough mirrors, so the girls jostled for space as they painted on lipstick and teased their hair into curls on top of their heads, fixing the elaborate styles with spritzes of sugar water.

'I suppose there's something to be said for appearing half naked; at least you don't have to worry about laddering your nylons,' laughed an attractive brunette as she checked her reflection and deftly arranged her breasts to better advantage in her low-cut, sequined costume.

'Yes, but carbolic soap doesn't exactly leave your skin looking as fresh as a daisy after you've scrubbed the make-up off, does it, Doris?' replied another girl.

There was a sharp knock at the door and a young man peered into the dressing room, seemingly oblivious to the scantily-clad bodies that met his eyes. 'Five minutes, ladies!' he shouted before retreating.

'Oh well,' sighed Doris. 'Another shimmy, another shilling.' She stood up. 'I'm just thankful there's no more air raids. It was bloomin' freezing a couple of years ago, sitting

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in that bloody basement in not much more than your undies. My backside turned positively blue. Come on, girls, let's go and give our audience something to dream about.'

Doris left the dressing room and the others drifted out behind her, chattering amiably, until there was only one girl left, hurriedly applying red lipstick with a small brush.

Greta Simpson was never late. But today she'd overslept until after ten, even though she was due at the theatre at eleven o'clock. Mind you, it had been worth having to run the half-mile to the bus stop, she thought dreamily as she stared into the mirror. Last night with Max, when they'd danced until the small hours then wandered hand in hand along the Embankment as the sun came up over London, made it all worthwhile. She hugged herself tightly at the memory of his arms around her and his passionate kisses.

It was four weeks since she'd met Max in Feldman's nightclub. Usually, Greta was too exhausted after five shows at the Windmill to do anything other than go home to bed, but Doris had begged her to come and help celebrate her twenty-first birthday, and in the end she'd agreed. The two girls were chalk and cheese; Greta quiet and reserved, Doris brash and blowsy with a loud cockney twang. Yet they'd become friends of sorts and Greta hadn't wanted to let her down.

The pair had treated themselves to a taxi for the short journey to Oxford Street. Feldman's was packed with demobbed British and American servicemen, as well as the cream of London society who frequented the most popular swing club in town.

Doris had bagged a table in the corner and ordered a gin and It for each of them. Greta glanced around and



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thought how the atmosphere in London had changed since VE Day, just five short months ago. A sense of euphoria pervaded the air. A new Labour government had been elected in July, with Clement Attlee at the helm, and their slogan 'Let us face the future' summed up the fresh hopes of the British people.

Greta had felt suddenly light-headed as she'd taken a sip of her cocktail and soaked in the club's atmosphere. The war was over after six long years. She'd smiled to herself. She was young, she was pretty and it was a time of excitement and new beginnings. And God knew, she could do with one of those . . .

It was as she was looking around that she'd noticed a particularly handsome young man standing with a group of GIs at the bar. Greta had remarked on him to Doris.

'Yeah, and he'll be randy as they come, I'll bet. All them Yanks are,' Doris had said, catching the eye of one of the group and smiling boldly at him.

It was no secret at the Windmill that Doris was free with her affections. And five minutes later a waiter arrived at their table with a bottle of champagne, 'With the compliments of the gents by the bar.'

'Easy when you know how, dear,' Doris had whispered to Greta as the waiter poured the champagne. 'This evening won't cost either of us a penny.' She'd winked conspiratorially and instructed the waiter to tell the 'gents' to come over so she could thank them in person.

Two hours later, high on champagne, Greta had found herself dancing in Max's arms. She had discovered that he was an American staff officer working at Whitehall.

'Most of the guys are on their way home, which is

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where I'll be headed in a few weeks,' Max had explained. 'We just got a few things to tidy up first. Boy, I'm gonna miss London. It's a swell city.'

He'd looked surprised when Greta told him she was in 'show business'.

'You mean you're on the stage? As an actress?' he'd said, his brow creasing into a frown.

Greta had sensed immediately this wasn't something that was going to impress him and she'd quickly changed her story. 'I work as a receptionist to a theatrical agent,' she'd added hurriedly.

'Oh, I see.' Max's features immediately relaxed. 'Show business sure doesn't fit with you, Greta. You're what my mother would call a real lady.'

Half an hour later Greta had extricated herself from Max's arms and told him she must go home. He'd nodded politely and walked her outside to find a taxi.

'It's been a wonderful evening,' he'd said as he helped her inside. 'Can I see you again?'

'Yes,' she'd replied, before she could stop herself.

'Great. I could meet you here tomorrow night?'

'Yes, but I'm working until half past ten. I have to see a show one of our clients is in,' she'd lied.

'Okay, I'll be waiting for you here at eleven. Night, Greta, don't be late tomorrow.'

'I won't.'

As the taxi had driven her home, Greta found that her mind was a mixture of conflicting emotions. Her head told her it would be futile to begin a relationship with a man who had only a few weeks left in London, but Max seemed like a gentleman, and that made such a pleasant change

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from the often rowdy male audience that frequented the Windmill.

As she'd sat there, she'd thought sombrely of the circumstances that had landed her at the stage door of the Windmill barely four months ago. In all the magazines and newspapers she'd read as a teenager 'The Windmill Girls' had always seemed so glamorous, dressed in their beautiful costumes with an array of British celebrities pictured smiling between them. Having had to make a hasty exit from the all-too-different world she'd previously occupied, the Windmill had been her first port of call when she'd arrived in London.

The reality, as she now knew, was very different . . .

After she'd arrived back at her boarding house and climbed into the narrow bed, with a cardigan over her pyjamas to keep out the autumnal chill of the unheated room, Greta had realised that Max was her passport to freedom. And whatever it took to convince him that she was the girl of his dreams, she'd decided she'd do it.

As planned, Max and Greta had met at Feldman's the following night, and from then on they'd seen each other almost every evening. And despite all Doris's warnings about overpaid and oversexed Yanks, Max had always behaved like a perfect gentleman. A few days ago he had taken Greta to a dinner dance at the Savoy. As she'd sat at the table in the grand ballroom and listened to Roberto Inglez and his Orchestra, she'd decided she loved being wine'd and dined by her rich, handsome American officer. And, more and more, she was learning to love him as well.

Through their conversations, Greta had begun to realise

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that Max had lived a very privileged but somewhat sheltered life before arriving in London a few months ago. He told her he'd been born in South Carolina, the only son of wealthy parents, and lived just outside the city of Charleston. Greta had gasped when he'd shown her a photograph of the elegant, colonnaded white house where they lived. Max had told her his father owned several lucrative businesses in the Deep South, including a large automotive factory which had apparently fared well during the war. When Max left England and arrived back home he would be joining the family business.

Greta knew from the flowers, nylons and expensive meals he paid for that Max had money to burn, so when he started talking about 'our' future, a glimmer of hope that they just might have one had begun to ignite in her heart.

Tonight, Max was taking her out for dinner at the Dorchester and had told her to wear something special. He was due to ship out to America in a couple of days and had said time and time again how much he'd miss her. Perhaps he'd be able to come back to London to visit, or maybe, just maybe, she thought, she could save up enough money to make a trip across to the States to see him . . .

Her romantic reverie was interrupted by a light tap on the door. She looked up as a familiar, friendly face appeared around it.

'Ready yet, Greta?' asked David Marchmont. As always, Greta was taken by surprise at the clipped, upper-class English accent that was so at odds with his stage persona. As well as working as assistant stage manager, David doubled up as a comedian at the Windmill, going by the name of Taffy – a sly reference to his Welsh roots, and how he was

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commonly addressed by everyone at the theatre – and delivering his amusing spiel in a broad Welsh brogue.

‘Give me two minutes?’ she requested, remembering abruptly what she had to do tonight.

‘No longer than that, I’m afraid. I’ll walk you up to the wings and sort your props out.’ He frowned slightly as he looked at her. ‘Are you sure you’re okay about this? You look awfully pale.’

‘I’m fine, really, Taffy,’ she lied, feeling her heart rate increase. ‘I’ll be out in a jiffy.’

As he closed the door, Greta sighed deeply as she applied the finishing touches to her make-up.

The work at the Windmill was far harder than she’d ever imagined. *Revuedeville* played five times a day and, when the girls weren’t performing, they were rehearsing. Everyone knew that most of the men in the audience didn’t come to see the comedians or the other acts in the variety show but rather to gape at the gorgeous girls as they paraded around the stage in revealing costumes.

Greta grimaced and glanced guiltily at her beautifully tailored cherry-red coat, hanging on the peg by the door. She’d been unable to resist it during a particularly expensive shopping spree at Selfridges, wanting to look her best for Max. The red coat was an all-too-vidid symbol of the money problems that had brought her to where she was now – Greta swallowed hard – about to stand virtually naked in front of hundreds of leering men.

A few days ago, when Mr Van Damm had asked her to perform in the Windmill’s daring *tableaux vivants* – which meant standing stock-still in an elegant pose as the other Windmill Girls walked around her – Greta had balked at

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the thought of stripping off almost completely. A few sequins to cover each nipple and a tiny G-string were all she would have to protect her modesty. But, egged on by Doris, who had been appearing in the *tableaux* for over a year, and the thought of her unpaid rent, she had reluctantly agreed.

She shuddered at the thought of what Max – whom she had discovered was a Baptist from a devout family – would think of her career progression. But she desperately needed the extra cash that appearing in the *tableaux* would bring.

Glancing at the clock on the wall, Greta realised she'd better step on it. The show had already started and she was due to make her grand entrance in less than ten minutes. She opened the drawer of the dressing table and took a hasty sip from the hip flask Doris kept secreted there, hoping that Dutch courage might help to see her through. There was another knock on the door.

'I hate to rush you, but we'd better get going,' Taffy called from behind it.

Taking a last glance at her reflection in the mirror, Greta stepped out into the dim corridor, clutching her robe protectively around her.

Seeing her apprehensive expression, Taffy walked forward and gently took her hands in his. 'I know you must be nervous, Greta, but once you get out there you'll be fine.'

'Really? Do you promise?'

'Yes, I promise. Just imagine that you're an artist's model in a studio in Paris, posing for a beautiful painting. I've heard they strip off at the drop of a hat over there,' he joked, trying to lift Greta's spirits.

'Thank you, Taffy. I don't know what I'd do without

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you.' She smiled gratefully and allowed him to lead her down the corridor towards the wings.

Seven hours and three nerve-wracking performances later, Greta was back in the dressing room. Her *tableau vivant* had gone down a storm and, thanks to Taffy's advice, she'd managed to conquer her fears and stand under the bright lights with her head held high.

'Well, that's the worst over with – the first time's always the hardest,' said Doris with a wink as they sat next to each other, Greta removing her heavy stage make-up whilst Doris retouched hers in readiness for the evening show. 'Now, you just concentrate on looking gorgeous for tonight. What time are you meeting your American bloke?'

'Eight o'clock, at the Dorchester.'

'Ooo, get you, eh? Living the high life and no mistake.' Doris grinned at Greta in the mirror, before standing up and reaching for her feathered headdress. 'Well, I'm off to tread the boards yet again, while you gallivant around the West End like Cinderella with your handsome prince.' She gave Greta's shoulder a squeeze. 'Enjoy yourself, dear.'

'Thanks,' Greta called as Doris made her way out of the dressing room.

Greta knew she'd been lucky to get the evening off. She'd had to promise Mr Van Damm that she'd work extra hours next week. In a state of heightened excitement, she slipped into the new cocktail dress she'd bought with the extra shillings she knew her new-found promotion would earn her and carefully repainted her face before donning her beloved red coat and dashing out of the theatre.

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Max was waiting for her in the lobby of the Dorchester. He took her hands and gazed at her. 'You look so darned beautiful tonight, Greta. I must be the luckiest guy in all of London. Shall we?' He proffered his arm and the two of them walked slowly towards the restaurant.

It wasn't until they'd finished their desserts that he asked her the question she'd been longing to hear drop from his lips.

'You want to marry me?! I . . . oh Max, we've known each other for such a short time! Are you sure this is what you want?'

'*Certain* sure. I know love when I feel it. It'll be a different kind of life for you in Charleston, but it'll be a good one. You'll never want for anything, I promise. Please, Greta, say yes, and I'll spend the rest of my life doing my best to make you happy.'

Greta looked at Max's handsome, sincere face and gave him the answer they both wanted to hear.

'I'm sorry I don't have a ring to give you yet,' he added, tenderly taking her left hand in his and smiling into her eyes, 'but I want you to have my grandmother's engagement ring when we get to the States.'

Greta smiled ecstatically back at him. 'The only thing that matters is that we're going to be together.'

Over coffee, they discussed their plans: Max would sail home in two days' time and Greta would follow him as soon as she'd worked out her notice and packed up her few possessions.

On the dance floor later that night, dizzy with romance and euphoria, Max pulled her closer to him.

'Greta, I understand if this is inappropriate, but as we



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just got engaged and we've got so little time left before I sail, would you come back to my hotel? I swear I won't compromise you, but at least we can talk in private . . .'

Greta could see that he was blushing. From what he'd said to her, she'd guessed that he was probably still a virgin. And, if he was going to be her husband, surely a kiss and a cuddle wouldn't hurt?

Later, at his hotel in St James's, Max took her in his arms and began to embrace her. Greta could feel his growing excitement, and hers, too.

'Can I?' he ventured, his fingers resting tentatively on the three buttons at the nape of her neck.

Greta reasoned with herself that a few hours earlier she'd appeared almost naked in front of men she didn't even know, so what was there to be ashamed about in giving the gift of her innocence and making love to the man she was going to marry?

The following day, as Greta sat in the Windmill's dressing room securing her hair with a couple of kirby grips, she couldn't help feeling anxious. Was she making the right decision in marrying Max?

Appearing on the big screen had been her ambition for as long as Greta could remember, and her mother had done nothing to discourage it. She'd been so obsessed with the cinema herself she'd even named her only daughter after the legendary Garbo. As well as taking Greta to endless matinees at the Odeon in Manchester, her mother had also paid for elocution and acting classes.

But surely, Greta mused, if a career in the movies was her destiny, wouldn't someone have spotted her by now?

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Directors were always popping in to cast their eye over the famous Windmill Girls. During her four months at the theatre, two of her friends had been whisked off to become Rank starlets. It was the reason a lot of the girls, herself included, were here. They all lived in hope that one day there would be a knock on the dressing-room door and a message would be passed to the girl in question that a gentleman from a film studio would 'like a word'.

She shook her head as she stood up and prepared to leave the dressing room. How could she even think about not marrying Max? If she stayed in London, she might still be at the Windmill in two, or three, or four years' time, enduring the degradation and up to her ears in debt. With so many young men killed in the war, she knew she was lucky to have found a man who seemed to love her and, from what he'd said, could also give her a life of security and comfort.

Today was Max's last in London. He was due to sail back to America the following morning. Tonight they were meeting at the Mayfair Hotel for dinner and to finalise plans for Greta's passage. Then they would spend a last night together before he left at dawn to join his ship. Although she would miss him, it would be a relief to end the deceit about what she really did for a living. She hated lying to him constantly, having to make up stories about working late at the office for her demanding boss.

'Greta, darling! The curtain's about to go up!' Taffy broke into her daydream.

'Keep your hair on, I'm coming!' She smiled at him, and followed him along the dimly lit corridor towards the stage.

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‘I was wondering, Greta, if you fancied a drink after the performance?’ he whispered as he stood behind her in the wings. ‘I’ve just spoken with Mr Van Damm, and he’s giving me a regular slot. I feel like celebrating!’

‘Oh, Taffy, that’s wonderful news!’ Greta was genuinely thrilled for him. ‘You deserve it. You really are talented,’ she said, reaching up to give him a hug. At over six feet tall, with unkempt sandy hair and merry green eyes, she’d always thought him attractive and she had an inkling he had a soft spot for her. They’d sometimes go out for a bite to eat together and he would practise new jokes on her for his ‘Taffy’ routine. She felt guilty that she hadn’t yet told him about her engagement.

‘Thank you. So how about that drink?’

‘Sorry, Taffy. I can’t tonight.’

‘Perhaps next week, then?’

‘Yes, next week.’

‘Greta! We’re on!’ called Doris.

‘Sorry, got to go.’

David watched Greta disappear onto the stage and sighed. The two of them had shared some lovely evenings together but just as he’d started to think she might reciprocate his feelings, she’d begun to cancel their meetings. He knew why, as did the whole theatre. She had a rich American officer in tow. And how could a poorly-paid comedian, set on bringing his brand of laughter into a world that had seen so little of it in the past few years, possibly compete with a handsome American in uniform? David shrugged to himself. Once this Yank had gone home . . . well, he would bide his time.

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Max Landers sat down and glanced round uncomfortably at the noisy, all-male audience. He hadn't been keen on coming here, but the guys from his Whitehall office, out to celebrate their last night in London and already half-cut, had insisted the show at the Windmill was something they shouldn't miss before they left town.

Max didn't listen to the comedians or the singers but instead sat counting the minutes until he could slip away and meet his darling girl, his Greta, later tonight. It was going to be tough for her when he sailed tomorrow, and of course he'd have to pave the way with his parents, who wanted him to marry Anna-Mae, his high-school sweetheart back home. They'd have to understand that he had changed. He'd been a boy when he'd left, but now he was a man, and a man in love. Besides, Greta was a real English lady and he was sure her charm would win them over.

Max hardly glanced up as applause rang around the theatre and the curtain fell on the opening act.

'Hey!' His friend Bart thumped him on the arm and he jumped. 'You gotta check the next act out. This is what we came to see.' Bart made the shape of a woman's body with his hands. 'Apparently, it's really hot, man,' he said, grinning.

Max nodded. 'Yeah, Bart. Sure thing.'

The curtain rose once more, to thunderous applause and the sound of shrill wolf whistles. Max looked up at the virtually naked girls on the stage in front of him. *What kind of woman could do that?* he found himself asking. In his opinion, they were little better than whores.

'Hey, aren't they great?' said Bart, his eyes shining with

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lust. 'Look at that broad in the centre. Wow! Hardly a stitch on her, but what a cute smile.'

Max gazed at the girl, who was standing so still she could almost be a statue. She looked a little like . . . He leant forward and did a double take.

'Jesus H. Christ!' He swore under his breath, his heart pounding in his chest as he studied the big blue eyes that gazed out above her audience, the sweet lips and the thick blonde hair piled on top of her head. He could hardly bear to look at the familiar full breasts with their pert nipples barely concealed by a few sequins, or the seductively curved belly that led down to her most intimate part . . .

Without a shadow of a doubt, it was his Greta. He turned and saw Bart gazing hungrily at his fiancée's body.

Max knew he was going to throw up. He stood and hurriedly left the auditorium.

Greta took her third cigarette from the silver case Max had given her and lit it, checking her watch for the umpteenth time. He was over an hour late now. Where on earth was he? The waiter kept giving her suspicious glances as she sat alone at a table in the cocktail bar. She knew exactly what he was thinking.

She finished the cigarette and stubbed it out, glancing at her watch once more. If Max hadn't turned up by midnight, she would go home and wait for him there. He knew where she lived – he'd collected her from her lodging house on a couple of occasions – and she was sure he'd have a good reason for not showing up.

Midnight came and went, and the cocktail bar emptied. She stood up slowly and left, too. When she got home, she

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was disappointed not to see Max waiting for her outside. She let herself in and put the kettle on the small stove.

‘Don’t panic,’ she told herself as she spooned a tiny amount of the precious coffee powder Max had given her into a cup. ‘He’s bound to be here soon.’

Greta sat stiffly on the edge of the bed, jumping at every tap-tap of footsteps that passed the house and willing them to stop in front of it and mount the steps. She didn’t want to change or to take off her make-up in case the bell rang. Finally, at three o’clock, shivering with cold and fear, she lay down on the bed, tears coming to her eyes as she gazed at the damp, peeling wallpaper.

Panic rose inside her: she had no idea how to contact Max. His ship was sailing from Southampton and she knew he had to report to it by ten o’clock this morning. What if he didn’t get in touch with her before then? She didn’t even have his address in America. He’d promised to give her all the details of her passage and onward journey over dinner.

As the stars disappeared with the dawn, so did Greta’s dreams of her new life. She knew now for certain that Max wouldn’t be coming; by now he was surely on his way to Southampton, ready to sail out of her life forever.

Greta arrived at the Windmill the following morning, feeling numb and exhausted.

‘What’s the matter, love? GI sailed off into the sunset and left poor little you behind?’ cooed Doris.

‘Leave me alone!’ cried Greta sharply. ‘Anyway, you know he’s not a GI, he’s an officer.’

‘No need to get nasty, I was only asking.’ Doris stared

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at her, clearly offended. 'Did Max enjoy the show yesterday?' she enquired.

'I . . . What do you mean?'

'Your boyfriend was in the audience last night.' Doris turned away from Greta and concentrated on applying her eyeliner. 'I presumed you'd invited him,' she added pointedly.

Greta swallowed, torn between wanting to conceal the fact that she hadn't known Max was there and making sure that what Doris had said was true.

'Yes, I . . . of course I did. But I never look into the audience. Where was he sitting?'

'Oh, on the left-hand side. I noticed him because just after the curtain went up on us *jolies mesdames* he got up and left.' Doris shrugged. 'There's none so strange as folk, 'specially menfolk.'

Later that night Greta let herself into her room, knowing with absolute certainty she would never hear from Max Landers again.

### 3

Eight weeks later Greta realised that Max had left her a legacy which would mean she was unlikely ever to forget their brief but passionate affair. She was absolutely sure she was pregnant.

Miserably, she entered the stage door of the Windmill. She felt dreadful, having spent the early morning fighting sickness and, in between running to the lavatory, trying to work out what on earth she was going to do. Apart from anything else, a burgeoning stomach would cut short her employment at the Windmill in a matter of weeks.

She hadn't slept at all last night, the fear in the pit of her stomach making it impossible. As she'd tossed and turned, Greta had even considered going back home. But she knew in her heart that could never be an option.

Shuddering at the unbidden memory, she forced herself to concentrate on her current predicament. As she sat in front of the mirror in the dressing room, despair overwhelmed her. It was all very well to leave the Windmill to go into the arms of a wealthy American husband, but what she faced now was, at best, a place in one of the homes that dealt with women in her position. Although the manage-



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ment were kind, the moral rules laid down for the girls at the Windmill were unbreakable. And being unmarried and pregnant was the biggest sin a girl could commit.

Greta knew her life was in ruins. All her plans for a future marriage or a film career were over if she had this baby. Unless . . . she stared at her terrified reflection in the mirror but realised there was nothing else for it. She would have to ask Doris for the address of a 'Mr Fix-it'. Surely it would be fairer on her unborn baby? She had nothing to give it: no home, no money and no father.

The curtain came down at ten forty-five and the girls made their way back wearily to the dressing room.

'Doris,' Greta whispered, 'can I have a quick word?'

'Of course, love.'

Greta waited until the other girls had gone into the dressing room before she spoke. As calmly as she could, she asked for the address she needed.

Doris's beady eyes scrutinised her closely. 'Oh, dearie me. That GI gave you a goodbye present, didn't he?'

Greta hung her head and nodded. Doris sighed and laid a sympathetic hand on Greta's arm. She could be as hard as nails on occasion, but underneath the brashness there beat a heart of gold.

'Of course I'll give you the address, dear. But it'll cost you, you know.'

'How much?'

'Depends. Tell him you're a friend of mine and he might do it cheaper.'

Greta shuddered again. Doris made it sound as if she were going for a perm. 'Is it safe?' she ventured.

'Well, I've had two and I'm still here to tell the tale, but

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I have heard some horror stories,' Doris remarked. 'When he's done it, go home and lie down until the bleeding stops. If it doesn't, get yourself to a hospital sharpish. Come on, I'll write down the address. Pop along and see him tomorrow and he'll fix you up with an appointment. Do you want me come with you?'

'No, I'll be fine. But thanks, Doris,' Greta said gratefully.

'No problem. Us girls have got to look after each other, haven't we? And remember, dear, you're not the first and you won't be the last.'

Early the following morning Greta took a bus up the Edgware Road to Cricklewood. She found the street where Mr Fix-it lived and walked slowly along it. Stopping in front of a gate, she glanced up at a small red-brick house. Taking a deep breath, she opened the gate, walked up the path and knocked on the front door. After a moment, she saw a net curtain twitch, then heard the sound of a bolt being drawn back.

'Yes?'

A diminutive man, who bore an unsettling resemblance to the pictures of Rumpelstiltskin from Greta's childhood storybooks, answered the door.

'Hello. I . . . er . . . Doris sent me.'

'You'd better come in, then.' The man opened the door wider to let Greta through and she entered a small, dingy hall.

'Please wait in there. I'm just finishing with a patient,' he said, indicating a sparsely furnished front room. Greta sat down in a stained armchair and, wrinkling her nose at

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the smell of cat and old carpet, picked up a tatty copy of *Woman* and flicked through the pages. She found herself looking at a knitting pattern for a baby's matinée jacket and abruptly closed the magazine. She sank back into the armchair and stared at the ceiling, her heart pounding against her chest.

A few minutes later, she heard someone moaning softly from a room nearby. She swallowed hard as the man came back into the front room and shut the door.

'Now, miss, what can I do for you?'

It was a silly question, and they both knew it. The moaning was still audible, despite the closed door. Greta's nerves were in shreds.

'Doris says you maybe could sort out my . . . er, problem.'

'Perhaps.' The man stared at her intently, his fingers moving to his head and smoothing the few greasy brown strands that covered his bald patch. 'How far gone are you?'

'About eight weeks, I think.'

'That's good, good.' The man nodded.

'How much will it cost, please?'

'Well, I normally charge three guineas but, seeing as you're a friend of Doris, I'll do it for two.'

Greta dug her nails into the armchair and nodded her acceptance.

'Good. Well, if you care to hang on for half an hour or so, I could fit you in immediately. No time like the present, is there?' he said with a shrug.

'Will I be able to go to work tomorrow?'

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‘That depends on how things go. Some girls bleed a lot, others hardly at all.’

There was a knock at the door and a dour-looking woman poked her head around it. Ignoring Greta, she beckoned the man with her finger.

‘Excuse me, I have to go and check on my patient.’ He stood up and abruptly left the room.

Greta put her head in her hands. *Some girls bleed a lot, others hardly at all . . .*

She stood up, stumbled out of the grim front room and ran along the hall to open the front door. She slid back the rusty bolt, turned the latch and opened it.

‘Miss, miss! Where are you goi—’

Greta slammed the door behind her and fled away up the street, tears blurring her vision.

That night, after the show, Doris sidled up to her.

‘Did you see him?’

Greta nodded.

‘When are you . . . you know?’

‘I . . . some time next week.’

Doris patted her on the shoulder. ‘You’ll be fine, dear, honest you will.’

Greta sat without moving until the other girls had left the dressing room. Once the room was empty, she laid her head on the table and wept. The sound of the unseen woman she’d heard moaning had haunted her since she’d left the miserable house. And even though she knew she was sentencing herself to dreadful uncertainty, she knew she couldn’t go through with an abortion.

Greta didn’t hear the soft tap-tap on the dressing-room

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door and jumped violently when a hand was laid on her shoulder.

‘Hey! Steady on, it’s only me, Taffy. I didn’t mean to startle you. I was just checking to see that you’d all left. What’s wrong, Greta?’

She looked up at Taffy’s kind face watching her sympathetically in the mirror and searched for something to wipe her running nose. She was touched by his concern, especially since she knew she’d hardly given him a backward glance since she’d met Max. A spotlessly clean checked handkerchief was passed to her.

‘There you go. Would you like me to leave?’ He hovered behind her.

‘Yes, er, no . . . oh, Taffy . . .’ she sobbed miserably. ‘I’m in such trouble!’

‘Then why don’t you tell me about it? It’ll make you feel better, whatever it is.’

Greta turned to face him, shaking her head. ‘I don’t deserve sympathy,’ she whimpered.

‘Now you’re being silly. Come here and let me give you a hug.’ His strong arms closed around Greta’s shoulders, and he held her until her sobs were little more than hiccups. Then he began to wipe away her tear-streaked make-up. ‘We are in a state, aren’t we? Well, as my old nanny used to say, nothing’s ever as bad as it seems.’

Greta pulled away from him, suddenly uncomfortable. ‘I’m sorry about this, Taffy. I’ll be fine now, really.’

He looked at her, unconvinced. ‘Have you eaten? You could pour out your sorrows over a nice plate of pie and mash. I find it always helps with affairs of the heart. Which I presume is where your problem lies.’

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‘Try a little further down,’ mumbled Greta, then regretted it immediately.

He did his best not to let his true emotions register on his face. ‘I see. And that Yank’s upped and left you, has he?’

‘Yes, but—’ She looked at him in astonishment. ‘How did you know about him?’

‘Greta, you work in a theatre. Everyone from the doorkeeper to the manager knows everyone else’s business. A nun on a vow of silence couldn’t keep a secret in this place.’

‘I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about him. I should have, but—’

‘What’s past is past. Now, I’m going to wait outside while you change and then I’m going to take you for some supper.’

‘But, Taffy, I—’

‘Yes?’

Greta offered him a weak smile. ‘Thank you for being so kind.’

‘That’s what friends are for, isn’t it?’

He took her to their usual café across the road from the theatre. Greta found she was starving and devoured her pie and mash as she recounted her plight to him.

‘So, I got the address from Doris and I went to see him this morning. But, Taffy, you have no idea what it was like there. This Mr Fix-it . . . he had dirty fingernails. I can’t . . . I can’t—’

‘I understand,’ he soothed. ‘And your American doesn’t know you’re pregnant?’

‘No. He shipped out the morning after he went to the Windmill and saw me starkers. I don’t have an address for

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him in America and, even if I did, after seeing me on stage he's hardly likely to take me back, is he? He comes from a very traditional family.'

'Do you know whereabouts he lives in the States?'

'Yes, in a town called Charleston. It's somewhere in the South, apparently. Oh, Taffy, I was so excited about seeing the bright lights of New York.'

'Greta, if Max lived where you say, I doubt you'd ever have seen New York. It's hundreds of miles away from Charleston, nearly as far as London is from Italy. America's a vast country.'

'I know, but all the Americans I've met seem to be so forward-thinking and not at all stuffy like us Brits. I think it would have suited me.'

He gazed at her, his emotions a conflicting mixture of irritation and sympathy at her naivety. 'Well, if it makes you feel better, dear girl, the town you were about to move to is slap bang in the centre of what is known as the Bible Belt. Its inhabitants adhere so rigidly to the Scriptures that they make the morals of even our most devout English souls seem relaxed.'

'Max did say he was a Baptist,' Greta mused.

'There you are, then. I know it's no consolation, but honestly Greta, Charleston is about as far from the atmosphere of New York as my family home in the wilds of the Welsh mountains is from London. You'd have been a fish out of water there, especially after the life you've lived here. Personally, I think you've had a lucky escape.'

'Perhaps.' Greta understood that he was trying to comfort her, but everyone knew America was the New World, the land of opportunity, whichever part of it you lived in.

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‘But if you say they have such strict morals, then why did Max . . . well, you know . . .?’ Greta blushed.

‘Maybe he thought he could bend the rules if you were engaged to be married,’ he suggested lamely.

‘I thought Max loved me, really. If he hadn’t proposed, then I’d never, ever have—’

Greta’s voice dried up in shame and embarrassment. He reached for her hand and squeezed it. ‘I know you wouldn’t,’ he said gently.

‘I’m not like Doris, really. Max . . . he was the first.’ Tears appeared again in Greta’s eyes. ‘Why does my life always seem to go wrong?’

‘Does it, Greta? Do you want to talk about it?’

‘No,’ she answered quickly. ‘I’m just being self-indulgent, feeling sorry for myself because I’ve made such an awful mistake.’

As he watched Greta force her features into a smile, Taffy wondered what had led her – a girl who was obviously educated and whose accent told him she was well bred – to the Windmill. Greta was a cut above the rest of the girls, which, if he was frank, was the reason he’d been drawn to her. However, now was obviously not the moment to ask, so he changed the subject.

‘Do you want the baby, Greta?’

‘To be honest, I don’t know, Taffy. I’m confused and frightened. And ashamed. I really believed Max loved me. Why did I ever . . .?’ Her voice trailed off miserably. ‘When I was in that dreadful house waiting to see Doris’s Mr Fix-it I didn’t run away just because I was frightened of the procedure. I kept thinking of this little thing inside me. Then, on my way home, I passed two or three mothers



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wheeling their babies in prams. And it made me realise that, however tiny, it's alive, isn't it?'

'Yes, Greta, it is.'

'Then can I really commit murder for a mistake I've made? Deny the baby its right to life? I'm not a religious person, but I don't think I'd ever forgive myself for killing it. On the other hand, what future can there be for either of us if I bring it into the world? No man will ever look at me again. A Windmill Girl in the club at the age of eighteen? Hardly a good track record, is it?'

'Well, what I suggest you do is sleep on it. The most important thing is that you're not alone. And . . .' He voiced the thought that had been slowly brewing as he listened to her story of woe. 'I may well be in a position to sort something out, put a roof over your head if you do decide to go ahead with the pregnancy. This Mr Fix-it really doesn't sound too good, does he? You might end up killing both of you, and we wouldn't want that, would we?'

'No, but I'm still not convinced I have any choice.'

'Believe me, Greta, there is always a choice. What about going to see Mr Van Damm? I'm sure he's had to deal with this kind of thing before.'

'Oh, no! I couldn't do that! I know he's kind, but Mr Van Damm expects his girls to be whiter than white. He's terribly protective of the Windmill's image. I'd be out on my ear tomorrow.'

'Steady on, it was only a thought,' he replied, getting up to pay the bill. 'Now, I'm going to put you in a taxi. Go home and get some rest. You look exhausted, Greta.'

'No, really Taffy, I can take the bus.'

'I insist.'

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Hailing a taxi outside the café, he pressed some coins into her small hand and put a finger to her lips as she began to protest again. ‘Please, I’ll worry if you don’t. Pleasant dreams, Greta, and don’t worry, I’m here now.’

‘Thank you again for being so kind, Taffy.’

As David waved after the taxi, he asked himself why he was trying to help Greta, but the answer was simple. No matter what she’d done, he’d known from the moment he’d set eyes on her that he loved her.

## 4

The next morning the two of them were once again sitting in the café across the road from the Windmill. Greta had slipped out of the morning's rehearsal to meet David, claiming she was feeling faint and needed some fresh air, which wasn't far from the truth.

'You look awfully pale,' he said. 'Are you all right?'

Greta took a big gulp of her watery tea and added another lump of sugar. 'I'm tired, that's all.'

'I'm not surprised. Here, have half of my sandwich.'

'No, thanks.' Just the smell of it made her feel nauseous. 'I'll eat something later.'

'Mind you do. Well then?' He looked at her expectantly.

'I've decided I can't go through with the . . . procedure, so that leaves me no choice. I'm going to have the baby and suffer the consequences.'

'Right.' David nodded slowly. 'Well, now your mind's made up, I'm going to tell you how I may be able to help. What you need is a roof over your head and a bit of peace and privacy until the baby arrives. Yes?'

'Yes, but . . .'

'Hush, and listen to what I have to say. I have the use of

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a cottage in Monmouthshire, on the Welsh borders. I was thinking you could go and stay there for a while. Have you ever been to the area before?’

‘No, I haven’t.’

‘Well, then you won’t know what a special place it is.’ He smiled. ‘The cottage is on a big estate called Marchmont. It’s near the Black Mountains, in a beautiful valley not too far from the town of Abergavenny.’

‘What a funny name.’ Greta managed a half-hearted smile.

‘I suppose you get used to the language when you’re brought up there. Anyway, with me working in London, I don’t need the cottage at the moment. My mother lives on the estate, too. I telephoned her last night and she’s prepared to keep an eye on you. A lot of the land is farmed, so there’s enough fresh produce to feed you during the coming winter. The cottage is small, but clean and cosy. It would mean you could leave the Windmill, have the baby and if you wanted to, come back to London without anyone even knowing. Well, there it is. What do you think?’

‘It sounds lovely, but—’

‘Greta, all I can do is offer you an alternative,’ he said, seeing the doubt and fear in her eyes. ‘And yes, it’s very different from London. There are no bright lights, there’s nothing to do in the evenings and you may be lonely. But at least you’ll be safe and warm.’

‘This – er – estate is where you were brought up, is it?’

‘Yes, although I was at boarding school from the age of eleven and, after that, university. Then the war came and I was away with my regiment, so I haven’t been back as often as I’d have liked. But Greta, you’ve never seen any-

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thing more lovely than a sunset over Marchmont. We have over five hundred acres, the house is surrounded by woodland that's home to endless plant and bird life, and a salmon river runs right through it. It really is a very beautiful place.'

A glimmer of hope for her hitherto devastated future began to glow in Greta's mind.

'You say your mother has said she won't mind if I stay? Does she . . . does she know about the baby?'

'Yes, she does, but don't worry, Greta. My mother is unshockable and very broad-minded. And, to be honest, I think she'd enjoy the company. The main house on the estate was used as a convalescent home in the war and, since all the staff and patients left, she misses the activity.'

'It really is very kind of you, Taffy, but I wouldn't want to impose. I have very little money to pay rent. In fact, none at all.'

'You don't have to pay anything. You'd be there as my guest,' he confirmed. 'As I said, the cottage is empty and it's yours if you want it.'

'You really are very generous. If I did take you up on your offer,' she said slowly, knowing that whatever this cottage was like, it had to be preferable to an unmarried mothers' home, 'how soon could I go?'

'As soon as you would like to.'

Two days later Greta went to tell Mr Van Damm that she was leaving the Windmill. When he asked her why, despite strongly suspecting that he already knew the reason, Greta merely said that her mother was unwell and she had to return home to care for her. She came out of the office

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apprehensive, but feeling better that she'd made a decision. Later that day she informed her landlady that she'd be vacating her room at the end of the week, and spent her last few days at the theatre trying not to worry about the future. All the girls signed a card for her and Doris hugged her goodbye, at the same time discreetly handing her an envelope containing a tiny pair of bootees.

It took Greta no time at all to pack her few belongings into two small suitcases. She paid her landlady and said goodbye to the room that had been her home for the past six months.

David accompanied her to Paddington Station on a foggy December morning to see her off on the long journey to Abergavenny.

'Oh, Taffy, I do wish you were coming with me,' she said, leaning out of the window as he stood on the platform.

'You'll be as safe as houses, Greta. Trust me. I wouldn't do wrong by you, now would I?'

'Your mother will be there to pick me up from the station?' Greta asked anxiously for the third time.

'Yes, she'll be there. And one word of warning – try and remember to refer to me as David. She won't be very impressed with my Windmill nickname, I can assure you,' he said with a chuckle. 'And I'll come and visit as soon as I can, promise. Now, here's a little something for you.' He pressed an envelope into her hand as the guard blew his whistle. 'Goodbye, sweetheart. Safe journey and take care of the both of you.'

Kissing her on both cheeks, David thought Greta resem-

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bled a ten-year-old evacuee being billeted out to an unknown location.

Greta waved until he was a tiny speck on the platform, then made her way to her carriage and sat down amongst a group of demobbed soldiers. They were smoking and talking excitedly about friends and relatives they hadn't seen for months. The contrast between them and her was almost unbearably poignant – they were returning to their loved ones and she was on a journey into the unknown. She opened the envelope David had put into her hand. It contained some money and a note telling her it was for emergencies.

As she watched London's familiar buildings give way to undulating fields, Greta's fear began to grow. She comforted herself with the thought that if David's mother turned out to be a madwoman and the cottage no more than a chicken shed, she now had enough money to return to London and rethink her plans. As the train travelled west, stopping at numerous stations, the soldiers gradually disembarked to be greeted on the platforms by joyful parents, wives and girlfriends. There were only a handful of passengers left by the time she'd changed trains at Newport, then, eventually, Greta was alone in the carriage. She began to relax slightly as she stared out of the window at the unfamiliar Welsh landscape. As the sun began to set, she became aware of a subtle change in the scenery; it was wilder and more dramatic than anything she'd seen before in England. Snow-capped mountains appeared on the darkening horizon as the train chugged nearer to Abergavenny.

It was past five o'clock and already pitch black when the train finally drew in to her destination. Greta pulled her

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suitcases from the rack above her head, straightened her hat and stepped out onto the platform. A chill wind was blowing and she pulled her coat closer to shield her body. She walked uncertainly towards the exit, glancing around for anyone who might be expecting her. She sat on a bench outside the tiny station as her fellow passengers greeted those there to meet them and subsequently departed into the night.

Ten minutes later, the narrow forecourt was almost deserted. After shivering on the bench for a few more minutes, Greta stood up and walked back into the relative warmth of the station itself. The clerk was still working behind the window, and she tapped on it.

‘Excuse me, sir.’

‘Yes, *fach?*’

‘Can you tell me what time the next connecting train to London leaves?’

The clerk shook his head. ‘No more trains tonight. The next one’s tomorrow morning.’

‘Oh.’ Greta bit her lip, feeling tears pricking the back of her eyes.

‘I’m sorry, miss. Have you anywhere to stay tonight?’

‘Well, someone’s meant to be meeting me to take me to a place called Marchmont.’

The clerk rubbed his brow. ‘Look you, that’s a good few miles from here. Not walking distance. And Tom the Taxi is over in Monmouth tonight with his missus.’

‘Oh dear.’

‘Don’t panic yet, see. I’ll be here for another half-hour or so,’ the clerk said kindly.

Greta nodded and retraced her steps to the bench. ‘Oh



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goodness,' she sighed and breathed on her hands, trying to stop them going numb. Then she heard the sound of a car approaching. A loud horn assaulted her ears and bright lights dazzled her eyes. Once the noisy engine of the vehicle in front of her had died into silence, a female voice called out, 'Damn! Damn! Hello there! Are you Greta Simpson?'

Greta tried to make out the figure sitting in the driving seat of the open-topped car. The driver's eyes were shielded behind huge leather goggles.

'Yes. Are you Taff— David Marchmont's mother?'

'I am. Jump in then, quick smart. Sorry I'm late. The blasted car got a puncture and I had to change the tyre in the dark.'

'Er, right.' Greta stood, picked up her suitcases and hauled them across to the car.

'Throw those in the back, dear, put these on and grab that travel rug. It can be a bit breezy if the old girl gets above twenty miles per hour.'

Greta took the proffered goggles and blanket. After a few false starts the engine burst into life and the driver reversed rapidly out of the station forecourt, narrowly missing a lamp post.

'I thought you weren't coming,' Greta ventured as the car hit the open road and sped down it at frightening speed.

'Don't talk, dear girl. Can't hear a word above this racket!' shouted the driver.

Greta spent the following half-hour with her eyes tightly shut and her hands balled into fists, the knuckles white with tension. At last the car slowed, then it stopped

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abruptly, almost throwing Greta over the small windscreen and onto the bonnet.

‘Do be a darling and open those gates, will you?’

Greta stepped shakily out of the car. She walked in front of the headlights and pushed open two enormous wrought-iron gates. On the wall to one side of them there was an ornate bronze plaque with the word ‘MARCHMONT’ engraved upon it. The car drove through and Greta shut the gates behind them.

‘Buck up, dear. Nearly there now,’ the driver shouted over the roar of the engine.

Greta scurried back into the car and they set off along the rutted drive.

‘Here we go. This is Lark Cottage.’ The car shuddered to a halt and the driver leapt out, grabbing Greta’s cases from the back seat. ‘Home sweet home.’

As Greta stepped down, she watched the woman making her way through a glade of moonlit trees. Following nervously behind her, she sighed in relief as a small cottage came into view. Oil lamps illuminated the interior, giving out a soft yellow glow. The woman opened the front door and they went in.

‘So.’ The woman peeled off her goggles and turned to face Greta. ‘This is it. Will it suffice, do you think?’

It was the first opportunity Greta had had to study her companion, and she was immediately struck by the woman’s resemblance to her son. She was very tall and long-limbed, with piercing green eyes and a shock of wind-swept greying hair cut in a short, sensible style. Her outfit of corduroy breeches, knee-length leather boots and a tailored tweed jacket was both mannish and strangely elegant.

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Greta glanced around the cosy interior of the cottage, looking gratefully at the fire, with its burning embers.

‘Yes. It’s lovely.’

‘Good. Bit basic, I’m afraid. No electricity in here yet. We were just about to install it when war broke out. The privy’s outside and there’s a tin bath in the kitchen for high days and holidays, but it takes so damn long to fill it’s easier to use the sink.’

The woman strode towards the fire, picked up a poker, stirred the embers and threw on three logs from the basket beside the fireplace. ‘There. I lit it before I came to fetch you. The oil for the lamps is in a canister in the privy, the logs are in the shed out back, and I’ve put some milk, fresh bread and cheese in the pantry for your supper. I’m sure you’re parched. Put the kettle on the range and it’ll boil in no time. And don’t forget to stoke it with wood every morning. It’s a hungry beast, if I remember rightly. Now, got to be off, I’m afraid. We’ve lost a ewe, you see. Gone over a gulley, we suspect. David said you’re a pretty self-sufficient kind of gal, but I’ll drop in on you tomorrow when you’ve got your bearings. I’m Laura-Jane Marchmont, by the way’ – she thrust out her hand to Greta – ‘but everyone calls me LJ. You should too. Goodnight.’

The door slammed and she was gone.

Greta shook her head in confusion, sighed and then sank into the threadbare but comfortable armchair in front of the fire. She was hungry and desperate for a cup of tea, but first she needed to sit down for a few minutes and recover from the ordeal of her day.

She stared into the fire, pondering on the woman who had just left. Whatever she had expected Taffy’s mother to

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be, it was not Laura-Jane Marchmont. In truth, she'd imagined an unsophisticated country widow with plump, ruddy cheeks and child-bearing hips. She glanced round her new home and began to take full note of her surroundings. The sitting room was snug, with a charming beamed ceiling and a large inglenook fireplace taking up an entire wall. The furnishings were minimal: just the armchair, an occasional table and a crooked shelf stacked untidily with books. She pushed open a latched door and walked down two stone steps into the small kitchen. There was a sink, a Welsh dresser filled with mismatched crockery, a scrubbed pine table with two chairs and a pantry, in which she discovered a loaf of fresh bread, a slab of cheese, butter, some tins of soup and half a dozen apples. She opened the back door and found the icebox masquerading as a lavatory to her left.

A creaking staircase led off from the kitchen to a door at the top, beyond which was the bedroom. The low-ceilinged room was almost entirely taken up by a sturdy wrought-iron bed covered in a cheerful patchwork quilt. An oil lamp cast a warming, shadowy glow. Greta looked longingly at the bed but knew that, for the baby's sake as much as her own, she needed to eat before she slept.

After a supper of bread, soup and cheese in front of the fire, she yawned. She washed as best she could in the kitchen sink, realising she'd have to boil the kettle in future if she wanted warm water. Then, shivering, she picked up her suitcases and finally made her way up the staircase.

Pulling her nightdress over her head, and adding a jumper on top of that, she pulled back the quilt and sank gratefully into the comfortable bed. She closed her eyes and

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waited for sleep to wash over her. The silence, after her noisy London room, was deafening. Eventually, exhaustion overtook her and she fell into a dreamless slumber.