Blackout

by Shrubbery_Girl

Summary

One night changes everything for a former socialite in a country at war.

A sequelesque story centering on Caroline Bingley.

Notes

If you happen to know this story from DWG, this is still the same with only the occasional typo cleared up.
Chapter 1

A smoky London pub, filled with soldiers, as usual. Vera Lynn crooning to her love in the background, also as usual. The chatter around her became unbearable, the ale made her sick. She could feel the headache coming. Her bed seemed ever so tempting, but she had promised her brother Charles to stay. His arguments, after all, were good ones; that his leave was preciously short; that they had not met in such a long time; that his wife Jenny was also looking forward to seeing her again.

‘So, you are still in London, Caroline?’

It was Betty, of course, Jenny's sister. Of course Jenny could not go up to London alone; Betty had to tag along to protect her sister from the evils of the big city. Caro scolded herself for being unfair; Betty worked hard and deserved a break as much as anyone. She suspected that Betty had half-hoped that her husband, too, would be able to come, but Darcy, or so it seemed, was still holed up in Buckinghamshire. At least, that was what Caro had gathered from what he had said the last time they had met.

‘Yes, I am still working here,’ she said, trying to make it sound more interesting than it was.

‘I've always longed to work in the city,’ Betty said dreamily. ‘But then father fell ill, and then the war broke out -’

‘It is nothing like you think,’ Caro said tiredly. ‘I type, I make coffee, I type some more …’

‘But you are helping,’ Betty said. ‘You're part of it all. You're wearing the uniform.’

‘Ugly, isn't it?’ Caro said and picked at the lapels. ‘But we have to.’

‘Oh, I didn't mean that,’ Betty said with her annoying frankness. ‘Golly, Caroline, when the war broke out, I thought you'd be among the first to leave town. I’ve underestimated you, Caro.’

Caro smiled with thin lips.

‘Another round?’ Rick asked.

It was he of course who had suggested this place. It was not that he could not afford the Savoy, far from it, as she knew, but this dingy hell-hole was just the sort of place he frequented with a passion.

‘Not for me,’ she said. ‘Excuse me, but I am going home. Goodnight, Rick. Charles, I will see you tomorrow before you leave. Jenny, Betty – take care of yourselves.’

‘You too, Caro,’ Betty said.

Caro quickly hugged Charles; then Jenny kissed her on both cheeks, as usual, and said something about her having to eat more.

‘I'll see you home,’ Rick said as she had already turned to leave. ‘It's late.’

‘Really, there is no need -’ she began, but he had already helped her into her coat and was putting on his.

The streets were dark and wet, but Rick carefully steered her around the puddles of water and the
sandbags.

‘Are you all alone in that grand house of yours?’ Rick asked.

‘My charwoman comes thrice a week,’ she said. ‘But mother is now with Louisa in Staffordshire.’

‘Are you not afraid?’ he asked.

‘I sleep in the cellar,’ she said. ‘I am often too tired to hear the siren, but the all-clear always wakes me.’

He stopped in the middle of the street.

‘You must go to a shelter the next time,’ he said.

‘Really, Rick -’ she began, but he cut her short.

‘Please, Caroline, promise you will go to a shelter,’ he said earnestly. ‘You cannot know how often, when I heard that London was under attack again, I was thinking of you – but if I know you do not go to the shelters – Caroline, I have enough to worry about when I am in – when I am somewhere else -’

‘Rick, really, I can decide for myself -’

‘Of course, of course you can,’ he said hastily. He moved his hand, as if he intended to do something, but then refrained from doing whatever it was.

He had been in a funny mood all evening, now that she thought about it. Usually, when they met in one of his rat-holes, he quipped his usual flat jokes, flirted with Betty till she giggled and pretended to be trying to steal a kiss from Jenny, but this night, he had been quite sombre. Just like me, she thought. I have not been in the best of spirits either. None of us is. I do not know how much longer I can cope with all of this.

Will you come in for a coffee?’ she asked. She wanted to go to sleep, but she could not part from him like this, not when he was in such a strange mood and had not yet told her why.

The electricity was off again, but she had a couple of candles ready on the mantelpiece and she was able to light the drawing room tolerably well. The AGA was lit quickly, too, and soon, she had set the water for the coffee to boil.

‘It is strange to see you such,’ Rick said when she entered the drawing room again, still in her apron.

She looked down and hastily took it off.

‘When I met you, I never thought you knew how to put one on,’ Rick continued, ‘and like Betty, I thought you would leave town at once.’

‘I could never leave London,’ she replied. It came out much fiercer than she had intended, but she realised with a jolt that it was the truth. ‘If everybody left London, we could just as well directly surrender her.’

The candles with their orange light threw his face into an odd relief. The candlelight was almost as bright as the electric would have been, and yet, they were in another world; one with strange shadows on the walls and, the blinds tightly shut, the outside world invisible.
‘I have to leave again,’ Rick suddenly said.

‘But the coffee -’ she said, most stupidly. Then she understood.

‘When?’ she whispered.

‘Tomorrow,’ he said, studying his white knuckles. ‘I found out today. They cannot tell me when I'll be back. They cannot even tell me if -’

And suddenly, she knew. She had never believed it would, but her heart stopped for a second and then beat a frantic tattoo against her ribs. She felt as if the air had been knocked out of her.

‘I had to see you,’ he said. ‘I could not leave without -’

She stood up, not even aware that he was doing the same. His lips were trembling just as much as hers; her heart was beating just as fast as his.

They never drank the coffee.

When she woke up he was shaving. She supposed it must be still dark outside; the shutters were still closed so she could not tell.

‘I borrowed this,’ he said and pointed at her razor, her soap and the bowl of water on her dressing table.

‘Will they let you enter when you smell of my grandmother's lavender soap?’ she asked and tried to smile.

It was useless.

He reached for his uniform shirt and started buttoning it.

‘I will be back,’ he said.

‘You said you didn't know -’ she began, but she could not finish the sentence.

‘I will be back,’ he repeated and she could see the tears in his eyes glistening.

‘I love you,’ she said.

He stopped short, one of his braces still hanging loose from his waist. Looking at her as if he had not seen her before, he took a step towards the bed and roughly pulled off his signet ring. Before she could say anything, he had handed it to her with an unreadable expression in his face.

‘Golly, Rick -’

‘I'll bring you a real one when I come back,’ he said, almost slurring the words. ‘Will you wear this in the meantime?’

She nodded, not able to speak, and allowed him to put the ring on her forefinger, the only one it would fit.

‘I have to report back for duty,’ he said hoarsely. He pulled up the second brace and finished dressing. She watched him closely, not saying a word. When he had laced up his boots, he came back to the bed. He sat down next to her, took her face in both his hands and kissed her hard on the
lips. Far too soon, he stood up again and hastily brushed away a tear.

‘I will wait for you,’ she said and again attempted a smile.
Some weeks later, the doorbell rang late in the evening. Her heart beating frantically, her mind shouting for Rick, Caro raced upstairs, not caring that she was already wearing her pyjamas. She opened the door and found Betty, sobbing and wet from the sudden rain.

‘You are the only one I know who is in London at the moment,’ Betty said instead of a greeting.

‘Come in,’ Caro said. She tried to conceal her disappointment and closed the door behind Betty.

Ten minutes later, Betty was wearing Caro's second-best pyjamas and her spare dressing gown. They were sitting in front of the kitchen fire. Milk was heating up on the AGA.

‘Is Jenny not with you?’ Caro asked.

‘She didn't want to make the journey,’ Betty said. ‘She was afraid something would happen. And it was so warm the last couple of days -’

Caro did a mental calculation. Jenny would be almost eight months along by now. It was little wonder she did not want to brave London and its dangers now, nor the discomfort of the railways. The warmer season, however, also meant more work on the farm, which made Betty's journey all the more remarkable.

‘I was supposed to meet David,’ Betty now said. ‘I came up all the way from Cornwall just to see him and now -’

Caro frowned. It was not like Darcy to miss a chance of seeing Betty. The man was ridiculously fond of his wife - something she had not understood until that night two months ago.

‘Has - something - happened to him?’ Caro asked.

She was not even sure where exactly Darcy was. Something he had said once had lead her to believe that he was somewhere in Buckinghamshire, but where exactly, or what he was doing there, she had never learnt. It was all hushed-up, or so Jenny had said once, but Charles believed that, whatever it was, it was of vital importance to everyone.

‘No,’ Betty said. ‘I don't think so. He sent a cable to the hotel saying he wouldn't be able to make it.’

‘What could be more important than seeing you?’ Caro said. It was all she could do not to snap it. She would drop everything in an instant if it meant to see Rick if only for a couple of hours. Betty nervously gripped her mug tighter and said nothing for a while.

‘I'm not supposed to know,’ she finally said, very slowly, weighing every word. ‘And I can't tell you. David told me - very little, but he told me - and I had to promise never to tell anyone.’

Caro nodded. Tears welled up in her eyes. Rick had not had the time to tell her anything secret or to make her promise never to reveal his secrets. She wondered, again, if he had known where he was sent that morning, and why, if he had, he had not told her. She did not even know when to fear for him, what parts of the broadcasts to follow with particular attention, so she worried about him all the time. Would anyone even tell her if something - but the thought was so terrible she forbade herself to
'I can tell you though that what he's doing is of the utmost importance,' Betty said. ‘And if David thought he couldn't possibly leave, then he probably couldn't. Apparently he was already on his way when he - when he realised he had to return, for the cable was sent from the Milton Keynes railway station.’

She pressed her hand to her mouth in horror.

‘Please forget that,’ she said. ‘You aren't supposed to know -’

‘I heard nothing,’ Caro assured her. ‘And I'm not going to ask.’

‘You're a sport, Caro,’ Betty said and the fraction of a smile played around her lips. She was serious again instantly.

‘I know he didn't just stand me up,’ she said. ‘I know he had good reason. It's only -’

She broke off again for a moment, contemplating the cocoa in her mug. Caro hoped she would drink it up; she could not bear seeing the rations go to waste.

‘Golly, Caro, I know we aren't the best of friends,’ she said. ‘I know you must feel weird with me telling you all this, after all that was between you and David -’

Caro silently willed her to shut up. She knew now she had never been in love with Darcy, and the whole episode was just embarrassing right now, especially considering what might have been instead. Somehow, Betty understood her without words and did not dwell on the subject.

‘I miss him so terribly,’ she said. ‘I've only seen him twice in the past seven months, and only for a couple of hours -’

She swallowed hard.

‘I want a child,’ she said. ‘I know it's so silly of me, and to want a child now - but I've wanted one ever since we got married. But how can I have a child when I never see him?’

‘You've seen him twice this past year,’ Caro pointed out. The very same moment, she knew how unfair it was, but she could not help herself saying it. It was hard to keep the bitterness out of her voice. ‘Once, apparently, can be quite enough.’

Betty stared at her in disbelief and shock for a moment.

‘Caro, is that Rick's ring?’ she finally asked.

Caro did not feel up to an answer and Betty did not seem to expect one. They sat in silence for a long time, sipping their cocoa, not able to relish its unusual sweetness. Caro briefly thought what a waste it was to have used up half of the sugar rations if they could not even enjoy them, but drove the thought from her mind. She had never been a stingy hostess and she would not start to be one now.

‘How I hate this war!’ Betty suddenly exclaimed. ‘I hate what it's doing to us!’

She set her mug down with almost-shattering force and covered her face with her hands.

‘I hate David for standing me up like this,’ she cried. ‘What do I care for all his secret codes if I can't see him? What do I care for some rotten old cipher -’
‘Betty,’ Caro said firmly. ‘You mustn't tell me this.’

Betty looked up; her face was definitely blotchy now. She put her hand to her mouth.

‘What have I done?’ she said. ‘I promised David I wouldn't –’

‘Shh,’ Caro said. ‘I didn't hear a thing.’

She put an arm around Betty’s shoulders. It was an awkward business. They had never been very close and Caro definitely was not the type who initiated physical contact, but Betty seemed to be grateful for a shoulder to lean on.

‘I don't really hate David,’ she sobbed into Caro’s pyjama.

‘I know,’ Caro said. ‘I don't really hate Rick either.’

‘Oh, Caro,’ Betty said. ‘What are you going to do now?’

‘I have no idea,’ Caro said and was thankful for the shoulder to cry on.

Betty must have told Darcy at least some of what she had learnt. Caro normally could not stand meddling, at least where her own affairs were concerned, but this time it was different. Some two weeks after Betty’s visit, an envelope had been delivered to her at work. There was no sender given, the paper was plain, without marks, and the handwritten message short and cryptic.

_Someone asked me to rely this to you. Do not enquire. Do not answer. D._

The words enclosed turned out to be a mere slip of paper, ripped off from a larger sheet, with six typed words on it: “Tho it were ten thousand mile.”

She knew instinctively that it could only have been Rick who had sent it, and for that, she was glad, for it meant that he was still alive. As to what he wanted to say by it, however, she was lost. She could only hope it was not some Etonian way of soundly dismissing a person. She looked up ‘tho,’ ‘thousand’ and ‘mile’ in the dictionary, but the entries were not helpful. Shakespeare was her best bet. She was not successful, but at least spending the evenings with his collected works meant that she had no time to worry about Rick, or about what was to become of her. Eight days after the message had reached her, she was ready to start the _Lyrical Ballads_ when her door-bell interrupted her half-way into the “Ancyent Marinere.” It was the last person she had expected.

‘Darcy!’

He looked terrible. He probably had not eaten properly in weeks and his clothes were rumpled and partly stained. She vaguely remembered how, in another life, he had been so fussy about them and refused to wear anything that was not ironed. Charles had told her just how much care Darcy took for a smooth shave. Now, he seemed to have forgotten to shave half of his face altogether.

‘Can I come in?’ he asked hurriedly. ‘I don't have much time but I won't discuss this out here.’

‘Why aren't you in Cornwall?’ she asked as she closed the door behind him. ‘Betty is waiting for you.’

‘My train leaves in half an hour,’ he said, ‘but I had to see you before.’

‘What about?’ she asked.
‘Did you get the message?’

‘Yes, what -’

‘You must tell no one,’ he said and gripped her wrist. ‘No one, do you understand me? I had to call in several favours to get a message through to him, but it must not be known -’

She realised just how valuable these six words were.

‘Thank you, Darcy,’ she said. ‘Really, thank you -’

‘It’s nothing,’ he said. ‘Only remember, tell no one. Nothing about this. Better not tell them you saw me, either.’

‘I won’t,’ she said, ‘but what -’

‘Right,’ Darcy said. ‘I must hurry. Betty's been waiting for me all day.’

For a split second, Caro could see the old Darcy again, not the tired man, but Betty's husband, Nina's brother, Charles' and her friend.

‘Then go!’ she urged him. ‘She loves you – don't let her wait.’

‘Take care, Caroline,’ he said. ‘He said he would be back and so he will.’

He kissed her lightly on the cheek, a gesture that was so foreign to both of them that Caro almost laughed. He was already half out of the door when she remembered.

‘What did he mean though?’ she cried out.

‘Robbie Burns!’ Darcy shouted and the door fell shut.

It took her another two days to find A Red, Red Rose.

The next weeks passed in a blur. That Rick's six words had been a love letter, an actual love letter, filled her with inexplicable joy. When she thought about the volume of poetry, always in her handbag, the scrap of paper with the precious six words on it marking the page, she had to smile, and she could hardly keep herself from telling everybody she met, ‘he loves me, too.’ Then, however, she would see someone in a uniform like his, or she would come across a heap of sandbags in the street, or the sirens would sound, and she would remember that the war was still raging and that Rick was still out there, risking his life, and there was nothing she could do to protect him.

She tried going to church, but it did not help. The priest's words were comforting, but the crying women around her were something she could not bear. She liked the peace in the cold, candle-lit building but she was not sure she could still believe in a God who would turn Europe into the hell it was becoming, and who would send Rick into it. If, indeed, it was Europe where he had gone. This drove home once more how little she actually knew about Rick.

She wondered, again and again, whether she should have been able to locate the poem on her own. Had Rick said something, anything, that should have told her it would be Burns? She cursed herself for not having listened properly to him on all the many evenings she had thought he was just talking nonsense – she cursed herself for not having known sooner that she loved him. How much time they could have had together if only she had been less blind! The fantasy of the home, the family they could have had haunted her at nights. She wondered if he, too, was thinking about it at the same
time. How happy they could have been!

Instead, she could not even know if the child would ever see its father. The child whose existence she had tried to ignore was making itself known forcefully now. She felt miserable almost all mornings now and she was always tired. She did not worry about the rationing any more, for she hardly ate at all, and it was all she could do to pretend everything was as it should be at work. Everybody was looking haggard these days, so nobody noticed the changes in her face, but some days she felt so worn out she could hardly type, and the smell of the ever-present coffee turned her stomach. She knew she ought to love the child because it was Rick's, but not knowing if Rick would ever see it, or what would happen once it was there, made loving it very difficult.

Chapter End Notes

*Robert Burns, A Red, Red Rose.*
A few days before Jenny was due, Caro asked for leave and it was granted. She packed her bag the same night and took a train out to Cornwall the next morning. Her compartment was full with soldiers on leave, with land-girls who had been visiting their families, with young mothers who were fleeing to their families in the country. Longingly, she thought of her little car, stored in a garage, useless now that she could not get petrol for it. She had loved to drive it, even though her mother had been against it.

She had not been expected. Nobody was waiting for her at the station. She sat down, exhausted from the journey and from being pregnant and from missing Rick. She wondered if they had taxis here, and if they still ran. She had been here only once, years ago, for the wedding, and then, they had come by car. She had no idea if it was far from the railway station, but even if it was not, she was not sure she could walk there. Her shoes, one of the few remainders of a previous life, went well with the pretty frock she had chosen, but they were not very comfortable, and she now wondered if Jenny and Betty would even appreciate the frock or if they would think she was trying to be posh. She should have known from the beginning that coming here unannounced was a stupid idea.

‘Miss Bingley, isn't it?’ someone said, ‘Jenny Bennet's sister – Jenny Bingley I suppose I should say. Are you waiting for someone to pick you up?’

She looked up and saw a vaguely familiar face. He was old, judging by his white hair and the weather-beaten face, but somehow, he did not seem so very old. She could not say how she knew it, but she knew his daughter was only a few years older than herself.

‘It's William Lucas, Miss Bingley,’ he said. ‘We met at the wedding.’

‘Mr Lucas, yes,’ Caro said. ‘Of course I remember.’

She had said this so often and lied, but this time it was the truth. She did remember him, though vaguely. Jenny had pointed him out at the wedding as Betty's long-time mentor, and Caro now recalled some of the hateful things she had said about him to Louisa. When she thought about what she had said then, she cringed, and she could only hope she had at least been civil to him back then.

‘So you're waiting for one of the girls to pick you up,’ Mr Lucas said. ‘I'm afraid they won't come.’

Caro was shaken out of her maudlin thoughts.

‘Did anything happen?’ she asked. ‘Is anything wrong with them?’

‘Nothing wrong, lassie,’ Mr Lucas said and laughed. ‘It's the course of nature.’

Sawing her bemused expression, he explained, ‘The baby's coming. I've just brought my wife over. She's helped Jenny with the first, and she'll help her with the second, and you'll see, it'll all be alright.’

‘The baby's coming already?’ Caro asked. ‘But Jenny said it would be the 20th -’

‘Babies come when they're ready,’ Mr Lucas said. ‘But I'm afraid there'll be no one to pick you up.’

‘They don't even know I'm coming,’ Caro said and for some reason, tears welled up in her eyes. ‘I didn't tell them. I don't know if I'll be welcome at all -’
‘Now, now, lassie, of course you’ll be welcome,’ Mr Lucas said. ‘I'm sure as soon as you get there, the girls will be delighted – only, you need to get there. Tell you what, if you don't mind the rough ride, you can come with me. I told my wife I’d be around by tea-time, I just have to drop off a couple of things first -’

Caro gratefully accepted his offer of a ride. Anything was better than being stranded in a railway station with no idea where to go or who to turn to. She had taken a liking to Mr Lucas, who reminded her a little of her own grandfather. She could not understand now why she had ridiculed him at the wedding. That his ride turned out to be a pony cart with some furniture loaded onto it dampened her eagerness a little, but not so much as to refuse him after all. Her bag secured next to an oaken trunk, Mr Lucas helped her up on the driver's seat before climbing up next to her, and they were off. She wondered what her London acquaintances would think if they saw her on a pony cart, but found out that she was far too tired to really care.

They had to deliver the trunk, a couple of chairs and finally, a cradle for a doll, to various people, all of whom, or so it seemed, Mr Lucas knew intimately. Everywhere, they were invited to step inside and have hot tea, and everywhere, they did, in spite of the warm weather outside. Finally, they reached the farm, near tea-time, just as Mr Lucas had said, and indeed, Mrs Lucas was sitting in the kitchen, waiting for them, together with Betty and Charles, who was grinning in bedazzlement.

‘What took you so long?’ Mrs Lucas asked. Then she spotted Caro. ‘Who have you brought?’

It was only then that Betty and Charles noticed her. Caro was unsure how to behave around Betty, after all the emotions that had been bared at their last meeting, but Betty had no such reservations. She hugged Caro tightly while Charles was still trying to understand that his sister was standing in the kitchen.

‘I am sorry I did not write first,’ Caro said. ‘I just thought I’d come for a couple of days and help you, with Jenny and – how is Jenny?’

‘She's upstairs, sleeping,’ Betty said, ‘but she and the baby are fine.’

‘It's a girl,’ Charles said, grinning even more broadly. ‘I have a daughter.’

Caro hugged him, realising too late she was crying into his shirt.

‘Caro -’ he began.

‘I am sorry,’ she said. ‘I shouldn't just have come. I just -’

‘Nonsense,’ Betty said immediately. ‘Really, Caro. I'm glad you're here. Come, let us have tea.’

Caro could not believe how tiny the baby was. Mrs Lucas assured her that she was pretty big for a baby, but Caro had never held a baby. She had imagined a baby to be similar to a doll, but it was very different altogether. Everything on the baby was perfect, from the dark wisp of hair to the little fingers that curled around Caro's while she held her, to the fat kicking legs. As she held her, Caro could feel her heart beating steadily and it was marvellous.

‘We're going to call her Jennifer Elizabeth,’ Charles informed her proudly. ‘She's just as beautiful as her mother.’

Jenny smiled at him in the same bedazzlement.

‘She's perfect,’ Caro said.
The baby did not seem to mind Caro was holding her. She had her head snuggled against the crook of Caro’s arm and Caro thought she could spend the rest of the day just looking at her.

Someone knocked on the door.

‘Come in,’ Jenny called and Betty entered with a boy of about three in tow.

Caro was amazed just how much he resembled Charles. She realised she had last seen him when he was about a year old, and she had never paid much attention to him.

‘Andy wants to greet his little sister,’ Betty said and lead Andy to the bed.

Andy looked more reluctant than excited to Caro, but perhaps it was that she did not know children very well. He had but a fleeting glance for the baby on Caro’s arm, but he mustered Caro closely.

‘Who’re you?’ he finally asked.

‘That’s aunt Caro, Andy,’ Charles explained. ‘Aunt Caro, who lives in London and sent you the pretty bear last Christmas.’

Caro tried to remember the bear before she recalled that Louisa had sent a present from both of them.

Caro had always thought that living in the country would be incredibly dull, but it was not. It was quiet, much quieter than the city. It was a blessing to be able to sleep through the night without having to worry about the bombs. It was wondrous to wake in the morning and hear the birds singing outside. In a couple of weeks, the lilac in front of her window would be in bloom and she thought she might be able to smell it in the morning. She wished she would never have to leave, but she would be back in London when the lilac was flowering.

The volume of Robert Burns’ poetry had travelled with her ever since she had first identified the poem, but now she had the time to read it in earnest, trying to make sense of the antiquated Scots. She was sitting in the garden one afternoon, reading it, when she realised she had been in Cornwall for almost a week now and would have to return soon. She said as much to Betty, who had come into the garden for a few minutes, enjoying the unusually warm April sun.

‘Yes, but how long will you be able to continue working before you start showing?’ Betty asked bluntly.

Caro did not know what to say. Betty had not mentioned her pregnancy before and Caro had half hoped she had forgotten about it, even though she knew Betty would not. She wondered whether Jenny and Charles knew about the child.

‘No, they don’t yet know,’ Betty said when she asked. ‘I didn’t know whether you wanted me to tell them.’

‘I suppose I’ll have to tell them soon,’ Caro reflected. ‘Oh, what will they say?’

‘They will understand,’ Betty said softly. Tentatively, she placed her hand on Caro’s arm.

‘Really, Caro,’ she said. ‘I know what you’re thinking, but truly, they’ll understand. I’m sure they will.’

‘I don’t think I’ll be able to tell them,’ Caro said. ‘I’m not sure I can -’

‘I’ll tell them, if you want me to,’ Betty said.
‘Would you?’ Caro asked. ‘Would you do it for me tonight?’

‘I will,’ Betty said, ‘but I promise you needn’t be afraid. They will understand.’

Caro had never been one to cry, but now that she was having the child, she could not curb it any more.

‘I just don’t know what to do,’ she told Betty. ‘There’s so much I should do, I think, but I just can’t. I’m so tired all the time. I’m not ready to have the child – not without Rick -’

‘Shh,’ Betty said and allowed Caro to cry into her shoulder. ‘You won’t be alone, I promise.’

‘Rick doesn’t even know about the child,’ Caro continued, ‘I don’t even know if he’d be happy, or -’

‘Of course he’ll be happy, when he learns,’ Betty said. ‘Rick loves children.’

Caro swallowed hard. This was one of the many things she had never known about Rick.

‘I wish I could just stay here,’ she said. ‘I wish I could have the child here, where there are no bombs. I wish I didn’t have to go back to London.’

‘Yes, I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that -’

Betty broke off in mid-sentence. Her gaze turned to the garden door and her face broke into a smile. Caro could sense she wanted to let go of her, but was unsure whether Caro could remain upright without her support.

‘Go, run to him,’ Caro whispered. ‘He loves you.’

She imagined it was her running to meet not Darcy, but Rick at the garden door, hugging him, kissing him, letting herself be lifted up and spun around until the world around them did not matter anymore and the war was forgotten.

‘Uncle David!’ someone yelled and little Andy, clutching the wooden train that always went with him, came running out of the kitchen.

She wondered if the child would be running to greet Rick when he finally came back – but of course the child would not know Rick, and would greet him neither as an uncle nor as a father. Maybe Rick would come back before the child was able to run – or maybe the child would grow up and wait for a father who never came back.
Chapter 4

She went to her room early that night. She did not want to blame Darcy and Betty for being happy, but she feared she might end up doing just that if she continued to sit with them. It was hard not to feel left out when the two of them were sharing their own private jokes or whispering to each other. Caro had noticed that Darcy's hands kept roaming over his wife's body whenever he thought no one was observing him, which was unlike the Darcy she knew in so many ways. The worst part, however, was how much he reminded her of Rick. She had never noticed it before, but the way Darcy would raise his eyebrow was just the same way Rick would do it. Darcy's hands looked just like Rick's and even though one man's hair was dark and the other's strawberry-coloured, they both had the same way of running their hands through it when at a loss what to say.

She tried not to think of Rick. It would help nobody, not even Rick, if she was lying on her bed and pitying herself. There were so many things to do, so many things to consider. She had forced the nagging thoughts out of her mind for so long, but now she could no longer deny that in a very short time, she would have to make a decision about what was to happen to her and the child. Outside, dusk was settling in. She watched the sky change colour. For a very short moment, it was the most indescribable pink before the edges turned purple and grey set in. She clutched the volume of Robbie Burns tightly, hoping that somehow, she would understand what Rick would advise her to do. She had prided herself so much on her independence she had never realised that in all the years she had known him, Rick had always been her best adviser. She had sneered at his suggestions and rebuffed them, but later on, in private, she had always considered them and found most of them valuable. When he had said she might like to have a car, she had realised she did, and when he had wondered out loud whether the post at the ministry was not just the thing for her, she had taken it. She wanted to know what he would suggest she do about the child as much as she wanted to know what he would want her to do with his child.

She noticed he had crept back into her mind as soon as she had banished him. Maybe, she wondered, it was because he had been there for such a long time now – as a lover, only very recently; as her best friend, however, unacknowledged, all the time.

Betty would probably have told them about the child by now, she thought. She wondered what Charles would say. What would Jenny think? She wondered whether they would think it was her fault. She supposed Darcy already knew, that Betty had told him. There was no other reason why he would have forwarded the six words to her. It was difficult to say who she was more anxious to face now that the news about the child were out in the open. She was afraid she would read disappointment in their faces, would hear them saying she was the last one they had expected to end up thus.

A knock on the door interrupted her. After a couple of seconds, Betty peeked into the room.

‘Are you in bed already?’ she asked.

‘I was just thinking,’ Caro said. ‘You have told them, haven’t you?’

‘Yes, I have,’ Betty said. ‘We would like to discuss something with you, if you could come down –’

Caro hastily scrambled to her feet and put her slippers on.

‘We’re sitting at Jenny's bed,’ Betty explained as they were climbing down the stairs.

‘Are they very upset?’ Caro asked.
‘No one is upset,’ Betty said softly. ‘Charles and Darcy were very surprised, but Jenny said she half-suspected it from the way you were looking at Jennifer.’

‘Darcy didn't know?’

‘I never told him,’ Betty said.

‘But – the message -’ Caro began, then stopped herself. She had promised Darcy never to mention it to anyone and she was not so sure now whether that did not include Betty.

They had reached Jenny's and Charles' bedroom before Betty could ask further questions. Her heart pounding desperately, Caro stepped inside. Jenny was lying in her bed with Charles sitting beside her. Darcy was sitting on a chair next to the bed and an empty space at the foot of the bed showed where Betty had been sitting previously. When Charles saw Caro enter the room after Betty, he stood up hastily and closed the distance between them.

‘Oh, Caro,’ he said and hugged her tightly. ‘Poor, poor Caro.’

Caro pressed him tightly to herself. She allowed herself to forget all that had happened and would happen for a moment and concentrated on the feeling of security his embrace brought. Slowly, they broke apart again.

‘You're not angry then,’ she said.

‘Of course not,’ Charles said surprised. ‘Why should I?’

‘Because it was so stupid,’ Caro said. ‘So stupid of me to get myself into trouble – and what will people say. Mother – and Louisa -’

‘Frankly, my dear -’ Darcy began, but Betty cut him short with a pointed glance.

‘It's never stupid to fall in love,’ Jenny said softly, then giggled. ‘Golly, I sound like a film character.’

‘Yes, but we love you nevertheless,’ Betty said.

‘We understand Rick would never have left you in such a situation voluntarily,’ Darcy said. ‘He would take responsibility, if he could.’

Caro had been grateful for Jenny's and Charles' kind words, but now anger welled up inside her.

‘It's my responsibility too,’ she said hotly. ‘You don't think Rick took advantage of me, do you? I'll tell you what, it was my idea in the first place – now go on, despise me. But I won't have it sound as if I were a seduced schoolgirl. We both knew what we were doing and -’

‘You're right,’ Betty said. ‘I'm sorry, Caro.’

‘I'm afraid that came out wrongly,’ Darcy said. ‘What I meant to say was, I know you're not some common – I mean, you're not -’

‘Golly, David,’ Betty sighed. ‘What he means is no one thinks you or Rick are to be blamed for what happened, and we'll be there for you if you'd like us to.’

‘Yes, that,’ Darcy said and pressed his wife's hand.

‘Whatever help you need, Caro,’ Charles said. ‘Look, why don't we all sit down again so we can discuss what you'd like to do?’
‘I don’t want to go back to London,’ Caro said, wiping her eyes, cursing the stupid tears. ‘I know I always said I’d never leave London and if it were just me, I wouldn’t. But I don’t think I want the child to be born with the sirens in the background –’

‘I’ve been discussing this with Jenny,’ Betty said, ‘just before I went to get you. You see, we’d like you to stay here, if you wanted -’

‘Stay here?’ Caro asked, not quite believing it.

‘You’d have to work, though,’ Betty said quickly. ‘I know it’s not a very good idea – you probably don’t want to work on a farm – but I’m afraid we’d need some support from you for your board – either work, or money, I’m afraid -’

Caro was as embarrassed at the mention of this delicate topic as everyone else in the room, and sensing Betty’s growing discomfort, she hastily interjected.

‘Of course I’d pay for my food. I’d love to stay. And I wouldn’t mind working on the farm either – it would be something worth it -’

She found, to her own surprise, that it was true. She would not have believed it but she was actually hoping she would be allowed to stay and help with the work.

‘Really?’ Jenny asked, true delight showing on her face.

‘If you want me,’ Caro said.

‘Well, we really need help now in the summer,’ Betty said. ‘Especially now that the baby’s there, and Charles leaving so soon – but even if we didn’t, we’d love to have you here. We need a somewhat spunkier lady, because Jenny and I are very dull, you know.’

Caro was grateful for Betty’s quip, which broke the tense atmosphere. Without further words, it was settled that Caro would stay on the farm and work for her board.

‘I wish I needn’t have to go back to London at all,’ she said. ‘But I’ll have to pack my things, and close the house and -’

Suddenly, she recalled something else.

‘And the office – I’ll have to quit – I don’t even know if I can -’

‘Don’t worry about that,’ Darcy said.
Caro and Darcy left early the next morning. Betty drove them in the carriage to the station and they took the first train to London. It was much less crowded than the train Caro had taken the week before. From Plymouth on they had the compartment to themselves. Once, Caro would have relished the opportunity to be alone with Darcy and tried to impress him, but now, she was only glad she could ask him the questions she had not wanted to ask in front of Betty.

‘What did you mean when you said I shouldn't worry about the office?’ she blurted out.

Darcy was momentarily startled.

‘Only that I can take care of it,’ he said. ‘You needn't go back if you don't want to.’

‘You have that much influence?’ Caro asked in astonishment.

Then, she checked herself and lowered her voice.

‘Is it safe to mention this here?’

Darcy gave a hollow laugh.

‘Safe enough, I should think,’ he said. ‘And no, I don't have that much influence, not personally. I'm just a clerk in some office.’

‘But -’ Caro began.

‘My uncle, however, has that influence,’ Darcy continued. Seeing the confusion on her face, he added, ‘my mother's brother. The earl.’

Caro still did not understand.

‘Rick's father,’ Darcy said softly.

Caro's heart beat faster.

‘You're going to tell him?’ she asked.

‘No, of course not,’ Darcy said. ‘I'll just say that I need a favour for a friend.’

‘Thank you,’ Caro whispered.

‘My dear Caroline, you did not think I would betray your confidence thus, did you? I did not even tell Betty that Rick spent the night with you.’

His tone suggested faint disapproval.

‘It's not what you think,’ Caro said hastily. ‘He wants to marry me.’

‘Yes, I know,’ Darcy said. ‘He said as much to me.’

More questions raced into Caro's mind than she could ask.

‘When? When did he say that? Is he back? Have you seen him? Is he in London?’
Darcy shook his head and took her hand to stop her.

‘No, he is not back,’ he said. ‘Not yet. I saw him shortly before he left, when he came to – to the office where I am posted in order to receive some – thing. He asked me to look out for you if something –’

They both swallowed. Normally, Caro would have protested that she needed no one to look out for her, and that it was presumptuous of Rick to assume she did, but she could not say it now.

‘Not as a guardian or anything, Rick said,’ Darcy added, ‘only as a friend. He was quite clear about that.’

Tears came to her eyes once again. She cursed Rick for being so thoughtful and then immediately regretted it. Darcy said nothing. They sat in silence for a long time.

‘It is very dangerous, is it not?’ Caro finally asked. ‘The mission he's on. There's a good chance he won't make it.’

Darcy did not speak for a moment or two.

‘Yes, I am afraid there is,’ he said then. ‘I'm sorry, Caroline.’

‘Did they make him go there?’ she whispered.

‘Nobody can make a man do that kind of thing,’ Darcy said. ‘It was his own decision.’

Caro supposed she now ought to say something about how brave Rick was and how she loved him for it, but she could not. She did not want to understand that he had gone when he could have chosen to stay with her and not get himself killed. Cold crept up inside her as she realised she had allowed herself to finish that thought for the first time.

‘Bloody foolish of him,’ Darcy said. ‘But of course he had to go.’

‘I know,’ Caro said over the tears. ‘I only wish it hadn't had to be him.’

‘He said the same,’ Darcy said.

Caro almost did not want to ask the next question, but she knew she had to.

‘Was he afraid?’

Darcy contemplated her for a moment.

‘Yes,’ he said at last. ‘Yes, he was very much afraid.’

It might just have been a trick of the light, but Caro thought she had seen a tear running down Darcy’s cheek. She was glad she was not the only one.

‘However,’ Darcy continued with a faint attempt at a smile, ‘he also said that he had promised you he would return, and that he didn't dare break his promise for fear of your revenge.’

‘He better fear my revenge,’ Caro mumbled.

Then, she resolutely blew her nose and tried to dry her eyes.

‘Thank you, Darcy,’ she said. ‘Thank you for being honest with me.’
‘I do not think Rick would want me not to tell you the truth,’ Darcy said. ‘Or at least, as much as I can tell you.’

Caro mustered him sharply.

‘It’s not just some office you’re posted,’ she said. ‘And you’re not just some clerk.’

‘No,’ Darcy said. ‘But that doesn’t change anything about the fact that I feel horrible when I see Charles or Rick or anyone else leave and know what they have to face when I know I’m quite safe in the country behind my desk.’

There was not much Caro could respond and she remained silent. She hoped he understood. It was he who spoke again, but only when the train had rumbled on for a few more miles.

‘You need a ring,’ he said. ‘A wedding ring.’

‘A wedding ring?’ Caro echoed him.

‘Betty and Jenny are going to tell people that you’re married to my cousin,’ Darcy explained. ‘To avoid talk. You must have a wedding ring.’

Caro nestled under her blouse and produced the chain from which Rick’s ring was dangling.

‘He gave me this,’ she said. ‘But it’s too big.’

‘You could have it changed,’ Darcy suggested. ‘I know a jeweller who -’

Caro shook her head. She could not have Rick’s ring changed in his absence.

‘Rick has some of his grandmother’s jewellery in his flat,’ Darcy said. ‘Maybe one of the rings -’

Caro shook her head again.

‘He should give that to me himself,’ she said.

‘My mother’s ring then, maybe,’ Darcy suggested. ‘I gave it to Betty, but I am sure she would not mind -’

‘I’ll find something suitable amongst my grandmother’s things,’ Caro said flatly.

She had just realised that if everyone were to think she and Rick were married, she would not only have to wear a wedding ring he had not given her. Everybody would call her Mrs Fitzwilliam even though she was not sure she would ever become her.

The train rumbled on and on, through fields and meadows, passing villages and stations without signs. Finally, Caro picked up the courage to ask Darcy the question she had been meaning to ask all the time. She had asked Betty, but it was not the same thing. Darcy was as close as a brother to Rick and would, perhaps, know the answer.

‘What will Rick think?’ she asked. ‘About the child, about me pretending to be his wife, assuming a position -’

Darcy of course took his time before he answered.

‘As far as I know, Rick does want to marry you,’ he said. ‘And he will understand that we had no means of contacting him to inform him of our plans. I am sure he will approve of all we did to ensure
his child would not be born with a scandal attached to his name -'

For the first time, Caro felt fiercely protective of the child. The child had not asked to be conceived in such times, or to be born to an absent father and an overwhelmed mother. It was unfair that her child should suffer for circumstances outside its reach.

‘Or her name,’ she snapped.

‘I'm sorry?’ Darcy blinked in confusion.

‘I might have a daughter,’ Caro said, wondering whether she would prefer to have a girl. ‘And whether I have a daughter or a son, I don't ever want him or her to regret having been born, no matter how scandalous you or even Rick may think it. It may have been careless of us, but it happens all the time and I don't see why my child should take any blame.’

Darcy stared at her as if he had never seen her before.

‘I am sorry,’ he said at last. ‘I did not mean to upset you.’

He took her hand and pressed it.

‘Rick loves you,’ he said, ‘I'm sure he'll be delighted to hear about the child, and he won't mind our dating back his marriage a little.’

Caro accepted his apology with a nod.

‘You can have a quiet ceremony in London, or in the country, whatever you prefer, when he's back,’ Darcy said, ‘and no one will be any the wiser.’

Caro meant to ask what would happen if Rick did not come back, but she stopped herself. Darcy had already said that he thought what they were doing was in accordance with Rick's wishes. There was another thing she wanted to know, however.

‘Can you get any messages through to him?’ she asked. ‘Just a sentence, or two?’

Darcy shook his head.

‘That was a one-time thing,’ he said. ‘I was only able to add a few words to an outgoing message because I could call in a favour. I hadn't intended to do it, but when Betty mentioned that she'd seen you, and that you'd said -’

Caro hated herself for starting to cry again.

‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘That was really very sweet of you.’

‘s nothing,’ Darcy mumbled. ‘You'd have done the same -'

‘No, I wouldn't,’ Caro cried. ‘I behaved dastardly towards you and especially towards Betty, and you know it. I was mean and spiteful and now everybody is so nice to me. Really, I don't deserve it -'

‘Well, I thought I didn't deserve it either,’ Darcy said with a sickeningly loving smile. ‘As far as meanness was concerned, we were two peas in a pod, you and I – but you see, I was forgiven, and so are you. My wife – whose kindness I do not deserve – once told me, in her infinite wisdom – for she is beautiful as well as smart -’
Caro was about to choke when she saw the mischievous glance in Darcy's eyes. He had indeed changed.
Caro did not stay in London long. Once, it had been the world to her, but now, she only felt tired and wished she could be back in the country. It put Caro to shame that she would desert London so easily when she needed all the protection she could get, but she was too exhausted from being in town to think about it too long. After she had said goodbye to Darcy at the station, instead of going out, she simply took a cab home. Over the next few days, she saw to it that the house was properly closed; that all valuables were safely stored and all things she needed packed in her two suitcases. Taking a last long look at the now gloomy hallway, she locked the door and hoped that one day, she would be able to return to a home still standing, with her child on her arms and her husband in tow, carrying her bags from the car.

She sighed and decided to walk to the station rather than wait for a cab. Compared to the ride to London, the ride back was quiet. Mr Lucas was waiting at the station once more, this time expected. He loaded her cases onto the cart, helped her into the seat next to him, whistled to the pony and they were off.

‘My wife is with the girls,’ he told her. ‘Jenny's doing fine, but it can't hurt if Maggie has a look at her. She could have a look at you, too, you know – tell you when to expect the little one -’

Caro could feel the heat rising in her cheeks.

‘Didn't mean to embarrass you, lass,’ Mr Lucas said and patted her hand. ‘I forget you're not one of the girls, but from the city, and a married lady now too -’

Caro's gaze fell to her grandmother's engagement ring on her left hand. Suddenly, she felt unable not to tell Mr Lucas the truth.

‘I'm not really married,’ she said, twisting the ring between her fingers.

‘You would be if times were different,’ Mr Lucas said, ‘and that's all that counts.’

‘I suppose so,’ Caro said.

‘I'm sure of it,’ Mr Lucas said. ‘Here, want to hold the reins for a bit?’

‘I've never – I don't think I can -’

‘You're going to work on a farm, lass,’ Mr Lucas said and chuckled, ‘you'd better be able to handle a pony.’

Caro was momentarily speechless. The thought had not occurred to her. It was true, she knew she would have to work on the farm, but she had seen herself in the kitchen, cooking Cornish pasties for dinners, making jam, maybe baking apple tarts. She had made sure to pack her smart aprons from the finishing school for that purpose.

It turned out, however, that Mr Lucas had been right. The kitchen and the household were Jenny's domain; she and the housemaid had everything under control there, including the children, and a third would only have upturned the practiced routines. Caro was to work with Betty and the landgirls in the fields. Her aprons were not of much use there, nor her carefully chosen tweed skirts, which became too tight very soon anyway. Within a couple of weeks, Caro had discarded most of her previous, lovingly selected wardrobe and replaced it with old trousers and shirts from Charles.
Jenny had a few dresses she could borrow, but usually, Caro only did so on Sundays, when they went to Church. In London, she had scarcely ventured out to church on Sunday mornings, unless she wished to be seen at St George’s on Hanover Square, but in the country, everybody went, and as Betty pointed out, it would raise suspicion if she staid at home. Oddly enough, Caro found the familiar old rituals comforting. She realised that everybody she met in the village was praying for someone in the church and she felt much less alone than in the London churches she had visited. Nobody thought her husband’s absence odd, and her wedding ring was acknowledged to be very pretty indeed. Sometimes she felt slightly guilty about deceiving everyone, but then she thought of Mr Lucas’ words, that she would have been Mrs Fitzwilliam, if only time had allowed, and she felt slightly less bad at being addressed thus.

Working physically was hard, especially as she had never done it before, but it was also satisfying to see how much one could accomplish in a day, a week, a month. What had felt absolutely impossible the first days was becoming routine and when new land-girls arrived at the beginning of June, Caro felt competent enough to explain the work to them. Even Betty had praise for her work. A year ago, Caro would have said that Betty’s opinion on things did not count, but these days, hearing Betty say that she herself could not have cut the hay better meant more to her than any earl’s compliment on her dress. She felt healthier too and developed an appetite again. Betty and Jenny were far from living luxuriously, but they had the advantage of fresh dairy products and Jenny’s chicken’s eggs. Of course these were still rationed, but there were enough to last them if they calculated carefully. Once, Caro had ridiculed fresh milk as a peasant’s drink, but now she drank as much as she could, for she had heard that milk was beneficial for children.

Maggie had seen her and told her that her child would arrive early October. At times this seemed far away, in the distant future, but on other days, Caro realised how much weight she had already gained, how much her child must have grown, and she worried she was not at all prepared to be a mother. She tried to learn as much as she could from Jenny, but there were a lot of things Jenny preferred to do herself. At first Caro thought it very insulting to be trusted so little but then she saw Betty was treated the same way. Caro was not sure, but she suspected that with Charles gone, Jenny felt the need to make sure her daughter was as safe as she could be. Caro knew she would be the same once her child was born, and she understood. It was times as these that made her fear for the health of her child. If anything happened to it, would she not lose the last bond she had to Rick, the last proof that for one short night, he had been hers alone?

Betty received letters from Darcy every three days, as punctual as the Royal Mail itself, and Charles usually wrote once a week. Jenny did not know where he was stationed, or if she knew, she would not say, but judging by the little she told them, he was at least in no imminent danger. Caro, however, received no mail at all until the beginning of July, and even then, it was less than pleasant. This was unsettling in itself, for the letter was from Louisa, and Caro had used to love to hear from her sister.

“Dear Caro,” the letter read, “hope you are well and not too bored from it all. Cannot imagine how you could agree to move to the country to live on a farm of all places. I suppose Betty and Jenny needed someone to do their dirty work but why did it have to be you? If you wanted to leave London – and of course it was right you went away, such a horrible place to be with all the sandbags and everything and no decent food to be had for all the money in the world – you could just as well have come here. Lord knows I would not have minded for you must know it is dreadfully boring here. There is just nowhere to go of an evening and the neighbours are nothing to write home about. I do not know why Hurst has to live here of all places when there are so many nicer counties in England. That is, I do not know that they are nicer but I suppose they must be, for nothing could possibly be as disagreeable as Staffordshire. Does not Darcy have a seat in the country somewhere? I bet it would be much better there and now that we...
are practically related, I think we could expect an invitation, but then, Betty probably never heard about these things. I wonder why she insists on staying on that stupid farm and now dragging you into it as well – but then I never understood her. She has such an odd way of talking sometimes that I do not know what she means by it at all. Well, that at least explains why Darcy married her although I dare say he could have chosen better.

“I have half a mind of coming to visit you for a week or two now that it is summer. The train journey I suppose will be pretty dreadful but at least I could talk to someone properly again. I love mother dearly as you know but she has no interest whatsoever in conversation and instead spends her time in the garden if you can believe it. One could almost think she had lived on a farm too instead of Belgravia. How I miss London! I hope this ridiculous war ends soon so that we can all go back and must not endure all this nonsense any more. I heard Churchill on the wireless the other day and I swear I did not understand a word of what he was saying. What do you say, why do we not make a proper holiday of it and go to a sea-bathing place for ten days? I bet you'll be happy enough to get away from the farm and be amongst sensible people for a change and I do think that there must be some entertainment at least at Brighton. Surely they will not have given everything up. Please write soon, I am getting so bored with no one writing to me, etc.”

Caro put the letter down, not knowing what to think. Had Louisa always been so difficult to bear, or had she simply changed so much? She remembered, distantly, being great friends with her older sister. They had had the same opinions once and shared the same jokes. They had spent evenings and weekends together with the same friends and had been as inseparable as Betty and Jenny were. Something, however, had changed forever.

‘Louisa wants to visit me,’ she said, looking from Betty, biting her lip in concentration while reading Darcy’s letter, to Jenny, smiling fondly at Charles’ signature.

‘Oh, is that from Louisa?’ Jenny asked. ‘I should have written to her ages ago, but I just forgot. The last time I wrote was shortly after Jennifer’s birth, when I told her about the birth, and that you would be staying with us. And now she wants to visit?’

‘That’ll be – nice,’ Betty said slowly.

Caro only nodded. She did not want to show them the letter, it was far too spiteful.

‘We haven't seen Louisa for such a long time,’ Jenny said.

‘I don't know,’ Caro said. ‘She doesn't know about my child – or about Rick -’

She twisted the engagement ring between her fingers, which had become a habit of hers ever since she had started wearing it. Would Louisa recognise the ring as their grandmother’s? Louisa had never been very close to their grandmother, but the ring was very pretty, and the stone very valuable. Caro knew she would have recognised it, and she thought Louisa would as well.

She had never lied to Louisa before, or kept anything of importance from her, but she had found that she could not tell her about Rick. At first she had thought that it was only the intimacy of what had happened that held her back, but it was not that. She realised now that she had not told Louisa about Rick, or about her child, because she did not want to know what Louisa would think about it. Louisa, Caro knew, was not very fond of Rick. She would think Caro could have chosen better, just as she had said about Darcy. It had been Louisa who had always supported Caro in her childish infatuation with Darcy, Louisa who had said that Darcy was a good match for her. Rick certainly was a worse match, and an even worse father for a child born out of wedlock. Louisa did not think
highly of unmarried mothers either, Caro knew, and had had no scruples to let a pregnant housemaid go. Caro was not afraid of Louisa's contempt for her situation, but she did not want to see disgust in the face of one who had once been her closest friend.

‘You can tell her just what you told everyone else,’ Betty said, half-guessing at Caro's thoughts. ‘It was a very quiet ceremony in London and no one was invited.’

‘Surely, you can tell Louisa the truth,’ Jenny interjected. ‘She is your sister, after all. I know I would tell Betty if I got engaged and -’

‘As a matter of fact, you did,’ Betty said. ‘But maybe Caro thinks that Louisa won't keep the secret?’

‘No, it's not that,’ Caro said. ‘It's just – Louisa doesn't approve – of my living here, of you -'

‘I would never have guessed,’ Betty said dryly. ‘Why, that would explain so much!’

‘I don't think Louisa would approve of Rick either,’ Caro said.

‘Does that matter to you?’ Betty's eyebrows rose up.

‘No, not really,’ Caro said. ‘But we used to be so close -'

‘Or maybe she will understand,’ Jenny said. ‘You two were such very good friends.’

‘I guess we will just have to wait,’ Caro sighed. ‘Louisa is determined to come here, and I know of nothing that can stop her once she has decided she wants something.’

She pocketed the letter and stretched her arms.

‘Now, Jenny, am I allowed to bring my niece to bed or are you afraid I'll tell her horrid tales?’ she asked.

‘As a matter of fact, I would appreciate it if you did. Not tell her horrid tales, of course, but bring her to bed, I mean,’ Jenny said. ‘I still have to prepare the bread-doughs for tomorrow. You won't tell her horrid tales, will you?’

There was nothing of all the many tasks she had learned lately that Caro loved to do better. She had loved her niece from the moment she had first laid eyes on her and this love had only grown. After a long, tiring day out in the ever hotter sun, there was nothing more rewarding than being allowed to hug this warm, ever taller-growing body to oneself, feel her breath, smell the soapy scent of her skin after her bath. Caro had not told Betty or Jenny, for fear of being told it was only a grimace, but she was sure Jennifer had started to smile when Caro picked her up.

Jennifer slept in a cradle in Jenny's room. There was a rocking chair for Jenny to nurse her in, and Caro sat down on it now, very gently so as not to disturb Jennifer, who was already half-asleep.

‘Sleep, my child and peace attend thee,’ Caro sang softly, thinking of her grandmother, who had always sung this song when Caro was little. She had only ever sung it to Caro, or so she had told her.

Jennifer gurgled and grabbed the front of Caro's shirt with her surprisingly strong fingers. Caro closed her eyes and allowed herself to think of nothing for a moment. Forgotten was the day spent outside in the burning sun, her growing stomach, that yet another day had passed without a message from Rick; forgotten was Louisa's visit. Jennifer's breathing became more and more regular. She
made an odd sound like a sleeping cat, only to be picked up when one was very quiet. Not interrupting her song, Caro got up from the rocking chair and placed Jennifer in the cradle, replacing the shirt with a stuffed elephant Darcy had sent. Jennifer did not notice and slept on peacefully. Caro stood by her cradle a long time, watching her sleep.

Louisa would come, that much was sure, and she would have to decide whether to tell her the truth or not. It would all depend, probably, on how Louisa reacted when she learned about the pregnancy. Caro smiled. There was no point in trying to conceal her stomach now, so she would have to muster the courage to face Louisa as if it were the most normal thing in the world. Upon reflection, Caro thought, it probably was the most normal thing in the world.
They had a cable from Louisa that she would arrive on 1st August, intending to stay at least a week, and to take Caro with her back to Staffordshire if at all possible. Mr Lucas offered to pick her up at the station, but Caro did not want to see him laughed at by her sister, and said as much to Betty, who understood immediately. Caro thought it surprising that Betty would understand at first, but then she thought about how well they had got along the past weeks. She had not noticed it, but they were friends now. It was a strange feeling. Caro had never befriended anyone before without having the intention to befriend them – apart from Rick, who had made his way into her life and heart without asking.

Caro said she could pick Louisa up – Mr Lucas had been right, she had soon learnt how to drive a pony-cart – but Betty said she had some errands to run and would not mind taking Louisa. Secretly, Caro was thankful. She was almost sure Louisa would make a scene when she saw her, and she preferred for that scene to take place in the semi-privacy of the farm. Betty probably had thought about that as well, for she told Caro she could take the afternoon off work and spend the time with Louisa while everyone else was outside.

When Betty left for the village, Caro became increasingly nervous. She knew she would have to be firm and make Louisa see there was no point in becoming upset, but she had never been able to hold her ground very well where Louisa was concerned. She had taken particular care to dress today – not that she could do much, with her bulging stomach, but she had forced herself into a flowery dress borrowed from Jenny and tried to smooth her hair as best as possible. Her complicated curls were a thing of the past. She had no time in the mornings to arrange them and who would appreciate them anyway? These days, she usually resorted to a simple knot at the back of her head, but today, she had brushed her hair out in the hope of resembling Katherine Hepburn. Belatedly, she recalled that Louisa could not stand Katherine Hepburn because of her, as she called it, unrefined ways, but then, Caro had rather liked that film with the leopard.

The sound of hooves announced the cart and Caro hastened to the front door, heart beating fast. She paused a moment to catch her breath and opened the door. She stepped outside just as Louisa climbed down from the cart, eyeing it disdainfully and leaving it to Betty to unload her three suitcases and her bag.

‘Caro, dearest,’ she squealed and rushed forwards. ‘You won’t believe how much I -’

Caro had stepped out of the shadows and Louisa was cut short. For a full minute, she said nothing, and neither did Betty or Caro. Finally, Louisa was able to point at Caro.

‘What happened to you?’ she said.

‘I should have thought that much was obvious,’ Betty mumbled, but upon catching Caro’s eye, she retreated into the house.

‘Are you – are you -’ Louisa stammered.

‘The word is pregnant, Lou,’ Caro said, surprised at how spiteful she sounded.

‘But – oh, Caro, how could you?’ Louisa wailed. ‘Who on earth is the father?’

Caro made the decision what to tell her in a split second.

‘My husband,’ she said. ‘My husband is the father of my child.’
‘Your - husband?’ Louisa mouthed. ‘But Caro – you aren't married!’

‘Well, obviously, I am,’ Caro said, ‘otherwise, I couldn't be pregnant, could I?’

‘Oh, you know darn well -’ Louisa began but then broke off.

She mustered Caro's hand sharply, registering the ring but not recognising it.

‘Who did you marry?’ Louisa asked. ‘God, Caro, please tell me it's not another farmer!’

‘It's Darcy's cousin,’ Caro said.

Louisa’s eyes lit up momentarily.

‘The viscount?’ she asked.

‘The Colonel,’ Caro said. ‘The Honourable John Richard Fitzwilliam.’

She had never before realised how well it sounded.

‘Oh, Caro,’ Louisa said finally.

‘Do you – want to come in?’ Caro asked. ‘We could have some tea.’

‘Yes, I think tea would be nice,’ Louisa said. ‘I wouldn't say no to a bit of brandy either.’

‘Golly, Caro,’ Louisa said when she had sat down in the kitchen. ‘I don't quite know what to say.’

Caro did not answer immediately. The fire in the AGA was already burning and she only needed to fill the kettle with water. She waited until it was boiling, measured out the tea and poured the water over it.

‘I'm afraid there's no more sugar until tomorrow, only honey,’ she said, setting cups on the table. ‘But you can have that brandy if you want to, or perhaps a bit of rum with your tea?’

‘Rum, please,’ Louisa said faintly. ‘Caro, what on earth happened to you?’

‘I got knocked up,’ Caro said. ‘I should think it was pretty obvious.’

Louisa flinched.

‘I don't mean that,’ she said. ‘There's no need to be smart with me. It's the way you've changed that surprises me.’

‘Lou, what do you mean?’ Caro asked, frowning. ‘You've seen me all of fifteen minutes now and you think I've changed?’

‘Oh, but you have!’ Louisa exclaimed. ‘Only look at you!’

Caro could sort of see what she meant. Louisa was dressed carefully in an immaculately cut suit in spite of the heat. Her hair was laid in waves, her hat carefully placed on top of it at just the right angle. Her gloves were spotless and matched the colour of her shoes. Caro, on the other hand, wore someone else's frock that had been sewn for comfort, not style. Her face was flushed, her hair hastily brushed out.

‘Last year, you wouldn't have been seen dead like this,’ Louisa said. ‘You wouldn't have gone to a
farm in the country, working like a common peasant. You wouldn't have hid from all the world as if you cared for nobody. Last year, you would have let me know you had married and become pregnant, Caro, dammit!' There were a lot of things she could have replied to the first part of Louisa's speech, but only one thing she could say in answer to the second. ‘God, Lou, I'm sorry. I really should have told you. Only I didn't – I couldn't – I wondered what – ’ She angrily wiped away the tears. ‘I meant to tell you. I started to write so often. But I didn't want to see your disappointment, or your contempt –’ ‘I wouldn't have been disappointed,’ Louisa said. ‘The Colonel is respectable enough, and I will gladly call him brother, now that you are married.’ ‘There is more to it,’ Caro said, sitting down. She poured out rum for herself and Louisa, foregoing the tea. They both took a sip from their cups and Caro relished the burning sensation in her throat if only because it took her attention away from what she knew she had to do next. Just as Caro wanted to finally speak, Louisa's gaze fell to Caro's left hand. ‘Caro, that ring -’ she said. ‘Is that -’ ‘Yes,’ Caro said firmly. ‘You aren't married,’ Louisa said. ‘No.’ ‘Are you going to be?’ ‘I don't know,’ Caro said flatly. ‘Is the Colonel even the father of your child?’ Louisa asked. ‘Or did you lie about that as well?’ ‘Of course he is,’ Caro exclaimed. ‘And before you ask, I am sure about it.’ ‘Then why on earth doesn't he marry you?’ Louisa said. ‘Does he have anything better to do?’ ‘For heaven's sake, Lou, there is a war going on, little though you seem to care about it!’ Caro shrieked. It took a while for Louisa to realise what Caro had said. Finally, she gasped, clasped her hand to her mouth and then poured them both another cup of rum. Caro did not explain much that day. She knew a lot of things needed telling, but it could wait. Moreover, neither she nor Louisa took very well to the rum, and they both went to sleep rather early. The next day, however, they got up early, and when Betty had agreed Caro could take the morning off as well, they set out for a long leisurely walk. Caro told Louisa everything that had happened since she had asked Rick into the house for a cup of coffee in January. She left out nothing but Darcy's involvement in the sending of Rick's message, and that only because of her promise to Darcy. She found Louisa a most eager audience, ready to listen to everything. She could not forgive
Caro immediately for keeping her in the dark, but with Caro's sincere apologies, she was on a good way to getting there.

‘I still cannot quite believe why you chose to come here though,’ she said, ‘even if you were afraid of turning to me -’

‘Don't you see it, Lou?’ Caro said. ‘They were offering me friendship, unconditionally, sincerely, at a time when there was nothing I needed more, and thought I should lose yours.’

‘I thought you didn't like them,’ Louisa said. ‘We were always making fun of them -’

‘You cannot know how much I regret that now!’ Caro said. ‘It is true, I did not like them very much, and understood them even less, but I do now. This farm is their home. Betty and Jenny work hard to keep their home the place it is. They would not part with it for the world. We should have admired that from the first, not ridiculed them. We should have seen that had we given them our friendship, we should have received theirs in return.’

‘They were not always nice to us either,’ Louisa said.

‘No, they weren't,’ Caro agreed, ‘but it was nothing we did not deserve.’

Louisa checked her watch and reminded Caro that they had better return so as not to be late for lunch.

‘Maybe you are right,’ she said after half a mile. ‘Maybe we behaved unfairly towards them.’

They had almost reached the farm again when Caro halted Louisa.

‘Do you approve?’ she simply asked.

‘Would my disapproval change anything?’ Louisa asked.

‘No,’ Caro admitted, ‘but I would like to know.’

‘It is not what I imagined for you,’ Louisa said.

‘It's not what I imagined for myself either,’ Caro said. ‘I'm having a child with a man who has a good chance of never returning home – believe me, that is not what I dreamt of.’

‘You love him though,’ Louisa said, looking Caro directly in the eye.

‘Yes, and that's the worst part of it,’ Caro said. ‘Lou, you can't imagine how afraid I am he won't come back.’

‘Shh, Caro,’ Louisa said and rubbed Caro’s arm. ‘All will be well, sweetie.’

‘If only I could believe it,’ Caro said.
Chapter 8

Louisa stayed for a week. She tried to persuade Caro to come with her, but Caro was firm in her decision to remain with Betty and Jenny, and in the end, Louisa accepted it and said she would visit again soon. She made Caro promise she would write and urged Betty and Jenny to let her know if there was any way she could help. Betty brought Louisa to the station early in the morning and returned a little while later with their mail. There was nothing for Caro, as usual, Charles’ weekly letter to Jenny and several letters for Betty. Having nothing to read, Caro started clearing away the breakfast dishes.

‘This one is from Nina,’ Betty said, frowning. ‘She never writes to me. It’s difficult to get letters through as it is, so she writes only to David.’

She ripped open the letter, perusing its contents.

‘She seems to be alright, though,’ she said. ‘Although she has a droll way of saying it. Listen to this:

‘“Dearest Bets, don't worry, I'm ok.” Oh, David would have to say something about that. She's having a good time, apparently. “... and some Saturday evenings, we go to the drugstore ...” I wonder who we is? Oh, here she says, “... last weekend, it was just me and Tom ...” I think we’re getting to the problem now ... “... asked me to go steady with him ...”’

‘Darcy won't like that at all,’ Caro pointed out.

‘No, I suppose he won't,’ Betty laughed. ‘And I think she means I should tell him.’

‘Will you?’ Caro asked.

‘I have to,’ Betty said. ‘If he finds out I kept it from him – but I'll do it in person.’

‘Is he coming soon then?’ Jenny asked.

‘He said he'd come today,’ Betty said. ‘That's why I wonder that he wrote. Maybe he's telling me he'll take a later train.’

She took Darcy's letter and ripped it open. Caro started running water over the dishes and washing them.

‘Oh, God, no!’ Betty suddenly exclaimed.

Caro spun around, dropping the plate she was holding onto the floor.

‘Is it Rick?’ she asked in the same moment that Jenny stammered, ‘Charles?’

‘No, no,’ Betty said, shaking her head. ‘It’s Rupert – Rick's brother. His ship was sunk.’

In the same second that relief washed over her, Caro felt guilty for being relieved. The unknown Rupert was a stranger to her, but not to his mother, his father, his brothers, nor to Betty or Darcy.

Darcy had written he would not come that weekend; that he was going to spend his time off with his aunt and uncle. Betty said she understood, but Caro knew she was disappointed; she had not seen Darcy since the morning he had left for London with Caro. Jenny, however, had not seen Charles for almost the same time, and from Rick, they had not heard for months. When she was alone with her
anger and jealousy, Caro sometimes hated Betty for being unhappy when her husband was alive and well and only a couple of hundred miles away.

On Sunday night, they were sitting in the kitchen drinking milk with the rest of the sugar rations, when suddenly, someone knocked on the door.

‘Who is it?’ Betty shouted, grabbing the cast-iron pan from its hook on the wall.

‘It’s me.’

Recognising the voice, Betty unhooked the door and let her husband in. He looked as if he had not slept in days. Without a word, he pulled Betty into a close embrace and did not let her go for some time. Then, he pushed her away and mustered Caro as if he had just noticed her.

‘Caroline, can we talk?’ he said. ‘Alone?’

Caro nodded, afraid of what she would hear, and awkwardly stood up, cradling her stomach. She led the way into the drawing room.

‘Please, sit down,’ she and Darcy said at the same time.

Darcy took the seat opposite Caro and took her hand. For a moment, he said nothing, only pressed her hand.

‘It's Rick,’ he finally said. ‘My uncle says they haven't heard from him since the beginning of July.’

The rushing noise in Caro’s ears became unbearable.

‘It's not looking good,’ Darcy said, wiping away a tear. ‘The German army is making fast progress towards Moscow – it may be only a matter of weeks now.’

Caro sat still; not able to move, not able to look at anything else than Darcy's hand gripping hers tight.

‘Rick is in Russia?’ she finally whispered.

‘He was in Poland,’ Darcy said. ‘But now the way out may be blocked – you understand that this cannot leave this room, Caro! - and we do not know how much longer the Soviet army will be able to hold Leningrad and Moscow.’

Caro nodded stiffly.

‘This is against all regulations,’ Darcy said. ‘I could be shot for telling you, I suppose. You must not even let Betty and Jenny know.’

Caro nodded again, not able to speak.

‘I promised Rick I would let you know if anything happened to him – tell you in person,’ Darcy said. ‘And I fear that it may have happened. We – we don’t know anything definite yet, but – we heard about some people he was working with. They didn't make it, and Rick – he was supposed to be with them at the time.’

He ran a hand through his hair.

‘What am I even doing still in England?’ Darcy suddenly shouted. ‘I should be out there, doing something - \textit{anything}!”
The door burst open and Betty rushed into the room, looking for the source of the commotion. She saw Caro's stony face and the tears running over Darcy's cheeks and gasped.

‘Rick?’ she asked.

‘Look, Betty -’ Darcy began.

‘I understand,’ Betty said. ‘You can't tell me. I'm not supposed to know. I understand.’

‘Elizabeth -’

‘For heaven's sake, David, I love Rick too. Caro's my friend. Don't you think you can at least -’

Caro just let their shouts wash over her. She did not have the energy any more to get up, or to ask them to be quiet. Suddenly, their voices were interrupted by a third.

‘Cut it out, both of you,’ Jenny cried. ‘Can't you see she can't take it?’

She sat down next to Caro and put an arm around her, pressing her close to herself.

‘There, now, dearest,’ she said, stroking Caro’s hair. ‘There now.’

Dimly, Caro registered Betty and Darcy both apologising at the same time. She saw, but did not notice, Betty embracing Darcy, holding him close, allowing him to cry into her shoulder. She saw Darcy break free of the embrace and pace through the room.

‘I feel so useless,’ she heard him cry, even though she did not listen. ‘Such a coward I am, staying at home when everybody else – my aunt has lost two sons this week, and Andrew will return to his unit tomorrow, facing God knows what over the Atlantic – and I return to that rat-hole, doing nothing, helping nobody – I send them out there, Elizabeth – the information I gather sends them to their deaths – I can't bear it any more – it may well have been my information that killed Rick – if I made a mistake – if I wrongly decoded – their whole group was captured, my uncle says. They never had a chance.’

He collapsed onto a chair, burying his face in his hands.

‘It's the least I can do,’ he cried, ‘after I sent him out there, to tell his wife – I don't care if it's against regulations, she has a right to know.’

‘I'm not actually his wife,’ Caro muttered.

‘Does it make any difference?’ Darcy said. ‘You love him, and I have killed him. It's the least I can do, to tell you what I did.’

Darcy left early the next morning.

‘Remember, Caroline,’ he said as he pressed her hand. ‘We do not know for sure yet. There is still hope. Only - only be prepared for the worst.’

Caro had said little since the previous evening, restricting herself mostly to monosyllables, but something had welled up inside her.

‘How can your uncle do it?’ she cried. ‘How can he bear sending his sons out there? What parent could do that?’
Darcy, taken aback, paused for a moment, then said, ‘He would argue that we have no other choice.’

‘Is it worth it though?’ Caro asked. ‘Will it be worth it in the end?’

‘I wish I could answer that,’ Darcy said. ‘I hope it will be. I only know that if we do not fight, the result will be unbearable.’

With a last, long glance at Caro and Jenny, he left, accompanied by Betty, who would drive him to the station. Caro stared at the door for a long time after he was gone before she went back to the table and started picking up the crockery.

‘I hate this godforsaken war!’ she suddenly shouted and hurled a plate against the wall.

Then, she realised what she had done.

‘I'm sorry, Jenny - I didn't mean to - I will pay for it, of course -’

'It's alright,’ Jenny said, leading Caro to a chair. 'It's alright. Don't worry about the stupid plate.'

She put an arm around Caro's shoulder. The tears Caro had been holding back since the last night finally came and with great, retching sobs, Caro held close to Jenny's waist for what seemed an eternity.

Caro could not say how fast or how slow time passed over the next weeks. She ate and slept and worked like an automaton. It was the same thing to her whether it was dark outside or light. She hardly paid attention to her growing stomach, unless it was getting in the way. By the beginning of September, Betty forbade her to work outside any more. She was relegated to the kitchen, working under Jenny’s supervision, peeling carrots or potatoes for hours on end, or so it felt like.

Jenny urged her to prepare for the baby's arrival, but Caro could not muster much interest in the cradle that was brought to her room, or in the clothes Jennifer had out-grown, which were placed in Caro’s dresser. Maggie Lucas, who came by to check on her frequently, urged her to pick up some knitting, but Caro could not concentrate on the stitches and only produced misshapen bundles.
The cable came on the morning of the last day of September, as unexpected as the sudden cold the night before. It had been sent from London and read simply,

Before night falls, I will sleep in your arms.*

This time, Caro needed no help to discern the source, or to understand the meaning. For the first time in her life, she fainted.

When she came to again, she was lying on her back on the kitchen floor. Three anxious faces stared at her.

‘I think she's coming round again,’ Jenny said, holding Caro’s wrist.

‘Thank God,’ Betty mumbled, mopping Caro's forehead with a wet dishcloth.

‘The baby seems to be well,’ said Maggie, who was feeling Caro's stomach.

‘Rick …’ Caro muttered, trying to lift her head.

‘Shh, love, don't try to speak just yet,’ Maggie said. ‘The doctor will be here any minute. Will went for him right away.’

‘Rick …’ Caro said again.

‘Yes, dearest, I know,’ Betty said. ‘It's horrible, I know.’

‘What's this?’ Jenny said and picked up the cable on the floor. ‘Who sent it?’

Betty took the cable and read it, frowning.

‘It must have been Charles, or David,’ she said. ‘I wonder why they did not sign it. Who was it sent to?’

‘No idea,’ said Jenny. ‘There's no envelope.’

Caro wanted to say that the envelope was still in her apron pocket, but she could not form the words.

‘Rick … come …’ she mumbled.

‘Dearest, I'm so sorry,’ Betty said, lightly stroking Caro's brow. ‘You know Rick won't come.’

‘Do you think she is hallucinating?’ Jenny whispered anxiously.

‘We'll have to wait what the doctor says,’ Maggie said.

If Caro’s head were not hurting so much, she would have told them she was not hallucinating, that Rick had sent her a cable, that he was coming. She tried to lift her head again, but it hurt so much and the room began to spin around her. She closed her eyes. She felt so very dizzy. The three women were still talking, but she paid no attention any longer. She was so tired and her head was
throbbing so much.

A while later, she felt somebody's cold hands touching her face, checking her eyes, taking her pulse.

‘A concussion, probably,’ someone said. ‘Not too dramatic, but she should lie down for a couple of days, perhaps until the child is born, just to be on the safe side. Mr Lucas, if you’d perhaps – and Mrs Darcy – carry her to the bed.’

‘I'll just wash my hands,’ Mr Lucas said.

‘She should eat lightly today,’ the stranger said, ‘if she asks for food. If she can keep it, she may eat normally tomorrow. Pay attention to any signs of sickness and let Maggie listen to the heartbeat regularly. If anything is not right, call for me at once. I shall come again tomorrow.’

‘What about the hallucinations?’ Jenny asked. ‘She was calling for her husband before.’

‘That should cease soon,’ the stranger said. ‘When she has slept properly, she should be clearer. Let her sleep if she wants to, but wake her regularly, make sure she reacts to you. If she still hallucinates tomorrow, we may have to take further steps, but for the moment, it is best for her and the child if she just keeps to her bed.’

‘Thank you, Dr Long,’ Betty said.

‘She might go into labour from the stress,’ the stranger said. ‘If you foresee any difficulties, Maggie, call at once. Mrs Long will know where to find me.’

‘Yes, doctor,’ Maggie said.

‘Well, then,’ Mr Lucas said. ‘Shall we? If you just take her legs, doctor – hold her hand, Betty, there's a good lass -’

Caro felt herself lifted up by several people. They carried her somewhere – not to her room, which was upstairs, but somewhere else – and placed her on a bed. Someone took off her apron and gently unbuttoned her dress. Rough, warm hands helped her into a nightshirt and someone tucked her in.

‘No, no, you girls go back to your work,’ Maggie said. ‘I'll stay here, I don’t mind sitting with her.’

‘Poor darling,’ Betty said and pushed a strand of hair out of Caro's face. ‘It was all too much for her these last few months.’

‘Get better, dear,’ Jenny said and kissed Caro's cheek.

The door closed. Caro could hear Maggie's knitting needles softly clicking before she drifted back to sleep.

Caro woke up in a pale yellow room. It took her a while to realise she was lying in Betty's bed. She remembered she had been lying on the kitchen floor and they had brought her here to recover. Maggie had been sitting with her before she fell asleep. She turned her head, but Maggie was gone. Then she remembered she had woken up because there had been a knock on the door. Maggie had probably gone to open it. Sure enough, she could now hear Maggie talking in the hallway.

‘Really, sir, I don't know if that is such a good idea just now. She needs to rest.’

‘Is anything wrong?’ a hoarse voice said after a small pause. ‘Is she ill?’
Caro's heart skipped a beat.

‘The doctor says it's most probably just a concussion,’ Maggie said. ‘But in her situation -’

‘What situation? Goodness, woman, will you let me see her now?’

Caro's heart was beating so fast she thought it might explode. With much effort, she propped herself up on her elbows, trying to sit up.

‘Very well, but only for a couple of minutes,’ Maggie said in the hallway. ‘But be quiet, she is sleeping.’

The door opened just as Caro had managed to get herself in a sitting position. It hurt terribly to smile, but she could not help it that a silly grin was spreading all over her face.

She would have known him anywhere. His hair was longer, his face was thinner, he walked stiffly, but he was still Rick, whom she loved. Slowly, with a stiff leg, he stepped towards the bed, not taking his eyes from her. Then, he stopped, his smile halting.

‘You're pregnant,’ he said.

‘You're not dead,’ she said.

‘You're … pregnant,’ he said again.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Yes, I am.’

‘Golly, Caro, I've been thinking about this moment for months and now I don't know what to say.’

He ran his hands through his hair, the same way Darcy did, but infinitely more elegant, then took another step towards her. At last, at long last, he had closed the distance between them and pulled her into his arms. It hurt to move, but she did not care. There were more important things now.

Chapter End Notes

Much later, Caro said, ‘I thought you were dead.’

‘I'm sorry,’ he said softly, kissing her hair. ‘I never wanted to put you through this.’

‘I missed you so terribly.’

‘I thought about you all the time,’ he said.

‘I'm pregnant,’ Caro said.

‘Yes,’ he said, kissing her hair again. ‘It's sort of obvious.’

She moved away from him for just the fraction of an inch.

‘Are you going to ask me if it's yours?’ she asked.

‘No,’ he said simply and pulled her close again.

Caro did not know it was possible to feel so happy when one's head was hurting so much. For a long time, neither of them spoke, nor moved.

‘I'm going to be a father,’ Rick finally said. ‘I never thought this would happen.’

‘We neither of us did,’ Caro said, then paused. ‘How do you feel about the child?’

‘I'm happy, I think,’ Rick answered. ‘I don't think I have yet understood it properly. I can't even believe I'm here, with you, still alive –’

She could feel him swallow hard.

‘It is hell,’ he whispered. ‘It's simple and pure hell, what is happening there. You cannot imagine it –’

He swallowed again, even harder.

‘Caro, I have seen things, I have heard things, I've had to do things that made me wonder if there was a single good thing left in the world. What people will do to other people –’

His scarred hand underneath hers began to tremble and she pressed it firmly.

‘What world is this to bring a child into?’ he said.

He was trembling all over. Caro pulled the blankets up to cover both of them. It did not matter that he was still wearing his shoes and travel-stained clothes. Betty would understand.

For the second time that day, Caro woke up because somebody was hammering on the front door. When she opened her eyes, she realised they must have slept a long time, because it was already dark outside. Her legs had fallen asleep from the weight of her child and she tried to turn, but Rick, still asleep, had her in a tight grip.
'Where is he?' someone called in the hallway and the door burst open.

‘No, you'll wake them –’ Betty said, running after her husband.

With a groan, Rick woke and shielded his eyes against the bright light coming in from the hallway. Darcy stood at the foot of the bed, speechless, gaping at him. Awkwardly, Rick got on his feet and limped towards Darcy. They embraced each other tightly, neither of them speaking.

‘You are one lucky bugger, Richard,’ Darcy said hoarsely when they broke apart. ‘Thank God.’

Caro looked at Betty, who was standing in the door with tears glittering in her eyes.

‘How are you, Caro?’ Betty asked. ‘How's your head?’

Her head was fine, Caro now realised. It was not hurting at all.

‘I'm hungry,’ she said, surprising herself.

‘Only light food, the doctor said,’ Jenny said, entering the room. ‘Rick. It's so wonderful you're back.’

She hugged him tightly, then pushed him into Charles' arms.

‘Uncle Rick!’ Andy cried and shoved his father aside. Rick winced as Andy pressed the toy train into his injured knee, but said nothing.

‘So who sent the cable?’ Jenny asked later that evening.

Everybody was sitting around Caro’s bed. Rick, now washed and dressed in fresh clothes, had resumed his place at Caro's side. Charles and Jenny sat at the foot of the bed, holding hands and Darcy had sat down in an armchair by the window, Betty on his lap.

‘Cable?’ Darcy said and frowned. ‘I sent no cable.’

Jenny turned to Charles, who shook his head.

‘I thought one of you had sent it,’ Betty said. ‘It was very sweet.’

She pulled the crumpled piece of paper out of her pocket.

‘... before night falls, I will sleep in your arms,’ she read.

‘It sounds vaguely familiar, but I didn't send it,’ Darcy said.

‘Even if it is the twilight of the world, before night falls, I will sleep in your arms,’ Caro whispered, pressing Rick’s hand.

‘Well, I did, didn't I?’ Rick said, pressing Caro’s hand.

‘You sent it?’ Betty asked.

‘From London, this morning,’ Rick explained. ‘When one of Caro's neighbours could finally tell me where she’d gone.’

‘We didn't know who sent it,’ Jenny said. ‘You didn't sign it.’
‘I trusted Caro would recognise her favourite novel,’ Rick said.

‘Well, not my favourite novel, perhaps,’ Caro amended. ‘But certainly one that I like very much. I remember you giving it to me.’

‘That’s not quite how I remember it,’ Rick said.

Caro’s thoughts drifted back to a holiday spent in Scotland; two carefree summer weeks before the war broke out. Images came to her mind, of a lanky Nina in her bath-suit, of Charles and Betty playing battledore, of Jenny in a sun-dress, chasing after Andy. Caro herself had been sitting in a deck chair that afternoon, complaining to Louisa that she was bored. Suddenly, Rick had appeared at her side and dumped a stack of books on the table next to her. She had snapped at him and then ignored him, but had later eagerly read the books he had chosen. She had soon realised that they were all part of a series, of which the latest, the last one, was missing. She had then seen it in Rick's room, lying on his bedside table. One morning, when he was still asleep, she had crept into his room, sneaked past his bed and –

‘So many opportunities we missed, did we not?’ Rick whispered into her ear.

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Caro gasped in horror when she saw the red scars on Rick's shoulder and down his back. She tried to stifle the sound, but it was too late, he had already heard her. He placed his shirt carelessly on the chair, turned around and faced her.

‘Yes,’ he said with a pained smile, ‘I suppose I am what they consider damaged goods now.’

‘Does it hurt?’ Caro asked.

‘The shoulder?’ Rick said. ‘No, not that much.’

‘And the knee?’ Caro whispered.

‘With that much damage, there's not much that can be done,’ Rick said and shrugged with only his uninjured shoulder. ‘Getting down on one knee for example is right out of the question.’

He put one hand in his pocket.

‘Caro, my love, I almost forgot this,’ he said and from his pocket, pulled a box and gave it to her. She opened it and found a ring inside.

‘It was my grandmother’s,’ he said. ‘If you still want it, it is yours forever.’

‘I –’

‘Do you not want it any more?’ Rick said, twitching slightly. ‘Fair enough, I mean –’

‘Of course I do,’ Caro said, fighting back the cursed tears. ‘More than anything else. It's only –’

She showed him her grandmother's ring.

‘People think we are already married,’ she said. ‘Darcy and Betty thought it was the best. For my child's sake –’

‘For our child's sake,’ Rick said.
He pulled off his trousers and his socks and got into bed next to her.

‘I don’t care where or how, or when we marry,’ he said. ‘I’ll take you to Scotland after the birth and marry you there, if you'd like, or I'll marry you in my mother's parish church, or yours – just say when, and where, and I'll be there.’

He placed a hand on her stomach and looked at her in amazement when the child kicked him. Caro leaned onto his shoulder and sighed.

‘If only tonight would never end,’ she said. ‘These nine months – these incredibly long nine months – I almost forgot what it's like being happy.’

He rubbed her neck.

‘I'm sorry I could not be there,’ he muttered.

‘You had a good enough reason,’ Caro said.

‘I'm still sorry I left you that morning,’ Rick said.

‘But you came back,’ Caro said. ‘You're here now.’

She closed her eyes and allowed herself to forget everything but the man who held her in his arms.

Before she fell asleep, she heard him say, ‘Serve God, love me and mend.’

Chapter End Notes

*Much Ado About Nothing, V 2.

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